



WHY DID STALIN DISLIKE SHOSTAKOVITCH?

History Research Project 2024



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Essay Topic

Why did Stalin dislike Shostakovich?

Research Questions

- How did Shostakovich's music go against what Stalin wanted for Soviet culture?
- How did Shostakovich handle with the censorship and pressure from Stalin's government?

Introduction

Stalin, a forceful and powerful totalitarian leader of the Soviet Union from 1920-1953 is mainly known for being an authoritarian and controlling figure. Like all totalitarian regimes, the control over what happens in the country, including what kind of music people would listen to, was immense. This would turn out to clash with Dmitri Shostakovich, a talented and renowned composer with a beautiful repertoire. Shostakovich's music would rarely suit what Stalin saw of Russia. This famous historical conflict has been iconic in the tense battle between music and politics.

According to Stalin, all good music should glorify Russia and focus on painting a facade of power, strength and unity. He wanted music to inspire pride in the people and show off the greatness of the Soviet Union. However, Shostakovich's music didn't always fit this ideal. Instead of praising Russia, his music sometimes includes topics considered tabu or criticising the government. Symphonies 4 to 9 are known to have embodied Shostakovich's efforts against Stalin's tyranny and have served as a demonstration of his struggle against political oppression. This clash between what Stalin wanted for Soviet culture and Shostakovich's musical expression eventually led to conflict as well as censorship.

However, despite the pressure from Stalin, Shostakovich did not let it get to his music or beliefs and would continue to compose. He was willing to face the risks of imprisonment, to express himself as honestly as possible through music. His act of rebellion has been iconic in art challenging authority.

Comparison

According to *Dmitri Shostakovich and the Soviet State*, Shostakovich's opera "Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk" was heavily criticised by Stalin. Eventually, it got so far that Stalin banned the opera, and Shostakovich was soon after excluded and

shunned. Everyone would read Stalin's review in the biggest daily newspaper, Pravda, owned by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Stalin's published review which labelled "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" as a "muddle instead of music" and criticising it for not glorifying Russia and its leadership enough. The opera's use of taboo themes and natural depiction of human emotions conflicted strongly with Stalin's vision for Soviet culture and future, causing the opera to be censored and discriminated against.

Similarly, *Stalin Didn't Like This Opera, but Audiences Still Do*, explores the chaotic reaction of "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" after Stalin's published review. Its subjects and themes of love, betrayal and tragedy went against Stalin's narrative of a successful Soviet society, causing him to describe it as "an ugly flood of confusing sound". When Shostakovich refused to follow the political expectations of his music his opera got banned and his artistic freedom as well as personal safety was threatened.

Both sources agree strongly in that "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" played a huge role in the conflict between Shostakovich's artistic expression and Stalin's totalitarian regime. Additionally, they both highlight the significance of how this came to shape both Shostakovich's career as well as the bigger perspective of resistance through arts and music in Soviet Russia.

Both sources cover Shostakovich's fight against censorship and political pressure relatively well. However, both sources could to some degree be biased. *Dmitri Shostakovich and the Soviet State* does provide a valuable insight of the political tensions and Shostakovich's career, but also undoubtedly leans towards emphasising Shostakovich's boldness and strength, while overlooking the complete relationship with Soviet authorities. On the other hand, *Stalin Didn't Like This Opera, but Audiences Still Do* offers a more complete portrayal of the reaction and responses of "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" as well as its consequence. But it also looks at the Metropolitan Opera's version and recent world events, which might make it biased towards modern times.

However, even though there's a possibility for bias, both sources still prove useful in understanding Shostakovich's rebelliousness as well as political censorship in Stalinist Russia. These sources, when properly looked at, help at giving a good understanding of how music and politics work together or conflict to influence history.

Evaluation

Shostakovich's experiences under Stalin's regime are very well detailed in *Dmitri Shostakovich and the Soviet State*. The source provides insights on both the artistic struggles as well as the political pressure put on him. The source refers to historical reports and currently ongoing analysis to provide as much context as possible and try to understand Shostakovich's opera "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk"'s reaction among Soviet authorities and by Josef Stalin. The source generally covers a lot of high points in Shostakovich's career and the atmosphere of culture in Soviet Russia.

