

# Remembering Laughter and Tears In a Drawer

Music as a Response to Soviet Repression

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*Music*

It shines with a miraculous light  
 Revealing to the eye the cutting of facets.  
 It alone speaks to me  
 When others are too scared to come near  
 When the last friend has turned his back  
 It was with me in my grave  
 As if a thunderstorm sang  
 Or all the flowers spoke.

By Anna Akhmatova, dedicated to Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich  
 (Trans. Grigori Gerenstein. Wilson 319).

## Introduction

In 1936, Joseph Stalin and another Soviet official, Andrei Zhdanov, attended a performance of *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, the most recent opera of Dmitri Shostakovich. The opera marked the high point of Shostakovich's rise to fame as the Soviet Union's most talented young composer. Despite public enthusiasm for the opera, and over 200 wildly successful performances, Stalin and Zhdanov left the performance early. Two days later, an article appeared in *Pravda* entitled "Muddle Instead of Music." This article was a brutal denunciation and condemned the composer as "formalist," "leftist," and virtually anti-Soviet (Weiss 302-3). Although Andrei Zhdanov played only a minor role in this 1936 denunciation, a decade later, in 1946, he was appointed as the new monitor of culture for the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin and assumed a deeply influential role in guiding Soviet culture. World War II had ended, and Stalin was determined to reassert state control over culture. Thus began *zhdanovshchina*<sup>1</sup>, an era of unprecedented artistic repression in the Soviet Union. Confronted with a sharp increase in censorship and public ridicule, most composers desperately attempted to satisfy the state's

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<sup>1</sup> Zhdanovism. The period of denunciations and strict control over Soviet culture that was led by Andrei Zhdanov and lasted from the late 1940s until Stalin's death in 1953.

demand for “socialist realism” and to obliterate their “formalist” tendencies even though no one understood exactly what was implied by the two terms (Makanowitzky 269).

The music of Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich, the most beloved and well-known composer of the Soviet era, follows a different pattern though. Shostakovich publicly apologized for his formalism in speeches and promised to reform his music according to party demands. In contrast to the trend of appeasement which characterized the Stalinist era, his music continued to defy government policies and constituted a less submissive, more politically incorrect response. Shostakovich not only quoted many of his officially banned works in new compositions but also increasingly used Jewish folk idioms<sup>2</sup> even though Jews, along with composers, were suffering from increased scrutiny. Why did Shostakovich turn to self-quotation and Jewish idioms in order to respond to state repression? I believe that through these two methods, Shostakovich was able to create a reflective, outspoken musical history and criticism of government-imposed suffering and restriction in his own life and in the lives of others.

## Historical Background

*Zhdanovshchina* has undergone much vague examination in recent years, but in Shelia Fitzpatrick’s article, “Culture and Politics Under Stalin,” she leaves no doubt as to its ideological basis. “The totalitarian model is, in fact, primarily a model of the late Stalin period (1946-53), at least as far as culture is concerned” (211). In February 1948, under Zhdanov’s leadership, the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Music brought two years of growing political tension to a boiling point. A decree condemning “formalism” and demanding “realism” was issued shortly after the Congress, and it left few Soviet composers untouched. Many of their works were

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<sup>2</sup> For clarity, I will borrow Joachim Braun’s definition of “idiom” as, “... any kind of national subject, idea, historical reference and musical intonation. Musical intonations will be defined to mean any melodic, rhythmic or harmonic nucleus which projects a certain ethno-social characteristic sound or image” (“Jews in Soviet Music” 1).

stricken from the official repertoire, leaving only a token few to be played by performers too terrified to associate themselves with the disgraced, formalist composers. Soviet music was expected to be for “the people” with blatantly popular and socialist themes. Furthermore, composers were required to present optimism about the future of socialism, not reminders of suffering or grief (Wilson 222; Fay 160-5; Makanowitzky 275). All compositions that did not live up to these demands were to be blotted out from Soviet memory. It was in defiance of this extreme censorship and in an effort to preserve his own history that Shostakovich began quoting his banned compositions.

## Self-Quotation and Memory

By the time of the 1948 decree, Shostakovich had numerous works with controversial histories. His monumental opera, *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, was in official disgrace, in part, because it dared to portray adultery, rape, and murder—topics that were not supposed to exist or even be discussed in Soviet society. It was barred from Soviet stages until 1961, but even then, it was only allowed to be performed after significant re-working. Shostakovich’s Eighth Symphony “fail[ed] to be a grandiose hymn extolling Soviet victory over the Germans” (Wilson 175) and was promptly withdrawn. The authorities made it clear that Soviet art should inspire confidence and optimism in the masses about the future of socialism (Makanowitzky 267, 274), not elicit reflection on social problems or injustice. Shostakovich withdrew the symphony “voluntarily” upon suggestion. Throughout his life, Shostakovich suffered repeated censure for failing to incorporate the aims of socialist realism into his music. Thus, the Soviet authorities forced many of Shostakovich’s works into “nonexistence” simply because they did not fit the official vision for music. Under such repressive conditions, a person’s most precious possession is memory. It was in the spirit of creating a musical autobiography that Shostakovich composed his Eighth

Quartet in July 1960. The question then becomes: what could have motivated Shostakovich to revisit many of his older, banned works so long after *zhdanovshchina*?

