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*Combating Collaboration:
Shostakovich's Spontaneity and Soviet Suppression*

Leonard Bernstein characterizes the 20th century as the era of death and consequently the artistic culture addressed this 20th century dilemma with portrayals of the impending apocalypse. *Greed, Genocide, World War, hysteria, totalitarianism, repeat* formulate the genetic makeup of the century, and the culture responds accordingly. And there is no other space more than the Soviet Union where we can see how death is dealt with spontaneous acts of life.

Culture in the Soviet Union is a paradox in itself, which is to say that the Soviet Union relied on producing and maintaining a *party culture* while simultaneously dismantling the old and persecuting anything new. The precarious foundation of the Soviet Union is built on a conformist system where any deviation from the communist conscious is not only crossing an ideological line into anti-communism, but also an ethical and philosophical line into immorality. Antagonism, the Avant Garde, and provocative thought are demonized and repressed for non-conformity and for destabilizing the manufactured *party culture*. What is most curious about the Soviet Union case— along with other dictatorship-controlled nations who fervently repress the opposing culture— is the sliver of resistance to the nationalist culture through disguised acts of defiance that fly under the omnipresent Soviet overlord's radar. For the purpose of this essay, I will be using Dmitri Shostakovich as my case study for a camouflaged act of defiance in the face of the Soviet Union's censorship and violent abuse of power. I question if his *acts of defiance* were either *too-camouflaged*, or if his historically rebellious music was even meant to be defiant.

Rather I argue that Shostakovich's *Symphony no. 5* is merely an argument that modern harmonic composition can still be realistic, anti-bourgeois and *for the people* when thematic composition is evidently strict. *Symphony no. 5* is proof that ambiguous-tonality does not mean ambiguous-theme.

theme to an untrained ear takes precedence over harmonic composition.

This essay seeks to provide the historical background in which Shostakovich performed, his contemporary musical influences and finally the failure in his defiance and the answer to if he was trying to be insubordinate. This is to say that Shostakovich's early works are conforming to the *Socialist-realism*, but contemporary harmonic practices deemed too modern for Stalin snuck into his *Lady Macbeth* opera and his *deviancy* began. Yet his Fifth Symphony is proof of Shostakovich's ability to add nuance while still conform to Stalin.¹ Consequently, his political message is lost in an almost too-covert symphony that at its forefront wanted to please Stalin, in which it succeeds, yet the conversation of his second goal— dispersing an anti-Stalin message to the masses— is still open for discussion in its *success*. I question if Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony was met with public approval for its portrayal of the dismal state of Stalin- Soviet Russia in a rebellious manner, or if its success was merely based in the party's likeness towards his traditional, nationalistic themes.

The Communist Conscious:

Hannah Arendt categorizes totalitarianism as a total domination and control of citizens within a state given the populace is “reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other.”² This is to say, in

¹ This facet of my essay is curious because, as I will further discuss, Shostakovich's goal in his Fifth Symphony was conformity in a rebellious formalist manner— yet to an untrained ear, Shostakovich's disobedient undertones are completely overlooked.

² Arendt, 438.

a totalitarian state like the Soviet Union, the state relies on the elimination of plurality to turn the populace into one individual to be easier controlled. In the Soviet Union, Stalin accomplishes total control by doing exactly this via his crusade against anything not aligning with the official culture.³ “An *official culture* is a body of artistic work produced wholly or largely with public funds and subject to varying degrees of scrutiny for correctness by the state or the ruling party”⁴— and Soviet Russia had strict criteria for what is forbidden and allowed within the official culture that is also subjected to change. For example, the post-Bolshevik revolution culture hailed Avante Garde art and Cubo-Futurists praised for “[embracing] all aspects of art and life itself.”⁵ This movement was also indicative of what the Bolshevik revolution stood for where the art “is the spirit's protest against the materialism of modern times.”⁶ Bolstering the *collective communist conscious* is clear and present by the time Stalin rises to power:

"A Communist regime demands a Communist consciousness. All forms of life, morality, philosophy, and art must be re-created according to Communist principles. Without this, the subsequent development of the Communist Revolution is impossible.”⁷

This collective conscious is far less rigid and restricting compared to the conscious Stalin seeks to generate; yet nevertheless, Arendt’s argument stands that totalitarian states rely on removing cultural plurality and by 1925, the stage is set for Stalin to run with and abuse the idea of a communist conscious.

