

Translations of conversations between Stephen Johnson and Boris Tischenko, Tigran Alikhanov, Alexandra Mravinsky, Manashir Yakubov and Victor Kozlov in Moscow and St Petersburg.

Boris Tischenko – Composer and former pupil of Shostakovich

It's not just the suffering of Shostakovich *himself* that you hear in his music, but his compassion for the pain suffered by the people around him.

The 8th Symphony ... this is such a tragic work. It went against the grain of official ideology which said that there were no tragedies in a socialist society ... they had all been resolved.. But Shostakovich showed that tragedies did exist and they're not simply ordinary tragedies but the greatest tragedies in human history. For me, the very tragedy of the 8th Symphony speaks about how bad and difficult it is for humans to live under someone's power, someone's control and terror and all this music is against the terror, it is the music of wrath and protest. Shostakovich was the first composer and artist in Soviet Russia who stated that tragedy is legitimate and this point is very important.

I think that his music embraces all humanity, – and I don't want to say it without any caveats – but in a way that religious teachings do. Christ's teachings were aimed at saving all humanity, and in a way Shostakovich's music is similarly aimed at saving humanity.

He was ill in, I think it was 1966 with a suspected heart attack and I went to visit him in hospital. Fortunately it wasn't a heart attack and he was up and about and he showed me a piece in the newspaper ... he was very angry ... this was at the time of the conflict with China and he was saying: "Look, look, what's happening there". It was when China was fighting against population growth, and the piece in the paper was called - *How I Snipped My Semen Ducts*. He was trembling with anger reading it. He cared about China too. You'd have thought that this country was too far away for him to bother about, but he cared about what was taking place over there too.

Shostakovich is without doubt a direct successor of Beethoven's symphonism, in the same way Tchaikovsky was. It's as if the currents of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky joined together and gave rise to something new ... something sanctified by the personality and the individuality of Shostakovich. However, Shostakovich didn't just get to understand and use the methods of the great classical composers – he understood and somehow absorbed the

music of his contemporaries. Alban Berg's music had a huge influence on him. The same can be said about the music of Hindemith; he also adored Benjamin Britten who was his best friend and favourite composer. Stravinsky - he definitely considered him to be the greatest composer of the 20th century and as far as Prokofiev was concerned – once, like a father, he took me by my hand and we went to the theatre for me to see Prokofiev's opera *The Gambler*. He didn't just assimilate the music of the classical composers but also the music of his contemporaries, up to and including the very latest music. This is such an all-embracing phenomena that it can't be defined through adherence to any one particular direction.

Generally he didn't particularly like to talk about his music; he was incredibly modest. It's true, he was a very nervous person, but then, who could remain totally psychologically well after all the terror he was subjected to so many times – first in 1936, then in 1948 and afterwards in 1962 – this would affect anyone. It's very important to say this ... he became nervous not only through the terrorist actions of Zhdanov and the Zhdanov-Stalinist period in relation to his work but also through the entire atmosphere in the country where they could come and take away anybody at any time of day or night, arrest, exile and shoot them - were not these sufficient grounds for feeling nervous?

The point is that people lived such a horrible life and were so cowered by the reality that surrounded them that many of them had no energy for Shostakovich's music. The music itself however - through its very existence - was saying that it was necessary to fight against this oppression, that people had to find inner strength and overcome this fear and search for justice ... *actively* search for justice, not waiting for it to be handed to them from above. It was this position, the position of real fighter, that of course affected – in the most positive sense – the entire atmosphere in the country.

Here's something else. I remember Dmitriy Dmitriyevich once said that in many of the great works he liked, he didn't like the endings with their motif of resignation. In Verdi's *Othello*, say, when he kills Desdemona, gentle music of coming to terms with reality could be heard. Or when Boris Godunov dies in Mussorgsky's opera, this resignation is there again. He, on the other hand, was saying that he was against all this because (in his words) it was impossible to come to terms with the face of death. He said all this when he wrote his 14th Symphony ... a non-stop protest against death, against violence and against prisons.

Tigran Alikhanov – Rector of Moscow Conservatory

It's the people who lived through those times, very difficult and tense times of the Stalinist regime – these people will have a particularly acute understanding of the music.

Shostakovich's music is obviously a terrible inditement of those times. I am deeply convinced that it is a truer document than any memoir or work of literature or even any documentary film. The music of Shostakovich ... it conveys the frightful atmosphere of the period in an incredible way – the ice-cold horror which penetrated through the whole life of the country. It's got this hopelessly inconsolable quality. It's a *dark* music.