The catalyst for this quartet was not only the memory of suffering under Stalin but also ongoing political conditions. In June 1960, after decades of heel-dragging, Shostakovich had finally become a member of the Communist Party. Friends and family recall Shostakovich crying bitterly over his new membership, even contemplating suicide (Ardov 159-60; Glickman 91-2). The event was personally devastating and hardly voluntary. There are many theories as to why he finally broke down and joined; the most likely explanation is that he was coerced into membership after Khrushchev appointed him President of the Soviet Composers' Union. Even though Stalin was long dead, the oppressive political climate of the Soviet Union was still intact and still a threatening presence in individual lives.

Roughly a month after joining the Communist Party, Shostakovich completed the Eighth Quartet. Lev Lebedinsky, a close friend, recalls that “[Shostakovich] dedicated the Quartet to the victims of fascism to disguise his intentions.... In fact he intended it as a summation of everything he had written before. It was his farewell to life. He associated joining the Party with a moral, as well as physical death” (Wilson 340). Scattered throughout the Eighth Quartet, there are quotations from many of Shostakovich's previous works, including the disgraced *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and Eighth Symphony. Ironically, Shostakovich also included excerpts from “Tormented by Grievous Bondage,” a popular song from the 1918 Revolution. In a letter to his friend Isaac Glickman, Shostakovich jokingly described the new quartet as “quite a nice little hodge-podge” (Glickman 91).

What could have motivated Shostakovich to revisit so many of his older, banned works even as the Soviet government continued to exert its power so forcefully? While Lebedinsky sees the Eighth Quartet simply as an autobiographical response to party membership, Shostakovich's daughter, Galina, explains that the dedication "to the victims of fascism" was not the original inscription.

"[Father announced,] 'I've just finished writing a composition which I've dedicated to my own memory.' [...] That was the day he completed the famous Eighth Quartet.... Immediately pressure was put on the composer to change the dedication. Father was obliged to concede and the work was dedicated to the victims of fascism" (Ardov 158).

At that time, "fascism" still conjured up poignant memories of the Nazi invasion of Russia during World War II. That dedication alone would have made the work an instant success, but the Eighth Quartet became a timeless masterpiece because it addressed more than one destructive regime. The composer's son, Maxim Shostakovich, suggests that the word "fascism" should be understood as the "totalitarianism" of the Soviet era, especially under Stalin's rule (Ardov 158-60). From that perspective, Shostakovich could include himself as a victim of fascism in a vague and officially acceptable dedication. Despite the changes in wording, the music itself conveys Shostakovich's original self-dedication in ways that a title page could never convey. The evocation of Shostakovich's compositional history and the repetition of four notes—D, S, C, and H (Shostakovich's monogram in German note names)—maintain the self-eulogy of an autobiographical composition.

Why did Shostakovich have such an urgent desire to create a record of his life and music? The reason extends well beyond forced party membership. Maxim Shostakovich reminisces,

“From the beginning of the 1930s and up to Stalin’s death, Shostakovich himself lived under constant threat of arrest and execution” (Ardov 66). The threat wasn’t just confined to Shostakovich; it was firmly entrenched in Soviet society. The composer had witnessed countless, unexplained “disappearances” of fellow citizens who had supposedly committed crimes against the state. Friends and family might privately remember the victims of Stalin’s purges, but officially, the dead had never existed. Just as musical works were banned from Soviet repertoire, human lives were swiftly removed from public memory. In a letter to Isaak Glickman, Shostakovich explained, “I started thinking that if some day I die, nobody is likely to write a work in memory of me, so I had better write one myself. The title page could carry the dedication: ‘To the memory of the composer of this quartet’” (Glickman 90-1). Through the quotation of his banned compositions, Shostakovich was able to create a permanent memorial to vanished art and souls.

