



DSCH; WILL THE REAL DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH PLEASE STAND UP?

In David Pownall's play *Master Class*, the composers Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev are invited to the Kremlin one evening in 1948, for a private audience with Joseph Stalin and his deputy Andrei Zhdanov. Shostakovich, a nervous wreck even before Stalin turns up, dreads to think what might be in store. Prokofiev plays it cool, but beneath his urbane front is equally rattled. The Man of Steel arrives, jolly, avuncular and fulsome in praise of the two terrified composers. Stalin's pleasantries are merely a prelude, of course, to the inevitable threat of deportation, or worse, if the USSR's two leading composers don't fall into line and quick smart. He has had enough of their modernist 'rubbish' and wants them to start writing music that will glorify the state and lift the spirits of the Soviet people. The tension builds to a stunning first act curtain (and here is a spoiler alert) in which Stalin treats the terrified pair to a symbolic demonstration of the consequences for composers who don't cooperate. Taking a pile of gramophone recordings of their works, he begins to smash them, one by one until the entire stack is nothing more than a pile of shattered shellac.

Pownall's synopsis is fictitious. The meeting never took place, but his summing up the situation is spot on. In January 1948 Zhdanov called a congress of the USSR's composers. It was time to bring them into line and remind them who was boss. His big gripe was against 'formalism', music he considered too academic, too discordant and too removed from the needs of the Soviet people. In Zhdanov's book, if the man in the street couldn't whistle it, or the woman in the factory couldn't hum it, it was formalist. He opened fire on Vano Muradeli's new opera *The Great Friendship*, labeling it "cacophonous" and "inadequate in musical expression". Zhdanov then turned his big guns against Shostakovich. Lesser composers joined the Let's-Bash-Dmitri queue. Shostakovich had to endure this from a nonentity called Vladimir Zakharov:

"There are still discussions round the question whether Shostakovich's 8th Symphony is good or bad. Such a discussion is nonsense. From the point of view of the People, the 8th Symphony is not a musical work at all."

And this review of his 7th Symphony came from Tikhon Khrennikov:

"The musical thought of this composer was far better suited to depicting the evil images of Fascism... than expressing the positive heroic images of our times."

Well, why not just call him a traitor and be done with it? A shattered Shostakovich mounted the podium and apologised to the assembly for his artistic 'failings':

"In my work I have had many failures, even though, throughout my composer's career, I have always thought of the People, of my listeners...I think that our three days' discussion will be of immense value, especially if we closely study Comrade Zhdanov's speech...A close study of this remarkable document should help us greatly in our work."

The words were not even his. He later recounted to the musicologist Marina Sabinina that the speech had been thrust into his hands moments before:

"And I got up...and started to read out aloud this idiotic, disgusting nonsense concocted by some nobody. Yes, I humiliated myself. I read like the most paltry wretch, a parasite, a cut-out paper doll on a string!"

In Zhdanov's Theatre of Humiliation and Terror, nothing was to be unscripted, nothing improvised.

The Congress left Shostakovich suicidal. Several of his major works were banned. He struggled on, but the psychic blow had been dealt. For the time being he would be two composers: Public Shostakovich would give the State what it wanted - patriotic cantatas and unobjectionable film scores - whilst 'Formalist' Shostakovich hid his works away in a desk drawer, safe from Soviet scrutiny. The 4th Symphony and the 4th and 5th String Quartets all remained unperformed until well after Stalin's death in 1953.

And, as if to reassert his own identity to himself, he created a musical signature in code. Taking his first initial and the first three letters of his surname in its German spelling gave him the notes (in the German scale) D, S, C, H, which we know as D, E flat, C and B. This melodic cell became Shostakovich's thumbprint.

The DSCH code dominates Shostakovich's 8th Quartet, a scarifying outburst composed in a three-day frenzy while the composer was visiting Dresden in June, 1960. He claimed that this tortured work was his response to seeing the once glorious city still lying in ruins after the war, but his friends and family knew better. At this very time, the Communist Party was pressuring Shostakovich to become a full member, an unwelcome distinction he had always squirmed out of. The distress this caused him was immeasurable. His friend Isaak Glikman remembered Shostakovich sobbing to him hysterically, "They've been pursuing me for years, hunting me down".

Regarding his 8th Quartet, the composer told Glikman, "I started thinking that if some day I die, nobody is likely to write a work in memory of me, so I had better write one myself. The title page could carry the dedication, To the Composer of

this Quartet." Instead, the published score carries the dedication 'To the victims of fascism and war'. DSCH's thoughts could not be made public.

Not all Shostakovich's string quartets are so intense. Many are sunny and cheerful. No. 15 is particularly unique. Meditative, reflective and profound, it sits far above the tumult of the world, and offers those with ears to hear music of hard-won wisdom.

To hear all fifteen is one of the great musical experiences, a little like climbing Everest or walking the Camino. The Brodsky Quartet have been exploring these works since their formation in 1972, and know them intimately. In five thrilling concerts, they will pass on the torch to ANAM musicians, maintaining a precious tradition of insight and experience.