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More Questions for Dmitri?

➔ by Lucksom, Nurkit - Monday, October 1, 2018, 9:05 PM

Good Evening All!

This was such an interesting article for such a cool opera! Nowadays, everyone is a critic and reviews/opinions run rampant. However, what Shostakovich received was absolute devastation to his career when Stalin walked out of his opera. And even if Stalin never gave him a proper reason for leaving, the life of Shostakovich the composer was never the same from then on.

While this article looks at the reasoning behind Stalin’s move, why do YOU believe he left? Was it on purpose because of the content of the opera? Or was purposely done because he wanted to use Shostakovich as a scapegoat for a bigger issue? Or was it for some other non-related reason (like he just really had to use the bathroom, and didn’t know how to explain...)?

We’ve talked about looking at the past through our present eyes and how difficult it is to add social commentary to a society that is different from our own. However, how do you think an opera like this would be portrayed today, in light of recent movements and the state of modern politics? Specifically the treatment of Katrina, and how easily she is tossed aside by the men in her life. Does this/Would this have any commentary on our state of affairs? If so, how?

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Re: More Questions for Dmitri?

➔ by O'Toole, Brendan - Monday, October 1, 2018, 10:48 PM



I think the content of the opera could have played a large role in Stalin's actions. This is quite a raunchy work with a lot of difficult content for the viewer. I was certainly uncomfortable at times reading a synopsis and the article about this opera just because of some of the themes. Maybe my emotions were reflected in some of the audience at that time. Although I feel that way though, the article talked about Stalin's own pride in his misogynistic views. Maybe he saw the opera as a mockery of him, his words, and actions.

There are two ways I think this opera could be portrayed today. Either the sex is played down to make it more family friendly and comfortable for the audience, or played up to make a point and a statement about current events.

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Re: More Questions for Dmitri?

👤 by Farrell, Rebecca - Tuesday, October 2, 2018, 12:16 AM

Brendan took the words right out of my mouth. I completely think that he could have viewed the work as a mockery of him. If it was this difficult for me (and I'm sure most of us) to read parts of this article due to its harsh realities, I couldn't imagine sitting and watching a work that I believe is mocking me and/or my society. Honestly, if this were portrayed today, I think 3 things could happen: people would laugh in a "you've got to be kidding me, hell no" (pardon my French) kind of way, be absolutely enraged by it, or they wouldn't be shocked at all. Given today's society I think (or would like to hope) that most people would have the reaction of, "I can't believe this is actually happening right now," but, like Brendan said, it would perhaps be played up in order to reflect current events. However, some people might laugh in disbelief while others would be absolutely (and openly) furious about it.

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Re: More Questions for Dmitri?

👤 by Mani, Alexa - Tuesday, October 2, 2018, 12:46 AM

Interesting first question, I'm leaning toward thinking that Stalin was using Shostakovich as a scapegoat for a larger issue but, there are cultural issues I'm curious about before I state that. Prior to leaving the *Lady Macbeth* performance Stalin had seen Dzerzhinsky's *Quiet Flows the Don* which received state approval. I'm wondering if there are any existing critiques of Dzerzhinsky's work from the time between its state approval and Stalin's departure from *Lady Macbeth*, which would show public disapproval. I'm just thinking that if *The Nose* was sharply criticized by RAPM then it would probably resonate with dissenters. I'm also curious about how *Lady Macbeth* was being discussed in print media. When Stalin attended the performance in 1936 it had already been staged for two years. That's a significant amount of time for a work to be performed and I'm curious about the impact it had culturally over that time. Can you imagine if *Lady Macbeth* was like a cult film where dissenters regularly went to the opera to negotiate free love and other topics surrounding women and sexuality in the Soviet Union and then Stalin found out and he was like "nah, cancelled."

Your second question is fascinating to think about. I read that when the opera was premiered it was staged by two opera companies, the Maliy Theatre in Leningrad and the Nemirovich-Danchenko Music Theatre in Moscow, but the Moscow production took 'a less satirical reading of Shostakovich's work'. I bring this up because I've been thinking about the influence an opera company has in how a work is received. How much freedom does the company have to stretch the boundaries (or safely stay away from them) of Shostakovich's creation and how does this affect the audience's reception?

In terms of how it would be portrayed today I think it has potential be a stellar production that could really dig into conversations surrounding sexual assault and rape culture in the United States. (wow so relevant!!) I'm drawn to a quote by Shostakovich on the bottom of page 164, 'I determined to preserve the strength of Leskov's novel and yet, approaching it critically, to interpret its events from our modern point of view'. There's a temporally unaffected strength in the story of Katerina, however, the nuanced, small but powerful details regarding sexuality that Shostakovich and Preis altered were the details that made the opera 'a little too much of its own time'. It's cool because Shostakovich saw

Leskov's work as something that was relevant, but needed to be altered slightly to reflect the times more. Today we sit here and can analyze Shostakovich's work as something very relevant while also understanding nuances to negotiate or construct differently to better reflect our times.