By 1922, Avant Garde ceased to be the official style of the revolution and art instead became ‘for the masses’ created by the state. Heroic realism became the new style that sought to “shape and organize the psychology of the generations to come.”⁸ Stalin’s grip on party

³ Kevin V. Mulcahy, 70.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Varvara Stepanova” (1919), cited in Mulcahy, 71.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Program Declaration of the Communist-Futurist (1919), cited in Mulcahy, 71.

⁸ Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (1924), cited in Mulcahy, 72.

controlled-mass-conformity tightened as he scorned, persecuted or forced into exile the Avante-Garde artists who formed their art with revolutionary passion who are now judged and scrutinized as *formalists* or non-conformist. Deemed as *cultural dissidents*, outspoken artists—authors, visual artists, musicians— or anyone in opposition to the party could choose between exile, labor camps or admittance into psychiatric hospitals.⁹ Stalin’s political strategy— as highlighted and analyzed in Arendt’s work¹⁰— is situated on the total domination of plurality, individualism, spontaneity, and opposition to the extreme point that even minor signs of opposition must die, leave the state, or be psychiatrically diagnosed with sluggish schizophrenia.¹¹ Stalin’s austerity and even paranoia towards dissidents highlights a crucial weakness in totalitarian states, which Arendt attributes to the mutual relationship between individuality, spontaneity, autonomy and freedom— where the first three are prerequisite eliminations for the total control of personal freedom.¹² Ergo, if conformity resides in eliminating individuality and autonomy, the anecdote to a totalitarian regime is spontaneity— or in the words of Arendt, “An agent’s ability to start something new *or produce novelty in the world*”¹³— an anecdote which Stalin understands could be utterly threatening to his regime. The elimination of spontaneity is ever so crucial in Stalin’s rule to the extent that any dissent— whether in art, music, or protest— must be either neutralized, removed and deported from the state entirely, or deemed as a mentally incapacitated theory and deranged in thought.

However, these sentiments of *class consciousness* and removal of opposition is neither novel nor exclusive to the Stalinist- Soviet Union. An important facet of totalitarian control— as

⁹ Report of the U.S. Delegation to Assess Recent Changes in Soviet Psychiatry, *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, Volume 15 (1989).

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, Meridian Book, Inc.

¹¹ Birk Engmann, “On the Origins of The Concept Of 'Latent Schizophrenia' In Russian Psychiatry.” (National Library of Medicine, 2021).

¹² Arendt, 438.

¹³ Arendt, 473.

Arendt ascertains— and consequently later rebellion lies in continual paradigm shifts of methodology in which standing-historical goals are achieved.¹⁴ Stalin extracts and exploits the ideas from the Lenin-era foundation (“We can only be right with and by the Party, for history has provided no other way of being in the right”¹⁵) and turns the ideas into a distorted logical process that becomes the justifying foundation for any new policy that seeks to fulfill party ideas— a similar cycle of Lenin’s exploitation and foundational use of Karl Marx.

Understanding the cycle is crucial to understanding how and why Soviet state-culture morphs into extreme totalitarian control by the 1930s.¹⁶ Stalin continues this practice where he takes Lenin’s fears and ideas from works such as *The April Thesis* and formulates new logic from fears like: “the proletariat has insufficient class-consciousness and organization,”¹⁷ into logic-based policies to alleviate fears or accomplish historical goals.

