

The Ups and Downs of Dmitri Shostakovich

RECENT reports in the newspapers that Dmitri Shostakovich has been forced to give up his chair at the Moscow Conservatory provide what is apparently the latest development in a series of reprimands and recantations that has been going on for many years between this bad boy among Russian composers and the ever-watchful Politburo. It is difficult to know what is truth and what rumour in cases like these, and impossible to feel that we ever have the whole truth. But the situation as presented in British and American journals comes to something like this.

ALTHOUGH composers the world over are known to have their ups and downs, the bewildered-looking young Shostakovich seems to have had a particularly bad time of it. Many will remember the castigation he got from the official journal *Pravda* over his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*. But his troubles began much earlier than that. It was when he was still a gangling youth just out of musical school that he suffered his first mild rebuke—from his former professor. It was only a mild rebuke, of course, because 19-year-old Dmitri had just been hailed by the populace as a second Tchaikovsky after they had heard his brilliant First Symphony. But the professor was very annoyed. "His First Symphony is the result of his study in the Conservatory," he said, "and I was very distressed by his published allegation that in the Conservatory we only 'hindered him from composing.' When he left the Conservatory he came under the influence of people who professed the musical principles of the extremist West, and already in his *October Symphony* there was an unhealthy tendency to adapt formalistic language for the expression of revolutionary ideas. When he brought his *Aphorisms* to me, I told him that I understood nothing in them, that they were quite foreign—after which he ceased coming to me."

Early Apologies

Shostakovich made haste to explain. It was the first of many explanations. He had just begun to realise, he said, that music was not just a combination of sounds arranged in this melody or that (i.e., "formalistic"), but an art capable of expressing the most varied ideas and feelings. "I did not easily win through to this conviction," he added, "but it is sufficient to say that during 1926 I did not write a single note." It seemed that he had begun to realise what every Soviet composer should know, that it doesn't do to be too high-brow in a country that insists on music for "the people" rather than for intellectuals with highly trained ears and sophisticated tastes.

Unfortunately, some people find it hard to match their words with deeds, and although for several years Shostakovich continued on happily composing in his Leningrad apartment, in 1929 he made another faux pas. He was writing an opera based on Gogol's fantastic tale *The Nose*, and in trying to get a satirical effect he fell into the treacherous quagmire of atonality, one of the worst sins of extremist Western music. In fact he made the work far too cleverly



SHOSTAKOVICH
"The party and the people are right"

satirical and sophisticated for the likings of his fellows, and it was assailed by the Russian Association of Proletarian Composers as a product of "bourgeois decadence," and had few performances. Once again Shostakovich hastened to make amends, this time in the form of a *First of May* Symphony, a popular work full of mob oratorical trumpet and drum passages, obvious rhythms that "the people" could follow, and rowdy orchestration.

The "Lady Macbeth" Affair

But the *Lady Macbeth* affair was already looming up darkly on the horizon—it was an episode that put him really under an official cloud for five years. He may have been a little apprehensive about the opera from the start, for at its first performance in 1934 he said in the programme notes, "I have tried to make the music as simple as possible." However, the axe didn't fall at once, and for another two years he lived on in a kind of fool's paradise, basking in the effusions of such people as Boris Mordvinov (the opera's producer), who said, "We realised we were confronted with a phenomenon of the highest creative order. No one cared to use common terms of praise. . . . The opera was accepted without hesitation."

Then one night, so the story goes, Marshal Stalin decided to pay a visit to the opera; the flags were hung out, the company gave the best performance of their lives, when, to everyone's horror,

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