You know, we used to have a remarkable pianist, her name was Maria Yudina - Maria Veniaminovna Yudina – I went with her once to hear the 8th Symphony ... It's dark ... very dark work. It was on for two days in a row and Maria Veniaminovna went to the first concert. I asked her if she was going to join me again the next day. She said: No, I am not going to come because I do not want to descend into all this darkness again.

You see, this is a special kind of humour. You know in Goya's Caprichos there is humour, too, yet his pictures generally depict horror ... may be in Briegels pictures that are full of horror, there might be humour there at some level, but somehow it creates a frightful impression. Shostakovich's humour is frightful as well. What kind of person was he? He had a very complex nature, of course– far from a one-dimensional person - a man who was a product of his era. He was a broken man ... a person who experienced all the horrors of the Stalinist regime in 1930s. He witnessed the disappearances of the inhabitants of entire blocks of flats and entire families. He used to say that one could be with a family in the evening and the next day the door of their flat would be open and the flat would be empty.

He felt that in any event, he could do nothing. I remember very well, how he used to come to our house. He was friendly with my parents. I remember him sitting around our dinner table in the evenings and thinking it was frightful, when he would open his mouth to say something in this black humour of his ... that *they* were going to come and take him away. But nevertheless the next day there would be some disgusting pro-party article in a newspaper with his name underneath it. I remember my dad throwing the paper aside and asking: Why

does he need this? So I am deeply convinced that the only way he could protest about everything around him was through his music.

You see, if someone was ever in love or knows what love is, he can't avoid identifying with Romeo and Juliet, otherwise he's just like a piece of wood. The music of Shostakovich is so obviously woven of pain, of suffering and pain, and if people are capable of perceiving it, capable of making out such feelings ... well. Look at Rembrandt's picture of the prodigal son – do we, any of us, have to go through the actual experience of our loving son leaving us for - what was it - forty years, and then coming back when we are very old? I don't know what I'd go through if that happened to me, but when I look at the picture it affects me because it is fantastically good.

You don't have to go through the same experience as Shostakovich went through to understand what he is saying, it is not at all necessary because the way he expresses it is so powerful.

Alexandra Mravinsky – Flautist and widow of conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky

Shostakovich reflected the tragic times better than anyone else ... I'd call him a chronicler ... a musical chronicler of his times. Take his 11th Symphony - called 1905 – It's written in such a way that this music will remain Russia's *eternal* music, really and truly because there will *always* be poor people in Russia. There will always be unhappy people and demonstrations, and there will *always* be tragedy in Russia ... it will never get rid of its tragic path.

In the 1905 Symphony, Dmitriy Dmitriyevich had in fact written a Symphony for all times. (*sings*) - this is the song of the hard labour prisoners, people driven to prison in chains in tsarist times and they are being driven there now as well ... they'll still be sent there in the future too. At the time they used to send you to prison for one thing and now they do it for something else. But the Russian people have an inherent distinctive feature ... hope. We're always hopeful. We now have a very good President and we hope that perhaps he'll pull our country out of peril by the ears. And this hope can also be heard in Dmitriy Dmitriyevich's music.

No-matter where you come from, everyone experiences love, death, war and struggle - these things are universal. Now, the 7th Symphony is considered to be a war symphony, right? And is the music not understood by everyone? The British were fighting, Germany fought, the US fought and is still fighting, Islam is fighting – the war theme is sweeping through. However, it's the people at the top who arrange these wars, yet it's the ordinary people who cry. That's why everyone understands the music.

Shostakovich and his wife use to stay in the same place as we did on holiday. Because of that we sometimes had our meals together and went for walks together. He was *cosmically* good - he would help anyone. He saw evil and he saw bad things, yes? But there were also a lot of good and beautiful things in life.

He also understood people and had this insight. Yes, he was a great person, more than a person, a genius. He was a genius in music on a global scale because he was able to reflect his times in his music.

When they were together – my husband Yevgeniy Alexandrovich and Dmitriy Dmitriyevich.- there was never any reticence or shyness, I'd never noticed any. They'd drink vodka together and laugh – no shyness.

Manashir Yakubov – Head of Shostakovich Archive and publishing house.

I think that it was simply impossible to survive without a sense of humour in the society he and we all lived in. We laughed so as not to go mad. Shostakovich had a very developed and acute sense of humour. He was very sharp and witty – he could destroy or ridicule something with just one word ... it was that which helped him to survive.