However, it is very important to consider the potential bias in *Dmitri Shostakovich and the Soviet State*. The source shows very clearly Shostakovich as someone incredibly brave and as a strong figure fighting against oppression. And while his bravery does match with other analyses of Shostakovich's life, there may be certain essential details being lost. Such as how much Shostakovich would actually change his music to fit in with the political requirements. Furthermore, the source doesn't show any clear citation or references to other sources, proving it difficult to determine the source and its information as being reliable.

Stalin Didn't Like This Opera, but Audiences Still Do also provides an insight on how "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" was received by its audiences. Specifically, it focuses on the relevance of opera and geopolitical conflicts in the time of the premier. The source provides primary reports and analysis of the operas impact. There are even certain insights of musicians as well as directors who were involved in the production of the opera. Overall, I'd say this makes the quality of the information available relatively high, especially with its included detailed descriptions of the operas theme and significance.

However, *Stalin Didn't Like This Opera, but Audiences Still Do* potentially shows bias through its modern perspective and attention on recent events. The source goes on to discuss the opera's relevance in the context of the war in Ukraine. That, along with the source portraying Shostakovich as a heroic symbol for standing up against political oppression shows as a rather modern interpretation of the historical events in Russia.

In conclusion, both sources have their strengths and weaknesses. *Dmitri Shostakovich and the Soviet State* provides an extensive overview of how Shostakovich lived and was treated under Stalin's rule, but it may be biased when it comes to his musical defiance against the oppression Shostakovich faced. *Stalin Didn't Like This Opera, but Audiences Still Do* offers a very good

insight on how the opera "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" was viewed at the time but doesn't show particularly clearly a historical analysis and may be influenced by modern political events.

Conclusion

The War Symphonies provide an incredibly thorough perspective on why Stalin disliked Shostakovich's music and how he believed it opposed Soviet the culture and people. It also describes greatly how the political context of the time shaped the Soviet government.

Firstly, the music written by Shostakovich, in particular his symphonies, like the Fourth Symphony, went against the narrative of great prosperity lead by Stalin. The symphony was composed during the height of Stalin's terror and massacre in Russia, and it tried captured the grim hell on earth most experienced. While Stalin wanted to blind the population with a stable and progressive vision of the future, Shostakovich was depicting his experiences and was incorporating melancholic themes and dissonance.

Moreover, Shostakovich resistance in music, in the shape of expressing himself as part of the people through emotional honesty proved to conflict with Stalin directly. Stalin's government was trying to use music and art as a way to enforce propaganda to glorify Russia, its future and its leaders.

Shostakovich would try to evade the censorship and pressure from Stalinist authorities in a lot of ways. He was known by his close friends and family to often express irony and wit in his musical works. Most notably, he would mix compliance with defiance. Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, for example, was written in a way that made it easy to interpret in multiple ways. This allowed him to masque critique in his music.

Something remarkable about Shostakovich was his ability to survive under Stalin's falling regime. Despite the critique he faced and the banishment of some of his work Shostakovich still managed to produce inspiring work for the audiences of the time. Even through the political pressure, he did what he always sought to do with his work; to emphasize resistance to citizens as a citizen.

In conclusion, Stalin disliked Shostakovich primarily because his music went against the false visions advocated by Stalin and the Soviet regime. Shostakovich would aim to show the harsh realities and instability from within Soviet society. He would actively work against Stalin trying to maintain the illusion of unity and progress to the masses. And through Shostakovich

handling political censorship he was able to convey resistance through musical expression.

Sources

[Shostakovich and Stalin](#)

(introduction)

[Shostakovich against Stalin](#)

[Dmitri Shostakovich and the Soviet State](#)

(comparison and evaluation)

[Shostakovich: The composer who was almost purged](#)

[Stalin Didn't Like This Opera, but Audiences Still Do](#) (comparison and evaluation)

[Article: Official Culture and Cultural Repression: The Case of Dmitri Shostakovich](#)

[THE WAR SYMPHONIES Shostakovich Against Stalin](#)

[The War Symphonies - Shostakovich](#)

(conclusion)

[Shostakovich kills Stalin](#)