

### **Neil Edmunds**

Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, Oxford University Press: New York 2000, 464 pp.

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975) has become one of the twentieth-century's most popular composers. Laurel Fay is undoubtedly correct to end her biography of the composer *Shostakovich: A Life* with the claim that 'Enjoying ever increasing popularity and critical appreciation, Shostakovich's musical legacy now seems certain to endure well into the future'. Hardly a day goes by without some of his music being performed on the radio, and he is a favourite with record companies and concert planners. Laurel Fay suggests several reasons for the growth of interest in Shostakovich's music over the last two decades. Some are purely musical, such as 'festering dissatisfactions with "serialism" and the musical avant-garde had reached breaking point', and 'Western performers and audiences were ready and eager to explore and embrace more accessible, more 'obviously "communicative" music, music not ashamed of its audible links to the traditions of the past'. It is therefore ironic that with the passing of the USSR, the anti-serialist pronouncements of Soviet cultural ideologues (and Shostakovich himself for that matter) branded reactionary in the West at the time are finally being adhered to.

Other reasons suggested by Laurel Fay for Shostakovich's popularity are political. They include 'the headline-grabbing defection of the composer's son, Maxim, and his grandson Dmitriy, in Germany in 1981', and 'the publication of Solomon Volkov's *Testimony*, a provocative book purporting to be the composer's memoirs, in 1979'. The latter is of particular significance, since few composers have posthumously been the source of such violent controversy amongst scholars as Shostakovich, and the debate centres largely on the authenticity of *Testimony*, or *Testimony. The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov* to give it its full title. Such is the passion aroused by this debate – justifiably dubbed the 'Shostakovich wars' – that it was deemed significant enough to be discussed on national television (BBC 2's *Newsnight* programme).

Until the publication of *Testimony*, Shostakovich had been perceived as the personification of all that was positive in Soviet artistic life. He was a model citizen-composer who decided to remain in the country while others defected to the West, including Solomon Volkov. His allegiance to the regime was illustrated by his socialist-realist music (i.e. music that was accessible to the politicians and often containing an overt propaganda message); he

was content to sign official edicts, including the denunciation of Andrey Sakharov in 1973; he proved the USSR's ideal representative at numerous international conferences and colloquia. It was also a source of great pride to the authorities that Shostakovich could truly be described as a product of the Soviet musical education system, having entered the Petrograd Conservatory in 1919. In *Testimony*, however, the composer is presented as a musical dissident and latter-day 'yurodivy' ('holy fool') who deliberately incorporated double meanings into his music in order to satirise the state and express his life-long anti-Communist beliefs. Consequently, even some of his most overtly propagandistic works are really protests against the Soviet leadership and system. The Eleventh Symphony (*The Year 1905*) (1956-7), for example, did not commemorate the victims of Tsarist oppression during the 1905 Revolution, but according to the composer via Volkov 'deals with contemporary themes'. These 'contemporary themes' turned out to be the Hungarian Uprising according to acquaintances of the composer. The signatures have been explained in the wake of *Testimony* by claims that he signed whatever papers were put in front of him without necessarily agreeing with them, reading them, or even writing them on occasions.

Not surprisingly in the context of the Cold War, the publication of *Testimony* was a *cause celebre* and gleefully exploited for propaganda purposes by the anti-Soviet lobby. The image *Testimony* presents of the omniscient artist secretly battling and mocking the totalitarian state while waiting for the secret police to come knocking also attracted filmmakers and playwrights with Tony Palmer's *Testimony* and David Pownall's *Masterclass* both loosely based on the book. It soon became clear, though, that two wider issues than whether or not the Soviet Union's leading composer was a willing pawn of the Kremlin or life-long dissident were at stake. Firstly, *Testimony* raised the fundamental question over whether meaning – particularly political meaning – could be conveyed or evoked in as abstract an art form as music. This has long been a matter for discussion, but particularly so over the last fifteen years or so thanks to practitioners of what is controversially branded 'the new musicology' (Richard Leppert, Susan McClary, John Shepherd and Rose Subotnik amongst others) who emphasise the political, social, linguistic and philosophical ramifications of music rather than concentrate on the notes alone. Secondly, *Testimony* raised the question of whether Soviet-style state control of the arts and artists' lives was a positive or negative phenomenon. This of course is an emotive issue that depends largely on one's political persuasion. The disadvantages are obvious, but irrespective of politics, one wonders how many struggling artists in the West would have rejected the guaranteed income, accommodation, public exposure, and adulation that the Soviet system offered Shostakovich. Even the most anti-Soviet of commentators can also not fail to notice how the financial crisis that currently bedevils artistic life in the states of the Former Soviet Union contrasts with the situation that existed during the Soviet period.