“What matters is to transfer power to the proletariat and revolutionary peasantry... What is needed, first of all, is to purge thoroughly all government departments and institutions... and to place loyal members of the working class and the peasantry everywhere. Then, and only then, will it be possible to say that power has been transferred to the Soviets centrally and locally.”¹⁸

¹⁴ For example, Stalin (and Hitler) “Did not add a single new thought to the ideas and propaganda slogans of their movements,” rather, Stalin simultaneously participated in the ideological cycle of totalitarian logic while also exploiting and developing his predecessor’s ideology into a *logical process* in itself. This is to say that Stalin was no longer primarily concerned with the idea behind the party— like Lenin and other revolutionaries were— but rather the “logical process that could be developed from them,” and eventually turned into the foundation for *how the idea is carried out*.” I say that Stalin also actively participates in the ideological-to-logical process because he too is merely repeating the cycle that his predecessors arose from— a cycle starting with an idea which eventually builds into an self-justifying logic which gives foundation to both the idea and the means to accomplish the idea while also establishing that any new logic or means to satisfy idea must arise from the old given the old idea is consequently the *logical* foundation for the new.

¹⁵ Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, cited in Arendt, 473.

¹⁶ The domino effect of logically manipulating the masses to produce dispensable “victims and executioners,” is equally predicated on fearing contradiction and fearing a potential relapse into chaos. For Lenin, this propagated fear was a return to the “old Adam of wage-slavery,” resting on Marist idea and “belief that history progressed through clearly defined stages [and] tasked to adjust its political aspirations to the historically possible at any given stage.” Lenin’s use of Marxist ideas to formulate a fear in which only he and his political system can alleviate via a logical process is what Arendt calls the “tyranny of logicity”— where compulsion of total terror... and the self-coercive force of logical deduction...[are needed] to set up the terror-ruled movement into motion and keep it moving.

¹⁷ Lenin, “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution.” Published April 7, 1917, in *Pravda* No. 26. From Lenin’s *Collected Works* (Progress Publishers, Moscow: 1972).

¹⁸ Stalin, “Soviet Power,” (October 13, 1917). From Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow: 1954.

Stalin's clear and present shift to formulate ideas into logical practices seen above is indicative of the Soviet and totalitarian-state struggle to maintain power by continually shifting what the masses ought to fear and what logical process is best for easing fear by means of following the state's logically-founded processes of rule. This phenomenon is illustrated clearly when the Party's culture shifted from Avante-Garde to traditional Russian artistic forms.¹⁹ Artistic formalism— although praised early in the century for being modern, experimental, innovative and in regard to Soviet propaganda, even enthusiastic for the socialist regime— became the enemy because its relation to modernism aesthetics “characterized by a vision of the world... antithetical to socialist realism's principles of truthfulness.”²⁰ Strengthening party control and conformity meant stricter limits to the spheres of influence and by the early 1920s the modernism-movement that gave rise to flourishing pro-Bolshevik poetry, futurism, art academies, constructivist architecture and other Avante-Garde public works were dismantled and demonized vis à vis state-controlled censorship that only became harsher and more traditional as Stalin's need for conformity grew out of Lenin's original logic:²¹

“Art belongs to the people. It must penetrate with its deepest roots into the very midst of the toiling masses. It must be intelligible to these masses and moved by them. It must unite the feeling, thought, and will of these masses and elevate them. It must awaken in them artists and develop them.”²²

Although Lenin reimposed censorship within weeks of the revolution, Stalin takes Leninian ideas and in an extremist manner, formulates them into equally harsher practice. And by the

¹⁹ Stalin's shift is paradoxical yet predictable given the Soviet history of creating an enemy and fear from the ‘old’ in attempts fulfill present objectives. The shift's paradox lies in how the ‘old’— post revolution modernistic Avante-Garde— is modern in the artistic and Lenin-contemporary sense, yet Stalin wages war on modernism by bringing back even older traditions.

²⁰ Quote from t Dmitri Markov cited in Mulcahy, 76.

²¹ Gordon B. Smith, “The Politics of Culture: Chapter 12,” in *Soviet Politics* (Palgrave, London: 1988). p. 273 & 274.

