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PUSHKIN’S “REBIRTH,” SHOSTAKOVICH’S FIFTH SYMPHONY, AND
THE ART OF CODED PROTEST

CELESTE BELKNAP
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Charles Youmans
Professor of Musicology
Thesis Supervisor
Honors Adviser

Maureen Carr
Distinguished Professor of Music Theory
Faculty Reader

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.
ABSTRACT

This thesis brings new insight to the long-standing academic debate over a possible anti-Stalinist dimension of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony. Chapter One traces Soviet musical culture from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 through the Great Purges of the late 1930s, providing context for the proposition that the work is not an authentic product of Socialist Realism. In Chapter Two, poetic analysis of Alexander Pushkin’s lyric poem “Rebirth,” and an aesthetic and theoretical analysis of stylistic parallels between Shostakovich’s setting of “Rebirth” and the finale of his Fifth Symphony, support the assertion that melodic and harmonic content bear extra-musical meaning that amounts to a coded protest against the Stalinist regime. Shostakovich’s tactics of artistic concealment allowed the protest to pass censors undetected, but to an informed listener, as Pushkin’s poem suggests, the original work will reveal itself in time.
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Soviet Musical Culture in the 1920s and ’30s

The governmental structure of the Soviet Union originated from disdain for Imperial Russia, but the core principles of these apparently opposite governments intersect at totalitarianism. Imperial Russia was governed by an unapologetic, conspicuous authoritarian. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, aimed to appear to be run by the proletariat, but Stalin’s brutal authoritarianism emerged as he gained power. A regime’s authority can become precarious without control over all aspects of culture that may incite an uprising. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Emperors and the so-called General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union alike considered music and literature a potential threat to their reign and established methods of controlling output of artists to protect their own power.

For an authoritarian ruler, famous, well-respected artists have influence over citizens, and therefore pose the greatest threat to power if they were to dissent. Nicholas I noticed the poet, playwright, and novelist, Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin’s prominence, and controlled Pushkin’s output by closely surveilling him and banning certain works from publication. One hundred years later, Stalin recognized an influential quality in Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich (1906-1975), and controlled him through public defamation, fear, and censorship. When survival and artistic expression are at odds, an artist’s options seem limited to either submitting to the oppressive authority, or risking their life by protesting. Another option that both distinguished artists practiced was to hide their grievances within their work, effectively protesting the regime but remaining undetected by authorities. The meaning of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony has long been disputed, with some interpreting it as Stalin did—as an apology for past bourgeois
tendencies, and as a model for Socialist Realism—while others detected below the surface an insincerity in the supposed “apology.”

To understand the ramifications of composing during such a tumultuous time in history, and to explain how Shostakovich recovered from public denunciation while covertly protesting the regime that shamed him, I will trace the musical culture in Russia and the Soviet Union from the pre-Revolution era through the Great Purges in the late 1930s. Then I will explain how Shostakovich’s setting of Pushkin’s poem “Возрождение” (Vozrozhdenie “Rebirth”) enabled him to make a subtle coded protest of the Stalinist regime in his ostensibly Socialist Realist Fifth Symphony.

Soviet musical culture between the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and 1980s Perestroika was not one long period of censorship, totalitarianism, and terror, but a time of rapidly changing cultural trends that were as chaotic as the economy and international affairs. These trends before World War II can be divided into four periods: pre-Revolution through the Revolution, post-Revolution to the 1932 Doctrine of Socialist Realism, 1932 to 1936, and 1936 to the start of the War in 1941. Defined by their differences—varying degrees of government involvement and altered justifications for keeping the Western classical canon—the periods are connected by a deep-rooted love for classical traditions among all Soviets, regardless of class or party. The effects of this cultural tumult on Soviet musicians can be gauged by tracing the main events and the important output of the most prominent Soviet-raised composer, Shostakovich, along each

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period of change, from his conservatory days in the late 1920s through his difficult relationship with Stalin in the late 1930s. His absence from pre-Revolution through the Revolution is of course due to the fact that he was only a child—a beginning piano student—in these years.

The 1861 emancipation of the serfs and creation of self-governed villages (zemstva), though reformative and generally in line with revolutionary and later Soviet thought, proved too little too late for the early revolutionaries, and Alexander II was assassinated before many of these reforms came to fruition. But some of Alexander II’s policies were integral in establishing cultural—in particular, musical—practices in the following years, which would carry on into the twentieth century. In the late 1800s groups within the zemstva began a movement of mass music education, calling for the elimination of musical illiteracy in peasants and serfs. To “eliminate musical illiteracy” did not mean to teach peasants to read music or play an instrument. Rather, the goal was to shape the peasants into productive members of society and curb the alcohol problem in villages by including them in cultural activities previously reserved for the nobility. Aristocrats subsidized tickets to symphonies and operas, events in which the working class and peasants sincerely engaged. Thus an enthusiasm for classical music was cultivated, reaching across class boundaries.

