Creativity Despite Duress:

Shostakovich and Prokofiev's Musical Struggles under Soviet Government Restrictions

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Abstract

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This dissertation investigates how Soviet composers Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev navigated state-imposed artistic constraints under strict government control. During periods of heightened nationalism and international conflict, especially World War II, the Soviet regime intensified its use of music as a propaganda tool, amplifying ideological pressures on composers. In response, Prokofiev and Shostakovich navigated the demands of Socialist Realism by creating works that reinforced socialism, nationalism, and patriotism, striking a delicate balance between state expectations and their personal artistic values. This study explores the tension between political control and creative expression, revealing how composers responded, adapted, and ultimately reshaped Soviet music under extreme ideological scrutiny.

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Dedication

To my parents, whose endless love and strength have been the greatest gifts of my life.

To my grandparents, who, I believe, would be very happy and proud to see the accomplishment of this dissertation, if they could.

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Introduction

A country or government's policies at any given stage reflect its ruling will and political demands, aiming to guide the people under its rule regarding what should be done and what should not be done. These policies influence various aspects, including politics, economics, military affairs, literature, art, and people's daily lives. As the first socialist country to emerge in contrast to the political systems in the West, the Soviet Union needed to defend its rule since its inception, thus the government placed greater emphasis on the people's attitudes and responses to the regime. This assertion of state will becomes particularly pronounced during historical crises such as war. World War II, the largest and most destructive conflict in human history, brought this dynamic to its peak. As the Soviet Union faced a critical struggle for survival, the government's determination to win the war was more evident than ever, with its will explicitly imposed on all aspects of society.

Undeniably, World War II transformed the world's political alignment and social structure, and the Soviet Union experienced severe instability during the war. The onset of World War II had a significant impact on its cultural landscape and artistic expression. Psychologically, this was particularly devastating, as World War I had been publicized as "the war to end all wars."[1] Before World War II, the Soviet Union had already established Socialist Realism as its dominant artistic doctrine in the 1930s. This movement aimed to portray an idealized vision of life under Communism while promoting the regime's values, including socialism, patriotism, and nationalism.[2] Although other countries have utilized a defined canon of art, Socialist Realism in

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[1] Steven Erlanger, "The War to End All Wars? Hardly. But It Did Change Them Forever.," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/27/world/europe/world-war-i-brought-fundamental-changes-to-the-world.html.

[2] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Socialist Realism | Art," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/art/Socialist-Realism.

the Soviet Union endured longer and was more constrictive than in the West.[3] The approach to art was not merely about aesthetics but also a means of ideological control. As one of the most sensitive groups within society, artists felt amplified pressure from the war and were compelled to navigate the dual demands of creative expression and state propaganda. This era witnessed significant shifts in art and culture, as artists adapted their works to reflect the realities of wartime life while striving to align with government expectations. Some artists were eager to practice their skills to praise the government, while others criticized it. One way or the other, this inevitably led to the government taking different stances toward different artists, affecting the direction of their creative output and even their fate.

Artists had to navigate a dangerous environment where deviations from state-approved styles could lead to severe consequences, including censorship, persecution, or even imprisonment. Prominent figures such as novelist Mikhail Sholokhov, who explored themes of heroism and sacrifice in his works, faced the challenges of censorship and ideological scrutiny.[4] Osip Mandelstam, a leading figure in Russian poetry, was arrested for his criticism of the government and faced severe repression. His later works were heavily censored, and he ultimately died in a transit camp.[5] Additionally, the work of prominent painter Pavel Filonov was criticized for its avant-garde style and largely ignored by the mainstream art establishment, illustrating the complexities of artistic creation under an authoritarian regime.[6] This impact on artists became even more extreme in the Soviet Union during World War II.

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[3] Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 3.

[4] Brian J Boeck, "Stalin's Scheherazade: Was Nobel Prize-Winner Mikhail Sholokhov a Brilliant Writer or a Communist Con Man?," The Millions, March 7, 2019, https://themillions.com/2019/03/stalins-scheherazade-was-nobel-prize-winner-mikhail-sholokhov-a-brilliant-writer-or-a-communist-con-man.html.

[5] The Poetry Foundation, "Osip Mandelstam," Poetry Foundation, October 25, 2020, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/osip-mandelstam.

[6] John E. Bowlt, "Pavel Filonov: An Alternative Tradition?," *Art Journal* 34, no. 3 (1975): 208, https://doi.org/10.2307/775992.

Undoubtedly, the war had a significant impact on music. As musicologist Boris Schwartz points out, while certain musical genres remained prevalent during the war, the music of the Soviet Union during World War II can be divided into two stages.[7] The first phase took place between late 1941 and early 1943, comprising the first shock of the German invasion and the catastrophic setbacks on the front lines; the second, which lasted from late 1943 to 1945, witnessed a rise in Soviet capabilities, dealt with the enemy's halt and the final triumph. The initial mood of sorrow and rage eventually led to a resolve to succeed and determination. The musical style and practice of the era captured all these upheavals. Schwartz emphasized that, "Whatever the ultimate evaluation of Soviet music of the war years will be, one fact is clear: it cannot be judged in a detached, 'objective' manner."[8] This dissertation will explore how the intersection of World War II and government control shaped the musical landscape of the Soviet Union, as demonstrated by the works of legendary Russian composers Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev. It will also discuss how these composers balanced their artistic needs by adhering to Socialist Realism's rules, highlighting the broader implications for cultural expression during this tumultuous period.

[7] Boris Schwartz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917-1970* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 180.

[8] Ibid.

Chapter 1: Prelude to War: Nationalism, Artistic Survival Under Early State Restrictions

At the onset of World War II, the Soviet Union was a relatively young political entity, established in 1922 following the Russian Revolution and the subsequent civil war.[9] Unlike traditional imperialist states, the Soviet regime aimed to establish a society based on socialist principles, emphasizing collective ownership, state control of the economy, and the promotion of a classless society.[10] This vision contrasted sharply with the imperialist regime, which prioritized the interests of the ruling elite and maintained a hierarchical structure that often marginalized the working class.

As a new country, one of the important artistic tasks for the Soviet Union was to create a new national style that broke away from Russia's pre-revolutionary musical heritage and move Soviet culture in a different direction. The Soviet aesthetic tried to establish a new national identity that was accessible to all citizens, promoting themes of heroism, collectivism, and optimism. Unlike Russia's imperial music, which showcased grandeur and often sought to rival Western Europe's high culture, Soviet-style music prioritized simplicity and folk-inspired elements, appealing to a broader public and reinforcing socialist ideals.[11] Even though the Soviet Union was composed of multiple nationalities, Soviet culture centered on Russian elements, especially as nationalism became a tool to unify citizens during the war.[12] When nationalism surged globally in the interwar period (1919-1938), the Soviet Union faced a public demand for a new Soviet aesthetic that would reflect the spirit of this modern socialist society—a need that

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[9] John C Dewdney et al., "Soviet Union | History, Leaders, Map, & Facts," in *Encyclopædia Britannica,* December 20, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/place/Soviet-Union.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Nicholas V Riasanovsky and Andrew B Wachtel, "Russia - Music," in *Encyclopædia Britannica,* May 11, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia/Music.

[12] Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 328.

persisted until the outbreak of World War II.[13] Soviet music played a significant role in shaping this new cultural identity, helping unify the citizens under a shared musical language and advancing the state's vision for a distinct Soviet artistic style.

Opera was especially prominent in this new national style. Due in part to the high cost of creating the elaborate staging and the substantial labor required behind the scenes, opera was long seen as a form of entertainment reserved for the wealthy upper class. On the other hand, the public's focus on Soviet music, as opposed to the elite's emphasis, was crucial in shaping the new Soviet musical style. Joseph Stalin's administration aimed to establish a positive, socialist new operatic style that was able to convey national characteristics simultaneously. As Stalin advocated, "The development of cultures that are national in form and socialist in content is necessary for their ultimate fusion into one General Culture, socialist both as to form and content, and expressed in one general language."[14] Hence, Soviet composers made a determined effort to develop a contemporary Soviet opera genre that reflected Soviet reality and aspirations.

Shostakovich: *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*

Among the Soviet composers contributing to this new national style, Shostakovich emerged as one of the most prominent figures. Renowned internationally, Shostakovich held significant musical importance to the Soviet Union, skillfully balancing his creative expression with the expectations of Soviet ideology. His musical style is marked by emotional depth, complex harmonies, and a distinctive blend of satire and tragedy. Often characterized by sharp contrasts, his compositions move seamlessly between somber, introspective passages and bold,

[13] Katlin Harris and Peter Murray, "The Three Major Shifts in Soviet Music during World War II," 2006, https://wwwold.methodist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/mr2016_harris2.pdf, 73.

[14] Frolova-Walker, 311.

powerful themes, reflecting both his personal struggles and the turbulent reality of Soviet life. In 1934, he premiered one of his most famous and controversial operas, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, which was initially met with great success in Leningrad. It was well-received and praised for its originality and performed hundreds of times nationwide over the next two years. It was praised as "a triumph of musical theater" by the journal *Sovetskoe Iskusstvo*, while *Sovetskaya Muzyka* described it as "the best Soviet work, the chef-d'oeuvre of Soviet creativity."[15] Party officials were likewise pleased, worshipping the opera and praising Shostakovich as "a Soviet composer brought up in the best tradition of Soviet culture."[16] The opera showcased Shostakovich's extraordinary ability and his potential as an opera composer.

Ironically, two years later, the opera was severely denounced by the Soviet regime and banned in the Soviet Union for almost thirty years. On January 26, 1936, Stalin and several government officials attended a performance of *Lady Macbeth* in Moscow. Shostakovich was also in the audience. Stalin anticipated a delightful evening: his favorite conductor, Alexander Melik-Pashaev, was leading the performance; he enjoyed opera and ballet; more importantly, Shostakovich's opera had been widely recognized as "a victory of the musical theater."[17] However, *Lady Macbeth* let him down. The performance was too incompatible, experimental, and inaccessible to comply with Stalin's musical regulations of "national in form and socialist in content."[18] Stalin showed obvious discomfort throughout the performance and made a swift exit

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[15] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca (N.Y.) ; London: Cornell University Press, 1992). 184.

[16] Dmitri Shostakovich, *Dmitry Shostakovich, about Himself and His Times* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980). 33.

[17] Solomon Volkov and Antonina W Bouis, *Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship between the Great Composer and the Brutal Dictator* (London: Little Brown, 2004), 101.

[18] Simon Morrison, "The Fact and Fiction behind Shostakovich's 'Lady Macbeth,'" *The New York Times*, October 6, 2022, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/06/arts/music/shostakovich-lady-macbeth.html.

before the final act even began. Contemporary accounts reported Shostakovich was "white as a sheet and glassy-eyed" when he took his bow afterward.[19]

Two days later, the government newspaper *Pravda* published an anonymous editorial article, condemning the opera as an atypical example of the Soviet aesthetic and style. In the article, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was described as a "muddle instead of music" and "an ugly flood of confusing sound... a pandemonium of creaking, shrieking and crashes."[20] It denounced Shostakovich for having "ignored the demand of Soviet culture that all coarseness and savagery be abolished from every corner of Soviet life," and also accused him of replacing "simple, accessible musical language" with "quacks, hoots, pants, and gasps."[21] Even worse, it included a warning to the composer: "It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly."[22] Everyone who had supported the opera was likewise attacked by Stalin for his condemnation of *Lady Macbeth.* Stalin commonly employed this strategy, which was one of his favorites: The blow was delivered not just to the composer but also to supportive reviewers. Stalin accurately understood that this approach effectively isolated those who displeased him, creating a "burned-ground zone" around them.[23] Several individuals within the Soviet music community perceived this as an attempt by the government to control all types of artistic expression, rather than just targeting a particular opera and its composer.

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[19] Clemency Burton-Hill, "Shostakovich: The Composer Who Was Almost Purged," www.bbc.com, August 7, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150807-shostakovich-the-composer-who-was-almost-purged.

[20] Ed Vulliamy, "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk and the Muddle Surrounding Shostakovich's Opera," The Guardian, September 25, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/sep/25/lady-macbeth-of-mtsensk-dmitri-shostakovich-opera-english-national.

[21] Susan Scheid, "Seeking Shostakovich ('All Life for Me Is Music')," Prufrock's Dilemma (Prufrock's Dilemma, September 17, 2013), https://prufrocksdilemma.wordpress.com/2013/09/17/seeking-shostakovich-all-life-for-me-is-music/.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Volkov and Bouis, 186.

To understand *Lady Macbeth'*s initial acceptance and subsequent rejection within a few years, one must consider its artistic themes and Shostakovich's avant-garde writing style. Composed in 1934, the opera was written based on a well-known nineteenth-century Russian tragedy, Nikolai Leskov's 1865 novella, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District.*[24] It explores themes of sexual repression, violence, social injustice, rebellion against authority, and the consequences of extreme actions driven by passion and despair. Its portrayal of Katerina as a complex, sympathetic, and tragic anti-heroine trapped in a brutal environment was both provocative and revolutionary for its time. Compared to Shostakovich's other compositions created during the remaining years of Stalin's regime, *Lady Macbeth* was undoubtedly more creative and modernist.

Shostakovich had radical ideas—both musical and literary—while creating this opera. When he wrote to his fellow composer friend Andre Balanchivadze during the compositional period of *Lady Macbeth,* he believed "it is the attitude of the composer to a particular subject which he wishes to illustrate that defines his ideology."[25] With this belief, Shostakovich incorporated folk elements and featured vivid orchestration, resulting in a powerful and immersive experience. Along with combining extreme violence and sexuality with imaginative and captivating music, the composer also purposefully developed a narrative that was focused on eroticism—something that was not included in Leskov's story. Shostakovich thoroughly explored different themes of oppression, passion, resistance, and the consequences of moral corruption, integrating intense drama with his characteristic wit and dark humor.

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[24] Elizabeth A. Wells, "'The New Woman': Lady Macbeth and Sexual Politics in the Stalinist Era," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 13, no. 2 (July 2001): 163–89, https://doi.org/10.1017/s095458670100163x, 164.

[25] Ibid, 163.

However, these controversial elements were simply the wrong aesthetics at the wrong place at the wrong time. The ideal Soviet opera, according to Stalin's new musical standard was to be "positive in outlook, socialist in content, and national in musical idiom."[26] The administration demanded music should be "tonal, heroic, patriotic, or at least hopeful in tone, classical or neoclassical in genre, and accessible to the masses."[27] *Lady Macbeth* lacked these qualities, which made its official rejection inevitable. The work's suppression destroyed Shostakovich's desire to compose opera and altered his compositional approach. Since then, he never completed another opera until after Stalin's death. *Lady Macbeth* vanished entirely from public performance for the next twenty-five years.[28] When it returned to the public in a new and less controversial version in 1962, it was finally recognized for its artistic value and musical sophistication. These fair and in-depth evaluations also served as an indication of the increasing maturity of Soviet society and its aesthetic standards.[29]

Due to its misalignment with Soviet ideals, *Lady Macbeth* exemplified the restrictions enforced by Soviet authorities. Although it did not align with the typical aesthetic and style that Soviet composers were expected to achieve, the opera remains significant both as a remarkable musical work and as a historical artifact reflecting the tumultuous relationship between art and politics in the Soviet Union. Despite receiving harsh criticism from the public, Shostakovich cherished *Lady Macbeth* more than any of his other works. Dedicated to his first wife, it was "one of only two compositions that he took with him when he was evacuated out of Leningrad at the beginning of World War II."[30]

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[26] Schwartz, 141.

[27] George G. Weickhardt, "Dictatorship and Music: How Russian Music Survived the Soviet Regime," *Russian History* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 121–41, https://doi.org/10.1163/187633104x00052, 125.

[28] Bruce Scott, "Opera vs. Politics: Shostakovich's Lady Macbeth," NPR, January 15, 2010, https://www.npr.org/2010/01/15/122575072/opera-vs-politics-shostakovichs-lady-macbeth.

[29] Schwartz, 141.

[30] Simon Morrison, "The Fact and Fiction behind Shostakovich's 'Lady Macbeth'".

Shostakovich lived and worked throughout Stalin's dictatorship and was twice publicly denounced for his compositions, including his *Fourth Symphony.* This symphony was composed between 1935 and 1936, with the *Pravda* attack occurring halfway through this period. As Russian scholar Caroline Brooke points out, to prevent compositional "error," Shostakovich was advised that "it would be wise to send any future opera or ballet libretti to the committee in advance of starting work on the music, and to experiment by having individual movements of his works performed to audiences of workers and *kolkhozniki* (collective farm workers) during the process of composition."[31] Even though Shostakovich received this suggestion months before the symphony's premiere, the performance was still canceled. The decision to withdraw the *Fourth Symphony* was not a spontaneous move; rather, it was the composer's response to unbearable pressure from local party officials. At that pivotal point of his career, Shostakovich must have instinctively sensed that this symphony was not the kind of work expected of him.[32] Instead of a work filled with turbulence and complexity, what was needed was a piece of clarity and affirmation, in line with the Socialist Realism principles. As a result, the score of the *Fourth Symphony* was set aside for the next twenty-five years.[33]

Shostakovich once described life under Stalin's regime as "unbelievably mean and hard. Every day brought more bad news, and I felt so much pain. I was so lonely and afraid."[34] The denunciation of *Lady Macbeth* caused a significant setback to Shostakovich's career, and its aftermath delivered an almost fatal blow to him. What was worse, that year also marked the beginning of the Great Terror. Over a million people were killed in this horrific campaign of

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[31] Caroline Brooke, "Soviet Musicians and the Great Terror," *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 3 (May 2002): 397–413, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130220129533, 406.

[32] Schwartz, 131.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Burton-Hill.

repression, imprisonment and executions. During this period, many of Shostakovich's close friends and family members were persecuted or executed, “including his patron, his uncle, his brother-in-law (a distinguished physicist), his great friend (a musicologist), his mother-in-law (an astronomer), and several of his colleagues.”[35]

Shostakovich had no time to grieve though, as himself was denounced as “an enemy of the people” and faced the threat of arrest.[36] Knowing him was dangerous, and interacting with him was suicidal. There were even musicians who took advantage of the circumstances, using the different gatherings in the conservatories to disparage their colleagues in the hopes of advancing their careers.[37] For many years, Shostakovich lived in fear and uncertainty about his life. He kept a small suitcase packed with essentials by the door, for the day he presumed he would be deported to Siberia. As a precaution, he began sleeping in the stairwell outside his apartment, fully dressed in his outdoor clothes. As conductor Mark Wigglesworth comments, “It is hard to imagine what that kind of fear must feel like. It is impossible to know what it must feel like as a permanent condition of life.”[38]

Shostakovich’s creative freedom was severely threatened by the government’s strict Socialist Realism standards. His compositions were frequently suppressed, forcing him to modify his style to avert more retaliation from the government. Works like *Lady Macbeth* were undeniably more avant-garde and modernist than the music he composed during the remaining years of Stalin’s dictatorship. The suppression of these pieces impacted his compositional style, compelling him to adopt more conservative and politically compliant forms to survive in the oppressive cultural climate of the time. This pressure, coupled with the constant fear of

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Brooke, 410.
[38] Burton-Hill.

persecution, hindered his ability to fully explore his true artistic potential and curbed the expressive freedom he deeply deserved.

