
Letters to the Editor

from Solomon Volkov

I am writing to correct a mistake in the otherwise admirable piece by Ronald Weitzman in *Tempo* 206 about the Fleishmann/Shostakovich opera *Rothschild's Fiddle*, which stems, probably, from erroneous reading of my 'Preface' to *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*. In this 'Preface' I state that Maxim, the composer's son, came – at my invitation – to the stage première of the opera in Leningrad in April 1968. But he didn't conduct, as Mr Weitzman (and some other critics) presume; he was present as the guest of honour, representing, as it were, his father. The conductor was Yuri Kochnev, then the music director of the Experimental Studio of Chamber Opera, of which I was the artistic director. At the time of the publication of *Testimony* in 1979 I couldn't mention Kochnev's name, because it would surely attract unwelcome attention of the KGB. (I learned only recently that my precaution was futile and Mr Kochnev had – as did many other friends and colleagues of mine in the former USSR – his share of trouble because of association with me.) I am happy to report, though, that Mr Kochnev is by now one of the most respected opera conductors in Russia. He is widely admired there as a long time music director of the Saratov opera and ballet, a leading regional institution of its kind. Recently Mr Kochnev was the recipient of the prestigious Golden Mask award for his production of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, which was hailed in the Russian press as 'Shostakovich played as Mozart!'

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from Ian MacDonald

Good to see that John Shand is impressed by the pro-*Testimony* case made by my colleagues Allan Ho and Dmitry Feofanov in their book *Shostakovich Reconsidered* (No.206, pp.40-2). Alas, half of Professor Shand's review consists of

misconceived claims about some points I make in *Shostakovich Reconsidered* – to wit: that I adopt the Marxist principle that 'the significance and value of a work of art is entirely a function of its relation to social and political events outside the work itself' and that a work of art 'can have not intrinsic timeless transcultural worth'. In fact, there are more than a few statements among my contributions to *Shostakovich Reconsidered* which explicitly contradict this contention. Here's one, taken from the paragraph that closes Ho and Feofanov's book: 'Universality emerges from local specificity and Shostakovich's work, at root, is very specific. Equally, at its highest reach, it is as universal as any other great music; indeed it can fairly be said to be *more* universal than most other great music'. One might have thought this final phrase sufficiently provocative to have caught Shand's attention (particularly since the footnote which is attached to it cites the wrong justifying passage, which is actually on p.582).

Comparably vague is Professor Shand's off-hand claim that in my book *The New Shostakovich* 'the Ninth Symphony is declared superior to the Tenth, the Seventh better than the Eighth, [and] the Twelfth a neglected masterpiece'. In fact, there is in *The New Shostakovich* no such declaration, nor anything even approximating it, concerning the Twelfth Symphony; no comparison at all between the Ninth and Tenth (the latter, in any case, being called 'the supreme thing of its kind composed in the last half-century'); and only a very general comparison between the Eighth and the Fourth, Fifth, and Seventh, based on a lengthily argued suggestion that the Eighth Symphony is not all that it's ritually cracked up to be. If that opinion offends Professor Shand's intuition about the work, all I can venture is that it's reasonable to expect an academic philosopher to allow rational argument precedence over instinct.

Shand's claims about *The New Shostakovich* seem to be based on misreading or imagination. Much the same, I would mildly suggest, applies to his claims about my statements on universality in *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, wherein, contrary to his thesis, I do *not* present and 'either/or' choice as between universality and specificity,

farguing instead that the former arises from the latter, and that we must address both if we seek a deeper understanding of the music of Shostakovich (or of anyone else).

In a nutshell, my argument runs as follows. This philosophical solecism of ‘pure music’ rules modernist criticism and much modernist composition. Those who belong to this tradition are unused to seeking specific meanings in music because the idea of ‘pure music’ contains the correlate of ‘extra-musicality’, according to which concept specific meanings are deemed at best irrelevant, at worst theoretically inconceivable, and in all cases a trivialisation of what should properly be regarded as universal. In contrast, I argue that such ‘universality’ is merely a generalisation by which (rather than signifying more or less the same to all of us) a musical work becomes, in terms of meaning, infinitely pliable – in deconstructionist jargon, free of ‘closure’ – and hence will signify a different thing to everyone who hear it. Such pseudo-universality is, in truth, only an aggregate of private responses, which may differ widely not only from each other but from what it may be reasonable to suppose that a composer intended.

My remarks on the specifics in Shostakovich’s music – which parallel remarks by Russians who knew him – are at once practical (claims about particular meanings, of which several have been confirmed by the composer’s associates) and theoretical: an argument against the pretentious generalisation of modernist pseudo-universalism which, by cutting an art-work off from its contextual roots, deprives it of its original, local and specific, tone and dynamic (which cannot be represented by notation alone). For example,

in Shostakovich’s work – encompassing, as it arguably does, a politically shaded form of moral satire – there is a degree of expressive specificity which can only be fathomed by reference to local context. My thesis is that, far from “trivialising” his music (or any other composer’s), such contextual specifics are the roots of universality. Shand’s assumption that I deplore or deny universality in itself is simply mistaken.

What is usually at the bottom of such misconceptions is (1) a besieged allegiance to the score-centred idea of extra-musicality, and (2) a lack of knowledge of (in this case) Soviet history. By speaking, unphilosophically, of the ‘outside’ of a work of art, Shand, in effect and possibly unwittingly, espouses the first of these positions. By claiming, offhand and without any supporting testimony, that Shostakovich’s ‘chief method of defying the tyrannous ideology was the determination to write great music in the classical tradition’, Shand appears to signal membership of the second caucus. This being so, his claim that my interpretive method amounts to ‘Take the official line about the specific meaning of certain passages, turn it on its head, and you will have the truth’ suggests, more persuasively than it otherwise might, that he could profitably learn more about Soviet Russia – a status shared by several music scholars whom I accordingly criticise in the final essay in *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, which exposition John Shand, perhaps significantly, fails to address in his review.

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(Concluded from p.37)

pulled in. Ross Lorraine’s *Movements and Acts* – yet another world première – is an abstract work with echoes of both the American post-war scene and the Kagel of the early string quartets. Using various unusual items to ‘play’ the instrument, the piece progresses in isolated episodes (the order decided by the performer during performance). Each of these is not a short individual sound or gesture, but a long sound, often oscillating, and changing gradually – very

imaginatively done, with a precise sense of theatre.

Unfortunately the remaining three items in the concert were all weaker than the earlier ones. However, what unified the recital was the even-handed treatment given all the pieces by Lukoszevieve. It is remarkable for a single performer to be able to display such understanding and sympathy with such a wide range of material, and I look forward to his turning his hand to still more areas of contemporary music.

Nicolas Hodges