²² Clara Zetkin, “Reminiscences of Lenin,” (1924). Published by International Publishers (1934). Transcribed & marked up by Martin Fahlgren for the Marxists' Internet Archive (2012).

1930s, Stalin quest to control all artistic affairs was complete with music being his last conquest. Situated within the complex changing culture of Soviet Russia lies an example of a once praised “darling of the Soviet cultural establishment,” turned deviant-formalist-rebel then again praised as a “hero of Soviet culture.”²³ Shostakovich’s life, music and legacy reveals the shifting state-culture of Stalinist-Russia while also standing as an indicative pillar of art prevailing in perilous cultural-repressive regimes.

The Soviet Darling:

The curious case of Shostakovich is characterized by the party’s initial love for the young artist and later scrutinization of a publicly-loved artist. His initial work portrayed fervently revolution and party ideas as his First Symphony (1925) commemorated the Bolshevik Revolution and his Second (1927) honored International Workers Day. Shostakovich’s tonality in his initial work coincided with Stalin’s socialist realism that required structure, clear positive tonality, direct emotional expression, and intelligible for the masses.²⁴ Under official doctrine, state-sponsored music must have nationalistic sentiments and be simple enough for the masses to understand. Adhering to the socialist-realism-shift would not be hard for Shostakovich given his “training at the Leningrad Conservatory in the tradition of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov,”²⁵ and although his first two symphonies were modern and innovative, themes of pro-revolution sentimentality remained at the forefront of public approval of the longstanding supporter of the Bolshevik revolution.²⁶ However, it is Shostakovich’s early manipulation with traditional harmonic practices that suggest his early work was merely experimental and his later

²³ Mulcahy, 72-74.

²⁴ Mulcahy, 73.

²⁵ William Hussey, “Triadic Post-Tonality and Linear Chromaticism in the Music of Dmitri Shostakovich.” (MTO Journal of the Society for Music Theory: 2003).

²⁶ Mulcahy, 74.

not an act of rebellion, but a continual experimentation of axis tonality²⁷— a growing practice post-Mahler.²⁸

Both Stravinsky in the *Symphony of Psalms* and Shostakovich create polarity and conflict between its two constituent triads, achieved via axis tonality which at its most basic sense allows for the use of all twelve notes to further harmonic themes. Shostakovich's tonality, however, is not as ambiguous as that of Mahler who composes many symphonies with a *progressive* tonal scheme;²⁹ not as Avante Garde as later Stravinsky composition; and yet not as concentric as the classical tonal tradition like Beethoven.³⁰ Situated between modernism and classical tradition, Shostakovich's tonality is reminiscent of Bela Bartok's experiment to use all twelve-tones and still be tonal.³¹ Tonality is removed altogether by some, who like Litz³² and later Schoenberg, view tonality's limits and use were stretched and became too indistinct for unifying western music.³³ While pro-tonal theorists like Heinrich Schenker deem tonality as the sole law of Nature,³⁴ conformists such as Sergei Prokofiev, nevertheless followed either the *Law of Nature* or Soviet-culture laws to produce pieces strict, clear, and diatonic in tonality.³⁵ Shostakovich is again positioned in between two more influential movements: atonality and the Soviet tonal

²⁷ Some music theorists suggest Shostakovich's 'experimental and modern' sound derives from playing with and stretching tonality, e.g., Hussey.

²⁸ Hussey, "Triadic Post-Tonality and Linear Chromaticism in the Music of Dmitri Shostakovich."

²⁹ Gustav Mahler's Second Symphony begins in C minor and concludes in E-flat major— an example of tonal progression.

³⁰ Beethoven is indicative of classical concentric tonality as his Fifth Symphony begins in C minor and ends in C major.

³¹ Hungarian composer and pianist (1881-1945) who in attempts to combine Hungarian folk music with classical tradition, used all twelve tones yet remained within a tonality system to prove to Schoenberg that use of the twelve tones does not have to be in atonal. Kip Montgomery, "Schenker and Schoenberg on Harmonic Tonality." (*Indiana Theory Review*: 1994) p. 54-57.