Prokofiev: *Romeo and Juliet*

In fact, Shostakovich was not the only Soviet composer whose life and works were deeply influenced by the dictatorship. Prokofiev, another legendary figure in Russian music, likewise lived his entire life navigating the complexities of Soviet artistic policies. While Shostakovich struggled with severe censorship and personal danger, Prokofiev's path was marked by his self-imposed exile in Paris, followed by a dramatic return to his homeland. His experiences, particularly his renowned ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, reveal the difficulties and adaptations of Soviet composers under Stalin's strict control.

During the turmoil of the Russian Revolution, Prokofiev left Russia in 1918 at the age of 27.[39] Rather than escaping the emerging Soviet dominance, he accepted generous offers to perform in Western countries. This move marked the beginning of a significant phase in his artistic growth and international recognition. With the help of several Russian emigres, he began to establish himself as a composer-pianist, specializing in his virtuosic modernist compositions.[40] His innovative style, characterized by bold dissonances, complex rhythms, striking orchestration, and a blend of lyrical and percussive elements, has gained great attention and acclaim abroad. This period of self-imposed exile allowed Prokofiev to develop his distinctive style, unrestrained by the ideological constraints that would subsequently dominate his career in the Soviet Union.

[39] Marina Frolova-Walker, "Prokofiev the Soviet Artist," Gresham College, March 8, 2022, https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/soviet-prokofiev.

[40] Ibid.

However, despite his financial prosperity, popularity with the public, and interactions with notable figures of Western culture during the 1920s, Prokofiev increasingly missed his homeland.[41] He eventually lost interest in radical modernism and Western music due to his growing dissatisfaction with his existence as a Russian emigrant.[42] He persistently pursued new opportunities in the Soviet Union and maintained communication with friends and colleagues there. Following his world tour, he started considering his possibilities for a potential return. He chose to pursue a less structured and more experimental musical career and considered whether such work would conform to Soviet political norms. Prokofiev appeared to be well aware that the artistic propaganda there could determine his success or failure, but he was curious to discover if his music and Soviet Union politics could coexist peacefully.[43]

Prokofiev had already gained international recognition in the West, a success that the Soviet government could not ignore. Naturally, Stalin's administration saw the renowned composer's return as a huge propaganda opportunity, and any harsh repressions would have drawn criticism from throughout the world.[44] Thus, the Soviet government, eager to repatriate a composer of Prokofiev's international stature, offered him lucrative commissions and promised him artistic freedom and official support. These promises, combined with a desire to be reunited with his roots, eventually convinced Prokofiev to make the fateful decision to return to the Soviet Union. Along with a well-earned worldwide reputation, Prokofiev carried with him a refined innovative intellect that had been fostered before the Soviet era and later flourished outside of Russia. He made a permanent return to his homeland in 1936 during the outset of Stalin's

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Weickhardt, 129.

[43] Lori Newman, "Program Notes: Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet," New Mexico Philharmonic, November 22, 2011, https://nmphil.org/music-in-new-mexico/program-notes-prokofievs-romeo-and-juliet/.

[44] Weickhardt, 129.

campaign of Great Terror and the assault on Shostakovich.[45] Prokofiev did not appear to recognize it at the time, but the move was fraught with risk since the country's political environment was increasingly repressive, and any forms of art were closely monitored and controlled by the state.

Nevertheless, Prokofiev hoped to contribute to the development of Soviet music and believed he could find a way to satisfy the regime without sacrificing his artistic integrity. Upon his return, Prokofiev obtained several prestigious commissions and was granted substantial funds to create new works. Among these, Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet* is one of his most celebrated works. He was enthusiastic about this project, seeing it as an opportunity to combine his innovative musical style with a universally beloved story. Thus, his return to a more conventional idiom was the result of both his own natural development and governmental pressure. According to historian George Weickhardt, this may have given Prokofiev the false impression that he could modify his creative tendencies to fit the rigid parameters of Soviet musical standards.[46] Perhaps he just believed that being in his original environment would "feed" his creativity.

Composed between 1935 and 1936, the music of *Romeo and Juliet* was a demonstration of Prokofiev's genius, characterized by its rich melodic content, vivid orchestration, and dramatic intensity. The ballet's score employs a sophisticated use of motifs to represent the characters and their relationships, which enhances the narrative and emotional impact of the work. As Russian scholar and historian Simon Morrison comments: "This ballet was conceived in paradise… Prokofiev was about to create this astonishing diversity of music from his

[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

imagination."[47] Undoubtedly, this work is widely regarded as a masterpiece of twentieth-century ballet because of Prokofiev's ability to convey the emotional depth and complexity of William Shakespeare's characters through his music.

On the other hand, *Romeo and Juliet* faced censorship, rewriting, and second-guessing from the beginning, which made its situation especially difficult.[48] When Prokofiev began composing the ballet, his initial concept included a significant divergence from Shakespeare's original play—a happy ending. Prokofiev envisioned a resolution in which the lovers did not die but lived together instead, thereby providing a more uplifting and optimistic conclusion to the story. Subsequently, the composer used the statement, "Living people can dance, the dying cannot," to defend the modification.[49] This decision was influenced by the Soviet regime's cultural policies, which favored works that conveyed positive messages and aligned with the goals of Socialist Realism. By altering the tragic ending, Prokofiev aimed to produce a work that reflected socialist ideals of hope and progress. This adjustment was intended to make the ballet more suitable to Soviet censors and ensure its acceptance and performance within the Soviet Union. According to Weickhardt, Prokofiev's adaptation demonstrates that he either refrained from challenging official musical standards or simply did so very subtly.[50]

However, the music community and Soviet officials found this dramatic divergence from Shakespeare's original story to be controversial. They argued that altering Shakespeare's tragic ending would lessen its enduring appeal since the tragedy was essential to the emotional and

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[47] Joshua Barone, "The Tortured History behind Prokofiev's 'Romeo and Juliet,'" *The New York Times*, January 23, 2018, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/arts/music/prokofiev-romeo-and-juliet-new-york-philharmonic-new-york-city-ballet.html.

[48] Simon Morrison, *The People's Artist* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 39.

[49] Joe Horowitz, "Prokofiev's Happy Ending, and Further Thoughts on Conducting Ballet," Unanswered Question, April 23, 2015, https://www.artsjournal.com/uq/2015/04/prokofievs-happy-ending-and-further-thoughts-on-conducting-ballet.html.

[50] Weickhardt, 130.

dramatic integrity of the work. Since then, Prokofiev's score was considered "undanceable" and the production was postponed indefinitely.[51] Even worse, Prokofiev found himself in a challenging situation because of increased demands from the public to maintain the original narrative. Despite his initial intentions, the criticism against the happy ending eventually led Prokofiev to revert to Shakespeare's original tragic conclusion. In addition, Prokofiev was intimidated into adding a group dance and other forced modifications to the ballet, including the removal of three exotic dances and some of the most intriguing music.[52] The ballet's director, Leonid Lavrosky, without consulting Prokofiev, added needless repetition, changed the orchestration, and simplified some of the music.[53]

Notwithstanding these challenges, the ballet was both commercially and critically successful. During Prokofiev's final years, he was able to enjoy the popularity of the work, but he was bitter for many years about the alterations made to the orchestration and the ending. As Morrison comments: "Soviet censors ruined its [original] characters."[54] In essence, the decision to change the ballet's ending had significant political implications. The reinstatement of the tragic ending reflected the complexities of managing Soviet cultural regulations, as well as offering a compelling example of the complex interplay between artistic creativity and political ideology in the Soviet Union. Prokofiev's initial attempt to align with Socialist Realism through a happy ending was eventually viewed as an artistic compromise that did not resonate with the underlying values of the original work.

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[51] Timothy Judd, "Prokofiev's 'Romeo and Juliet': From Ballet Score to Concert Suite," The Listeners' Club, November 9, 2022, https://thelistenersclub.com/2022/11/09/prokofievs-romeo-and-juliet-from-ballet-score-to-concert-suite/.

[52] Linda B Glaser, "In Composing 'Romeo and Juliet,' Prokofiev Witnessed Betrayal, Exile, Execution," Cornell Chronicle, March 21, 2011, https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2011/03/dark-story-behind-romeo-and-juliet-ballet-revealed.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

Prokofie*v: Semyon Kotko*

Following his work on *Romeo and Juliet*, Prokofiev continued to face significant restrictions under Stalin's regime. These constraints became even more pronounced in his next major project, the opera *Semyon Kotko*. Unlike the more subtle compromises made in his earlier works, *Semyon Kotko* exemplifies the direct impact of Stalinist censorship, and the ideological demands imposed on Soviet composers. The opera, based on a patriotic war story, depicts the same conflict between artistic vision and political ideology but in a different musical and narrative form. This transition from ballet to opera emphasizes Prokofiev's broader challenges in aligning his creative instincts with the demands of the Soviet regime.

Written between 1938 and 1939, *Semyon Kotko* is Prokofiev's first opera based on a Soviet subject. During that time, political norms made it impossible for *Romeo and Juliet* to find a stage, so he had to create an opera that would be both popular and politically acceptable.[55] Prokofiev was inspired by the opportunities presented by creative concepts, receptive audience, and deeper links to national customs, in addition to the tangible support he received. Promoting the idea of an authentically Soviet opera was something Prokofiev was also eager to do. Shortly after his permanent return to Moscow, he stated, "I very much want to write an opera on a Soviet topic, but it is not so simple to find a suitable libretto: while much space is given in our plays and libretti to a satirical, caricature-like picturization of the negative hero, little is said about the positive and heroic type, or—if at all—it is done too schematically."[56]

[55] Victor Carr, "Semyon Kotko - Classics Today," Classicstoday.com, October 7, 2024, https://www.classicstoday.com/review/review-5153/.

[56] Schwartz, 147.

Prokofiev wanted a subject "heroic and constructive... for these are the traits characteristic of the present era in the Soviet Union."[57] Therefore, he selected Valentin Katayev's 1937 novella, *I, Son of the Working People* to adhere to official guidelines and appeal to an unsophisticated audience.[58] Prokofiev explored the Socialist Realism's theme of "realist in form, socialist in content" set against the background of the 1917 Ukrainian-Russian War and produced a captivating and inventive composition of music theater.[59] He had started to advocate for a "new simplicity," rejecting the boundaries he believed modernism in the West had reached, either as a description of his artistic ideal or as a prescription for his Soviet contemporaries.[60]

However, when Socialist Realism was established as the dominant Soviet aesthetic in the early 1930s, opera was expected to serve as a vehicle for promoting Stalinist ideology. By the late 1930s, the Soviet arts administration demanded that opera conform to Romantic conventions, featuring emotionally powerful arias, choruses, and grand imagery in order to be both approachable and breathtaking.[61] Despite this, Prokofiev's core principle of his operatic aesthetic was to resist "bombast" and "triviality," aiming instead for the "universal and timeless" while avoiding overly "local or topical elements," refusing to be constrained by Socialist Realism's limitations as well as the traditions of Romantic opera.[62] This approach allowed him to navigate the tension between his artistic vision and the state's ideological requirements.

Therefore, Prokofiev did not compromise his artistic ideals, even if he tried to meet the expectations of the time by portraying the heroic narrative of the Soviet people's struggle. He continued to write for posterity, intending for *Kotko* to stay "without propaganda, which quickly

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, 313.
[60] Nathan Seinen, "Prokofiev's Semyon Kotko and the Melodrama of High Stalinism," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21, no. 3 (November 2009): 203–36, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0954586710000212. 203.
[61] Ibid, 204.
[62] Ibid.

goes out of style."[63] He deliberately questioned the exuberant marches and traditional "song and dance" routines, which were popular at the time. According to the composer himself, "When a person goes to the opera, he wants not only to hear but to see. Hence the action must be dynamic."[64] Therefore, in order to "activate" the events taking place on stage, Prokofiev decided to avoid recitatives, which he considered to be "the least interesting element in opera."[65] While some critics disagreed, Prokofiev believed that he pursued originality rather than ignoring the melodic elements. He said, "I preferred to use new material... of new design. New life, new subject matter demand new forms of expression, and the listener must not complain if he has to exert a little effort to grasp these forms."[66]

However, neither the public nor the critics were willing to make the "little effort" that the composer begged for. Although *Kotko'*s premiere was met with a somewhat positive reaction, as usual, Soviet ideology outweighed all other factors. Professional critics solely discussed the work's significance as a "Soviet opera" and the music's intrinsic value was simply neglected. Therefore, Prokofiev's first Soviet opera received a contentious reaction due to his unwillingness to completely comply with government regulations, which set the stage for his subsequent theatrical career. *Kotko's* approach to the subject matter, particularly its lack of heroism, drew harsh criticism even though Prokofiev's musical ability was acknowledged to be much above Soviet standards. The opera's humorous aspects were deemed unsuitably disrespectful, and it was determined that they went against the conventions of ritualized seriousness. After being labeled as "formalistic," *Semyon Kotko* vanished from the repertoire for over two decades.[67]

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Schwartz, 148.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

Additionally, the piano score was not released until 1958, five years after the composer's passing. Since then, the composition has undergone extensive restoration and become one of the composer's most significant contributions to Soviet music.

It may be said that Prokofiev's opera was a kind of failure, as it did not fully reflect his political consciousness or his function as a propaganda tool in Soviet society. Notwithstanding its initial failure due to its prioritization of "lively" drama over propaganda, the work may nevertheless be valued in the context of opera and theater traditions. Along with Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, these operas demonstrate the significant influence that Stalin's cultural policies had on Soviet composers. At that time, "artistic originality was no longer valued, and political disinterestedness was unacceptable."[68] Both operas, which were first criticized for what were seen as departures from Socialist Realism, represent a broader struggle of composers to preserve their artistic integrity under a regime that demanded ideological conformity. Despite their initial failures, both operas ultimately underscore the resilience of artistic expression, even in the face of oppressive state control. The legacy of these compositions, along with their eventual recognition, serves as a testament to the enduring power of art to challenge and transcend political boundaries.

[68] Seinen, 235.

Chapter 2: 1941-1943: The Great Patriotic War, Patriotism and Programmatic Music

Although Stalin had aggressively attempted to avoid it, the Soviet Union was still dragged into the war when Germany invaded Russia in 1941. A newfound sense of pride and unity throughout the country was strengthened by the German invasion, which coincided with the emergence of a distinctively Soviet style in music. Russian music started to adopt a much more nationalistic style between 1941 and 1943. The strengthened patriotism can be sensed by the way Stalin described the war publicly—the Great Patriotic War. This arousing title was emphasized by the Soviet government to evoke similarities to Tsar Alexander I over Napoleon's invading army, which created a strong sense of nationalism due to the patriotic nature of the Soviet people.[69] Many Soviet memoirists shared this perception of the Great Patriotic War era, seeing the early 1940s as the "best" of times, even a "blessed" time.[70] As Russian poet Boris Pasternak comments, "When the war broke out, its real horrors, its real dangers, the real menace of death, were a blessing compared with the inhuman power of the lie, a relief because it broke a spell of the dead letter."[71] The memoirs speak of a genuine and honest patriotism throughout the war, as well as a sense of freedom and fearlessness. It was a moment when everyone could fully relate to their nation and the battle it was enduring. The war was exposed to the public through a variety of cultural means and music played an important role in the country's growing trend of nationalism. The outbreak of war gave Soviet critics and composers a unifying theme: The enormity of the war was so significant that every piece composed during the war, and for years following, was expected to address or reflect it in some manner.

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[69] Jimmy Chen, "Napoleon vs. Tsar Alexander: Friendship and Rivalry," TheCollector, April 6, 2024, https://www.thecollector.com/napoleon-tsar-alexander-friends-rivals/.

[70] Marina Frolova-Walker, "Soviet Music in World War II," www.gresham.ac.uk, March 24, 2022, https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/soviet-war-music.

[71] Ibid.

Around this time, the Soviet authorities took precautions to preserve cultural interests. Stalin ensured that the artistic elite were evacuated from cities near the war lines and relocated to the interior. The Soviet Union provided financial security for composers and provided incentives in the form of rewards known as the Stalin Prize. Unlike other song contests, it was awarded based on a composer's body of work rather than the merits of individual works. Winners of the Stalin Prize were awarded a substantial sum of rubles for their musical compositions as well as other cultural endeavors.[72] It was first given out in 1941 to musicians who had shown exceptional talent in creating compositions that embodied Soviet principles and inspired a sense of patriotism. In addition to bringing about considerable fame, receiving this esteemed award served as more evidence of the value of music. The Soviet government actively encouraged musical engagement throughout the war years by granting financial incentives along with the rewards, creating an environment in which music could be composed and performed despite the country's widespread hardship brought by the war.

However, while financial incentives and public recognition offered security and prestige to composers like Shostakovich and Prokofiev, they also placed composers under immense pressure to conform to state expectations. The Stalin Prize served as a powerful tool for the Soviet government to endorse and propagate art that aligned strictly with the principles of Socialist Realism and the state's ideological goals. This imposed conformity limited artistic freedom and placed a heavy burden on recipients. Thus, the Stalin Prize, while an honor, acted as a double-edged sword. It incentivized artistic production during a time of great hardship but at the cost of composers' independence and creativity. The laureates were expected to be both

[72] Ibid.

artists and political tools, navigating a landscape where personal expression was often sacrificed for survival.