However, it was not long before doubts were raised over the probity of *Testimony*. Laurel Fay was one of the first to doubt its veracity in an article published in *Russian Re-*

view (Vol. 39, No. 4, 1980) that made her name as a Shostakovich scholar. In it she noted that all but one of the sections of the book began with virtual word-for-word transcriptions of earlier writings by Shostakovich. This contradicted Solomon Volkov's claims to have arbitrarily constructed the memoir as seemed appropriate out of notes he took from the dying composer. Shostakovich was also notoriously reluctant to talk about his music in anything but vague generalisations, and disparagingly compared such discussions 'to blabbing about a lover', as Laurel Fay points out in *Shostakovich: A Life*. The plot thickened when it became clear that Solomon Volkov had destroyed his original notes and claimed to have sold the Russian typescript which included Shostakovich's signatures to a collector. Consequently, several eminent scholars, including Malcolm Hamrick Brown, Christopher Norris and Richard Taruskin followed Laurel Fay in questioning his intentions, and more than once the word 'fraud' has been mentioned. Questions have also been asked about some of Solomon Volkov's other activities that are similar if not entirely identical to *Testimony*. His *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky* (1998), for instance, has provoked disquiet as the letter from Brodsky's literary executors (TLS 2/10/1998) and review of the book (TLS 12/2/1999) illustrate. Furthermore, the caution with which scholars must approach memoir sources on Soviet matters in general, not only *Testimony*, has recently been emphasised by the case of *Special Tasks* (1994). *Special Tasks* were the memoirs of the 'spymaster' Pavel Sudoplatov and used most notably by the late Dmitry Volkogonov in his biographies of Trotsky and Stalin before they were found to be fabricated.

It is therefore perhaps not entirely coincidental that two of the anti-Volkov camp, Profs. Brown and Taruskin, are amongst those who heaped advance praise on *Shostakovich: A Life*. More surprising (and compelling) would it have been if this advance praise had emanated from the equally vociferous pro-Volkov camp. Its battle headquarters is the web site 'Music under Soviet Rule' (<http://www.siue.edu/~aho/musov/musov.html>), its main platform is the journal named after Shostakovich's musical signature *DSCH*, and its most belligerent representative is the late Ian MacDonald. Ian MacDonald's book *The New Shostakovich*, published in 1990, largely follows the Volkov line in presenting the composer as a dissident. His numerous articles also include detailed rebuttals of Laurel Fay's criticisms of *Testimony* and her account (in *The New York Times* 14/4/1996, Section 2) of the circumstances surrounding the composition of the song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* (1948). These criticisms are repeated in *Shostakovich Reconsidered* (1998), a detailed (755 pages) and earnest attempt both to defend Solomon Volkov and attack his detractors, edited by Allan Ho and Dmitry Feofanov, two other prominent members of the pro-Volkov camp. The fact that the latter is a lawyer as well as a concert pianist is particularly apt bearing in mind the amount of abuse that has been traded during the Shostakovich wars.

As a result of the Shostakovich wars and the composer's legendary status in his own lifetime, Shostakovich scholarship is anything but 'in its infancy', as Laurel Fay claims. There are those indeed who believe that the scholarly obsession with Shostako-

vich, which can be dated back to at least the first English-language biography of the composer published in 1943 and even earlier in the USSR, is an unhealthy (if understandable) phenomenon. It overshadows other important aspects of Soviet musical life, and obscures other Soviet composers' activities, with the exception of Prokofiev and perhaps latterly Alfred Schnittke. What earlier scholars of the composer did not have to endure, however, was the vitriolic tone that characterises the Shostakovich wars. Even being asked to review a book about the composer today let alone write his biography can be likened to receiving a poisoned chalice, especially when the biographer is a key figure in the controversy. It is no wonder that when one's integrity is constantly being questioned and one's ideas subject to violent criticism, as is the case with Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* took almost a decade to come to fruition.