It would seem that this mass cultural education of the serfs would fall perfectly in line with Bolshevik ideology; however, in the confusion following the Revolution of 1917, private patronage ended and the status of government funding was unclear. Moreover, Bolsheviks believed in equal economic status among citizens, and since wealth is generally a fixed amount that can be distributed and redistributed, this ideology required the rich to lose wealth while the

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poor gained. Whether an effective economic policy or not, this idea was extended into culture and education, as if they, like wealth, were concrete things, and could run out if not properly distributed. Instead of raising the education and cultural level of the uneducated up to that of the well-educated, Bolsheviks planned to have them meet somewhere in the middle, eliminating both illiteracy and anything seen as bourgeois or high culture.\textsuperscript{3}

In 1922 Lenin shut down the Mariinsky and Bolshoi Theatres, citing bourgeois cultural heritage. Yet Post-Revolution purging of the musical bourgeois, the official stance of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, would not hold up in practice due to the appreciation and enthusiasm for the Western classical canon instilled in the people of Russia since Alexander II. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet People’s Commissariat for Education, expressed his opposition to closing the Mariinsky and Bolshoi, and the theatres were subsequently restored. One might expect that a country whose primary goal had been to purge all vestiges of the aristocracy and capitalism would fully support a nationalistic avant-garde; however, both the citizens and the authorities could not let go of the Western classical canon. In reality even Lenin himself was not truly anti-tradition, and eventually admitted that though the Soviet government and cultural life was aimed at the workers, it was created by the elite. He claimed to not understand modernism, and called for the preservation of musical tradition as it fit into Soviet ideology.\textsuperscript{4} With no remaining “greats” of musical composition in Russia after the Revolution (Stravinsky had left for Paris, Prokofiev went on tour, Rachmaninoff traveled to Scandinavia and the United States, and Scriabin had died before the Revolution) the Soviets would have to wait for a new great

composer to emerge. In the meantime, they appropriated the Western canon in tendentious ways to preserve tradition while perpetuating Soviet principles in order to justify the repertoire’s position in the Soviet State.⁵

The post-Revolution practice of appropriating and propagandizing the Western canon occurred in tandem with a generally relaxed culture of contemporary composition, which developed out of confusion about the direction of modern music as well as governmental disorganization. Lenin also recognized that cultural “problems” could not be solved as quickly as political or military ones, so he allowed more freedom in the early post-Revolution years. During the New Economic Policy (NEP), which was characterized by a limited free market, musicians formed independent musical societies, some of which promoted the classical tradition, and some the avant-garde.⁶ The two main groups consisted of the Association for Contemporary Musicians (ASM) and its adversary, the Russian Association for Proletarian Musicians (RAPM). ASM, led by Nikolai Myaskovsky and “traditional modernists,” promoted Soviet classicism, while RAPM hated both modernism and traditionalism and accused both of being inaccessible to the people. Unlike the Soviet government, which supported traditional performances, RAPM denounced all existing music and fought for entirely new Soviet propaganda music. When Stalin abolished the NEP and began the First Five Year Plan in 1929, RAPM was given administrative control over all musical institutions, ousting professors at the Leningrad and Moscow Conservatories, and denouncing the pre-Revolutionary elite. RAPM, with its intolerant attitude toward almost all music besides propaganda songs, created more of a nuisance for established composers (as well

⁵ Andrei Zhdanov, for example, Head of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee, argued for the continued relevance of Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart, and Verdi to mid-1930s Soviet musical culture. See Frolova-Walker, Stalin’s Music Prize, 116-17.

as budding ones like Dmitri Shostakovich) than did the Soviet government in these years. They opposed Shostakovich’s First Symphony because of its “neoclassical” form, yet sarcastic irony, and his absurdist opera based on Gogol’s *The Nose*, which featured an entr’acte of entirely unpitched percussion, because of its alleged elitism and inaccessibility to the average audience. It is no surprise, then, that many composers including Shostakovich embraced the 1932 Resolution (which included the Decree on Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations and the Doctrine of Socialist Realism), as it abolished RAPM and all independent organizations in favor of one centralized composers union.

The Resolution of 1932 established the Union of Soviet Composers to control the new official Soviet style of art: Socialist Realism. The goal of Socialist Realism was to reject “formalism” while depicting Soviet life positively, usually in the form of an archetypal hero who struggles with his own bourgeois tendencies, but eventually overcomes them, successfully achieving the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Socialist Realism required that folklore (or folk song, in the musical world) formed the basis for new art; it demanded loyalty to the Communist Party, rejection of formalism, and a programmatic element that was easy for listeners to understand. The last two demands proved especially hard to enforce for instrumental music, since musical meaning is more susceptible to interpretation, and “formalism” seemed to be a catch-all term for any music incompatible with Stalin’s personal taste. A leading Soviet musicologist and theorist, Boris Asafyev, however, theorized that within instrumental music, one can detect semantic units that made form as meaningful as, if not more meaningful than, content.