This balancing act between creativity and state-imposed constraints extended beyond just personal expression—it also influenced the broader nationalistic goals the government sought to embed in the arts. Music became a powerful tool for fostering national pride and unity, with composers expected to convey patriotic sentiments in their works. For vocal music, the simplest method to express nationalism was through the texts. For example, a famous Soviet song, The *Song of the Russian Army,* explicitly wrote, "Invincible and legendary,/ in battle, who experienced the joy of victories./ You have always defeated your enemies, you will defeat the fascists too."[73] However, more intricate procedures were required to evoke a nationalistic feeling in instrumental music. Composers often drew on specific sources of inspiration—such as historical figures, significant locations, or collective experiences—to craft a patriotic sound in their works.[74] To convey these inspirations, they employed a diverse range of musical styles and techniques, weaving these elements into their compositions to capture the essence of their themes. As a result, their music became programmatic, meaning it represented something beyond the music itself.[75] At the same time, programmatic music was supported officially. The more strictly Socialist Realism was imposed, the more urgently this encouragement was needed. Programmatic music increased the accessibility of instrumental music, thereby enhancing its appeal to new audiences. On the other hand, capturing the national sound was another method by which composers created more patriotic works.[76] This meant employing folksong tunes or

[73] Socialist East, "Несокрушимая и Легендарная! Invincible and Legendary! (English Lyrics)," YouTube, December 30, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcxbnNekGUw.
[74] Harris and Murray, 71.
[75] Ibid, 72.
[76] Ibid.

portions of them together with distinctive sounds, to make the public identify them as uniquely Russian.

Shostakovich: *Symphony No.7*

Surely, Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony* was one of the most significant compositions that emerged from the Soviet Union during World War II. The city of Leningrad was the main inspiration for this symphony, which was the historical and cultural gem of the Soviet Union. Leningrad was home to a large portion of the remnant of Russia's intellectual and cultural elite, and the city's residents took great pride in this historical legacy. As the symbolic capital of the Russian Revolution, Leningrad held a special place in Soviet political history.[77] Thus, it became Adolf Hitler's main target due to its importance to the Soviet Union, which endured one of the most devastating sieges in history. From September 1941 to January 1944, the siege of Leningrad was a prolonged military blockade undertaken by the German forces against the Soviet city.[78] Three million people were confined, encircled, and condemned to death by starvation during the nine hundred days of the blockade. Eyewitness accounts spoke of the bravery of the people of Leningrad who endured inhuman pain yet confronted the Germans by refusing to surrender. According to journalist Harrison Salisbury, "This was the greatest and longest siege ever endured by a modern city, a time of trial, suffering and heroism that reached peaks of tragedy and bravery almost beyond our power to comprehend."[79]

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[77]Muhanna Lawati, "Time to Face the Music: Shostakovich's 7th Symphony and the Siege of Leningrad," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History* 13, no. 1 (2023): 28–46, https://doi.org/10.20429/aujh.2023.130103, 36.

[78] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Siege of Leningrad | Soviet History," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, September 1, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/event/Siege-of-Leningrad.

[79] Schwartz, 177.

Under such severe circumstances, one would expect that nothing but physical survival would matter. Nonetheless, certain performers continued to play for patrons even in situations where regular concerts had to be canceled due to a shortage of food, fuel, or electricity. Theaters struggled to function, musicians continued to perform, and composers managed to create music. Shostakovich created his *Seventh Symphony* during this time. He began work on this symphony in 1941, barely six months after the German invasion, and completed three movements in Leningrad. Later, he was ordered to flee the city and flew to Moscow with his family over enemy lines. Shostakovich composed quickly because "war was all around. [He] had to be together with the people, [he] wanted to create the image of our embattled country, to engrave it in music."[80] As reported by newspapers, the symphony's premiere was interrupted by the announcement of an oncoming air combat, but neither the performers nor audience would take refuge in shelters until the symphony had been concluded.[81] Soon after this, the *Seventh Symphony* became well-known across the country and was hailed as an epic nationalistic hymn.

Between 1941 and 1945, Shostakovich composed his *Seventh, Eighth,* and *Ninth Symphonies,* known as his "War Symphonies."[82] As the first symphony of his war trilogy, the *Seventh* was originally dedicated to Lenin and later re-dedicated to Leningrad in honor of its besiegement during the war. In Shostakovich's brief but memorable essay about this new symphonic project, he wrote, "Never in my life have I dedicated my compositions to anyone. But this symphony—if I succeed in its realization—I shall dedicate to Leningrad. For all what I wrote into it, all that I expressed in it, is tied up with that beloved native city of mine, is

[80] Lawati, 36.
[81] Jason Caffrey, "Shostakovich's Symphony Played by a Starving Orchestra," *BBC News*, January 2, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34292312.
[82] Schwartz, 190.

connected with the historic days of its defense against fascist oppressors."[83] Thus, the *Seventh Symphony* was a programmatic work that embodied not only the besieged Leningrad, but also the composer's hope for the siege and the whole country. Shostakovich later reported the composing process was "like a man possessed. Nothing could hinder the flow of ideas—neither savage raids, German planes, nor the grim atmosphere of a beleaguered city. I worked with an inhuman intensity I have never reached before.[84] It is important to keep in mind that the composition was created in the heat of combat, and there is no questioning the authenticity of Shostakovich's words or music. The composer intended for this symphony to boost morale and serve as a symbol of resistance against the Nazi forces.

As Shostakovich's longest symphony, the *Seventh* has four movements. It is evident that each movement symbolizes a programmatic idea, originally with titles: "War," "Reminiscence," "Native Expanse," and "Victory," but Shostakovich quickly removed them and left the pieces with just their tempo markings.[85] The force of the overall conception comes from Shostakovich's idea of a piece having two levels of significance. A broad, strong motif that is fundamental to the symphony is introduced in the opening movement. The first *Allegretto* movement features a relentless and repetitive theme, often referred to as the "invasion theme." Initially, many thought it was a reference to the German invasion of Russia. However, Shostakovich made it clear that the theme has two meanings, "I was thinking of other enemies of humanity when I composed the theme."[86] Unlike the assumption of invasion with threatening and forceful sounds, this theme begins innocently, quiet and distant, and gradually builds in intensity, eventually turning into a

[83] Ibid, 178.
[84] Caffrey.
[85] Schwartz, 192.
[86] Dimitri Shostakovich and Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dimitri Shostakovich* (London: H. Hamilton, 1979), 123.

howling monster. The snare drum plays a pivotal role throughout the piece, especially in the "invasion theme."

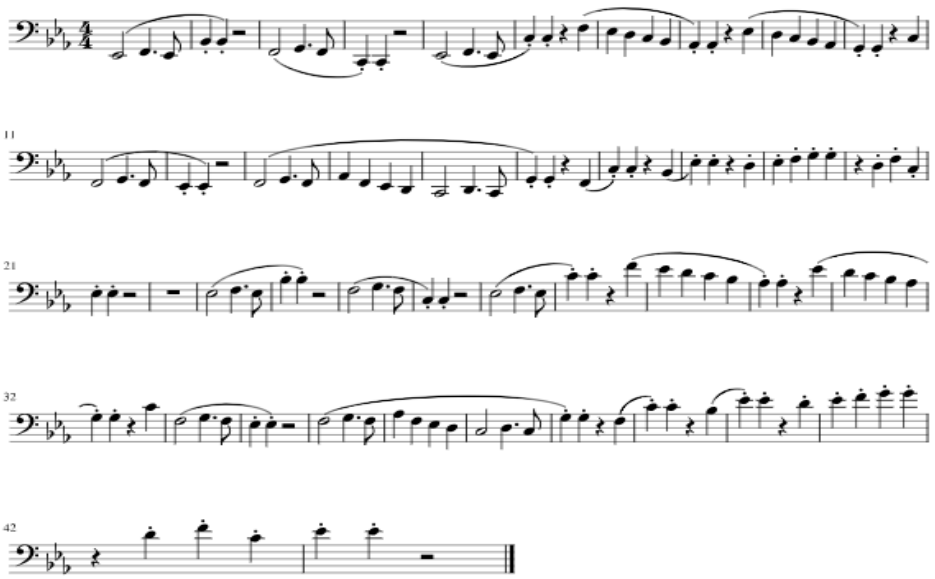

Figure 1: Dmitri Shostakovich, *Symphony No.7* in C Major, Op. 60 (Piano Reduction), Movement I, mm.31-73.[87]

It introduces and maintains a repetitive, march-like rhythm, which is persistent and mechanical, symbolizing the persistent strength of enemy forces. As the theme develops, the orchestration becomes denser, with layers of instruments joining in, such as the strings and woodwinds, enhancing the theme's ominous character. Shostakovich anticipated this twenty-two-measure ostinato march would be compared to Ravel's *Bolero* because of their similar use of repetitive, intensifying structures. In a letter to a confidant, he stated that "idle critics will no doubt reproach me for imitating Ravel's *Bolero*. Well, let them, for this is how I hear the war."[88] Besides the prominent usage of the snare drum to give the piece a more aggressive texture, the

[87] Musescore, "Symphony No. 7," Musescore.com (Musescore, November 22, 2021), https://musescore.com/user/32417071/scores/7147941.

[88] Lawati, 37.

brass and percussion are also commonly used to portray more militaristic sounds since they are typically employed in military settings.[89] For instance, the central section of the *Adagio* movement, marked *Moderato risoluto,* takes listeners back to the terrifying moment of the invasion's climax in the first movement. As the movement goes on, the addition of brass and percussion adds to the already intense suffering. These fanfare-like motifs are reminiscent of military bugle calls, reinforcing the powerful, martial atmosphere.

In addition to featuring multiple motifs that provide the impression of militarism, Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony* finishes in a profoundly meaningful way. Once again, the finale resembles the "invasion theme" from the first movement and represents a vision of ultimate victory. It begins quietly and then grows more determined over time, with a revitalized march spirit. It is not *Adagio*'s mournful march but rather one of the firm resolutions, as if to remind listeners of the forces lurking outside the city gates.[90] There are poignant passages that evoke memories of past losses, but the final section, which is based on a recurring rhythmic fragment in the strings, restores the strong vigor of previous passages. Creatively, Shostakovich chose to end the *Seventh* with a significant use of brass instruments. The bright, powerful tones of the brass instruments give the listener faith that Leningrad and, in a larger sense, the Soviet Union would triumph over the German invasion.[91]

[89] Harris and Murray, 75.

[90] Betsy Schwarm, "Leningrad Symphony No. 7 in c Major, Op. 60 | Symphony by Shostakovich," Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Leningrad-Symphony-No-7.

[91] Harris and Murray, 75.

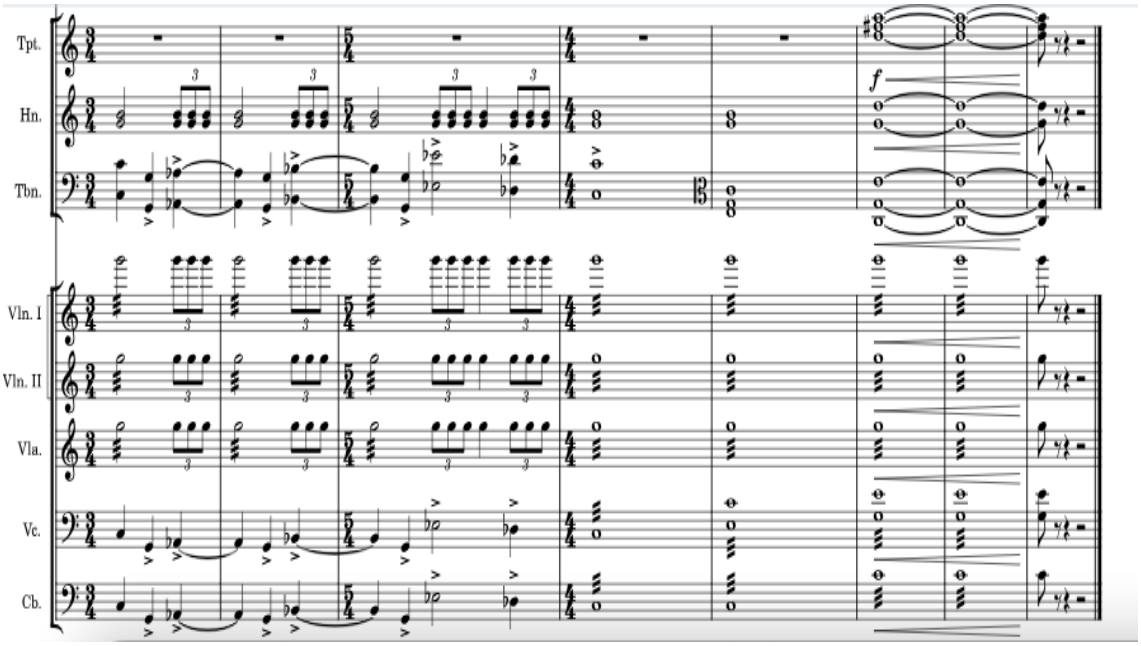

Figure 2: Dmitri Shostakovich, *Symphony No.7* in C Major, Op. 60, Movement IV, mm. 162-169.[92]

In addition to encouraging other Soviet composers to revive the symphonies genre as an effective medium for imposing and profound wartime music, Shostakovich's *Seventh* plays an important role in confirming the grotesque style within the context of the war narrative. The dissonance and rhythmic complexity, once likely to be criticized before the war, were now seen as reflecting the life-and-death struggle of the Soviet people. The outrageous aspects of the style, which previously contradicted the ideals of Socialist Realism, were now accepted as a parody of Nazism.[93] As the Soviet Union sought to unify its people against a common enemy, it loosened its rigid control over nationalist expression, recognizing that the survival of the nation depended on a strong, culturally resonant identity. Therefore, what was once considered unacceptable under rigid ideological control could later be viewed as a vital reflection of the nation's struggles

[92] Musescore.
[93] Frolova-Walker, "Soviet Music in World War II".

and endurance, demonstrating how historical context can transform the interpretation of artistic value and significance.

This symphony was written during the most difficult time of the Soviet Union during World War II. As one of music history's most renowned premiere stories, the performers demonstrated incredible perseverance. Even though the battle was still raging in the city, the ensemble gathered in frigid Russian weather to practice, so they could perform the Leningrad-themed symphony for the public.[94] Despite difficult circumstances, musicians in the Soviet Union tried to give their best performances to ensure that the standard of the music they were performing was not compromised. They were not only performing to entertain the audience, but more importantly, to inspire people to be proud of their country.

Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony* had an enduring legacy that touched not only the music community but also the hearts of all Soviet people. The symphonies influenced by the *Seventh* were notable for their depiction of horror and tragedy, reaching an emotional depth that had never been seen before in Socialist Realism music. It inspired thousands of people to struggle heroically to defend their homeland. As Shostakovich declared more than once, "The symphony is not merely battle music but a celebration of humanity, and my countrymen particularly. I have written my symphony about them, because I love them from the bottom of my heart… I dedicate my dearest work of art to the heroic defenders of Leningrad, to the Red Army, and to our victory."[95] This statement, likely written during the bleakest moments of the Russian withdrawal in Kuibyshev, reflects the profound emotions behind the music.[96] Through such intense and powerful compositions, Shostakovich was able to communicate not just the

[94] Harris and Murray, 79.
[95] Schwartz, 192.
[96] Ibid.

hardships, but also an unyielding belief in ultimate victory. His unwavering faith in triumph resonates deeply, turning the symphony into a lasting testament to resilience and hope in the face of unimaginable adversity.

Around the same time, Stalin approved a propaganda campaign centered on the *Seventh Symphony,* which contemporary critic Ivan Martinov considered to be "Russian first and foremost."[97] The totalitarian state's efficient ideological engine went into full action to promote Shostakovich's music. The striking contrast between the *Seventh*'s appreciation and *Lady Macbeth*'s repression demonstrates the Soviet government's overpowering control over artistic expression. By taking this move, it is clear that the symphony aligned with Stalin's emphasis on nationalism and patriotism as the key ideological weapons in the battle against Germany. As Stalin's ideologue, Alexander Fadeyev expressed the leader's thoughts: "Let us try to create now, during the war, works that are real, serious, big, but ones that can be used right now as weapons, not set aside for later… Make it for now, like the *Seventh Symphony.*"[98]

Though the symphony itself played an important role in illustrating a musical change in Soviet history, the work's widespread popularity was much more significant and long-lasting, giving the Russian people much-needed inspiration to defend their nation. It became a symbol of the Russian people's solidarity and spiritual connection in their battle against the Nazis.[99] The symphony's significance in Soviet culture was strengthened when its influence was acknowledged with the precious Stalin Prize. It was given to Shostakovich for the second time in two years (the first time was his *Piano Quintet*, awarded in 1941), which further enhanced his reputation as a patriotic composer.[100] Surprisingly, the *Seventh* was nominated for the prize even

[97] Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, 346.
[98] Volkov and Bouis, 177.
[99] Ibid, 182.
[100] Schwartz, 132.

before its public premiere, without an audition or discussion prior to voting. As critic Mikhail Khrapchenko commented, "I think there is no need to discuss it, since everything is perfectly clear."[101] At the same time, the dictatorship was eager to take advantage of what it saw as the propagandist potential of this work, by exporting it to Soviet war allies, including Britain and America.[102] The *Seventh Symphony* was a weapon of Shostakovich's struggle against the fascist regime and even as a hymn of victory for all the anti-fascist countries of the world together. Shostakovich indeed left a significant musical legacy not only for the Soviet Union but for the whole world.

Prokofiev: *Piano Sonata No.7*

While Shostakovich's symphony expressed his patriotism and spoke out for the Soviet people against the German invasion, other composers made contributions to the war effort using equally powerful but different methods. Prokofiev, who was severely impacted by the war, not only as a citizen of a besieged nation, but also through his connection to the people around him who were suffering, blended these feelings and experiences into his piano works, particularly his "War Sonatas." The war trilogy, which includes the *Sixth, Seventh,* and *Eighth* piano sonatas, is regarded as one of the greatest cycles in piano literature. Composed between 1939 and 1944, these sonatas capture the passionate feelings and harsh reality of the whole war era. The war heightened Prokofiev's patriotic revolutionary feeling, which promoted his ambition to compose the "War Sonatas." These works reflect on and respond to the horrors of the Soviet Union's immense struggle against the German forces, which became a way for Prokofiev to process and

[101] Marina Frolova-Walker, *Stalin's Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 91.

[102] Weickhardt, 127.

express his emotional turmoil and the collective experience of his countrymen. They successfully convey the fear, aggression, and perseverance that defined Soviet life throughout wartime.