### **Laughter through Tears<sup>3</sup>: Shostakovich and Jewish Music**

Another development in Shostakovich’s music after 1946 was his increased use of Jewish folk themes. This development was closely related to the political climate of the day. After World War II, the crushing censorship of *zhdanovshchina* coincided with a violent effort to eliminate foreign influences from Soviet society. One of the groups that the state found most threatening was the “cosmopolitans”—an abstract, manufactured label for Jews. In January 1948, Solomon Mikhoels (a cornerstone of Yiddish theater and close friend of Shostakovich) died mysteriously. Most authorities agree that he was murdered upon Stalin’s orders (Wilson 227). Furthermore, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a World War II institution, was disbanded that year. After a series of violent interrogations and secret trials, thirteen of its former members were executed in

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<sup>3</sup> Reference to a quote of Shostakovich in Volkov’s *Testimony*: “I never tire of delighting in [Jewish folk music], it’s multifaceted, it can appear to be happy while it is tragic. It’s almost always laughter through tears.” (156)

1952. Meanwhile, the Soviet press began a lengthy and passionate campaign against the threat of “cosmopolitanism” (Yakovlev 200-210). Finally, Israel became a state, and the mass emigration that followed caused Stalin no end of angst as people rushed to flee the Soviet Union (Rubenstein xi-2; Wilson 226-7). One joke claimed that 200% of Soviet Jews would immigrate to Israel: 100% of the Jews, plus an equal number of Soviet citizens pretending to be Jewish in order to emigrate (Harris 69-70).

While composers were being attacked by Zhdanov, Jews were figuratively and literally under fire as a threat to Soviet society. As Joachim Braun put it, “...Jewish culture, including musical culture, existed and exists on the borderline of the permitted, and the undesirable even ‘anti-Soviet.’ This paradox of the permitted but undesired, and the forbidden but not unlawful, has created a highly ambiguous situation in Soviet culture regarding the employment of Jewish themes and motifs in art” (Braun, “The Double Meaning” 69). Despite the official attitude toward Jews and Shostakovich’s own, precarious situation, he often incorporated Jewish history, poetry, music, or some combination of the three into his music, especially during the last years of Stalin’s rule. Between Zhdanov’s appointment in 1946 and Stalin’s death in 1953, he composed *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, a violin concerto, a quartet, *24 Preludes and Fugues*, and *Four Monologues*, all of which feature some measure of “Jewishness.” Clearly, his use of Jewish idioms was too pervasive to have been an unconscious or haphazard choice. Since the severe social pressure on Jews during this time paralleled and mirrored the artistic pressure on Shostakovich, the use of Jewish themes allowed him to address both his own struggles and the broader political climate of the Soviet Union.

The Jewish references in Shostakovich's music can be divided into two groups based on Joachim Braun's definition of "idiom" (see footnote on page 3). First of all, Shostakovich borrowed musical idioms from Klezmer, the hybrid of liturgical and secular folk music created by Ashkenazic Jews in Eastern Europe. The combination of introspection and exuberance found in Klezmer music appealed to Shostakovich as a medium for expressing a broad range of emotions, especially "laughter through tears" (Wilson 235), a long-standing facet of Jewish and Russian culture. Shostakovich also employed non-musical references to Jewish life, particularly in his Thirteenth Symphony. The composition contains no traces of folk music, but instead, was inspired by Yevgenii Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar" which memorialized the Nazi massacre of Jews in Kiev during World War II.

Perhaps Shostakovich's most overt and comprehensive reference to Jewish culture was made in his song cycle, *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, a work which encompasses a broad spectrum of Jewish culture, both musically and non-musically. The work was composed "for the drawer" in 1948 and was not given a public performance until 1955 once Stalin was safely in the ground. Soon after World War II, a book of Jewish song lyrics was published; Shostakovich chose eleven of the poems and wrote new music for them, some of which is based on the traditional Klezmer style (Wilson 234-5). Vocal music was a great favorite of the Soviet state "because the proper ideological content [could] be put into the words of the chorus more surely and more concretely than into the sounds of orchestral instruments" (Makanowitzky 274). It is, therefore, highly ironic that Shostakovich used the state-preferred form of music to offer one of his most overt critiques of Soviet policy.

His choice of poems was quite revealing (and timely) as they repeatedly mention imprisonment, the grief of assimilation, poverty, hunger, death, etc. Again, such problems were not acknowledged in Soviet society and certainly had no place in art intended to inspire and encourage the masses. Defying the official agenda, Shostakovich created a record of, and commentary on, government abuses by incorporating Jewish themes into his own music. In a detailed examination of Shostakovich's work, Joachim Braun explains:

The use of Jewish elements in Shostakovich's music reaches far beyond their specific and "colorful" Jewishness. [...] It is in fact a hidden language of resistance communicated to the aware listener of [sic] its subtle meaning. Dissidence and opposition are here represented by the Jewish element which, because of its special place in Soviet culture, served as a perfect vehicle... ("The Double Meaning" 80).