³² Franz Liszt's *Bagatelle sans tonalité* (1885) is often credited for being one of first atonal works

³³ Carl Dahlhaus, *Studies on the Origin of Harmonic Tonality*, trans. Robert O. Gjerdingen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.13.& Montgomery, 60.

³⁴ Montgomery, 57.

³⁵ Sergei Prokofiev created the children's symphony *Peter and the Wolf* (1936) which was hailed for its Soviet-moral message to the youth. Harlow Robinson "Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf is 50 Years Old," (*The New York Times*: 1985).

conformists. Like any artist, influence is inescapable; yet in Shostakovich's case, the influences that materialize in his work most predominantly is the difference between life or death.

It is not the absence of tonality in Shostakovich that deemed him *formalist*, rather the complex dialogue in which the tones operate, tell a story, and react to each other. It is important to note here that while many see Shostakovich as an idealistic, modernistic deviant, his tonal is what some, like Mark DeVoto, call the *Russian Harmony*.³⁶ Categorized from their use of the submediant vis à vis emphasizing the sixth in adjunct with the tonic triad, composers like Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky and later Shostakovich all partake in the history of the *Russian Harmony*. By providing alternative tonal focus to the submediant, a combined-major-minor- *super-key* is created by this an alternative tonal focus to the tonic function in an ultimate two tonic harmony: the *Russian Harmony*.³⁷ DeVoto suggests this Russian sound derives from earlier combinations of Russian folk music into classical themes as seen in pieces by Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, where tonal paring of the tonic and the submediant conveys a *super-key*.³⁸

Muddle Instead of Music:

This traditional Russian folk-music symbolized the joining of Neoclassical and traditional Russian music, and I argue Soviet-culture likened to this mix given its still tonal strictness and nationalist themes. This is why Shostakovich was originally praised for his early work and first through third symphonies that joined in the Russian Harmony tradition. And it is not until his operatic opus 29, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, where his tonality stretches to the likeness of Schoenberg, Mahler, Chopin and Stravinsky, that Shostakovich is ridiculed for ambiguity in

³⁶ Mark DeVoto, "The Russian Submediant in the Nineteenth Century." *Current Musicology* 59: (1995). 48–76.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Mark DeVoto, cited in Stephen C. Brown, "Axis Tonality and Submediant in the Music of Shostakovich," (MTO Journal of the Society for Music Theory: 2009).

theme and tone. Curious enough the *Pravda* piece that labeled this opera “Muddle Instead of Music,” is not published until two years after the opera’s original performance in 1934.³⁹

Nonetheless, his opera violated the major guidelines for operatic composition outlined in a previous *Pravda*-published decree,⁴⁰ and on January 28, 1936, Shostakovich became publicly humiliated and scrutinized in the “Muddle Instead of Music” piece, casting *Lady Macbeth* “for formalism, the absence of melody, and a pessimistic and immoral story.”⁴¹ It is fair to say that Stalin and the cultural ministers’ opinion on *Lady Macbeth* may derive from its ambiguity in tone, theme, and melody.⁴² When a composer is not only manipulating the tonic but also using the axis triad tonic practice, the music becomes more provocative. This is to say that Shostakovich’s use of all twelve tones in an axis triad allows for more tones and harmonies to have the dominant tonic voice which opens more possibilities for narratives and themes, while also introducing more subdominant or counter-pole characters. For example, C and F# are both tonic, on the same axis, and oppositely still dominant voices— the pro and antagonist or lovers or the past and the future, the possibilities are endless, and the variety of expression and messages are likewise. This is where I and others argue Stalin’s hatred for *Lady Macbeth* comes from: the openness and ambiguity of op. 29 and the potential for the music’s message to be understood as something not *Soviet- Realism*. The field’s argument split on whether this was accidental or purposefully rebellious towards Stalin’s cultural decree. My argument falls on the

³⁹ Mulcahy, 73.