Prokofiev's *Seventh Sonata* is occasionally subtitled "Stalingrad," and captures the fury and uncertainty of the times with a distinctive personal voice. It is distinguished among the "War Sonatas" for its intensity and expressiveness due to its exceptionally concise and concentrated form, sharp contrast between movements, and intricate rhythmic structures. This sonata, like Shostakovich's symphony, portrays the tenacity and determination of the Soviet people but through the lens of solo piano, which is more personal yet still dramatic. In fact, most of the sonata's themes were already outlined in 1939, when the Soviet Union and Germany were still in a mutually uneasy state of non-aggression, simultaneously with the composition of his *Sixth* and *Eighth* sonatas. Therefore, Prokofiev's real fear at the moment was surviving Stalin's purges.[103] The government's strict regime profoundly shaped the artistic landscape, forcing Prokofiev to create in a climate of intense fear and political oppression. Hence, nothing would prevent one from seeing it as a man's efforts against the Soviet dictatorship or as a brave person's struggles with destiny.[104] The sonata was later completed in 1942 while Prokofiev was relocated to the Caucasus to avoid the impending German invasion.[105] Thus, the *Seventh Sonata* is filled with exploding feelings of terror, anger, worry, and battle, whereas the *Sixth* captures the anxious expectation of the war and the *Eighth* focuses on its aftermath. As one of Prokofiev's most significant compositions, the *Seventh* stands out for its concise structure and intricate development of material. It vividly depicts the horrific situation when the war broke out, while

[103] Norman Lebrecht, "Prokofiev Was Stalin's Final Victim," Scena.org, June 4, 2023, http://www.scena.org/lsm/sm8-9/prokofiev-en.htm.

[104] Weickhardt, 130.

[105] Ibid.

also honoring the bravery of the Soviet people in fighting fascism and their unwavering belief in the country's eventual victory.

The first movement, *Allegro inquieto*, develops and contrasts two main themes that are explored throughout the movement in a modified sonata form. The rhythms are extremely tense and anxious, as the tempo marking implies. The opening theme is quite sarcastic and harsh, with dissonant chords and forceful, persistent beating in both high and low registers. It is characterized by a tense agitation that seems to be a fear of being arrested immediately. Prokofiev, more than anyone else at the time, must have been aware of this emotion because some of his colleagues and acquaintances were detained and eventually executed during the purges, including his close friend and professional collaborator, the director Vsevolod Meyerhold and his wife.[106] The music then takes a turbulent turn before arriving at a slow, thoughtful, yet unsettling second theme, which implies an attempt to flee reality. Prokofiev deliberately employed broken melodies, chromatic notes, and sudden changes in various harmonies and dynamics to convey the contradictory sensation.

[106] Dinara Nadzhafova, "Sonata No. 7 in B-Flat Major, Op. 83 | Dinara Nadzhafova | Piano Music | Free Classical Music Online," Classicalconnect.com, February 20, 2007, https://www.classicalconnect.com/Piano_Music/Prokofiev/Sonata_No_7/853.

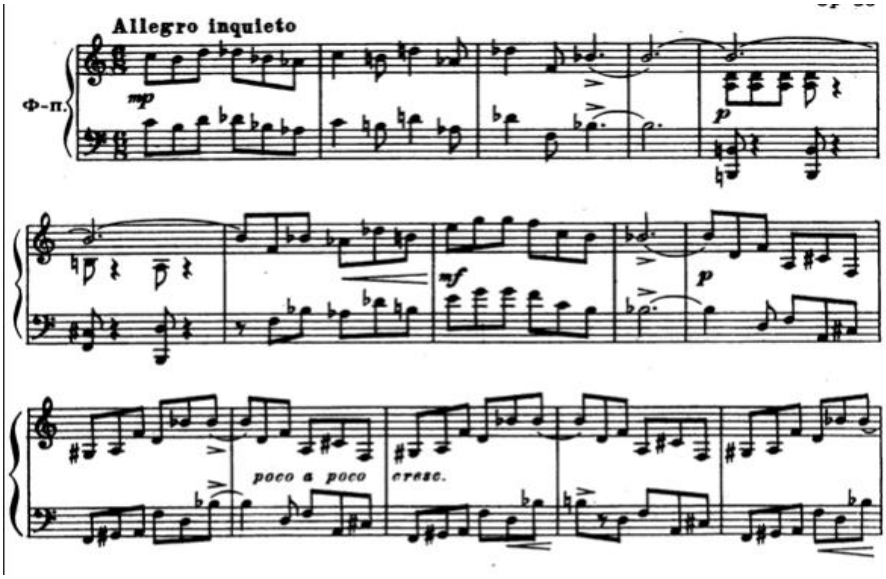

Figure 3: Sergei Prokofiev, *Piano Sonata No. 7* in B♭ Major, Op. 83, Movement I, mm. 1-15.[107]

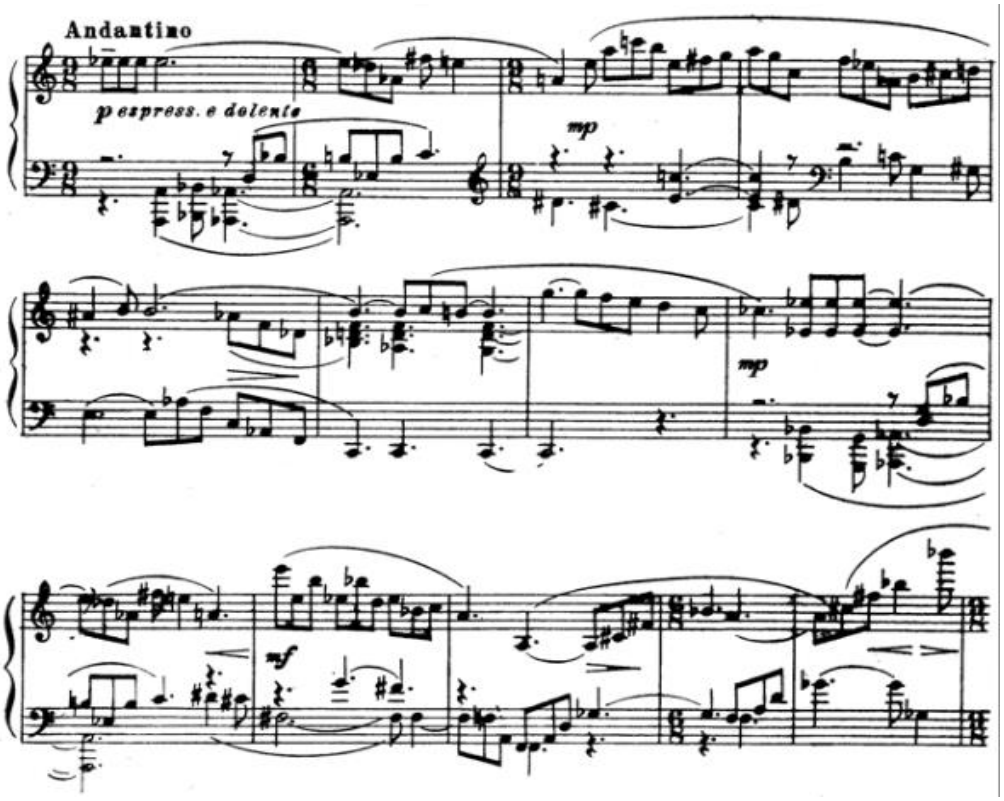

Figure 4: Sergei Prokofiev, *Piano Sonata No. 7* in B♭ Major, Op. 83, Movement I, mm. 124-136.[108]

[107] Sergey Prokofiev. "Complete Piano Sonatas." Edited by György Sándor. New York: MCA Music, 1967. 1.

[108] Prokofiev, 174-175.

The tension between these two themes is heightened in the development section, and the music gradually alters and evolves with it. The agitation is evident, foreshadowing the return of the opening's threatening theme, which is as aggressive as anything Prokofiev has ever written. Following the dramatic Recapitulation, the piece concludes with a powerful coda that evokes unresolved tension. It is important to note that, while the music is identified as being in the key of B-flat major, with a melodic motif indicating B-flat as the home key, the opening movement lacks the key signature. Indeed, this might be the most tonally ambiguous of all Prokofiev's sonata movements.[109] This tonal ambiguity may reflect the uncertainty and inner conflict Prokofiev was experiencing in real life, as he navigated the pressure between his artistic vision and the demands of Soviet authorities. Overall, the first movement embodies the tension and chaos of wartime, with its driving rhythms and dissonant harmonies reflecting the uncertainty and anxiety of the era.

The second movement takes a drastically different turn and enters a dreamlike realm. The music begins with a lyrical E major lead into a cantabile melody with a unique harmonic color. According to scholar Daniel Jaffe's biography of the composer, this lovely and yearning theme is claimed to have been derived from one of Schumann's lieder, *Wehmut.*[110] The text runs: "I can sometimes sing as if I were glad,/ yet secretly tears well and so free my heart./ Nightingales... sing their song of longing from their dungeon's depth... everyone delights,/ yet no one feels the pain,/ the deep sorrow in the song."[111] This opening motif soon fades into a highly chromatic passage with eerie and anxious lines, building the piece to an enormous climax that surpasses all the highlights of the opening movement. Following a dark and uneasy climax, the music softens

[109]Boris Berman, *Prokofiev's Piano Sonatas: A Guide for the Listener and the Performer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 151.

[110] Daniel Jaffé, *Sergey Prokofiev* (Phaidon, 1998), 172.

[111] Ibid.

and returns to the beautiful opening theme. This movement is reflective and poetic, providing relief from the aggressive outer movement. It may be seen as a contemplation of the personal and collective losses of war. As the most peaceful movement in the sonata, its warmth represents the Soviet people's desire for happiness and tranquility.

The *Precipitato* finale is written in a toccata-like style with a recurring brief theme and perpetual motion, once described as "an explosive burst of rock 'n' roll with a chromatic edge."[112] In contrast to the first movement, the finale is firmly grounded in tonality from the very beginning, with consistently repeated B-flat major chords. This movement is written in a quirky 7/8 time signature. Russian composers of the nineteenth century employed these asymmetrical meters, which are frequently found in folk songs, in their nationalistic works.[113]

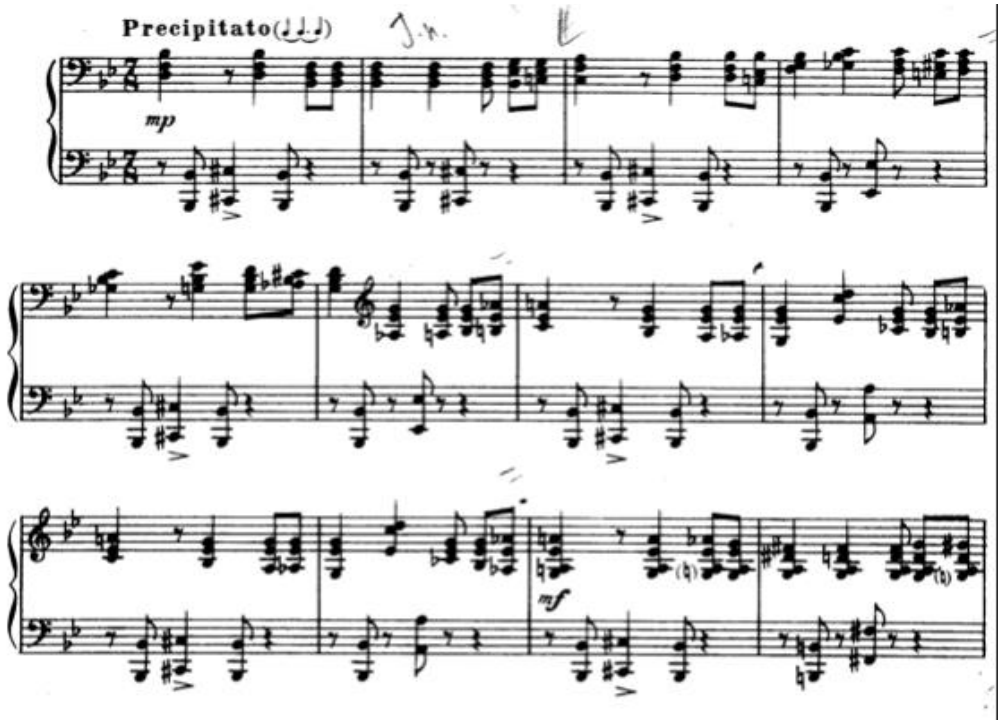

Figure 5: Sergei Prokofiev, *Piano Sonata No. 7* in B♭ Major, Op. 83, Movement III, mm.1-12.[114]

[112] Kozinn Allan, "Opera and Concert Recordings Reveal Prokofiev's Variety," *The New York Times*, July 4, 2003, sec. Movies, https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/04/movies/opera-and-concert-recordings-reveal-prokofiev-s-variety.html.

[113] Berman, 160.

[114] Prokofiev, 195.

The movement's distinctive sense of urgency is created by Prokofiev's use of a complicated rhythmic structure that frequently features syncopation and uneven accents. The use of octaves, dense chords, and rapid passages create a powerful, even brutal sound. More profoundly, the finale represents the tenacity and vigor of the wartime spirit, signifying the strength and determination needed to overcome hardship. Its forceful nature with stark dissonance portrays the intensity and brutality of the war, while also highlighting the bravery and perseverance of the Soviet people in winning the war.

Composed during a period of immense political and personal turmoil, the *Seventh Sonata* is one of the most successful of Prokofiev's compositions, which is a remarkable illustration of Prokofiev's ability to combine technical mastery with emotional depth. Despite the stark contrast between each movement, together they create a cohesive narrative that reflects the complexities of the wartime experience. Its relentless intensity and driving rhythms embody the spirit of perseverance and the resolute determination of the Soviet people throughout the war. The pianist Sviatoslav Richter, who gave the sonata's premiere, described this work as

> a huge success. The audience clearly grasped the spirit of the work, which reflected their innermost feelings and concerns… With this work, we are brutally plunged into the anxiously threatening atmosphere of a world that has lost its balance. Chaos and uncertainty reign. We see murderous forces unleashed. But this does not mean that what we lived by before thereby ceases to exist. We continue to feel and to love. Now the full range of human emotions bursts forth… In the tremendous struggle that this involves, we find the strength to affirm the irrepressible life-force.[115]

The sonata is not only a testament to Prokofiev's extraordinary compositional skill but also a profound artistic response to one of the most challenging eras in history. When it won the Stalin Prize in 1936, the award underscored its alignment with state ideals, as the government sought to promote art that embodied patriotism and optimism. This recognition was emblematic

[115] Berman, 151.

of the government's control over artistic expression during a period marked by the enforcement of Socialist Realism. While the award provided a platform for artists like Prokofiev, it also reinforced the notion that government approval was essential for artistic success in the Soviet Union, further entrenching the state's role in shaping cultural output.

Chapter 3: 1943-1945: War Symphonies, Triumph and Tragedy in Musical Expression

The battle of Stalingrad was one of the most significant and brutal battles of World War II, marking a turning point in the war on the Eastern Front.[116] It represented the late period of musical shift during World War II, from 1943 to 1945. The victory of this battle finally turned around the disadvantages of Soviet forces. It became a symbol of Soviet determination and resistance, which provided strong evidence to the public that the Soviet soldiers could overcome the German forces and protect their country. By the end of the war, Soviet soldiers were fighting Germans on German territory, and the Soviet people were so proud of their nation and soldiers.[117] However, people living through the war at the time were unaware that it would finish in 1945. They were becoming more and more aware of the price of winning the war, even if they still believed the Soviet Union would defeat the Germans. Different emotions began to spread throughout the music community. Some were confident that the Soviet Union would win in the end, while others were depressed that even a victory would pay such a heavy price for the whole nation.

In the realm of music, different perspectives on the result of the war are best illustrated by contrasting the last two significant symphonic compositions that emerged during the war years, which are Prokofiev's *Fifth Symphony* and Shostakovich's *Eighth Symphony*. Shostakovich's symphony is an illustration of a darker piece written in 1943, while Prokofiev developed a composition that was much livelier in 1944. Even though these two compositions were written under the same historical context, they differ significantly in their approaches, styles, and musical languages. Shostakovich captures tragic and dramatic inner conflicts in his

[116]John T. Correll, "Turning Point at Stalingrad," Air & Space Forces Magazine, August 29, 2017, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/turning-point-at-stalingrad/.

[117] Harris and Murray, 75.

symphony. It features darkly ponderous statements, meditative passages, brutally intense segments, volcanic upheaval and bleakly eerie sounds. Prokofiev, on the other hand, saw the *Fifth Symphony* as "glorifying the grandeur of the human spirit… praising the free and happy man—his strength, his generosity and the purity of his soul."[118] The simple and lyrical melodies with Prokofiev's characteristic sense of humor made this optimistic symphony into a symbol of victory.

Shostakovich: *Symphony No.8*

Temporarily nicknamed as "*Stalingrad Symphony*," Shostakovich's *Eighth Symphony* was written in 1943 when the battle between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union had turned and the Nazis were beginning their retreat.[119] This is not a triumphant work but rather a collection of distant, lamenting sounds. Despite being overshadowed by its more famous predecessor, the *Seventh Symphony,* Shostakovich's *Eighth* is undeniably an even more ambitious piece of art and remains one of his most powerful and introspective works. In Shostakovich's written comments on this piece, he states that he finished it in just three months, saying, "I wrote it very quickly… When the *Seventh Symphony* was finished, I began work on the *Eighth Symphony.* It reflects my… elevated creative mood, influenced by the joyful news of the Red Army's victories."[120]

Shostakovich himself called the symphony "an attempt to reflect the terrible tragedy of war" and "a requiem of sorts," while his friend Isaac Glikman referred to it as "his most tragic

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[118] Timothy Judd, "Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony: 'Glorifying the Grandeur of the Human Spirit,'" The Listeners' Club, May 19, 2021, https://thelistenersclub.com/2021/05/19/prokofievs-fifth-symphony-glorifying-the-grandeur-of-the-human-spirit/.

[119] Raymond Limbach, "Battle of Stalingrad | Facts, Deaths, & Summary," in *Encyclopædia Britannica,* November 22, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Stalingrad.

