

To What Extent is Shostakovich's Oratorio Song of the Forests a Survival Strategy of Protecting His Career under Stalinist Ideological Control Rather than an Artwork of Genuine Individual Expression

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Abstract. The Soviet Union limited the creation of musical pieces by composers during Stalin's reign. The state gradually strengthened the degree of ideological control from the 1930s to the 1940s, forcing composers to create music works that enhanced the Soviet ideologies and followed the Socialist Realist style. This paper focuses on Dmitri Shostakovich's works and his music career under Stalinist rule, aiming to evaluate how his works and his attitude towards state control were affected. By using his oratorio Song of the Forests as a case study, this paper examines the extent to which this oratorio is a genuine artistic expression of Shostakovich or represents his conformity to the strict doctrine. The musical score of this oratorio reveals several features that align with Socialist Realist expectations. Considering the historical context of the increasing severity of censorship, this paper argues that this oratorio implied Shostakovich's adaptation to state control, functioning more as a survival strategy rather than an artwork. This investigation displays the effects of censorship on cultural diversity and artistic freedom, as well as reflecting the difficulty of maintaining individual expression under state oppression.

Keywords: Dimitri Shostakovich, Soviet Union, Ideological Control, Song of the Forests

1. Introduction

Dmitri Shostakovich was one of the most famous and yet censored composers of the Soviet Union. Can his music pieces created under ideological control ever be truly free? This leads to the research question of this essay: To what extent is Shostakovich's oratorio Song of the Forests a survival strategy of protecting his career under Stalinist ideological control rather than an artwork of genuine individual expression? I believe that the Song of the Forests represents Shostakovich's compromise with ideological control, with minimal traces of self-expression. It was more of an act of self-preservation than an artwork. This case study of Shostakovich's oratorio provides a window to observe how artistic creation resists or adapts to state control, inspiring us to investigate the effect of censorship on cultural diversity and artistic freedom.

2. Background

From the 1930s to the 1940s, the Soviet Union gradually tightened its ideological control over the production of all forms of art, including literature, music, and other visual arts. The state was expecting artworks to be Socialist Realistic and should be supportive of Stalinist ideologies. More and more artists faced pressure from state control and were forced to alter the content of their works. Artistic freedom has become more precious. Dmitri Shostakovich was one of the composers who faced the constant pressure of adapting his music to the state's demands. His career and his works went through a transformation from a genuine artistic expression into a political tool propagating Soviet values. By analysing Shostakovich's music, it can be seen how the oppressive regime under Stalin affected artistic freedom.

3. Literature review

3.1. The changing degree of ideological control in the Soviet Union

A lot of scholars have made investigations about Shostakovich and his music career under Stalin's regime. In Liam Kircher's investigation, he explained the shifting degree of surveillance and censorship on music. In the 1920s, which was the early stage of Stalin's reign, there was relatively much freedom in the music world in the Soviet Union. Different forms and styles (such as modernist music) were supported by the first leaders of the Soviet society [1]. When it was approaching the 1930s, the communist party leaned towards the idea of constructing a more monitored music world, where music was being criticized for its "formalist, bourgeois" features [1]. At this time, Shostakovich had just become famous in his music career, and his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was performed, gaining the audience's appreciation and support. According to Michael Robert Tirman, this opera could be a representative work of what "a composer would have developed very differently" if there wasn't such strict control over music from the state [2]. Despite the success of the opera, it soon received an anonymous critique after Joseph Stalin attended the opera production [2]. The opera was criticized for portraying "formalist" ideologies. This was the start of the pressure on Shostakovich's music career. During the following few years, the state continued to centralize control over music production. The government regarded all musical works as obliged to carry the task of promoting Soviet ideologies [1]. Socialist Realism became the official style of composition. Composers were demanded by the state-supported organization, the Composers' Union, to compose music works that follow Socialist Realism traditions. They would face denunciation if they didn't do so. The Great Terror began in 1937, when many composers had been questioned for their ideological status, and some of them were consequently imprisoned or executed [1]. In the same year, a Soviet composer named Nikolai Myaskovsky produced his *Sixteenth Symphony*, which was considered the "first masterpiece of Socialist Realist music" [3], elaborating the instructions on the state's expectations of music. During World War II, the government's control over the composers loosened, resulting in more freedom in artistic expression. However, after the war, the state started to restrict the doctrine again. Some composers were even expelled for their "formalist" music. The denunciation was enforced to finally become a method to serve the cosmopolitan ideal of the state [1].