The length of time it has taken to complete *Shostakovich: A Life* can also be explained by the practical problems of writing about Shostakovich. As Dr. Fay points out, there is a lack of reliable sources, and much of the primary-source material is inaccessible to the scholar, because it remains in private hands. Have these problems been overcome, and has the wait been worth it? Generally speaking, the answer to both these questions in my opinion is a resounding YES. Laurel Fay has produced an outstanding volume that supersedes all other biographies of the composer in any language by a long way, and it is a huge testimony to her scholarship. Its main virtue lies in the author's belief that 'Hasty attempts to assimilate the new revelations... into revisionist interpretations of Shostakovich and his music have until now outstripped the basic research and necessary to back up any sweeping pronouncements'. Consequently, 'basic research and fact-finding' is the hallmark of *Shostakovich: A Life*, as illustrated by the 57 pages of footnotes. Laurel Fay goes into scrupulous detail over how she treated her source material in order, no doubt, to defend herself from those who will be going through the text of *Shostakovich: A Life* with a fine-tooth comb in search of weapons for the next instalment of the Shostakovich wars. Thanks to her fastidiousness we have for the first time a dependable source to turn to for information about this most enigmatic of figures.

Laurel Fay writes in a self-effacing way that less sympathetic commentators might describe as 'dry' or 'dull'. However, self-effacement can be advantageous, as Stephen Walsh's fine biography of Stravinsky illustrates, and as far as I am concerned it is a virtue of *Shostakovich: A Life*, for it contrasts refreshingly with the intemperate language that has recently been a feature of Shostakovich scholarship. The fast pace of change that characterised Soviet culture until the mid-1960s also militates against dullness. This is one of the advantages of writing about Soviet cultural history, and obviously cannot be credited to Laurel Fay, but where *Shostakovich: A Life* excels is that it conveys a sense of the unexpected (and illogical) that was such a feature of Soviet culture. Like the composer and millions of other Soviet citizens, one could never guess what was going to happen next, particularly during the chapters that cover the period of the Great Terror (1936-1939) and the late 1940s. As Laurel Fay

emphasises, the latter was an even more uncertain time for artists than the former. This was the period when they along with other members of the intelligentsia were singled-out for official criticism thanks to the anti-cosmopolitan campaign orchestrated by Stalin's cultural commissar Andrey Zhdanov.

Not surprisingly in light of the above, Laurel Fay provides us with a scrupulously balanced appraisal of the composer which fits neatly with her main argument that Shostakovich's life was more complex than the crude debates over *Testimony* would lead us to believe. The overall image of the composer presented in *Shostakovich: A Life* is not the dissident of *Testimony* or the Hero of Socialist Labour of Soviet propaganda. It is of a patriotic individual who like many others felt threatened by the system, but at the same time was able to use it to his advantage. Continuing in the spirit of objectivity, Laurel Fay also notes both the positive and negative features of Shostakovich's character. A particular example of the former was his propensity to use his status to try and help those who were under fire from the state, such as Lina Prokofiev and the composer Moisey Vainberg, despite the obvious dangers to himself and his family. Yet this was the same person who deviously (and falsely) claimed that his *Tahiti Trot*, an orchestral arrangement of Vincent Youmans's *Tea for Two*, had been composed for the ballet *The Golden Age* in order to avert criticism from the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM). However, by doing so, he knowingly subjected the conductor Nikolay Malko to the wrath of RAPM, which was particularly influential at the time.

Reference to RAPM also raises the subject of the many paradoxes and contradictions that characterised the composer's activities and pronouncements, since his relationship with the group was ambiguous to say the least. As this particular case illustrates, and throughout *Shostakovich: A Life*, Laurel Fay notes the ambiguities and contradictions, but usually makes no attempt to explain them. It is of course possible to write an interpretative biography of Shostakovich as Ian MacDonald has shown, but Laurel Fay's decision to place the emphasis on narrative rather than interpretation is both welcome and prudent. Students of Shostakovich have been crying out for a biography of the composer that is not blighted by political prejudices that are more to do with the Cold War than music, and we finally have it. In light of the problem of obtaining primary-source material, it is also eminently sensible of Laurel Fay not to draw rash and possibly inaccurate conclusions based on insufficient evidence, but better to wait until the evidence becomes available. She has not been reticent in expressing her opinions about Shostakovich in the past, and will no doubt be equally as forthright in the future. There is a time and occasion for everything, however, and Laurel Fay has chosen the right moment to show restraint.