[120] René Spencer Saller, "Shostakovich Symphony No. 8," Dallas Symphony Orchestra, June 2, 2023, https://www.dallassymphony.org/productions/shostakovich-symphony-no-8/.

work."[121] The tragic aspect of the piece is evident in the composer's selection of key signatures. The *Eighth* was written in C minor, which was the key frequently used in tragic symphonies, such as Beethoven's *Fifth,* Brahms' *First,* Bruckner's *Eighth,* and Mahler's *Second*. It is customary for C minor symphonies to transition into major for their optimistic finales, and these symphonies mentioned above all adhere to the traditional tragedy-to-triumph paradigm, conveying a sense of victory and resolution despite preceding challenges.[122] However, the concluding measures of Shostakovich's symphony lack the unrestrained excitement and instead crave more for calm than for victory. This puzzled audiences and resulted in hostility and restrictions from Soviet officials. Thus, it is clear that compositions lacking a positive or celebratory tone were often disregarded by the government, reflecting the regime's preference for music that aligned with its ideological goals. Shostakovich tried to defend the piece by calling it a reflection of "the grim tragedy of war." Listeners may perceive an ironic undertone throughout the piece. As the composer states, "It is an optimistic, life-asserting work. The philosophical conception of my new work can be summed up in these words: life is beautiful. All that is dark and evil rots away, and beauty triumphs."[123]

Like many of Shostakovich's symphonies, this one deviates from traditional symphonic form and structure and consists of five highly contrasted movements. It is evident that Shostakovich drew inspiration from themes, rhythms, and harmonies found in his earlier symphonies, especially in the *Fifth Symphony* and *Seventh Symphony.* As the longest movement in the symphony, the first movement is the dramatic core of the piece. The vast opening

[121] Redwire, "Mark's Notes on Shostakovich Symphony No. 8," Mark Wigglesworth, March 8, 2011, https://www.markwigglesworth.com/notes/marks-notes-on-shostakovich-symphony-no-8/.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Timothy Judd, "Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony: A Requiem," The Listeners' Club, May 13, 2020, https://thelistenersclub.com/2020/05/13/shostakovichs-eighth-symphony-a-requiem/.

movement has a very similar structure to the comparable movement in the *Fifth,* featuring a violent dotted rhythm with a fate motif played fortissimo in octaves.

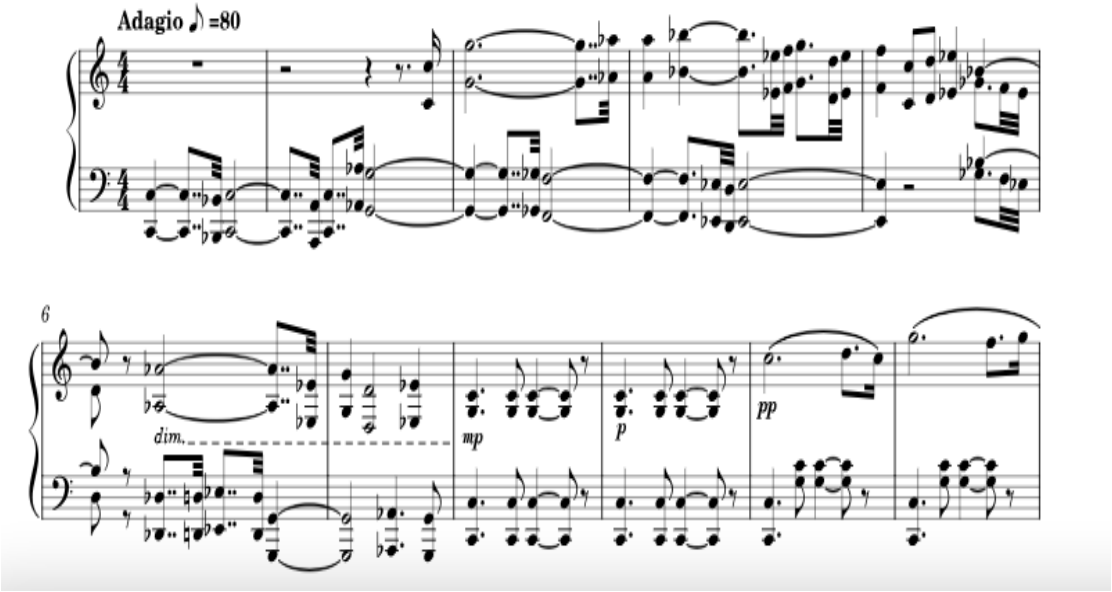

Figure 6: Dmitri Shostakovich, *Symphony No.8* in C Minor Op. 65 (Piano Reduction), Movement I, mm. 1-11.[124]

However, the motif is quickly replaced by two subjects of this sonata form movement, both lyrical in nature. The first subject opens with an unsettling whisper from the violins, followed by an echo of the well-known "invasion theme" from the composer's *Seventh Symphony.* It opens with calm, inquiring tension and progresses into a seemingly infinite soundscape. The development section is brutally violent, and an abrupt transition into *Allegro* provides several shocks, leaving little opportunity for lyrical expression. The bass clarinets and bassoons lead a massive *crescendo* that is accompanied by screaming brass, resulting in rising emotional intensity. Then, the side drum bangs out the rhythm of the "fate" motif, marking one of the movement's climaxes and dramatically changing its original tender mood. Another

[124] Dmitri Shostakovich. "Symphonie Nr. 8, op. 65." Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1947, 1.

terrifying, shrieking march by the woodwinds quickly enters, which are already ingrained in Shostakovich's unique musical languages. The snare drum and trumpet fanfares evoke sounds of battle between woodwinds, brass and drums. This fanfare which ordinarily sounds victorious, emerges from turmoil and struggle in this specific context. This recalls the grueling melody from the finale of Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony,* conveying a sense of tremendous frustration in articulating an inexpressible reality. With the restatement of the second subject, a discordant version of the "fate" motif appears in the Recapitulation. The enormous climax dissolves into the gloomy tremolo of the violins, with the English horn's melancholy melody indicating the movement's conclusion, which then descends into a tense tranquil. Overall, the music creates a sense of impending dread and overpowering anxiety, with motifs that emerge and evolve throughout the movement.

The following second and third movements are both grim and relentless, portraying the enemies as vicious and aggressive. The first one was described by the composer as "a march with elements of a *scherzo*," which implies some trembling volcanic turbulence.[125] Thick doublings with mechanical and grotesque rhythm give the piece a crushing weight, while the woodwinds generate an odd sense of humor, resembling a terrifying dance of death. The third movement is a brutal and forceful toccata, with relentless intensity and driving rhythms that suggest the horror and devastation of war. As it proceeds, an awful monotony appears, leading directly into the fourth movement, a gloomy *Largo*. This passacaglia, with the repetitive ground bass derived from the opening measure of the first movement, feels motionless, nearly trapped in time and space.

[125] René Spencer Saller, "Shostakovich Symphony No. 8," Dallas Symphony Orchestra, June 2, 2023, https://www.dallassymphony.org/productions/shostakovich-symphony-no-8/.

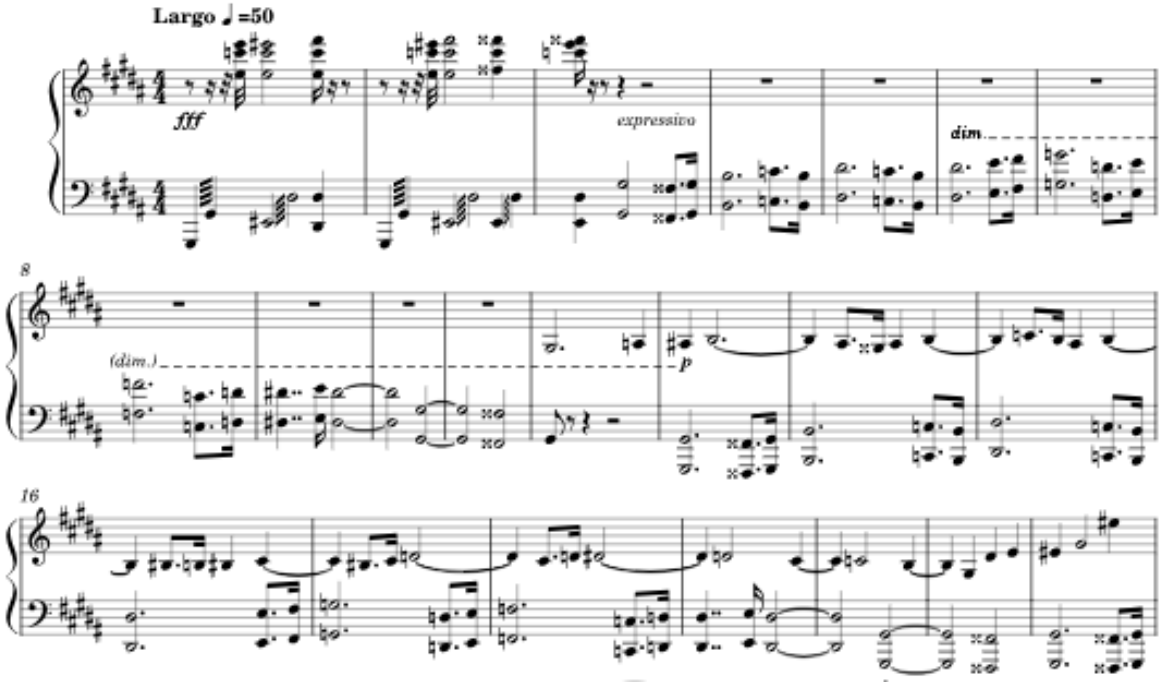

Figure 7: Dmitri Shostakovich, *Symphony No. 8* in C Minor Op. 65 (Piano Reduction), Movement IV, mm.1-22.[126]

As a Soviet commentator noted, "It is as if the music wished to say, 'here, there was life'."[127] The grim passacaglia theme is repeated twelve times, deepening the sense of entrapment in a frightening and dismal atmosphere. The variations built above it feature the solo horn, clarinets, flutes, and strings, all stand out as separate, mournful voices, dressed in a tone of desolation and loneliness.[128] This movement serves as the symphony's emotional core, providing a pause for meditation and sadness. The simple instrumentation and gloomy ambiance make it one of the work's most heartbreaking moments.

[126] Musescore, "Symphony No. 8 in C Minor Op. 65, Movement IV" Musescore.com (Musescore, May 8, 2023), https://musescore.com/user/34984683/scores/10789330.

[127] Schwartz, 194.

[128] Ibid.

Suddenly and subtly, the abrupt harmonic change to joyful C major leads the music to the last movement. It begins with a deceptively simple and poetic theme in the bassoon solo, which gives out optimistic messages reminiscent of the pastoral passages of the *Seventh Symphony*.

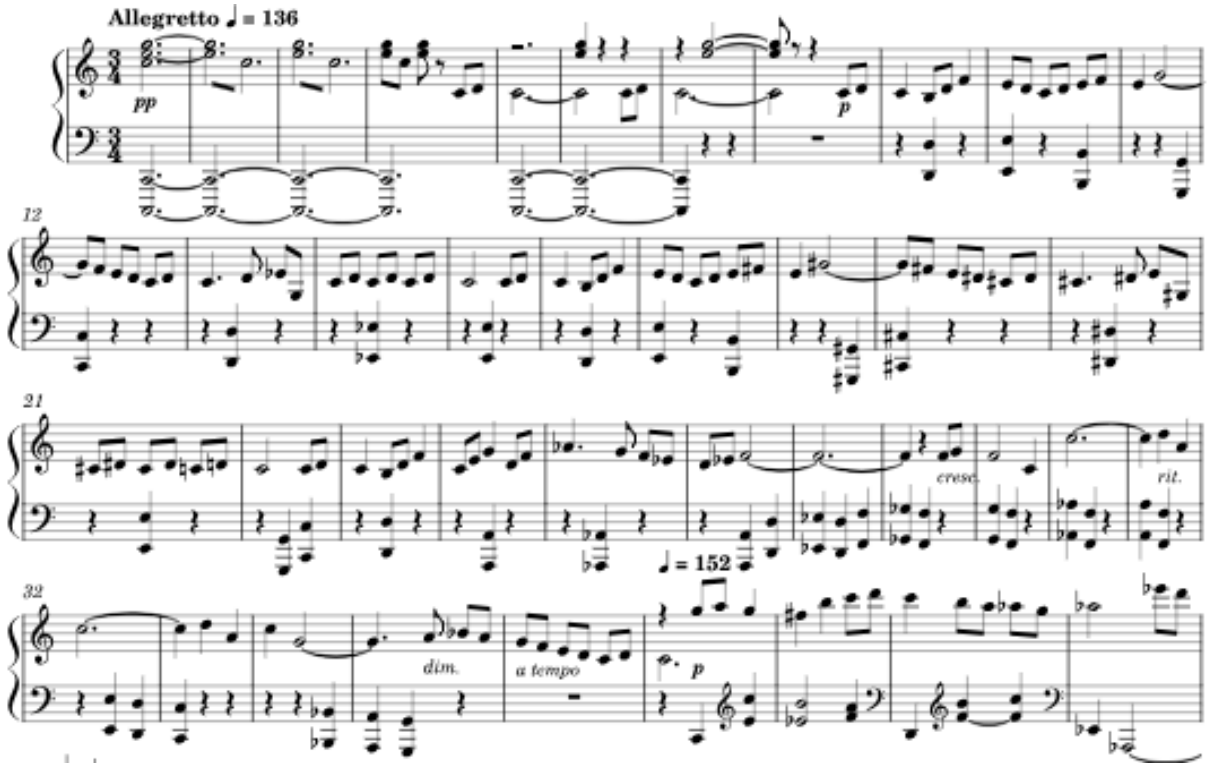

Figure 8: Dmitri Shostakovich, *Symphony No. 8* in C Minor Op. 65 (Piano Reduction), Movement V, mm.1-40.[129]

Shostakovich allegedly titled the finale "through the cosmic space the Earth flies toward its doom" and characterized it as "a bright sunlit pastorale, with elements of dance and simple tunes in the popular vein." [130] However, the lyrical section does not endure long, as the intense writing for the bass clarinet foreshadows the arrival of another brutal, irrational brass and drums climax. The movement culminates with a violent peak that fades into a sorrowful dialogue between the

[129] Musescore, "Symphony No. 8 in c Minor Op. 65, Movement V," Musescore.com (Musescore, May 8, 2023), https://musescore.com/user/34984683/scores/10789342.

[130] Judd, "Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony: A Requiem".

bass clarinet and the solo violin. In the closing moments of this ominous, dramatic monster of a symphony, Shostakovich composed a lengthy and unbearably mysterious coda, like a tranquil dream. Despite the appearance of the bright C major triad, offering a "happy ending" for C minor, the mood remains oddly bleak and unsettled.[131] The movement ultimately concludes quietly and unresolved, leaving the listener with a lingering sense of uncertainty and unease.

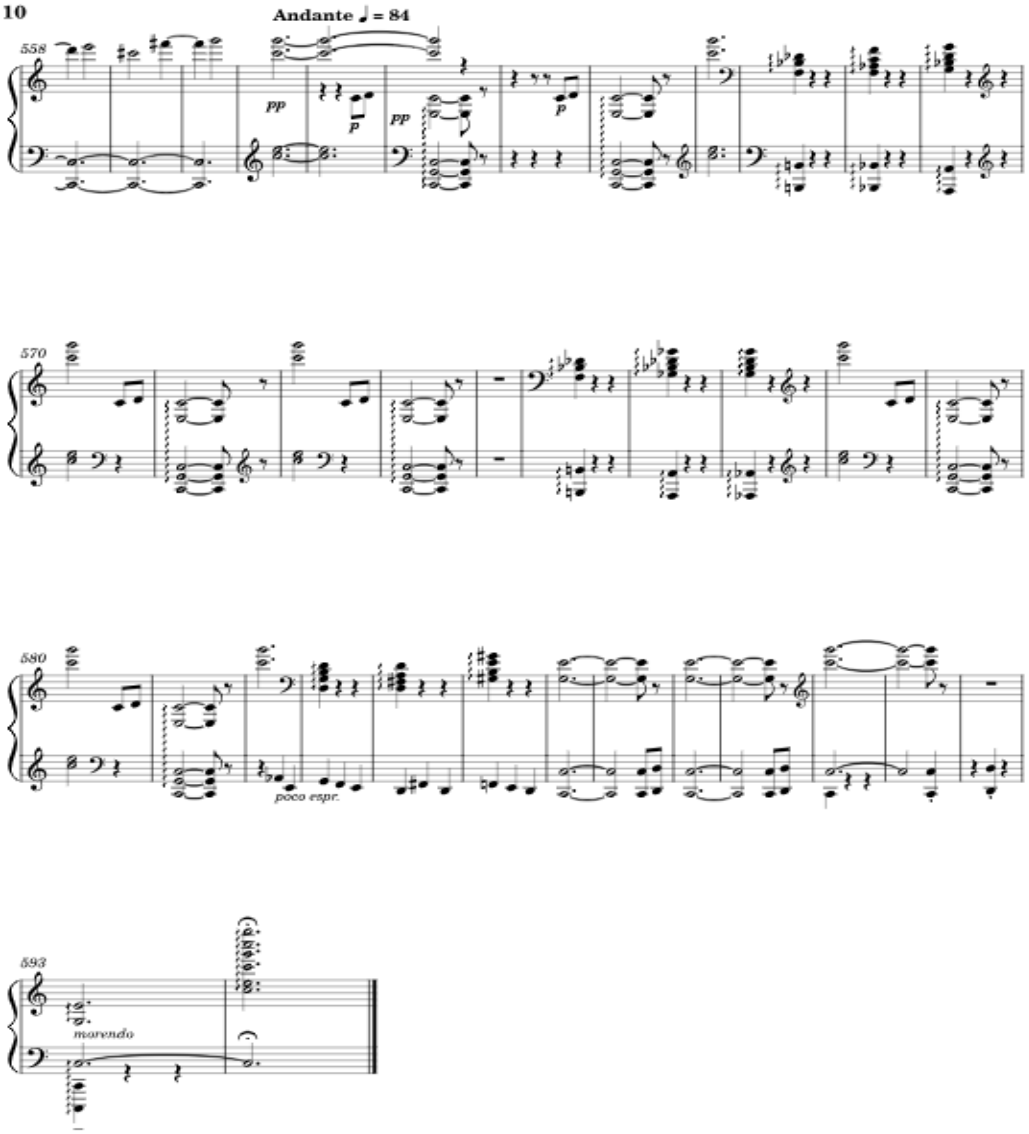

Figure 9: Dmitri Shostakovich, *Symphony No. 8* in C Minor Op. 65 (Piano Reduction), Movement V, mm. 558-594.[132]

[131] Ibid.
[132] Musescore, "Symphony No. 8 in c Minor Op. 65, Movement V."

Overall, the *Eighth Symphony* is rich in motive development, with ideas introduced and then modified throughout the work. The composer frequently employs short, straightforward themes that are repeated and altered, conveying a sense of obsession and inevitability. Shostakovich's music is full of contrasts, such as optimism and despair, light and dark, chaos and order, which reflects the dualities inherent in the human experience during wartime.