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Re: More Questions for Dmitri?

➔ by Baker, Elizabeth - Tuesday, October 2, 2018, 9:10 AM

I really like Alexa's point that this opera had already been released and performed for 2 years before Stalin's dismissal of it. I'm curious to read about what people had been criticizing (or praising) about the opera before Stalin dominated the conversation by walking out of it. Did people think it had achieved socialist realism? Did those who had praised the opera "take it back" once they realized it could be dangerous to support Shostakovich?

I think we opened last year's class, "Music, Politics, and Power" class with Shostakovich and this opera (and Symphony 5) and I remember how we discussed how a government can control art. While it's hard, and there's plenty of examples on how people continued to create protest art under strict regulations, it's amazing that simply by leaving the theater, Stalin managed to derail a composer's entire trajectory as an artist. And that we're still talking about it! Obviously it's terrible but it's pretty astounding how something as seemingly small and insignificant as an opera can make Stalin feel like he has to denounce it, or else it would undermine his authority and regime.

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Re: More Questions for Dmitri?

➔ by Girts, Adam - Tuesday, October 2, 2018, 1:15 AM

Stalin...

I think that it is possible that his reaction, was like that of a current nominee *cough* or president *COUGH* in that, this opera flaunts his wrong doing into his face. P 16 points out that Stalin is possibly guilty of assault. Knowing him, probably. Leaders with authoritarian tendencies, tend not to respect other people, comes with the territory. Perhaps he left, because he might have felt personally attacked.

Then again, sexuality is dangerous in a totalitarian society. Feared by authorities, because it can not be controlled. An opera advocating for glass of water theory, dangerous.

Finally, there is the political question of thinking. This opera points out what is wrong with soviet society. NOTHING IS WRONG WITH SOVIET SOCIETY COMRADE! NOTHING CAN EVER BE WRONG WITH THE PARADISE WE ARE BUILDING. DO NOT QUESTION IT! (And don't help others to question it.)

Remember, the perfect totalitarian society is one that self polices, like modern day china. Soviet government was attempting to acheive this. Free thinkers bring down the state (although, ironic, the lack of free thinkers is what caused it's downfall)

This is why he walked out. He was calculating. He left on a calculation.

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Re: More Questions for Dmitri?

➔ by Stroinski, Matthew - Tuesday, October 2, 2018, 7:42 AM

I think that The attack on Shostakovich was an attempt to remove all traces of pre-Stalin moral and social debates off of the cultural conversation. It is not enough just to gain political control but it is also imperative you have control over the discourses happening in the arts and what topics they are trying to grabble with. Shostakovich, though still in stylistic

transition, retained much of his early style held over from the distinctly vivacious 20's, such as the ballets *The Golden Age* and *The Bolt* as well as his opera *The Nose*.

As Wells argues Shostakovich drew heavily on topical issues of the pre-Stalin era, of the New Woman and Kollontia's ideas of sexual liberation. These issues, though interestingly dealt with by Shostakovich, were no longer ideal in the environment of Stalin. Even though the explicit representation of sexual acts can be seen as the most obvious point of contention in the opera it has more to do with the holdover of Shostakovich's artistic style and subject which was the main factor of the attack in 1936.

Shostakovich did make revisions to the work, arguably for those reasons that the treatment musically of the subject matter was no longer tasteful and that Shostakovich was maturing in style at this point. In his Fifth Symphony he turns to more conventional idioms of symphonic writing and retracted the premiere performance of his fourth symphony which was in the same vein as *Lady Macbeth*. Shostakovich was, in a way, forced to make a stylistic shift in order to acquiesce to the demands of the new political regime.

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More Questions on Lady Macbeth

🔴 by Lynch, John - Monday, October 1, 2018, 5:56 PM

Hi everybody!

Here are some more questions related to the article by Elizabeth A. Wells on Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*.

The article opens with a quote from Shostakovich himself: "It is the attitude of the composer to a particular subject which he wishes to illustrate that defines his ideology." With this quote in mind, do you feel that Shostakovich portrayed his personal ideology through this opera? Do you agree or disagree with the ideology that is portrayed? Can you think of other operas/composers who have defined an ideology that has caused them trouble in their life?

Much of the article deals with Shostakovich's use of graphic musical allusions to sex, harassment, and rape. How do you feel about this? Should opera make use of such compositional techniques to enhance the story, or can the story be told with less on-the-nose means?

Also, a large section of the article deals with the ideology of Alexandra Kollontai and how it relates to the opera. Have you seen any connections that weren't mentioned in the article, or perhaps have you seen any evidence to the contrary?



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I think it is important to use music to enhance graphic details in stories. Often these graphic details are necessary to the plot. They help send a powerful message to the audience. Music can help convey these strong emotions that the characters may be feeling. This idea kind of reminds me of the opening rape/murder scene in Jake Heggie's "Dead Man Walking (I am currently studying that opera for this class.) I was talking to a friend about the opera and she said that she had a very hard time watching it because it was so incredibly graphic. That's kind of the point though. As an audience, it makes us think and reflect about our problems with society.