This is not to say that *Shostakovich: A Life* is completely devoid of interpretation. Laurel Fay is prepared to draw conclusions and pass judgement when she believes sufficient evidence is available to back her opinions up. She continues to argue, for example, that *Testimony* is 'a poor source for the serious biographer' and 'highly anecdotal', the con-

troversty over the book is 'far from resolved', and *Shostakovich Reconsidered* (see above) 'raises as many new questions as it purports to answer'. Several of the contentious issues in *Testimony* are also discussed. For instance, she questions the claim that the finale of the Fifth Symphony (1937) was deliberately composed in a restrained fashion to give the impression of rejoicing under duress in order to make an anti-Stalinist gesture citing the various published tempi for the coda as evidence. Conductors who worked with Shostakovich, such as Aleksandr Gauk and the composer's son Maxim, adopted the quicker (and thus more joyous-sounding) tempo, while the composer himself favoured the quicker speed after hearing Leonard Bernstein's performance of the symphony in 1959. It is also suggested that the song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* might not be Shostakovich's protest against late-Stalinist anti-Semitism, but the composer's attempt to protect himself in the wake of criticism by Zhdanov at the first Congress of the Composers' Union in February 1948 by composing precisely the sort of tuneful, folk-inspired music the authorities wanted to hear. The delay in the work's performance until after the death of Stalin was a prudent decision on the composer's part in light of the escalation of the anti-Semitic campaign at the time of its planned premiere in early February 1949.

Laurel Fay also found no evidence to corroborate the claim in *Testimony* that the scherzo of the Tenth Symphony (1953) was a musical portrait of Stalin, or that the Eleventh Symphony had anything to do with Hungary. With reference to the latter, she notes that the 'chronology of composition, specificity of musical materials, and dearth of reliable first-person testimony' all militated against the argument, and most of Shostakovich's contemporaries including Anna Akhmatova and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn accepted the symphony at face value on first hearing. With regard to the issue of music and meaning in general – and with specific reference to the Seventh Symphony (1941), Laurel Fay quotes the composer claiming that 'real music, is never attached literally to a theme'. On the subject of the documents Shostakovich signed, she notes that he did not abdicate 'responsibility for everything attributed to his pen', and 'willingly accepted some commissions to provide articles and reviews on topics – usually musical – of special interest to him'. The composer also closely vetted documents ghostwritten by friends, and provided 'talking points' in his own hand for official speeches.

However, the primary aim of *Shostakovich: A Life* is not to debate issues raised by *Testimony*, but to provide information about the composer's life. In this respect particular praise should be awarded to the chapters dealing with the 1920s, since they shed light on Shostakovich's activities during a period that we know comparatively little about. Shostakovich allegedly describes the period as his 'misty youth' in *Testimony*, and that is about as far as we get. The later chapters, on the other hand, are stronger on personal matters, such as the composer's battle with ill health. In general, however, *Shostakovich: A Life* is a biography of the composer's public life in terms of the circumstances surrounding the composition and performance of his music, rather than an exposé of his pri-

vate life. As a result no doubt of the lack of sources and Shostakovich's natural reticence, we learn very little about his relationship to other members of his family or about the family members themselves. It would also have been interesting to find out more about Shostakovich's activities as First Secretary of the Russian branch of the Composers' Union, since he expended a lot of time and energy over them, and how he coped with the demands of public office. He was elected a deputy in the Supreme Soviet for the town of Gorky and a member of Leningrad City Council at various moments during his life.