Today, the *Eighth* is regarded as one of Shostakovich's most important orchestral compositions. However, it was not well received in the 1940s. As Shostakovich's friend Ivan Sollertinsky noted, "The music is significantly tougher and more astringent than the *Fifth* or the *Seventh* and for that reason is unlikely to become popular."[133] Indeed, the *Eighth Symphony* became a prominent target at that time. It was inappropriate for use as propaganda both domestically and internationally due to its depressing tone and dissonant language. Moreover, its lack of optimism and affirmation made it stand in contrast to the artistic rules that Stalin and his administration desired to present. The symphony's melancholy and ambiguous finale was one of subdued affirmation rather than resignation or sorrow, yet this was scarcely sufficient to win the official endorsement. As it did not provide a clear triumph or a satisfying resolution, it was viewed as unpatriotic and even subversive. Although serious reviewers valued it higher than the *Seventh,* its triumph in Russia was not universal.

However, despite its limited popularity and resistance from the authorities, Shostakovich's *Eighth Symphony* still garnered critical respect among serious reviewers, which helped pave the way for its nomination for the Stalin Prize in 1944. This nomination can be interpreted as a reflection of the sacrifices and suffering of the Soviet people during the war,

[133] Susan Scheid, "Seeking Shostakovich: The Eighth Symphony," Prufrock's Dilemma (Prufrock's Dilemma, February 5, 2014), https://prufrocksdilemma.wordpress.com/2014/02/05/seeking-shostakovich-the-eighth-symphony/.

aligning the work with the state's narrative of resilience and heroism. Undoubtedly, it provoked considerable discussion and debate. Prokofiev and other composers publicly denounced the symphony as "a depressive, self-pitying confession of subjective emotions, of tortured expressionism."[134] Ultimately, even after being nominated, the symphony did not receive the Stalin Prize. The story of the *Eighth*'s inability to win a prize demonstrates that the increased artistic freedom provided by the war narrative still had its limitations.[135] The *Eighth* remained essentially banned until after Stalin's death in 1953 and then reinstated during the cultural "thaw" in 1956. Shostakovich expressed his frustration later, "I regret very much that the *Eighth Symphony* has remained unperformed for many years. In this work there was an attempt to express the emotional experience of the people, to reflect the terrible tragedy of the war… It is an echo of that difficult time, and quite in the order of things."[136]

The *Seventh* and *Eighth* "War Symphonies" of Shostakovich are frequently compared. British critic, Andrew Porter, has expressed: "The *Seventh Symphony* was heroic. The *Eighth* is not heroic, but rather a direct and dreadful presentation of what all good men must hate [war]."[137] Similarly, Russian historian Alexander Orlov, called the *Seventh* a "heroic chronicle," while the *Eighth* a "philosophical tragedy."[138] Nevertheless, even though both symphonies fundamentally address the same subject, there is a significant distinction: The *Seventh* is a depiction of war, which depicts a spontaneous reaction, similar to eyewitness accounts or documentary; whereas the *Eighth* is a contemplation of war and its horrors, which indicates more mature ideas, more bitter, submissive, and profoundly desiring for genuine peace, rather than a boisterous victory

[134] Schwartz, 193.
[135] Frolova-Walker, "Soviet Music in World War II."
[136] Schwartz, 193.
[137] Ibid, 194.
[138] Ibid.

celebration. The alternating passages of ferocity and introspection, and the subdued, ambiguous conclusion appear to be the result of extreme pressure on Shostakovich's delicate psyche.

As the war dragged on relentlessly, now in its third year, there was no sign of an end to the carnage, which was growing crueler by the day. Without a doubt, the composer was severely impacted, the lively tone from the *Seventh* was replaced with a melancholy one in the *Eighth*. The composer supplied extensive comments on the *Seventh* but kept mute on the *Eighth*. He intended to portray both misery and optimism, leaving triumph out of his palette. It was a deficiency that the public and criticism lamented. Many felt that, in a time of war and struggle, audiences craved a sense of victory and hope, a sentiment that resonated deeply with the Soviet ideals of perseverance and triumph over adversity. This tension between the artist's vision and the expectations of society created an ongoing conflict, compelling Shostakovich to navigate a dangerous landscape where genuine expression risked alienation from his audience. Ultimately, this struggle highlighted the complex interplay between art and ideology in a repressive regime during a time of turmoil. Regardless of the symphony's initial negative reception from Stalin and the Soviet officials, the work thoroughly expresses Shostakovich's genuine concern for the horrors of war and the human cost of battle. His *Eighth* includes some of his best writings and sincerest statements. As a profound and powerful work, it is now recognized as a testament to deeply felt humanity.

Prokofiev: *Symphony No.5*

While Shostakovich's *Eighth Symphony* explores the depths of human misery and the harsh realities of war, Prokofiev's *Fifth Symphony* presents a striking contrast, emerging as a ray of hope and perseverance. Prokofiev's work, which celebrated the human spirit and resilience,

inspired the Soviet people to bravely defend their country despite adversity. Unlike Shostakovich's symphony which uses a minor key, Prokofiev's work is written in B-flat major and concludes triumphantly. The difference in the selection of key signatures is one of the most evident expressions of contrasting sorrow and victorious views of the war. With its lively melodies and vibrant orchestration, Prokofiev's symphony offers a juxtaposition to Shostakovich's darker themes. This also demonstrates how different composers may respond to the same historical contexts and transform them into magnificent musical settings.

Composed in 1944, during the final stage of World War II, the symphony serves as both a reflection of the times as well as the composer's statement. Prokofiev once stated, "I cannot say that I deliberately chose this theme. It was born in me and clamored for expression. The music has matured in me, it filled my soul."[139] Even though the war was still raging, the tide was shifting in favor of the allies. Victory was in sight, the Soviet people had psychologically adapted to the battle, and their sense of outrage had transformed into resolute determination.

To alleviate the stress caused by city bombs and wartime shortages, the Soviet authorities arranged for the artists' evacuation to locations outside of Moscow. It was at a retreat in Ivanovo, where musicians such as Glière, Shostakovich, Khatchaturian, and Kabalevsky found peace away from the conflict to compose.[140] The piano score of Prokofiev's *Fifth Symphony* was completed in as little as a month, yet its inspiration came from ideas he had while writing some of his earlier works. Prokofiev's attempt to incorporate melodic material with contrasting characters is a brilliant example of his artistry. Though most of it dates from 1940 to 1944, many

[139] Ibid, 197.

[140] Lori Newman, "Program Notes: Prokofiev Symphony No. 5," New Mexico Philharmonic, January 7, 2012, https://nmphil.org/music-in-new-mexico/program-notes-prokofiev-symphony-no-5/.

of the melodic ideas that finally formed the symphony may be found in his sketchbooks dating back several years, some as far back as 1930.[141]

To some degree, the *Fifth Symphony* is Prokofiev's first authentic Soviet symphony. Of his four previous symphonies, the first was composed before the Russian Revolution, while the other three were written during his exile in America and Paris. Thus, the *Fifth* was the first symphony Prokofiev composed that was directly impacted by the war.[142] The premiere was conducted by Prokofiev himself in 1945, elevated him in the eyes of critics and the public.[143] It was the final work he would conduct before his long, painful physical deterioration. During the performance, Prokofiev had to pause before his first downbeat, as distant artillery fire echoed through the city, indicating that the Red Army had advanced into German territory across the Vistula River.[144] This interruption served as both a sobering reminder of the ongoing battle and a celebration of the allies' progress toward victory, offering an unexpected yet meaningful connection to the symphony. Richter was in attendance and left a vivid recollection: "When Prokofiev stood up, the light seemed to pour straight down on him from somewhere up above. He stood like a monument on a pedestal… There was something very significant in this, something symbolic. It was as if all of us—including Prokofiev—had reached some kind of shared turning point."[145]

Unlike the conventional Sonata-*Allegro* style, Prokofiev purposefully wrote the opening movement in a dense sonata form, making it as sluggish as *Andante*. The piece opens quietly, with a lengthy, mournful theme shared by the bassoon and flute. Tension rises amid constantly

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[141] Ibid.
[142] Newman, "Program Notes: Prokofiev Symphony No. 5."
[143] Morrison, *The People's Artist*, 252.
[144] William E Runyan, "Prokofiev, Symphony No. 5 Program Notes," Fort Collins Symphony, March 8, 2023, https://fcsymphony.org/program-notes/prokofiev-symphony-5-program-notes/.
[145] Judd, "Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony: 'Glorifying the Grandeur of the Human Spirit."

altering harmonic progressions. The flute and oboe's subtle, contrasting second theme comes after an upward-moving bass line.

Figure 10: Sergei Prokofiev, *Symphony No. 5* in B♭ Major, Op. 100, Movement I, mm.1-7.[146]

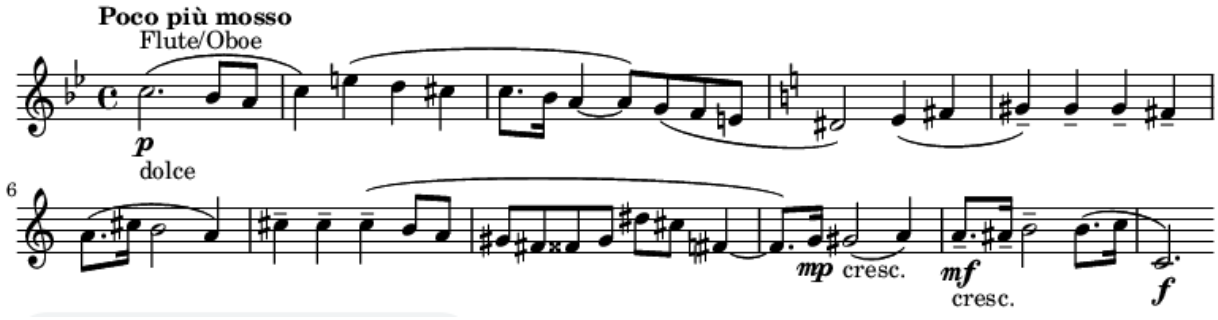

Figure 11: Sergei Prokofiev, *Symphony No. 5* in B♭ Major, Op. 100, Movement I, mm. 54-64.[147]

This long-lasting melody, accompanied by shimmering, soaring violins, is full of extremely twists and turns that culminate in a complex and dramatic devolvement section. The coda section brings the movement's slow progression to a thunderous climax. This movement culminates in a forceful and heroic finale that is characterized by its grandeur and rich orchestration. This entire piece is full of contrasts: it is both magnificent and ominous, calm and anxious, optimistic and hopeless. These dualities merge, expressing the wartime's uncertainty, not only capturing the era's tension but also winning listeners' hearts.

[146] GiovanniAglio, "Sergei Prokofiev - Symphony No. 5, Op. 100 (Score)," YouTube, February 18, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Uaxn5iG0ac.

[147] Ibid.

The second movement is a fast and frantic *Scherzo* in Prokofiev's typical toccata style, which exemplifies his distinctive sarcastic sense of humor. It moves ahead relentlessly, sometimes driven by the snare drum, giving it the appearance of a demonic, persistent machine.

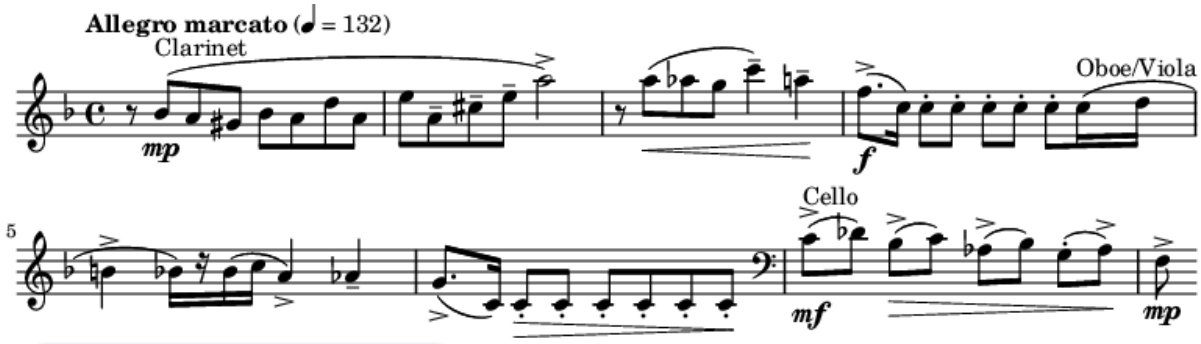

Figure 12: Sergei Prokofiev, *Symphony No. 5* in B♭ Major, Op. 100, Movement II, mm. 1-7.[148]

Several motifs emerge against a constant rhythmic background, initially played by violins and clarinet, and then by the piano and percussions. With the tempo getting slower, the woodwinds provide a contrasting yet poetic melody in the middle section. The transition back to the *scherzo* is exquisite, it returns with a more substantial and threatening tone than when it was initially heard. The music builds progressively to a menacing and abrupt conclusion. With its sharp, angular melodies and sense of persistent energy, this uplifting movement exhibits a spirit of revolt while showcasing Prokofiev's characteristic wit and playfulness.

The third movement is a nostalgic and lyrical mediation, marked *Adagio*, which serves as "the emotional heart of the symphony."[149] It starts with a lengthy, twisting theme exchanged between the woodwinds, and then the strings take it to new heights. The violins' abrupt leaps to their highest notes are especially expressive. A fresh, frantic theme with piano accompaniment first arises in the lower strings, which is followed by a more menacing melody in the bassoon

[148] Ibid.

[149] JDCuebas, "Hope amidst Adversity: The Triumph of Prokofiev's 5th Symphony," Fort Collins Symphony, May 8, 2023, https://fcsymphony.org/blog/hope-amidst-adversity-prokofiev-5/.

and trumpet, with trills reminiscent of a funeral march. The melodies clash with one another, becoming more and more chaotic. The gloomy middle part gradually builds to an exciting climax, which has excruciating, tortured cries from the strings and woodwinds.

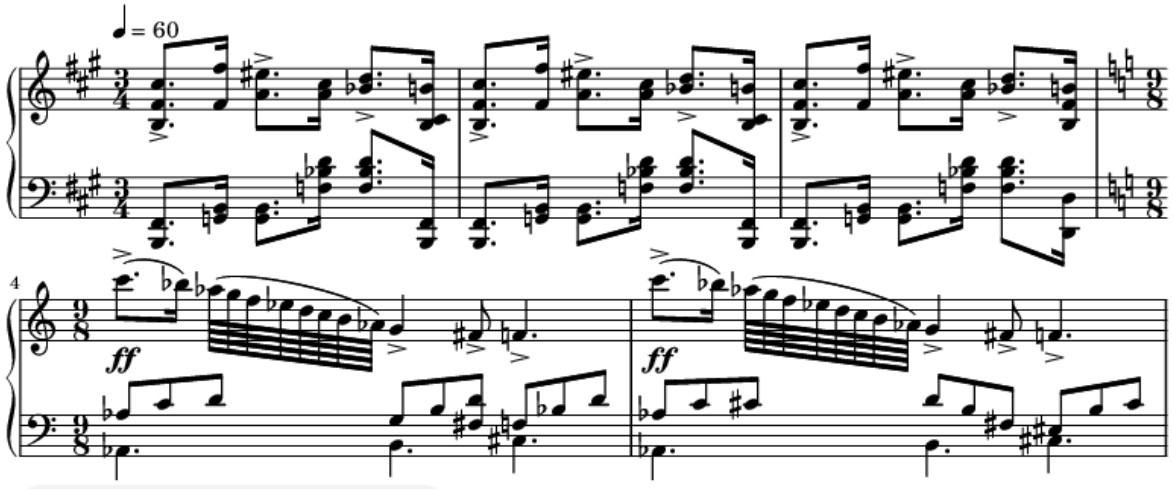

Figure 13: Sergei Prokofiev, *Symphony No. 5* in B♭ Major, Op. 100 (Piano Reduction), Movement III, mm. 125-131.[150]

This is followed by the most delicate rendition of the opening melodies, with an exquisite key shift beneath a melancholic piccolo theme. Finally, the relentless tunes lead listeners to a soft, peaceful resolution. The rich melodies and powerful climax serve as a reminder of the human spirit's resilience in the face of hardship. Throughout the movement, one can discern a wide range of feelings and experiences, which is rendered even more devastating by the fact that the war was still raging at the time the symphony was written.

The final movement opens with deceiving simplicity. Prokofiev begins the finale with a leisurely introduction incorporating flutes and bassoons, just as he did with the first movement. After a brief introduction, the symphony's opening theme is nostalgically recalled. It swiftly transitions to a peculiar, vibrant theme played on the clarinet.

[150] GiovanniAglio.

