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Marina Frolova Walker and Jonathan Walker,
***Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5*, Oxford and New York,**
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When Richard Taruskin discussed Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony in his *Defining Russia Musically*, he struggled with interpretation. "What constrains interpretation? What validates or invalidates a reading? What, finally, does the symphony mean?", he asked; "Answers can […] only be deduced from practice and from the specific case".[1] Taruskin was troubled by the critical tension inherent in the various claims to "ownership" of interpreting the Fifth Symphony, with its ongoing "inscription and reinscription" following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, at a time when rights of interpretation had just started to be handed back from the Party to the individual.[2] Taruskin insisted that a valid interpretation must be historically informed, with arguments grounded and carefully balanced. *Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5* by Marina Frolova-Walker and Jonathan Walker clearly adheres to this belief by negotiating the many complex narratives that have arisen about the work. They also offer a dedicated website for audio examples that provide the reader with the opportunity to make direct comparisons of the available recordings.

The first chapter charts the prehistory of the Fifth Symphony, beginning with the 1936 *Pravda* article denouncing Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Op. 29 (1932), which prompted him to postpone the planned première of his Fourth Symphony. The startling stylistic contrast between the modernist Fourth and the realist Fifth Symphonies signals the fact that the latter indeed marks a crucial stylistic turn for Shostakovich, likely facilitating his subsequent rehabilitation. In Chapter Two, "Musical Contexts", Walker & Walker trace the

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[1] Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically. Historical and Hermeneutical Essays*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, 521.

[2] Ibid.

works that exerted a possible musical influence on Shostakovich, from the Austro-German symphonic tradition of Beethoven and Mahler to the contemporary styles of Paul Hindemith and Ernst Krenek. Chapter Three paints an intricate picture of the relationship between the Russian intelligentsia and the Revolution. It questions to what extent Shostakovich himself was an "intelligent" protagonist of the entire symphony, and how its early reception followed the narrative of the critic Alexey Tolstoy, who interpreted the symphony as depicting "the individual reaching maturity within society" (p. 68). Chapter Four investigates how performance practices have been linked with the critical reception of the Finale's coda. Leonard Bernstein and Yevgeny Mravinsky chose two different tempi – the former fast and jubilant, the latter slow and tragic – both of which were approved by the composer. Just how fast should it be? Should the composer have the final say on making such decisions? Shostakovich was open to different renderings. Initial critics were hesitant to defend him because of the *Pravda* article and the ongoing Great Purge, until Tolstoy effusively praised the symphony about a month later, arguably reflecting a reading in line with Party thinking, with the symphony as an "optimistic tragedy" serving the mainstream ideology of socialist realism. Shostakovich grasped this opportunity, repeating the same narrative as a political shield.

The relationship between the individual and the collective in socialist realist Russia forms an underlying theme of the book, which is most explicitly discussed in Chapters Three and Five. In the fifth chapter, the Walkers return to the Finale's coda, a "triumph formula" as they call it, to rethink this fraught relationship, yet it is again a matter of interpretation. The coda can variously signify a "hard-won victory" (p. 106) or a "gnostic, personal statement" (p. 119). The same "formula" even appeared in Shostakovich's film music for *The Great Citizen* (1938) and later compositions. Here again, the Walkers remain open to various interpretations.

This openness can appear overcautious. For Shostakovich and many sympathisers, the Beethovenian tradition is more at stake here. The mature Shostakovich, says Taruskin, was indeed a Russian *intelligent*, a "civic" artist whose artistic inspiration was not based on "alineation" (as with Western Modernism) but on "service".[3] The many possible readings of the Fifth Symphony are symptomatic of a composer who struggled to balance both public service under socialist realism and personal needs under harsh circumstances. Chapter Three considers the relationship between Soviet literature and music, in light of which the Fifth Symphony can be seen as a prototype of musical socialist realism comparable to the Soviet *Bildungsroman*, such as Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel was Tempered* (1934). In this reading, the Fifth offers a hard-won, heroic classicism that enables its composer as an individual *in extremis* to find expression in the collective according to the ideals of the Party.

[3] Richard Taruskin, op. cit., 496.

The emergence of new archival sources, however, offers a challenge to the overarching heroic narrative discussed in the first five chapters. Chapter Six describes Alexander Benditsky's discovery of a "secret programme" in the Symphony, namely a love affair between Shostakovich and a student called variously Lala or Elena, whose name is embedded in a monogram of pitches in the work similar to Shostakovich's use of his own motto DSCH and other monograms in his later oeuvre. More strikingly, the Walkers' thorough analysis of each movement reveals that the symphony was "profoundly imbued with the music of Bizet's *Carmen*" (p. 127). Instead of endeavouring to resolve these competing interpretations, the Walkers acknowledge both the public and private spheres of the Symphony, with no single narrative cancelling out any other. Yet this also returns us to Taruskin's questions at the beginning: if the Fifth Symphony indeed "remains an open book" (p. 153), just how open is it? The Walkers spare no effort in reconstructing the context of the Symphony, suggesting that although a work like Shostakovich's Fifth can afford many interpretations, each one has its own limits. What to do with these various interpretations, then, becomes another matter. Perhaps, in the end, these various interpretations of the Symphony prove that we still need stories to tell.