As for Alexandra Kollontai, I have definitely heard of the "glass of water" theory before this reading before. This kind of reminded me of the modern phrase "slut shaming". It's basically the same idea that women should be able to choose the life they want to live with no judgment passed.

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Re: More Questions on Lady Macbeth

👤 by Milne, Emily - Monday, October 1, 2018, 11:04 PM

Shostakovich did reveal some of his personal ideology when he wrote this opera, we see this in the changes he made to Lescov's version of the story. In showing Katerina's feelings and motivations, he makes her more relatable and sympathetic. (page 179) He also shows how society itself is oppressing to women and how Katerina has nothing to lose (page 180)

I think "graphic musical allusions to sex etc." is going a bit far (although I will never think about trombones the same way). There are techniques and motives that would be lost on the casual (or to put it another way, uninformed) listener, and so, how graphic are they really? If you knew nothing about trombones and couldn't see the performer, would that instrument and its motive have the same impact? I don't think it would. So much goes into composing anything, but especially an opera, and in this case I do think Shostakovich closely aligned the music and the internal journeys of the main characters, (making the internal external, like we discussed for Debussy) so while we the listeners might be made uncomfortable by being brought into such close proximity to someone's most innermost thoughts, it's not an opera problem, it's our problem.

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Lady Macbeth and sexual politics in the Stalinist era

🚩 by Flynn, Meagan - Monday, October 1, 2018, 4:12 PM

Hi all!

On January 26 1936, Joseph Stalin went to the opera in Moscow which was not an unusual occurrence. But on this specific occasion, things ended differently. Stalin walked out half way through the opera, leading to the vanishing of Lady Macbeth for years to come. From that exact moment, Shostakovich began to live a life that was faced with a never ending struggle to maintain his artistic integrity in the face of totalitarian oppression. With that said, here are some thoughts based on Stalin's actions;

What about this work set Stalin off so much? Was it Shostakovich's failure to bring socialist realism to the stage? Was it the sexuality in the work that he objected?

Do you think it was Shostakovich's intentions to be provocative?

Another common theme that we've seen in other operas we have studied is the way women are portrayed on the operatic stage, portraying sexuality, instability, and emotion.

Shostakovich creates an emotional and sexual main character, Katerina, whose emotional authenticity is bolstered by her



demonstrations of feminine sexuality. He also tries to create a character that is more sympathetic and thoughtful than in Leskov's version.

Shostakovich also changes a scene from a somewhat romantic viewpoint, to a scene that is read as harassment and even rape. Leskov's original story where Sergei is portrayed as "passionate and intense, but trembling and gentlemanly in his demeanor" is not portrayed this way during this scene, but in fact the opposite.

Why the change? Do you think Shostakovich composed Lady Macbeth from a misogynist viewpoint? Or was he simply mirroring the time he was living in?

Last but not least, addressing the latter section of this article, what similar issues do you think Alexandra Kollontai and Shostakovich faced? Both are painted in a light by others that does not show who they clearly are or what they believe.

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Re: Lady Macbeth and sexual politics in the Stalinist era

👤 by Lynch, John - Monday, October 1, 2018, 6:08 PM

I feel that Shostakovich did his best to create an opera with Socialist Realism in mind, but that he derived his work out of an ideology that was not popular with the upper echelons of the Russian Government. As shown in the article, Stalin himself was not beyond coarse sexual remarks and behaviours, so I feel that his condemnation of the opera was more about the politics of the issues being discussed than the issues themselves.

I do believe that Shostakovich was trying to be provocative. The article mentioned that he was attempting to create a post-revolution reimagining of a pre-revolution drama. I feel that the provocative nature of the opera was meant to cause reprehension of the past, and perhaps the present. Unfortunately, the provocative nature lead to reprehension of the opera itself instead.

Based off of the examples of Shostakovich's personal beliefs given in the article that the changes to the story were meant to show the reprehensible treatment of women in Russia at the time, hoping that it would shock men into changing. Whether he did this effectively or not remains to be seen.

It seems as if the two were viewed with suspicion and contempt for most of their lives. Both of them wanted to live up to the ideals of Soviet society, but did so in a way that angered those in power, which lead to many problems throughout their lives.

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Re: Lady Macbeth and sexual politics in the Stalinist era

👤 by O'Toole, Brendan - Monday, October 1, 2018, 10:41 PM

From reading the article, I viewed Stalin leaving as a result of Shostakovich actually portraying the harsh brutal realities of Russia at this time. Some parts of this opera and even this article were difficult to read due to the violence and horror of it all. I think Shostakovich meant to play up the provocative themes in the opera, not only because that is a theme in performance art in general, but also for it to be a selling point for the show. You either love it or hate it, all press is good press I guess. To be clear though, I think Shostakovich was being both misogynistic AND reflecting the times. We can't take his context away from him, but in no way can we call this opera an appropriate work by today's standards, maybe it's power comes from that though.

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