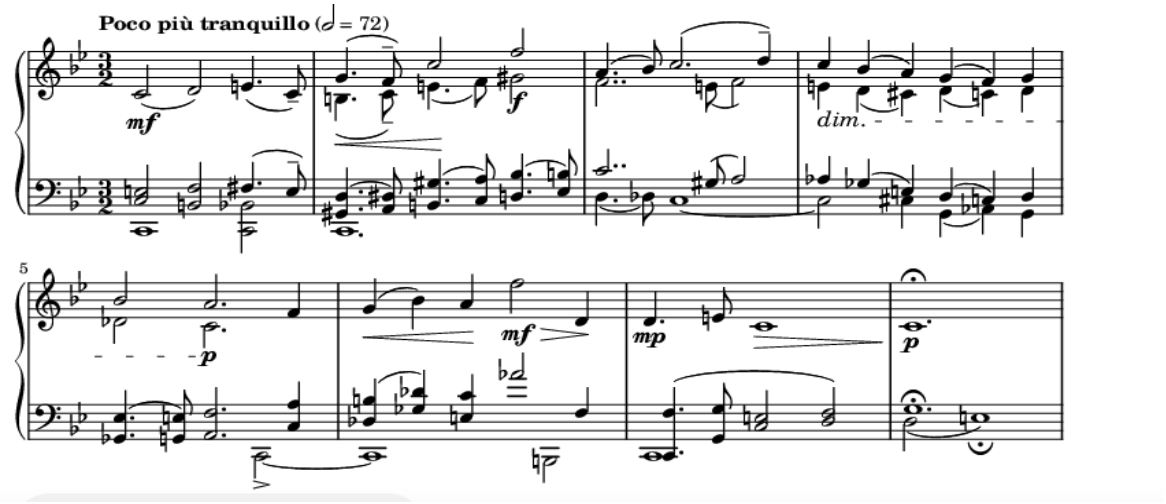

Figure 14: Sergei Prokofiev, *Symphony No. 5* in B♭ Major, Op. 100 (Piano Reduction), Movement IV, mm. 15-22.[151]

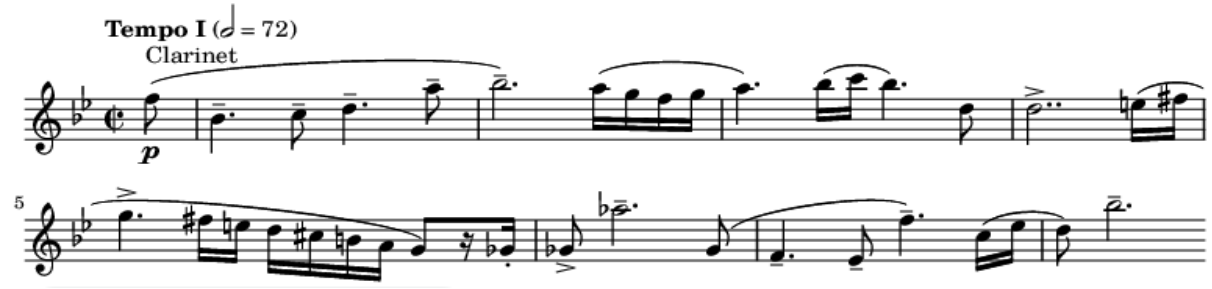

Figure 15: Sergei Prokofiev, *Symphony No. 5* in B♭ Major, Op. 100, Movement IV, mm. 29-36[152]

Written in the *Rondo* form, Prokofiev's melodies can be heard clearly, even in the middle of thick textures. The lively main theme is juxtaposed with two contrasting episodes. The first removes many driving rhythms, and the flute sets the tone for relaxation with a new melody. On the other hand, the second episode is intriguing, which starts quietly and slowly in the low strings and is rather basic, almost chorale-like. The melodies keep alternating, and many concepts from the earlier movements reappear.

[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

Prokofiev progressively turned this enormous work into a frenzy, and the melodies become much wilder, with slicing percussion punctuation, to guide the rushing ideas back to their triumph, and bring it to a breathtaking coda. The primary theme of the symphony is frequently interrupted by curiously mechanical elements in a fierce and magnificent conclusion. The symphony's unexpected finale occurs when most of the orchestra disappears during the climax, instead of the piece finishing with a boom. There's an unanticipated fillip that causes the strings to play chaotic rhythmic patterns with all "wrong" notes, along with rude outbursts from trumpets.

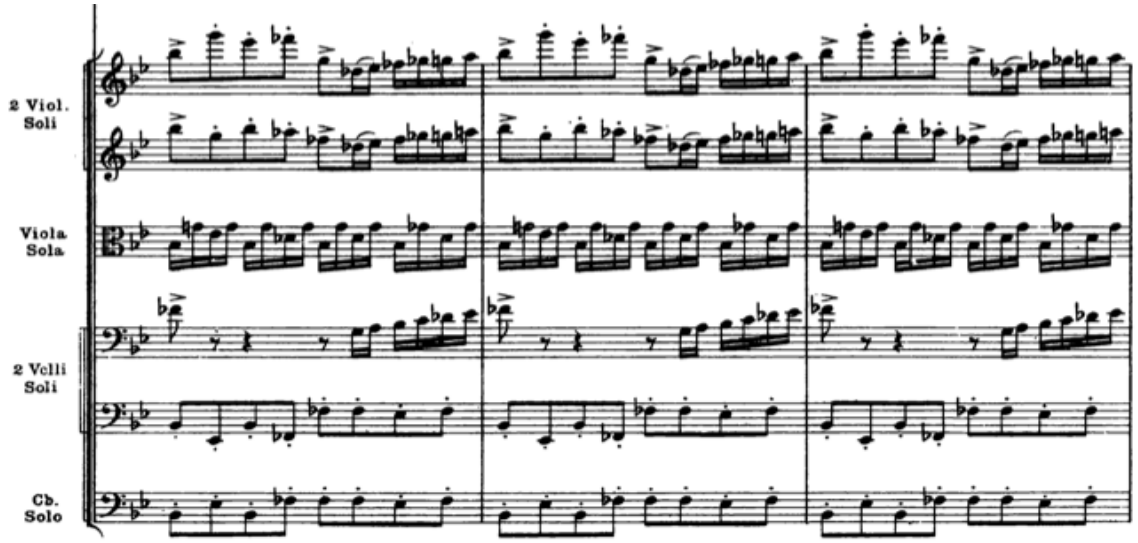

Figure 16: Sergei Prokofiev, *Symphony No. 5* in B♭ Major, Op. 100, Movement IV, mm.147-149[153]

Almost suddenly, with Prokofiev's characteristic style for the sardonic gesture, the piece abruptly ends everything with an orchestra unison in the "right" key of B-flat. The vivacious and bright finale brings the symphony to a triumphant conclusion. The use of rhythm and orchestration in this movement is particularly effective in conveying the profound impact of war on the human spirit. The driving rhythms and dynamic orchestration create a sense of urgency

[153] Ibid.

and movement, mirroring the tumultuous experiences of those living through conflict. At the same time, this movement evokes a sense of celebration and joy, which uplifts listeners' emotions with its energy and positivity, leaving people who were experiencing the war motivated and encouraged.

Prokofiev's *Fifth* was regarded as a powerful and optimistic work that captured the spirit of wartime, expressing the Soviet people's hope, determination and resilience as the war came to a close. It was enthusiastically appreciated by Soviet authorities and the public, particularly in recognition of its impact, the symphony was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1946. Western audiences and critics also praised Prokofiev's unique humor and skill in blending conventional symphonic structures with contemporary, approachable tunes. Especially, Prokofiev received a unique compliment from Olin Downes, a critic for the *New York Times*, which stood in contrast to the lukewarm critical reception of Shostakovich's *Eighth Symphony*: "The [Prokofiev] Symphony is certainly one of the most interesting, and probably the best, that has come from Russia in the last quarter-century. It is unquestionably the richest and most mature symphonic score that the composer has produced. There are new spiritual horizons in the serenity of the opening movement and wonderful developments that come later."[154]

Since its premiere, Prokofiev's *Fifth Symphony* has received immense praise and grown to become one of the orchestral repertoire's most lasting and significant pieces. Prokofiev's composing progression is focused and concise; he avoided using excessive or protracted elaboration. Its unique blend of grandeur, lyricism and rhythmic vigor has made it a global favorite. Normally quiet when it came to explaining the meaning behind his compositions, Prokofiev unusually revealed to his biographer, Israel Vladimirovich Nestyev, "Now we are

[154] Schwartz, 198.

rejoicing in our great victory, but each of us has wounds which cannot be healed. One has lost those dear to him, another has lost his health. This must not be forgotten."[155] Although the *Fifth* exudes such dignity, assurance, and calm humor that the idea of conflict seems far away, Prokofiev's explanation serves as evidence that he was far from apathetic toward the tragedy of war.

Both Shostakovich and Prokofiev composed significant symphonic works during the war, each responding to the era's challenges in unique ways. The war symphonies stand as monumental reflections of the wartime experience, yet they diverge sharply in tone and intent. Prokofiev's *Fifth Symphony,* with its uplifting, triumphant spirit, embodying a hopeful vision for the future. In contrast, Shostakovich's *Eighth Symphony* is far more somber and tragic, deeply expressing the horrors and suffering of war. While Prokofiev's work conveyed resilience and victory, Shostakovich focused on the darker aspects, reflecting a more melancholic and introspective response. Although both compositions are masterpieces of the wartime period, they highlight the distinct ways in which the composers approached the same events, offering contrasting emotional perspectives. The government's different reactions to these symphonies again underscore its focus on compositions aligning with Socialist Realism.

[155] Ibid, 197.

Chapter 4: Patriotic Songs and Film Music as Propaganda Tools

Even though much of the music being played for the public on radios was the formal, sophisticated music of classical symphonies, another genre began to grow in favor among the Soviet people, which allowed the public to appreciate and even perform music. Unlike symphonies, which often symbolize a sublimated experience, the lyrics of wartime songs were deeply connected to the historical context, eliciting a more spontaneous response to the war. Countless patriotic songs were sung and composed in the early days of the war by both poets and musicians, amateurs and professionals, who swore to defend the homeland and repel the enemies. On the other hand, there were also songs of somber determination and severe agony, all strongly infused with that unique Russian passion for their fatherland. There was also pride in the past and recollections of prior foreign invasions that were defeated. During the winter of 1941, when the war was at its worst, Stalin's "Holy Russia" speeches emphasized the outrage and revived the nation's flagging spirits.[156] Every facet of the war was covered in the patriotic songs, from the front lines to the home front. This material made the songs appealing to both front-line armies and civilians.[157]

Among all the patriotic songs, Alexander Alexandrov's *Sviashchennaia vojna* (*The Sacred War*), whose lyrics were written by Soviet poet Vasily Lebedev-Kumach, is recognized as the "emblem of the Great War."[158] Also known as *Arise, Great Country! The Sacred War* was written in grand 3/4 time with such words:

> Arise, vast country,/ Arise for a fight to the death/ Against the dark fascist force/ Against the cursed horde./ …We shall repulse the oppressors/ of all ardent ideas,/ The rapists and the plunderers,/ The torturers of the people!/ The enemy shall not dare tread!/ …We'll

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[156] Joseph Stalin, "Speech at the Red Army Parade on the Red Square, Moscow," Marxists.org, 2019, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1941/11/07.htm.

[157] Harris and Murray, 77.

[158] Suzanne Ament, *Sing to Victory!: Song in Soviet Society during World War II* (Brighton Academic Studies Press, 2018, 10.

> drive a bullet into the forehead/ Of the rotten fascist filth./ For the scum of humanity,/ We shall build a solid coffin![159]

Its stirring words provided inspiration and a sense of unity in the face of the overwhelming Nazi invasion. Even with its unsuitable meter and lack of martial dotted rhythms, it still functioned as a marching song. The song has a hymn-like quality and is reminiscent of the traditional revolutionary Russian songs. It explicitly calls for a struggle against the fascist invaders and presents the war as a heroic and sacred defense of the Soviet homeland. *The Sacred War* was distributed to all the allies, and "had success in bringing out patriotic feelings in all the nations: England, America, Australia, and China."[160] Millions of people were captivated by the song, and it soon gained popularity as a means of boosting morale and inspiring a collective spirit of bravery, resistance, and togetherness against the oppressive enemies.

In addition to composing the music for *The Sacred War*, Alexandrov also served as the "composer and head of the Red Banner Ensemble of Song and Dance of the Soviet Army, and eventually the composer of the new Soviet national anthem."[161] The *Internationale,* which had fulfilled this function since the Revolution, was to be replaced by a new Soviet hymn that composers and poets were urged to create. This was a breakthrough in the Soviet music community in the 1940s. More than two hundred artists entered their best efforts in response, including Shostakovich, Khachuaturian, Glière and Shebalin. For the following forty-seven years, Alexandrov's *Hymn of the Bolshevik Party* served as the Soviet Union's new official anthem. The development of a national anthem proved to be one of the most effective uses of music during wartime. This new anthem acted as a unifying symbol of the masses and helped to

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[159] Socialist East, "Священная война! The Sacred War! (English Lyrics)," YouTube, July 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2N366xn6V4.

[160] Ament, 121.

[161] Ibid, 11.

boost patriotism and national pride.[162] Furthermore, it was a crucial cultural and political tool in the early Soviet Union, promoting party propaganda and igniting revolutionary passion.

The inclusion of Alexandrov's works, *The Sacred War* and *Hymn of the Bolshevik Party*, is essential for understanding the broader role of music in Soviet wartime culture. Although neither piece was composed by Prokofiev or Shostakovich, they were central to the Soviet wartime propaganda effort, providing a powerful tool for rallying the masses and boosting national morale. Along with the compositions of Shostakovich and Prokofiev, these works represent the collective cultural and ideological response to the war, showcasing the diverse musical efforts sponsored by the state.

While some of the patriotic songs were newly written, many others were inspired by pre-existing Russian folk melodies, such as *Volga Boatmen*, *Farewell of Slavianka*, and *My Country is Wide.*[163] Adding new lyrics to existing tunes was a simple process, making it easy for almost anyone to write a song. Unlike large-scale choral compositions, these songs were easily performed by amateurs. Given the country's enormous population, a significant portion of the songwriting and spreading process was done by ordinary people. Throughout the military, political departments actively encouraged amateur creativity. These songs were a way for individuals to express their feelings and experiences, and the fact that even untrained people could write them contributed to their popularity. Compared to other musical genres, their universal messages made songs easy to incorporate into everyday life and enhanced their broad appeal.

Due to their adaptability to a range of performance contexts and capacity for large or small audiences, which made the patriotic songs especially well-suited for the demands of the

[162] Harris and Murray, 78.
[163] Ibid, 77.

war. With very few limitations, these songs can be sung by as few as one person or as many as a large choir. Sheet music, melodies published in newspapers, recordings, and song leaders are all good sources for learning new tunes by ear.[164] In many cases, an instrumental accompaniment was not even necessary.[165] Due to its exceptional adaptability, the song genre developed to represent Soviet people's demands and feelings.

Even while Stalinist ideology persisted in various forms, it lost ground to other ideas in public perception and government propaganda. These new ideas included the importance of family, a sense of national allegiance, the need for relaxation, and the spiritual essence of all people. The patriotic songs recounted stories about homes, families, and the efforts being made at home or about the accomplishments of honorable armies.[166] Even while the overarching topic was undoubtedly constrained—everything written had to be connected in some way to the battle—the scope of this restriction appeared limitless. Indeed, for the composers and poets of this time, this work was the pinnacle of their careers and the most significant contribution they had ever produced.

The Soviet Union saw four years of intense warfare, during which time a vast array and diversity of patriotic songs were composed. These songs honored the nation with humorous, poetic, and sometimes severe patriotic tones. They praised the courage and sacrifice performed by soldiers and civilians and used scathing sarcasm and heartbreaking tales to disparage and ruin the enemy's cruelty. They lifted spirits during moments of sorrow and hardship, celebrated minor and major achievements, and provided comfort for both armies and individuals during difficult times. Each patriotic song had a specific purpose, with their moods and messages

[164] Ament, xvii.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid, 44.

evolving depending on the situation. They not only mirrored the events but also actively influenced the thoughts and emotions of those who sang and listened to them.[167]

These songs were freely played both at home and on the front lines since public engagement was a feature that suited Soviet ideology.[168] Soviet music shifted toward broad appeal and igniting listeners' sense of patriotism, film music became a powerful tool for shaping public perception and reinforcing patriotic sentiments. Just as patriotic songs united soldiers and civilians through shared experiences, Soviet cinema, with its sweeping scores, engaged audiences on a grand scale, using visual storytelling to inspire collective resolve. Through both the visual elements and the music that played throughout the movie, nationalism could be expressed in this medium. While musical, a film score differs from other types of musical works like symphonies, it is meant to be used as a soundtrack for a film rather than as a stand-alone piece. Nonetheless, some composers continued to write in a way that allowed their film scores to be performed without any visual accompaniment because of the thematic material, even despite the merging of music and film.[169]

Prokofiev: *Alexander Nevsky*

When analyzing the role film played in song promotion, it is important to understand that a lot of the songs requested and performed during wartime were not brand-new compositions, but rather songs from films released in the late 1930s. During that time, Socialist Realism's bland music was not truly exportable. Symphonies and cantatas that extolled the virtues of Lenin, Stalin, and the Red Army were simply unappealing to the West. Soviet music evolved into

[167] Ibid, 28.
[168] Harris and Murray, 77.
[169] Ibid.

"provincial" music, as Prokofiev had anticipated in 1934.[170] Soviet music became increasingly alienated and cut off from the West's dominant musical culture as Soviet officials demanded that music be "national in form, socialist in content."[171] However, Soviet music in films quickly and unquestionably became well-known around the world. The most accomplished composers in the Soviet Union were attracted to the new medium of sound film by incredibly gifted film directors.[172] Thus, film music eventually made its way back into artists' repertoire and was played on the radio or records, even if at first many of them were suppressed due to their joyful tone, which was seen as incongruous with the brutal realities of war. From letters to the artists in the films, it is evident that they offered viewers joy, happiness, and optimism to everyone, from soldiers to civilians.[173]

As Shostakovich said: "Cinema music is often regarded as mere illustration, supplementary to the screen. In my opinion, it should be treated as an integral part of an artistic whole."[174] While Shostakovich's observation highlights the importance of film music, his contributions to the genre were relatively limited compared to his symphonies and other major works. Though his film scores are valuable, they did not achieve the same cultural or artistic significance as those of some of his contemporaries. In contrast, Prokofiev dedicated a substantial portion of his career to film music, creating groundbreaking scores that have left a lasting impact on the genre. His collaboration with renowned Russian director Sergei Eisenstein stands out as particularly significant. Prokofiev's vivid creativity, guided by a sharp, disciplined intellect, rose to the challenge of this new medium, meeting the precise demands of enhancing

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[170] Schwartz, 135.
[171] Frolova-Walker, *Russian music and Nationalism,* 311.
[172] Schwartz, 135.
[173] Ament, 153.
[174] Schwartz, 136.

and illuminating the motion picture with music. Eisenstein later reminisced, "Prokofiev works like a clock… His exactness in time is a by-product of creative exactness… His music is amazingly plastic. It is never content to remain an illustration, but everywhere… it wonderfully reveals the inner movement of the phenomenon."[175]

In 1938, Eisenstein reached out to Prokofiev with the idea of working together on a film about *Alexander Nevsky,* which depicts the thirteenth-century Russian hero's victory over the invading Teutonic Knights, serving as an allegory for contemporary Soviet struggles against fascism.[176] As a strictly regulated, commissioned work, *Nevsky* avoids formalism and largely follows Hollywood-style principles of dramatic action.[177] The story features a savage inhuman antagonist, a strong yet sympathetic hero, and well-defined objectives that are accomplished by group effort. Prokofiev's score was essential in conveying the emotional intensity and heroic spirit of the film, particularly its emphasis on Russian resilience and unity in the face of external threats. As a result, this is one of the rare instances in which a superior film not only has terrific music but also gains even greater impact and significance from it. *Alexander Nevsky* is undoubtedly the finest collaboration of Prokofiev and Eisenstein, and it remains unparalleled in the brilliance of its music-film connection.