3.2. Changes in Shostakovich's works

As the government tightened its control over composers' creations, Shostakovich's works, as well as his attitudes toward censorship, underwent some changes. In his early career, his music was affected by experimental, modernist, and western popular music (such as jazz and foxtrot). He wrote satirical and bold music works, including two operas, *The Nose* and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The two productions were either banned or criticized by the state, as they seemed to conflict with the Socialist Realism discipline [4]. The criticism, along with the oppression from the Composers' Union, has undermined Shostakovich's confidence in composing music and has caused a shift in his composition style. The denunciation split him apart from his family members and friends, forcing him to conform gradually to official doctrine. The fifth symphony was more conventional compared to the previous operas, and expressed some optimistic features that aligned with the Socialist Realism expectations. He gained back the acknowledgement from the Party through the new uncontroversial works, and even won the Stalin Prize in 1941 [4]. During wartime, Shostakovich composed three symphonies that depicted the tragedies and destruction of the war. The Party accepted the seventh and eighth symphonies, but was irritated by the ninth symphony as it didn't evoke the victory of the leader. After the war, Stalin aimed to "exclude Western influence", inducing Shostakovich's fear of execution [4]. He stopped composing new symphonies until the death of Stalin; instead, he wrote film music and other works that matched the state's discipline. After Stalin's death, he wrote powerful symphonies that condemned anti-Semitism.

3.3. Traces of personal expression in Shostakovich's works

Although Shostakovich adapted his music style to the official expectations under the terror, some scholars believe that he still preserved some traces of private protest in his works. White states that the fifth symphony contains hidden codes, and Shostakovich "mocked the authorities" through the techniques. Hope R Strayer points out that there is a lack of Russian folk music elements and heroic themes, and it does not portray nationalism explicitly [5]. Based on these features of Socialist Realist music, this symphony isn't the perfect model that fits the Socialist Realism doctrine. However, the Party still accepted and even praised this work. This is possibly because Shostakovich still applied the formal and traditional four-movement format and the triumph finale in this symphony, showing a surface-level conformity thus satisfying the authorities.

4. Primary sources discussion

The Soviet Union's harsh oppression of music can be proved through various primary resources. First, I will analyze the famous editorial article from the state-supported newspaper *Pravda*, *Muddle Instead of Music*, which shows the state's expectation of music production. In the article, there are explicit demands for music to carry cultural responsibilities. It states that "The power of good music to infect the masses has been sacrificed to a petty-bourgeois, 'formalist' attempt to create originality through cheap clowning." [6] This sentence emphasizes the state's opposition to formalism. The author also warned Shostakovich to adapt his compositions to features of "simplicity, realism, clarity of image", or it would "end very badly", which showcases the severity of not following the official style. Then the article starts criticizing Shostakovich's opera as "primitive and vulgar", accusing him and his work of ignoring "the Soviet audience's expectations in music" [6]. Overall, the article highlights the Party's control over music.

The official document of a state-supported organization, Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations – April 23, 1932, shows the organization's strict control over artistic productions. It claims the state's concern about the proletarian organizations (such as RAPP, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) changing from a platform to “mobilize the Soviet artists for Socialist constructions” to “an instrument for cultivating elitist withdrawal” which might cause “loss of contact with the political tasks and Socialist artists” [7]. This displays that the state required all forms of art to fulfill political functions, enforcing the importance of merging ideological propaganda into the arts. By abolishing these proletarian organizations and decreeing the formation of the official Union of Soviet Composers, the regime was able to centralize its control of music, surveilling the portrayal of Socialist Realistic and communist ideologies in compositions.

To discuss whether Shostakovich had completely conformed to the Party's disciplines and had abandoned his private expressions, I chose to analyze the oratorio *Song of the Forests*. There is a lack of literature about this music piece, and I found it interesting to investigate whether this oratorio is more of a survival strategy under ideological control or an artwork to express Shostakovich's patriotism. I will analyze this oratorio in the following aspects: instrumentation, melodies, and lyrics.

Firstly, the instrumentation of this oratorio can evoke the themes of hope and unity, which are two core elements of Socialist Realistic music. For example, in the fourth movement, “The Pioneers Plant the Forest”, the children's chorus is combined with the pizzicato strings (the strings are played in short, detached notes), eliciting a joyful mood in the audience. Their repetitive melody enhances the energetic mood, depicting a picture of these children pioneers planting trees enthusiastically in the forestation program. The trombone (marked as Tr-be in Fig. 1) in the background reinforces the hopeful sense of this movement. These instruments fuse together well with the children's chorus, inviting the audience to praise the active involvement of these young pioneers as well as the successful forestation program. This aligns with the Socialist Realistic requirements of portraying optimism, supporting the state's ideologies, and serving the masses.

