

# Music and Counter-Revolution

A Review of *Stormy Applause: Making Music in a Workers State* by Rostislav Dubinsky (Hutchinson, London: 1989); 292pp.; 14.95. ISBN 0 09 174257 9

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The first few years of the Russian Revolution were characterized by an explosion in avant-garde artistic activity, associated with such names as Malevich, Kandinsky, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Eisenstein, and Mayakovsky. For a period lasting a little more than a decade – and with the encouragement of the head of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky – radical aesthetic innovation marched in tandem with an attempt at the fundamental reconstruction of society. However, the most significant aesthetic experiments of this period occurred in the visual and literary arts rather than in music. One reason for this, undoubtedly, was the fact that the two leading Russian avant-garde composers, Stravinsky and Prokofiev, had emigrated to Weimar Germany. Nevertheless, the "new music" that had emerged to Russia's west was gradually coming to influence Soviet culture as well. Otto Klemperer and Fritz Stiedry both came from Germany to conduct. More importantly, Soviet musicians were kept informed of developments in avant-garde music by two contemporary music societies, as well as by the critic, Igor Glebov. In this way, they were prepared for the first Soviet production of Prokofiev's *Love of Three Oranges* in the spring of 1926, as well as a performance of Berg's *Wozzeck* by the Leningrad Opera the following year. At the same time, there were concert performances of *Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex* and *Les Noces*. Shostakovich's work was also beginning to achieve notoriety.

A Stalinist counter-revolution in the arts brought this prelude to the development of a musical avant-garde to an abrupt end. In 1932, the Central Committee of the Communist Party dissolved all existing art organizations, replacing them with a network of state-sanctioned unions, including the Union of Soviet Composers. The chief purpose of the network was to enforce the new guiding doctrine of "socialist realism," which rejected all modernist aesthetic experimentation. Still, some avant-garde composers, including Shostakovich, managed to have their compositions performed until 1948. At that time, an official party condemnation for the aesthetic crime of "formalism" denied them any outlet for their work.

Rostislav Dubinsky, virtuoso violinist and founder of the Borodin Quartet, begins his memoir at this low point in the history of Soviet music. At its worst, Dubinsky's book is a cold war diatribe that simplistically identifies Stalinist totalitarianism with socialism, and one-sidedly idealizes the societies of the West. But at its best, it is a valuable account of the way in which Soviet aesthetic doctrine was applied to the creation and performance of music.

At the outset, there is something puzzling about this application. Socialist realism – in actuality neither socialist nor realist – was framed by the Soviet bureaucracy, which sought to disguise its own self-interest as the interest of society as a whole. To this end, the doctrine prescribed a single subject matter for artistic treatment: the purportedly "monumental" and "heroic" process of building the new society. Because its normative aesthetic criterion was a matter of content, the doctrine had a fairly straightforward relevance for literature and painting, with their capacity to portray imagined situations. But how was the composer or performer supposed to depict the glorified event of "socialist construction" in a medium that is essentially non-representational?

Dubinsky's memoir succeeds in demonstrating that, however abstract the language of music may be, society is directly present within it. What the ideological managers of Soviet culture objected to was music whose critical negativism challenged the official interpretation of contemporary society. Thus Dubinsky points out that "compositions in minor keys or ending in pianissimo were subjected to sharp criticism as examples of pessimism, distortion, and even slander of Soviet reality, or a lack of faith in 'the triumph of Communism and its bright future'" (p. 221). Only affirmative music was countenanced, preferably delivered in Russian national style.

That is why Shostakovich was such a difficult figure for the Soviet musical establishment to come to terms with. As a composer with an international reputation, he was rehabilitated for nationalistic purposes in 1955, two years after Stalin's death. But his music is dark, tense, and disquieting, an unmistakable protest against the oppressiveness of Soviet life. In an interesting interpretation of his *Trio in E-minor*, Dubinsky goes so far as to hear in some piano chords of the third movement, "the sound of a hammer on a railway track which tells the prisoners of the concentration camp that 'one more day in the life of Ivan Denisovich' has started" (p. 156). It is not surprising that Shostakovich was censured by the authorities once again in 1965.

Dubinsky's own political message is a conservative one. But his memoir has important implications for the left. The ability of art to effect a critical negation of reality is a resource crucial to the liberatory process. Revolution in society is incompatible with counter-revolution in the arts.

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