The manner *Alexander Nevsky*'s film music was written contributes significantly to its vivid, almost visual effect. Few films have depended as heavily on music to convey meaning and depth to the on-screen visuals. Yet, Eisenstein established a powerful connection between sound and visuals, with Prokofiev's score shaping much of the film's energy, while the lyrics of the

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[175] Schwartz, 135.

[176] Greg Dolgopolov, "Alexander Nevsky – Senses of Cinema," Sensesofcinema.com, March 13, 2011, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2011/cteq/alexander-nevsky.

[177] Ibid.

songs serve as narration.[178] In each scored scene, background sounds and dialogue are nearly absent, allowing the music to solely drive and link the narrative. Prokofiev's music not only reflects but also amplifies the emotional impact of the images without any additional support. For instance, as the Russian soldiers stand motionless in anticipation of the Teutonic assault during the film's climax, *Battle of the Ice,* Prokofiev uses soft, static brass chords, followed by a swift movement of woodwinds. This subtly evokes the sensation of the icy lake beneath them, as well as the odd blast of frigid wind. Though the sound of wind is absent in the film, it is vividly present in the music. In certain scenes, even the patterns of the clouds seem to be reflected in the music. It is a stunning fusion of sound and imagery, with both elements playing an equally vital role in achieving the artistic vision. This elaborate scene's design and execution represented a significant innovation in special effects. That is precisely what Eisenstein aimed for in his collaboration with Prokofiev, at times filming sequences specifically to align with the music. Meeting the challenge of such a visionary filmmaker, Prokofiev composed the music that he knew would not only enhance the film but also stand on its own in any performances.

Prokofiev did, in fact, undergo another stylistic transformation—what Morrison characterizes as an "attitudinal adjustment"—partly to demonstrate his willingness to accommodate the continuously changing stylistic limitations.[179] Fortunately, the reception of *Alexander Nevsky* was overwhelmingly positive, both from the public and Soviet officials. Audiences praised the film's dramatic portrayal of Russian history and appeal to patriotism, as well as Prokofiev's score for its power and emotional depth. Officially, it was acclaimed as a "prime example of Socialist Realism."[180] The Soviet government embraced the film's message of

[178] Ibid.
[179] Kevin Bartig, *Sergei Prokofiev's Alexander Nevsky* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 74.
[180] Dolgopolov.

unity and resistance against foreign invaders, viewing it as a potent tool for instilling nationalist sentiment. Prokofiev's music, which blended Russian folk elements with grand orchestral textures, further elevated the film's status, and it was widely praised by Soviet authorities, including Stalin himself. Furthermore, *Alexander Nevsky* established the standard for a genre and demonstrated the importance of music in filmmaking. As historian Kevin Bartig commented, "Prokofiev's accomplishment marked a transition from the self-imposed new simplicity to a broader engagement with Stalinist aesthetics."[181] The film and its music were viewed as embodying the ideals of Soviet strength and resilience, and it became a cultural landmark with enduring importance, especially during the outbreak of World War II.

Following the completion of *Alexander Nevsky*, Prokofiev wrote in 1940,

> The cinema is a young and very modern art that offers new and fascinating possibilities to the composer. These possibilities must be fully utilized. Composers ought to make a study of them, instead of merely writing the music and then leaving it to the mercy of the film people. Even the most skilled sound technician cannot possibly handle the music as well as the composer himself… Eisenstein's respect for music was so great that at times he was prepared to cut or add to his sequences so as not to upset the balance of a musical episode.[182]

All Soviet composers, regardless of their status, have contributed to film music, but not everyone was fortunate enough to collaborate with Eisenstein. Prokofiev, however, developed a unique and powerful partnership with the visionary director, producing scores that not only complemented but also elevated Eisenstein's films. Their next project, *Ivan the Terrible*, marked a significant development in their collaboration.

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[181] Bartig, 103.
[182] Schwartz, 136.

Prokofiev: *Ivan the Terrible*

The film depicts the complex and turbulent period of Ivan IV's reign, exploring his transformation from a reform-minded ruler to a tyrannical despot. It portrays his efforts to centralize power, his military campaigns, and his internal struggles, including his infamous purge of the nobility. Ivan IV was always praised by Stalin for his intelligence, foresight, and accomplishments as the strong and unwavering leader of the Russian nation. Stalin viewed himself as the embodiment of Ivan IV and took a keen interest when he discovered Eisenstein's fascination with the historical figure. He then commanded Eisenstein to create a film on *Ivan the Terrible,* closely supervising the project himself. Having recognized his role, Eisenstein tried to craft a story that glorified Ivan as a national hero and symbol.[183]

Compared to Eisenstein's earlier film *Alexander Nevsky*, *Ivan the Terrible* is substantially different. The project took five years to complete, spanning from 1941 to 1946, due to war, evacuation, and an intrusive committee on film issues that scrutinized every aspect of the production to ensure it adhered to Soviet ideological standards. This committee's interference often delayed progress and demanded changes to align with the state's vision of historical representation and propaganda. Research and ideas for this project abound in Eisenstein's notes, although most of which remained unrealized.[184] Only the first two of the planned trilogy have been finished. *Ivan the Terrible*, according to Morrison, is an incomplete "collection of drafts" that includes a "perplexing non-narrative fragment," the product of bureaucratic intervention and "Eisenstein's five-year struggle with himself."[185]

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[183] Craig Lysy, "Ivan the Terrible – Sergei Prokofiev," Movie Music UK, October 3, 2016, https://moviemusicuk.us/2016/10/03/ivan-the-terrible-sergei-prokofiev/.

[184] Bartig, 132.

[185] Morrison, *The People's Artist*, 234.

Given the achievements of *Alexander Nevsky*, Eisenstein respected and appreciated Prokofiev's insights, dependability, and painstaking perfection. The two artists went over the screenplay together, identifying the music cues and discussing the emotional causes behind the scenes. Knowing that the film required an operatic quality, Prokofiev composed music for the chorus and once again enlisted Vladimir Lugovskov, who had previously collaborated with *Alexander Nevsky*, to help with the songs. Prokofiev understood that achieving authenticity required the integration of Russian liturgical chants, hymns, and traditional folk songs into the score.[186] He adhered to *Nevsky*'s formula for effective populist music, drawing on national music to create an immediate emotional connection with Soviet audiences and evoke a sense of patriotism and unity. His score reveals a deeper desire to fully immerse himself in the Russian national tradition, rather than merely using it for its symbolic musical elements. Prokofiev's contemporaries recognized that he had once again shifted his artistic approach, as musicologist Emiliya Fried describes the "condescended dramatic effect" and "emotional tension" of the *Ivan*'s score, so different from "the epic restraint of the choral and solo numbers of the preceding film."[187]

Eisenstein had even higher standards for Prokofiev's composition. He started to believe that a musical cue may serve as an alternative leitmotif, contrasting and connecting different situations to create narrative links. Eisenstein's direction is characterized by its striking visual style, including innovative use of composition and lighting. The film features elaborate sets, dramatic costumes, and symbolic imagery, which contribute to its epic and theatrical quality. However, issues related to politics and logistics challenged the project from the beginning to the end. Due to a lack of gasoline, food, power, and other supplies, Eisenstein struggled with casting

[186] Lysy.
[187] Bartig, 134.

and sustaining morale on set.[188] Although his musical ideas were elaborate, often disorganized by the numerous changes made to the film, and was only half-completed.[189]

The film's release and reception were also heavily influenced by the political climate of Stalinist Russia. The first part was well-received by audiences and critics in the Soviet Union. It was praised for its epic scale, dramatic storytelling, and innovative cinematic techniques. Likewise, the Soviet government supported the film as it aligned with the wartime narrative of strong leadership and resistance. The portrayal of Ivan IV as a decisive and powerful ruler was seen as fitting for the wartime context. The film was even awarded the Stalin Prize in 1946, which was a significant honor for both Prokofiev and Eisenstein. Conversely, unlike the success of the first part, the second part of *Ivan the Terrible* faced a much more mixed reception. While it was appreciated for its artistic and technical achievements, it was also met with controversy due to its darker themes and more critical portrayal of Ivan IV's reign. Since then, the second part faced significant censorship and was criticized for its perceived negative portrayal of authority. Subsequently, it was banned and denounced as it "does not stand up to criticism in view of its anti-historical and anti-artistic qualities."[190] Thus, the film was "prohibited from release" until 1958.[191] By this time, Stalin had died, and the new Soviet leadership was less favorable to Eisenstein's portrayal of Ivan IV. Eisenstein's work was seen as too controversial and critical of autocratic power, leading to its mixed reception and limited distribution.

Despite its problematic history and censorship, *Ivan the Terrible* remains a significant work in the history of Soviet cinema. Along with *Alexander Nevsky*, they are both monumental collaborations between Eisenstein and Prokofiev, although they differ in tone, style, and themes.

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[188] Morrison, *The People's Artist*, 240.
[189] Bartig, 134.
[190] Morrison, *The People's Artist*, 245.
[191] Ibid.

Every film project Prokofiev worked on renewed the challenge of creating serious yet accessible music for the masses, even if this goal became less clearly expressed in his later works. In *Ivan*, he returned to the approach that had proven effective in *Nevsky*, aiming to shape and enhance the Russian national tradition in a straightforward and populist way.[192] However, *Ivan* grew into a complex and sprawling work, showcasing Eisenstein's remarkable creativity but also revealing the bureaucratic interference that made the film occasionally inconsistent and unfinished. While *Nevsky* succeeded as clear Soviet propaganda, *Ivan* ultimately stands as a more ambitious, intricate exploration of power. It challenged the limits of Stalinist ideology, which made it not only a cinematic triumph but also a testament to the difficulties of working within Stalinist constraints. Both compositions, which are regarded as epic achievements in the Soviet film industry, demonstrated Eisenstein's innovative filmmaking techniques and Prokofiev's ability to craft powerful, evocative scores that heighten the film's dramatic impact.

In essence, Soviet composers possess a talent for creating music that serves a purpose, which they employ to great effect in their film soundtracks. Composers of many shades and beliefs, including Kabalevsky, Shebalin, Khachaturian, Dzerzhinsky, and Sviridov, were among those engaged in cinema production in the 1930s.[193] It is reasonable to argue that no other country that produced films had as many renowned composers contribute to the field. Conversely, according to Schwartz, the "absolute" music of Soviet composers has occasionally been impacted by the distinct and particular requirements of cinema music, such as its flexibility to rapidly shifting emotions, illustrative purposes, and tangible realism.[194] Certain vibrant yet

[192] Bartig, 162.
[193] Schwartz, 137.
[194] Ibid.

understated Soviet scores make it easy to visualize them as “the sound track of a non-existing moving picture.”[195]

Both wartime patriotic songs and film music became vital propaganda tools, helping to shape Soviet identity and stimulate the public in support of the state’s goals. These compositions were crafted not only to evoke a deep emotional response but also to instill a sense of pride, resilience, and optimism even in the face of hardship. Through their music, composers conveyed the struggles and triumphs of the Soviet Union, aligning closely with Socialist Realism aesthetics that emphasized concreteness, accessibility, and a sense of immediacy that resonated with Soviet life. This dual purpose—as both an art form and a vehicle for ideological messaging—was a defining feature of Soviet music during the war years, encapsulating the power of music to inspire, influence, and unify.

[195] Ibid.

Conclusion

As two of the most celebrated composers from the Soviet Union, Shostakovich and Prokofiev are inextricably linked to the country and the constrictive era which they experienced. In this specific historical setting, they represent a great number of Soviet musicians who were suppressed by the government. The limitations placed on them by the government had a significant impact on their artistic endeavors and compositions. Stalin's dictatorship placed both composers under strict inspection, dictating their creative possibilities through official censorship and the requirement to adhere to Socialist Realism. By regulating artistic expression through its cultural organizations, the Soviet government aimed to make sure that all works reflected the party's doctrine of glorifying socialism, nationalism, and the working class.

Prokofiev, upon his return to the Soviet Union, faced the pressure of conforming to the state's artistic standards. As musicologist Richard Taruskin comments, "He remains the straightforward, unreconstructed reflector of his catastrophic environments and all its hypocrisies."[196] Prokofiev's legacy is highlighted by the unfortunate coincidence of his death on the same day as Stalin.[197] Though he was enthusiastic at first, Prokofiev quickly found himself under pressure from the authorities to create compositions that praised Soviet life and ideals. He made every effort to avoid having his artistic freedom restricted by the government, but was forced to compose under the influence of Socialist Realism while staying faithful to himself.

Nonetheless, Prokofiev was able to strike a delicate balance between regime and art for at least a portion of his career. According to Russian specialist Francis Maes, "In about 1930 he began to simplify his style. He advocated a new look at the traditional elements of music, such as

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[196] Richard Taruskin, "Art and Politics in Prokofiev," *Society* 29, no. 1 (November 1991): 60–63, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02695364, 61.

[197] Ian T Wallace, "Russia and the Restricted Composer: Limitations of the Self, Culture, and Government," Mosaic, 2019, https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/145. 26.

tonality, melody, and classical forms, and spoke of the need to create 'a new simplicity.' This move brought him closer to the criteria of Soviet music than those of the Western avant-garde."[198] Works like *Peter and the Wolf, Lieutenant Kije,* the *Second Violin Concerto* and *Egyptian Nights* exhibited this new simplicity. These compositions have a certain aesthetic flair characteristic of Prokofiev while being simple and understandable. Prokofiev's musical style of the 1930s is characterized by an overall warmth and spontaneity of expression. Undoubtedly, his encounter with the "new" Soviet audiences had an impact on it, as he noted in 1937, "Music in our country has become the heritage of vast masses of people."[199] This shows that the challenge of reaching the public was a persistent thought in his mind.

Recalling Prokofiev's years in the Soviet Union, it is evident that most of his compositions were well-received by the Soviet public, and that he was honored with several official prizes. By creating a unique yet approachable and rather conventional language, he adhered to the officially recognized style. Of course, he had some protective armor because of his solid international reputation. There probably would have been a global stir if he had been arrested or even silenced.[200] Only a small portion of his compositions were banned, and even then, the majority were finally performed during the "thaw" years.[201] Prokofiev and the government, taken together, established a certain style of writing that was primarily based on his readiness to compose in a conventional style that differed much from his previous radical works.

Similarly, Shostakovich, after the harsh denunciation of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, is a prime example of an artist navigating a delicate balance between personal

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[198] Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2006).

[199] Schwartz, 117.

[200] Weickhardt, 131.

[201] Ibid.

expression and political conformity. Shostakovich's connection with the Soviet Union was quite unusual during his career, and he was very much constrained by that bond. Despite being a survivor, Shostakovich's compositions exhibit varying trends about the demands placed on composers by the state. Even though Shostakovich mostly writes in total, traditional forms, much of his music has a gloomy, melancholy, personal, and contemplative tone. Luckily, when music restrictions were put in place, Shostakovich already had a well-established international reputation. Yet, to a certain extent his fame had made him a more convenient target for a dictatorship that could not stand independence in music or any other aspect of culture.[202]

Notwithstanding the restrictions imposed by Stalin's regime, Shostakovich managed to compose music that met with government approval while simultaneously evoking deep emotions in his listeners. Shostakovich, who was never an overly radical composer, developed several survival techniques that would help him and other Soviet composers alike. These included writing occasional propagandistic music for the dictatorship, permitting the interpretation of his ambiguous works as supporting official policy, and enabling the regime to profit from his widespread international reputation. Additionally, he turned to the safer genre of chamber music, and even withdrew some of his risky works during difficult times, likely hoping for better times ahead.[203] Although he retained some degree of inventiveness, his creative process was hindered by the need to adhere to specific state requirements. The constant fear of being labeled "formalistic" or accused of anti-Soviet sentiments loomed over his later compositions. As a result, several of his works were either never performed during his lifetime or were outright banned. Shostakovich eventually found himself trapped, not only by the Soviet authorities but

[202] Ibid, 126.
[203] Ibid, 128.

also by his feelings of sorrow and shame over his connection to the Communist Party.[204] This self-restraint was deeply influenced by official prohibitions.

The onset of World War II marked a significant shift in composers' musical output and the cultural landscape of the Soviet Union. While public participation is crucial in promoting music, none of the Soviet Union's musical accomplishments throughout the war would have been achieved without the commitment of the musicians.[205] The impact of World War II on their compositions was profound, adding emotional depth and a new sense of urgency to their works. In these war years, their music began to reflect a more universal struggle, transcending the immediate pressures of censorship to convey deeper messages of human suffering, endurance, and hope.

The war did not stop the development of music; conversely, it gave the music the foundation and energy to span all phases of life.[206] Music has been a reflective power of contemporary events, as well as a strong symbol of public emotions. As the war unfolded, music became not only a tool for ideological control but also a powerful means of expressing national pride and resilience. Music, as an artistic carrier, became a vehicle to unite the Soviet people during catastrophe. The changes in musical style during World War II encapsulates a great deal of cultural, political and historical shifts, which left a significant musical legacy for the whole world.

As the saying goes, music knows no boundaries. Yet musicians have nationalities. Every musician is inherently a product of a particular nation and historical period. The work of any composer is shaped, consciously or unconsciously, by the external environment, leaving an

[204] Wallace, 28.
[205] Harris and Murray, 78.
[206] Ibid.

indelible mark on their creations. Shostakovich and Prokofiev were no exception, their works bearing the imprint of their turbulent times. Even under intense scrutiny, their compositions reveal traces of a deeper, often hidden, commentary on the human condition, shaped by war, repression, and personal resilience.

It is indeed fortunate for a musician to compose in a time of artistic freedom and to be able to express his feelings by his wishes. However, many artists must adapt to and navigate through repressive environments. They need to conform—or at least survive—under the weight of censorship, which often forces artists to decorate their visions within their works, to express their beliefs in veiled ways. In many cases, their true genius is only fully appreciated long after their time.

As American critic Bliss Perry once said, "It seems that the more powerful an artist is, the more they have to dance in shackles to truly dance with joy and excellence," which best describes the reality faced by musicians and how they can still find freedom, innovation, and expression despite limitations or external pressures.[207] Through skills and intellect, these musicians overcame the restrictions and managed to make their works soar. The compositions they created under intense pressure are perhaps the most brilliant dances of all, as their music not only reflects the external struggles of their time but also transcends them, leaving a legacy of beauty, wisdom, and resilience for future generations.

[207] Bliss Perry, "A Study of Poetry - Chapter V," Authorama.com, 2024, https://www.authorama.com/study-of-poetry-6.html.

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