*Shostakovich: A Life* will disappoint those who are seeking an in-depth analysis of the compositional elements of Shostakovich's music. Laurel Fay seems to be in agreement with Ian MacDonald's claim that 'value-free examination of that limited portion of the music which is representable by the score ... cannot ... by itself tell us anything of real consequence about this composer's [i.e. Shostakovich's] music'. Consequently, very little score analysis is undertaken in *Shostakovich: A Life*, and literature devoted primarily to the theoretical aspects of musicology are excluded from the bibliography. Nevertheless, the bibliography is still very impressive, and is supplemented by a list of Shostakovich's compositions and glossary of names. The work list is basically a reprint of the work-list compiled by Laurel Fay for *The New Grove Russian Masters*, Vol. 2 (1986), but unlike its predecessor lacks the original Russian titles of works. The glossary of names will be particularly useful for both the specialist and general reader, and it complements rather than repeats the glossary provided by Elizabeth Wilson in her excellent collection of reminiscences *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*. Inevitably, though, there are some omissions, such as the composers Aleksandr Davidenko (two of whose pieces Shostakovich orchestrated) and Nikolay Peiko (Shostakovich's assistant at the Moscow Conservatory from 1943 to 1948), and the conductor Kurt Sanderling. Sanderling is a particularly surprising omission, since he was joint chief conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra with Evgeny Mravinsky from 1941 to 1960, a fervent advocate of Shostakovich's music, and one of several individuals the composer used his influence to protect after he had received official criticism.

Thanks to extensive footnotes, glossary, work-list and bibliography, the main body of the text of *Shostakovich: A Life* is very concise: 287 out of the 458 pages. The division of any biography into chapters is inevitably a problem, because people do not live their lives in convenient self-contained sections, and it is left to the biographer to exercise their critical judgement. Laurel Fay divides her biography of Shostakovich into fifteen chapters that cover periods which range from two years (1936-1937) to fourteen (1906-1919). The logic behind how the chapters are divided is generally sound. It varies from significant moments in Shostakovich's musical career and private life, such as entering conservatory, the beginning of the composition of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and *Moscow, Cheryomushki*, and his departure to Kurgan for treatment for polio, to important historical events (the Great Fatherland War and the death of Stalin) and key moments in Soviet cultural/musical history (the criticism of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in „Pravda" and the Party resolution 'On the Recon-

struction of Literary-Artistic Organisations' of April 1932). Each chapter is given a title that characterises the period under discussion. Most of these titles are self-explanatory, although some are abstract. It is difficult to ascertain what is being consolidated in the chapter entitled 'Consolidation', for example, especially since the Eighth Quartet and Twelfth Symphony were composed during the period under discussion (1958-1961). Problems also invariably arise at times when Shostakovich's creative juices were not flowing, such as the late 1930s. It is at this point that we learn about the composer's love of various sports, chess and poker. This is all interesting information, but not specific to period, and there is a sense that it merely fills the void while we wait for the creative muse to return to Shostakovich and the circumstances surrounding his next composition could be discussed.

However, these are minor quibbles, and should not detract from what is an outstanding book. On the evidence of her analysis of the circumstances surrounding the composition of the song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* in 1996, Ian MacDonald claimed it 'comic were there not so many dead bodies involved' that Laurel Fay was 'presently engaged in producing what her publisher, Oxford University Press, trusts will be a definitive biography of Shostakovich'. Laurel Fay in my opinion more than answers her critics, and the intemperance of Ian MacDonald's remark alone illustrates why the calm and collected *Shostakovich: A Life* is a necessary and valuable contribution to the field of Shostakovich studies.

## Lars Kristensen

*Critical Studies Vol. 21: The Montage Principle, Eisenstein in New Cultural and Critical Context*, Jean Antoine-Dunne and Paula Quigley (eds.), Rodopi: Amsterdam & New York 2004, XVIII + 220 pp.

The aim of this study is to celebrate the diversity of Eisenstein's legacy, and as such is not about the montage principle in itself, but about how montage has given rise to working practices in different artistic fields. These fields are as diverse as they can be, incorporating animation, literature, drama, film theory, feminism, Caribbean aesthetics and the digital image.

In the reprinted essay, *A Boy from Riga*, Richard Taylor charts Eisenstein's life from early childhood to the troublesome time under Stalin and finds evidence of a traumatic relationship with an oppressive father figure, which leads Eisenstein to seek refuge in books and in his imagination. Eisenstein was 'an outsider in an outpost of German culture in a Russian state', and remained an outsider throughout his life – living his life in the imagination of his art, 'which provided a refuge from his sense of isolation, of difference' (p. 27-8). This, says Taylor, informed both his films and his writing.