Shostakovich's use of musical idioms alone was a tremendous expression of solidarity for Soviet Jews, but he also added another level of irony and criticism to the song cycle through strategic changes to the texts of the original Yiddish poems. Such alteration was in sharp contrast to his usual practice. While many composers adapt texts with great abandon, Shostakovich avoided making changes except when absolutely necessary or when an alteration was essential to the message of the entire work.

*From Jewish Folk Poetry* can be divided into two sections. The first eight songs of the cycle are uniformly mournful, while the last three seem to express contentment and joy. Despite the "obvious" meanings of these songs, most, if not all of them, can be read on many levels. In "Happiness," the last song of the cycle, a blessed mother repeatedly proclaims, "And what I want to tell the whole land, about the joy and the light which are now my lot! Doctors, doctors are what our sons have become!" However, the original Yiddish song said nothing about doctors.

“And all should know about my happiness, which Soviet power has given to me. All my sons are engineers! The sun alone shines so bright on us” (Braun, *Jewish Songs* 87). It is important to note the absence of “Soviet power” in Shostakovich’s version and the change from “engineers” to “doctors.” Why is this second change important? While the exact date of the text alteration is unknown, Sheinberg believes that “[‘Engineers’] was replaced by ‘doctors’, hinting perhaps at the Doctors’ Plot of 1952, when more than four hundred Jewish intellectuals—doctors, artists and scholars—were arrested and executed on Stalin’s orders” (239). As was often the case in the Soviet Union, success inevitably brought scrutiny, suspicion, and jealousy; of all people, Shostakovich was able to understand this. Speaking of the Doctors’ Plot, Abraam Gozenpud, a famous writer and musicologist, remembers a popular “reaction from many well-known and famous persons demanding punishment of ‘the murderers in white coats’ (who were mostly Jews). Therefore, premiering *From Jewish Folk Poetry* at that time was an act of civic moral courage, and Shostakovich had to overcome much official resistance in order to receive permission for a public performance” (Wilson 238).

Shostakovich’s text changes extended beyond the blatantly “happy” movements though. The third song of the song cycle, “Lullaby,” which is based on a Yiddish poem by Sholom Aleichem, also underwent alterations. In the original collection of poems, it read:

Sleep, my child, my beautiful...  
Your father is in Siberia in chains,  
Sleep, hushabye...  
(Braun, “Double Meaning” 72-3)

In Shostakovich’s lyrics though, the text directly implicates *a tsar’s role* in this imprisonment.

Your father’s held in chains in Siberia,  
Kept in prison by the Tsar.  
Sleep, hushabye...

(Decca liner notes 20)

This change in lyrics can hardly be ignored as a subconscious choice if one remembers the high levels of imprisonment and execution during Stalin's rule. Shostakovich's "Lullaby" automatically evoked memories of that time in Soviet audiences. Solomon Mikhoels' daughter, Natalya, remembers the premier of *From Jewish Folk Poetry* in 1953, shortly after Stalin's death.

"In those years, a presenter always came out to announce the works.... He declared that 'Lullaby', where the song contains [references to imprisonment in Siberia], 'it all took place in Tsarist Russia.' With that he left the stage. [...] people barely restrained themselves from laughing. For a long time after that Dmitri Dmitriyevich loved to repeat, 'It all took place in Tsarist Russia, it all took place in Tsarist Russia'" (Wilson 230).

Shostakovich repeated that line with the pervasive irony he was so well known for. To Shostakovich and everyone else in the hall, it was transparently obvious that the mournful lullaby was implicating a more recent, brutal tsar: Stalin.

In his examination of Shostakovich's music, Braun argues that there is a direct correlation between the intensity of Jewish idioms in Shostakovich's music and the depth of political meaning ("The Double Meaning" 76). The references to Jewish culture went well beyond a mere expression of support for Soviet Jews though. Instead, Shostakovich presented their sufferings as a means of addressing political and social restraint throughout the Soviet Union. He made a deliberate decision to criticize the government-imposed repression which had played such a dominant role in his own life and in the lives of his fellow citizens.

## Conclusion

While Soviet political leadership was insisting that music glorify the achievements of socialism and provide inspiration for the future, it was also silencing political, ethnic, and artistic

expression. Instead of unquestioningly attempting to satisfy the state's abstract demands for socialist realism, Shostakovich reshaped his methods of composition to create a musical history and criticism of Soviet policies and actions. Composed in the wake of a devastating political and personal crisis, Shostakovich's autobiographical Eighth Quartet became a memorial to his life through the quotation of his banned works. In the midst of Stalin's final purges, Shostakovich turned to Jewish culture to condemn cultural totalitarianism and to express support for the oppressed in Soviet society. Because of his uncompromising response, Shostakovich's work continues to serve as an insightful reflection on the past and as a relevant commentary on current artistic, ethnic, and political injustice.