I think that in his orchestral works, we have to listen out very carefully in order to understand what he wanted to say. His works without text often have a hidden agenda.

The cello concerto is just one of them. The main theme from the concerto is taken from the film, The Young Guard where the young heroes are being led to their execution to the sound of this music ... a funeral march. In the *concerto* though, Shostakovich presents the same

theme but at a much faster speed – it's also not in the minor key, but in the major ... he makes it sound like a parody on a funeral march. Then in the final movement of the concerto you can hear Stalin's favourite song, *Suliko*, in a kind of a cartoon version and there's also this humorous Jewish Wedding dance sort of motif. This combination of a caricatured march at the beginning and then - a caricatured portrait of Stalin, with this Georgian song *Suliko*, and *then* a joyous Jewish small-town dance – it all hints at the idea of a joyous funeral. However, the Concerto was written *after* Stalin's death ... the Jewish people suffered a lot under Stalin ... here they're burying a tyrant and are happy. The thing that proves this is that the Jewish dance that I mentioned was based on a popular song from the 1920s, opening with the words: To hell you go! They're sending this tyrant off to hell and having fun while doing so ... yet, Shostakovich didn't directly announce this agenda ... the listener must guess it and feel it.

Take the 7th Symphony, The Leningrad. Some people say that he wrote it before the war and that it had nothing to do with Hitler and his offensive against Leningrad and that it is, actually, about communist oppression. However, suppose that Shostakovich's 7th or even Beethoven's Third Symphony which he first dedicated to Napoleon and later tore up the text of this dedication ... let us say that people on the island of Trinidad listen to it or on the island of Madagascar – people who know next to nothing about the history of Europe or the history of the French Revolution or the history of the USSR and of WWII - they don't know anything about it and they simply listen to the music.

I doubt that when they listen to the funeral march from Beethoven's Third Symphony they will think that it is about some pastoral picture: birds singing, flowers blossoming and children walking about full of joie de vivre, I doubt it. So when listening to the 7th Symphony and the part that includes this monstrous aggression I doubt they will think that, for instance, someone is celebrating someone's birthday. I mean, the overall essence of the music gets through to the listener regardless. It does not however mean that one should not be aware of these details – the more a person knows the more he or she is capable of appreciating it.

The interest in Shostakovich's music is now huge – he is rated as the fifth of the most performed composers. Yet, you have to wonder, why do free citizens of free democratic countries need Shostakovich?

People often ask me whether it's true that Shostakovich led split life – did he write one thing for himself and another, as the official ideology demanded, for the state. I think that his personality wasn't just split down the middle, but he was split into three, five or even ten parts. He didn't have a *split* consciousness; it was a break up of his consciousness into a multiplicity of various sub-consciousnesses.

The point is that the very idea that human beings generally live in a free world is an illusion – the human consciousness can be split down the middle or split into three, five or ten parts in any society. We tell our children one thing and quite another thing to our wives or husbands, while we tell a third thing when we're out with our friends and then are thinking some fourth or fifth type of thoughts. Human beings have to live in a society by breaking up their consciousness into different parts, often contradictory parts. Shostakovich expresses this problem of multiplicity and the contradictory nature of our existence in a condensed, undiluted way and *that* is why we need him so much.

The world surrounding us is so ambiguous and in Shostakovich's music, like nowhere else, these unexpected world transformations are often expressed in an extremely high-relief way ... very powerfully. Something joyous and funny in his music suddenly becomes frightful and tragic and thunderous, while something powerful and solemn may become funny. In his music these changes are immediate, he was able to reflect this contradictory nature of the world; people feel that they need it, and not only those who were his contemporaries living in the same country – all human beings need it.

Shostakovich lived in this country. He strived for self-achievement and wanted to use his talent to the full but this was impossible without making some compromises. When an artist agrees to concessions he often undergoes some kind of an artistic transfiguration and starts to believe in what he is doing. If an artist is insincere his work is bad. An actor playing a murderer or a rapist or someone poisoning his victim isn't really such person and yet - if he is not going to be able to imagine murdering someone at the time when he is playing the murderer - nobody is going to believe his act.

Shostakovich was neither an orthodox communist nor a fascist but he wasn't a dissident either, in the sense that a dissident is someone who doesn't do anything apart from protest.

Shostakovich wanted to be engaged in positive creativity, he wanted to create artistic values and not merely devote himself to protest.

Mass consciousness is a very blunt thing that likes to label everyone and goes for oversimplified prescriptive definitions. The philistine likes to be told what is good and what is bad. So tell me, was Shostakovich good or bad after all? He was a normal person ... neither a saint nor a criminal.