⁴⁰ Some of the guidelines for the new state music are: strict and evident tonality, a positive plot, a socialist plot, and the music must be realistic.

⁴¹ Ibid. Mulcahy also asserts that there is a large opinion that Stalin himself wrote the *Pravda* article that demonized *Lady Macbeth*, but even though there are many others who believe this, I have not found sufficient evidence to argue this subpoint.

⁴² A growing practice of Shostakovich’s contemporaries, as stated before

former mostly because of Shostakovich's swift removal of his Fourth Symphony from performance.⁴³

After his initial criticism for *Lady Macbeth*, Shostakovich “Essentially, cut his aesthetics to meet the new Stalinist fashion,” and began his next work next entitled “A Soviet Artist's Reply to Just Criticism.”⁴⁴ The *Pravda*'s slander casted Shostakovich “with the label *enemy of the people*... ‘and I don't need to explain what the label meant in those days.’”⁴⁵ Shostakovich in his memoir is referring to the Party's violent response to cultural deviants who like Shostakovich's own friend and patron, Vsevolod Meyerhold, *not-so-mysteriously disappears* in the purges of 1936-39.⁴⁶ It is fair to say that Shostakovich's fear of Stalin made him cut his Fourth, and his Fifth showcases the revert to the more classical and Russian themes using the *Russian Harmony*. He writes in the classical tonal sonata form and Fifth Symphony is filled with gusto, Soviet patriotism, and positivity towards the future. However, throughout this seemingly communist conscious cultural symphony, Shostakovich added his modernist touch to some portions. He plays with axis tonality, stench harmonies, and even adds irony into the mix. Nonetheless, he places great emphasis on the first tonic and the *Soviet-Power-voice* which make his Fifth sound Russian, Soviet, and power-hungry. Consequently, when the Leningrad Symphony played his Fifth on its opening night in 1937, it was praised. It is said that everyone in the symphony hall, including Stalin himself, had tears in their eyes. The *Pravda*, Stalin, and the public praised his Fifth. So, what can be said?— was his Fifth following the classical-Soviet-culture music and his opera was accidentally too modern; or were his opera and fifth purely rebellious act of defiance against the soviet-conscious?

⁴³ Mulcahy, 70-74.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 74.

⁴⁵ Shostakovich, *Testimony*. From Mulcahy, 73.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion:

When Schoenberg moved away from tonality, his work was indicative of World War I's the destruction which removed Europeans from their homes as Schoenberg upheaved the home key of tonic.⁴⁷ Whether or not Shostakovich was attempting to create the same effect with his ambiguous tone and slight irony is still debatable in the field.⁴⁸ However, I argue that Shostakovich's First and Second Symphony reveal his prospective moves towards *accidental modernism* that are displayed in his Fifth and later his re-visited Fourth. And when the modernism was perceived by Stalin and the public, Shostakovich backpaddled by removing his Fourth and adding extra patriotism in his Fifth. The extra patriotism is curious because by the Fifth's finale, the Soviet-Culture theme is almost too much and even monotonous. C strings sounding like machine-guns, timpani turn into soldier marches, and sole flutes become the voice of hope. While we cannot know what Shostakovich wanted to accomplish with his Fifth, we can nonetheless view his work as an act of individual spontaneity—the anecdote Arendt says can combat totalitarianism. Shostakovich *may* have created rebellious music, but all we can say for sure is that he produced a camouflaged act of defiance—by adding touches of modernism—into a very traditional Soviet symphony so well that Stalin approved. His Fifth is still a mystery but an act of creative spontaneity, nonetheless.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Hussey.

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- Stalin's ideas may not have changed, but the process of which he would bring his ideas into fruition did change.*
- "The honor of bringing about this general overhauling and general cleansing of the Augean stables of the Second International fell to Leninism
- The honor of bringing about this general overhauling and general cleansing of the Augean stables of the Second International fell to Leninism (Joseph Stalin, *The Foundations of Leninism*