
Letters to the Editor

From John Shand

Perhaps being under attack so often has produced in Ian MacDonald the reflex of shoot first and ask questions later. This in any event seems to be his response to (*Tempo* 207) to my review of *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, in disregard of any possible common ground – thus driving away even those who might think he has a good point. If one doesn't totally agree with him then one can't have understood him. Still, being made of tougher stuff I can ignore all this and consider the arguments.

I can perfectly well see how my claim that MacDonald invests worth in DDS's music by turning the Marxist account of musical worth on its head – thereby playing by the same rules – might hit a raw nerve with someone who (in my view rightly) is antipathetic to the Soviet regime. It must be hard to be accused of sleeping with the enemy.

However, MacDonald does no justice to the subtlety of the view I try, albeit briefly, to present. So let's get a few points straight.

I do not, as MacDonald claims, deny that music can refer to things outside music itself. I would have thought the sketched argument, going well beyond even what most heteronomists would claim, that music can embody *ideas* by *enacting* them through the unfolding combination of the musical elements, would make that clear beyond doubt.

MacDonald claims, contrary to what I actually say, that I present him as giving us an either/or choice between specificity and universality. What I say is that he is close to claiming that the universal significance can only be understood if one first appreciates the specific reference of works. This seems to me to be false, and makes inexplicable our profound understanding of music whose origins we cannot access. Do we really want to claim that DDS's music (along with all others) becomes less and less comprehensible to us as the reality of the historical context of its composition fades for us?

I actually support the claim that music rooted in a tradition, musical and otherwise, often cherishes, rather than hinders (although it will need to be developed) the universal value of the music. As William Alwyn said "...even the great themselves bear the impress of their predecessors. Originality does not come by rejection of one's

heritage but through its acceptance...' The greatest music concerns important things well said.

My claim, simply ignored by MacDonald, is that the greatest music both has distinguished musical features *and* refers to important things outside itself, such as death, grief, love, determination, courage, integrity, illness, hope and loss of hope, despair, triumph and humour. I do not deny that there are referring passages in DDS's music that are specific in their reference. What I deny is that the bulk of the music can be understood or appreciated only if you also understand those specific references. This is the negative claim.

The positive claim is that DDS actively defied the Soviet system – and to compose *decent* music he would have had to do this – by composing music that both was distinguished in its musical qualities, implicitly adhering to the belief in trans-cultural artistic worth *and* addressed matters of universal concern to human beings directly. I am baffled that MacDonald cannot see how this is a more profound challenge to Marxist social-heteronomist aesthetics than composing works that derive from accepting heteronomist aesthetics but whose meaning is ironic. Keeping a realm of personal feelings and thoughts alive, having this as a subject that could be communicated to others, was a real and central struggle for Soviet artists.

MacDonald claims that I give no supporting evidence for the positive claim about DDS's compositional philosophy. I could hardly be expected to do so in a short review. Well, what was the composer about when he dedicated his 9th quartet to his third wife, after in 1959 begin diagnosed as suffering from a serious illness? What was the point of DDS trying to learn from playing through a piano transcription of Bruckner's 8th symphony? Why study Bach in detail? Why a 14th Symphony of poems all related directly to death? How on earth could these matters be directly related to Soviet history, as opposed to other things outside music directly concerning human condition as such? DDS may have defied the authorities by direct ironic reference. But his more profound defiance was to reject the whole way in which Marxist ideology applied in the Soviet Union being founded on the pernicious notion of the perfectibility of man through social engineering enforced by tyrannous force, would clearly indicate my understanding of what was fundamentally happening.

It amounted to nothing less than the attempt to crush the very nature of human beings, derived from falsehood (and hence the need for force) that human nature was an illusion and malleable all the way down. There is no significant disagreement between us over the pernicious nature of that political system.

I admit myself culpable of a sloppy reading of his comparison of the merits of symphonies. However, I would suggest that his code-hunting tends to raise up works that are obviously directly anti-Soviet as against those that are more indirect in the way I suggest. As to my remarks about the value of the 8th symphony I simply did not have space to argue my case – I could only give it as an example of where MacDonald's view seems to lead contrary to the general opinion of a work I love greatly.

Kurt Sanderling (who knows a thing or two about Soviet life), while admitting DDS's works can be deciphered in certain specific ways, says: 'But the strength of the music will ultimately have to be judged by how later generations understand – and love – his music without having lived through that time'. I don't think DDS would ultimately want his music to have value in any other way. This is the true rejection of Stalin and Soviet Marxist ideology: human nature goes on, and the music speaks of the human condition and does so in ways that are musically great.

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Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra



Wednesday 29th September 1999 7.30pm



Elgar Overture, Froissart
Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No.1
Nielsen Symphony No.2
The Four Temperaments

Douglas Bostock conductor
Dmitri Alexeev piano

Saturday 13th November 1999 7.30pm



Borodin Overture, Prince Igor
Stephen Montague Snakebite
Korngold Violin Concerto
Rachmaninov Symphony No.3

Junichi Hirokami conductor
Malcolm Stewart violin

The Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine Centenary Concert Sponsored by

Wednesday 20th October 1999 7.30pm

Holst A Choral Fantasia
Adam Gorb Clarinet Concerto
World Première
Elgar Symphony No.2

Vernon Handley conductor
Nicholas Cox clarinet
Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir



Wednesday 26th January 2000 7.30pm

Nielsen Overture, Helios
James Macmillan Veni, Veni, Emmanuel
Sibelius Symphony No.1

Iona Brown conductor
Adrian Spillett percussion



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