Now in addition to being a normal person he had his gift of genius – and the gift was his ability to reflect the most complex contradictions people come across both internally and externally. And that's that.

You see, there is one more secret, one more mystery, a very simple one. Human beings remain human beings whether it's under communism, capitalism, fascism or feudalism or any other type of "ism" and he or she wants to be happy and to love and to be loved, to have babies and to do whatever he or she likes most. This applies everywhere, be it in prison or in the camps, but the human core never changes. The ability to be happy is so extensive that people do achieve it, one way or another, perhaps a bit more and possibly a bit less. This is my understanding of life while all this capitalism or socialism – it is all politics.

It's the finale of the 5th Symphony that brings together his personal emotions and his public and social situation. It was in 1936 when the article came out called *A Muddle Instead of Music*. In it he was denounced as a formalist but also at that point in his life he was going through a terrible personal drama. He was in love with a woman who refused to become his wife ... *she* left for Spain and got married there – married to a person called Roman Carmen, and for Shostakovich *she* became *his* Carmen who'd rejected him. That is why in his 5th Symphony the musical themes from Bizet's opera Carmen have such an important role.

What's important is not Pushkin or Bizet but his personal destiny and personal emotions. At the very end - at the very end – he repeats the note La (or A) a total of 256 times. When they asked him what it meant, he said this is Ya, Ya Ya, Ya Ya Ya, Ya - Russian for Me, Me, Me, Me, Me. It's his self-assertion - it's me and not you.

And on top of this, La, La, La La, La, La is linked to this woman's name, Helen or the short Russian way of saying it ... Lala

La, La, La La, La, La La, La, La La, La, La – it's a name, a cry of despair and a farewell.

Viktor Kozlov – Clarinettist. Played in the first performance of the Leningrad Symphony during the siege of Leningrad.

During the war I served as a military clarinettist in the Orchestra of the Leningrad Military Headquarters. I was based here in Leningrad throughout the siege and we played concerts in military hospitals and at various meetings.

During the period of the siege and the hunger, the Radio Committee Orchestra stayed in the city. It was only a small orchestra - about 25 musicians. Mravinsky's Orchestra left for Kuybyshev.

Shostakovich lived here for the first year of the siege here where he managed to write the first two parts of his 7th Symphony. He was then told to leave the city for Kuybyshev where he completed the final two parts of it and they decided to premiere it over there in Kuybyshev.

The people of Leningrad found out and asked, if the symphony was dedicated to the city of Leningrad, *and* to the siege of Leningrad, how come it was premiered over there? After some time the Radio Committee Orchestra received the score and began writing out the instrumental parts. It turned out that the orchestra would need 80 people while they only had 25. They announced over the radio that they wanted musicians to come to the Radio Committee and play in the orchestra. So people began arriving but they were old people - the younger ones were all in the army. They took in violinists but they had no wind instrument players so they turned to the army and asked if they could use us. That's how I ended up playing in the orchestra as a clarinettist.

We began our rehearsals – it was during the peak of hunger when everybody was starving – we were sitting there playing not having had any food. The first rehearsals were only between 15 and 20 minutes long. Those of us playing wind instruments couldn't play properly - we were unable to hold our lips, we couldn't strain and our lips became weak. Slowly the rehearsals became longer, and then on 9 August 1942 Shostakovich's 7th Symphony was performed at the Philharmonic Orchestra premises in Leningrad. It's interesting that the

Germans were sending out tickets for 9 August also saying that they were going to celebrate their victory at the Astoria hotel. It was precisely on that day that Shostakovich's 7th Symphony was performed to show them that the city was still alive and functioning.

The audience received us very, very well. There was a lot of applause and standing ovations - one woman even gave the conductor flowers - imagine, there was *nothing* in the city then and yet this one woman found flowers somewhere. It was wonderful.

The music is very complex and it was very difficult for those who were not musicians, but at the same time it touched people because it reflected the siege. This was war time and everybody felt they understood this music. It was very moving and emotional for everyone. People were delighted and astounded by the fact that such music was played, particularly during the Siege of Leningrad.

It is very difficult for me to think about it. This music affected you so very deeply - it perfectly reflected the siege and the life of the people of Leningrad ... and ... when you remember it ...

Of course the music played a big role in raising the morale of the people of Leningrad, particularly during the blockade. When they say that he composed it from a Communist point of view, it had *nothing* to do with politics or communists. He composed his music the way he felt and the way it should be.

Translations by Rita Weissman