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Tr-be

Хор

Пи.о - мер - всем при - мер - так у - же с рас - све - та!

И.се.ни.

div.

unis. arco.

pizz.

Archi

60

Tr-be

Хор

и.се.ни род - ную степь у - кра.си.ли, и бе - рез наш кол.хоз но - са.

div.

unis. arco.

Archi

67

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Figure 1. Dmitri Shostakovich, Song of the Forests, Op.81 (1949), bars 60-73, score excerpt [8]

Secondly, the melodies of this oratorio match the Socialist Realism ideas as they convey an optimistic feeling. The melodies are usually in conjunct motion, meaning that the notes mainly move in steps, creating a smooth feeling that is easy to follow. This fits the simplicity that the Party looked for. For example, in the first movement, “When the War Was Over”, the tenor line follows a stepwise, undulating melody, with many sustained notes (Fig. 2&3), building a stable and majestic sense. This is related to the theme of celebrating the post-war peace. The melody depicts the theme in an explicit way, thus fulfilling the demand from the Party to ensure that every audience can understand and feel the victory of the Soviet Union.

6

Cor. *tenuto*
Расср.
Р

Tr-ubl
Tuba *Р*

Timп. *Р*

Нас созо- дны.
дны.

ХОР
Тенора *Р*
Басы *Р*
На- ста- дит сол-неч-ный о- днь, на- ста- дит

V-ni I div.
V-ni II div.
V-la div.
V-c. div. *ad lib.*
C-b. *ad lib.*

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Figure 2. Dmitri Shostakovich, Song of the Forests, Op.81 (1949), bars 23-27, score excerpt [8]

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Figure 3. Dmitri Shostakovich, *Song of the Forests*, Op.81 (1949), bars 53-58, score excerpt [8]

Thirdly, the lyrics of this oratorio are propagandist and praise Stalin and his forestation campaign explicitly. The lyrics are written by Yevgeny Dolmatovsky, but Shostakovich participated in writing and adjusting some lines. The lyrics are filled with praise of the communist party and Stalin. For example, in the fifth movement, “The Young Communist go forth”, lines say: “Communism is our glory and honor.”, “Ah, do not disturb this glorious garden.” [9], which celebrates the Party and Stalin’s success in leading the forestation campaign. The simple words without many literary devices can easily deliver the patriotic and communist ideologies to the audience, fulfilling the Socialist Realism’s goal of serving the public. In addition, lines from the final movement, “Glory”, portray the hopeful mood. “The day of Communism is dawning!”, “The trees rise up majestically” not only glorifies Stalin and the forestation program but also expresses the optimistic expectation for the future. The lyrics align with most Socialist Realism features, making it an ideal political propaganda material.

The instrumentation, melodies, and lyrics are all straightforward, providing many significant elements of Socialist Realism principles. This is not similar to Shostakovich's other music pieces, which contain irony and satire. His early works- *The Nose* and *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* are two examples of his genuine artistic expression. Thus, I suggest that this oratorio wasn't

written to evoke his patriotism. Furthermore, the context and the adjustment to this oratorio after Stalin's death also supported my opinion. Shostakovich faced denunciation before writing this oratorio; hence, under the fear of being exiled, he had to write an official composition to earn the trust of the Party. Indeed, this oratorio won a Stalin Prize, symbolizing that Shostakovich had survived under the terror. After Stalin's death, Dolmatovsky deleted the praise of Stalin, which shows that the lyrics might not be genuine. Therefore, I argue that Shostakovich's *Song of the Forests* is more likely to be a survival strategy instead of an artwork of individual expression.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the Soviet regime constantly reinforced the oppression of composers, forcing them to follow the official style of music, which is Socialist realism. Shostakovich, as one of these composers, lived in fear and had to adapt his works to the doctrine. There were secret protests in some of his works- the Fifth Symphony is one example. However, as the degree of ideological control deepened, he compromised with the authorities and wrote non-controversial music, such as the *Song of the Forests*, to protect himself as well as his music career. This leads us to consider the trade-off relationship between creating art and surviving under oppression, thinking about the importance of artistic freedom.

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