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Though Asafyev’s theory did not originally promote a political agenda, the Soviets adapted it in their favor and gave instrumental music the ability to contain “detectable” meaning, paving the way for censorship but also for the possibility of embedding coded meanings. The terms of musical meaning and formalism were loosely defined—perhaps on purpose—so that the government could appear to be following the guidelines of the theory when they were actually acting more on preference and with the intention of intimidating composers.

After the haphazard management of musical culture in the 1920s and the difficulty musicians faced because of it, stylistic trends naturally turned toward conservatism, regardless of the 1932 Resolution. Until this point, Russian culture generally and stereotypically lagged behind Western Europe, but the abundance of modernism in the 1920s and the subsequent shift toward conservatism in the 1930s actually reflected the overall musical trends in Europe during those decades. The first departure from modernism toward conservatism was the period between 1932 and 1936, which saw a rise of internationalism and an appropriation of the Western canon that became even more elaborate than in the 20s. In an era when religion and aristocratic and bourgeois culture were condemned, and optimism and loyalty to the Party were promoted, endorsing the Western canon presented a challenge, as many of the most popular works were religious, aristocratic, or pessimistic in nature. In order to continue performing the canon, the regime had to develop “strong readings” of these works, treating them as tools that promoted the Soviet cause, no matter how far from the cause a composer or their music seemed to be. It was in the Soviets’ best interest to embrace the most revered Western composers, because to erase them

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would pose an even greater challenge. Thus while compositions by Bach, a German and a Lutheran, would seem impossible to cram into the mold of Socialist Realism, his B Minor Mass nonetheless became a staple of the Soviet repertoire. In an effort to divest Bach of inconvenient facts, the Soviets asserted, for example, that anyone who had as many children as Bach could not actually be religious. This claim allowed the regime to advocate distorted (to say the least) secular interpretations of his Passions and the B-Minor Mass in particular. The case of Beethoven proved easier, since he already had revolutionary tendencies, was a “progressive romanticist” (in other words, not “pessimistic” like Schubert or Schumann), and composed in the symphonic genre, which was the bedrock of Russian musical culture. Of course Beethoven was also associated with heroism; despite the composer’s German background, Soviets would claim this quality as more compatible with their own national character than with Nazi Germany.

The next phase in the turn to conservatism was the rejection of internationalism and the rise of Russian nationalism, or the “Stalin Enlightenment,” which began around 1937. The Western classics that had been appropriated in the early 1930s were replaced for a short time with modern Western music, which itself was replaced with nineteenth century Russian music. Like Bach and Beethoven, Russian composers had to endure the infusion of Socialist Realism into their works. In this reading, Tchaikovsky’s Russianness and his popularity among Russian people conflicted with his association with Alexander III. And unlike Mussorgsky, who already displayed a revolutionary attitude before 1917, Tchaikovsky’s reputation as an aristocratic sympathizer required manipulation. Since the official stance of the Socialist Realist movement was to portray life honestly and optimistically (regardless of how honest that optimism was) the

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11 Ibid., 26.
Soviets chose to endorse the idea that although Tchaikovsky had objectionable politics, he portrayed his reality of adversity in Imperial Russia honestly. This interpretive strategy authorized the regime to maintain that the pessimism heard in Tchaikovsky’s music reflects the negative consequences of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie—a stark contrast to the optimistic “reality” depicted in the music of the new Socialist state.

The relief Shostakovich felt after the abolition of RAPM lasted for approximately four years before he was disastrously accused of the ever ambiguous crime of “formalism.” In 1932 he began working on an opera that would revitalize his career for some time. This clever, bold, and surprisingly feminist opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, was premiered in Leningrad in January 1934 and gained Shostakovich national and international success. The plot centers around Katerina Izmailova, who takes revenge on her husband and father-in-law for their oppressive patriarchal ways. Though clearly guilty of murder, Katerina is the protagonist, and the only character portrayed as human: her music has lyrical, romantic melodies with dynamic range. While the music elicits empathy for the murderer, it dehumanizes the victims with relentless ostinati, a staple of Shostakovich’s satirical, grotesque musical language. The difficult moral message of this opera has merit in both feminism and the proletariat ideology. Not to be taken at face value, the men Katerina murders are symbols of the oppressive patriarchal environment created by Tsarist Russia, but Katerina overcomes the patriarchy by killing her “class enemies”—those who perpetuate and benefit from the inequality.

*Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* ran for two years and enjoyed great success in Leningrad. In January of 1936, however, the Leningrad company traveled to Moscow for

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12 Ibid., 17-21.
13 Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 245.
performances at the Bolshoi Theatre, and there it ran into trouble. On January 26, 1936, Stalin, with a group of officials including Andrei Zhdanov, attended the opera of the Soviet Union’s most prominent contemporary composer. Shostakovich too was in the audience, and noticed Stalin leave before the end of the performance. An offended Shostakovich left the Bolshoi theatre that night confused and worried, and with no idea of the tragedy to come two days later. On January 28, the state-run newspaper Pravda published an anonymous article entitled “Muddle instead of Music,” attacking the opera as tasteless, primitive, and vulgar, and accusing the composer of formalism and petty-bourgeoisie “innovations” that ruined “real” art. Directed at Shostakovich, but applicable to any musician toeing the line of “formalism,” the article issued an ominous veiled threat: failure to adhere to Socialist Realism could “end very badly.”

Stalin’s public denunciation of Shostakovich foresaw the Great Purges, which officially started with the first Moscow Show Trial in August 1936 and lasted through 1938. Fearing an uprising after the Five Year Plan (1929-33), with its forced collectivization, dekulakization (the murdering of hundreds of thousands of prospering peasants), and the calculated famine in Ukraine, Stalin set out to suppress anyone seen as an “enemy of the people.” Of course, an uprising against a cruel government is an enemy of the cruel government, not of the people, but anyone was at risk for a public accusation or death sentence. The public nature of the Trials functioned as a warning to other citizens and government officials: one step out of line would result in public defamation, the death penalty, or a prison camp, and the person’s total erasure from history. Though the Pravda attack on Shostakovich came before the Show Trials, it mirrored the public threat and Stalin’s practice of using a visible, popular person as a scapegoat to scare ordinary people into adhering to the regime.

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14 Taruskin, Music in the Early Twentieth Century, 790.
For contemporary Soviet composers, the complicated political atmosphere fluctuated based on Stalin’s rash mood swings. The relentless fear that Stalin and the government sustained profoundly affected Shostakovich and his musical output. During _Lady Macbeth_’s successful run in Leningrad, Shostakovich began to write his Fourth Symphony, which was to have been premiered in December of 1936. But after the _Pravda_ attack and some rehearsals with orchestra, Shostakovich withdrew the Fourth and declined to present another major work for over a year. Instead, in early 1937 he participated in the “Pushkin Jubilee,” a celebration to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Pushkin’s death. Visual artists, musicians, and writers were encouraged (if not forced) to center their art around the great poet. Shostakovich set four Pushkin poems to song, including “Rebirth.” Amid the festivities, fear of Stalin infiltrated every moment of every citizen’s life as people close to them would disappear without explanation. It was especially distressing to those who had already experienced the regime’s wrath, and as Shostakovich watched his relatives and collaborators get arrested, the terror was closing in on him. Shostakovich kept a low profile until the premiere of his Fifth Symphony in November of 1937, a work that, to his relief, was hailed as a success, again securing him the status of the Soviet Union’s leading composer.

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Coded Protest in the Works of Pushkin and Shostakovich

Though the transition from imperial to communist rule brought sweeping changes and gave rise to a volatile musical culture, the Revolution did not upend every unpleasant tradition. Autocracy and oppression remained as powerful in the new regime as in the old. Thus it was that two artists working a century apart—the poet Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799-1837) and the composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75)—could create politically motivated works with eerie and revealing similarities. Both generated their art while suffering under oppressive leaders, but both were able to overcome that oppression privately by subtle acts of artistic defiance. One hundred years after its creation, Pushkin’s elliptical poetic criticism of the Emperor would become a model for Shostakovich, who sought to protest the Soviet regime in the wordless language of symphonic music.

Pushkin’s “Rebirth”

The assertive political dimension of Pushkin’s poetry and prose has long been recognized. A member of the aristocracy, but nonetheless subject to the aristocracy’s censorship, he found himself banished from St. Petersburg in 1820 for revolutionary epigrams and poems. That experience would teach him to balance his conflicting roles, and in 1825 Nicholas I granted his petition for release from exile in Mikhailovskoe, on the condition that Pushkin write under his
strict censorship.\textsuperscript{17} It is no secret that Pushkin would have preferred freelance writing, but in an attempt to keep his livelihood, he agreed to join the court of the Emperor and subject his writing to the tight control of Nicholas I. Privately, however, he worked to develop an oblique poetic means of expressing his true views.

One poem in particular, “Возрождение” (“Vozrozhdenie,” “Rebirth”) deals overtly with artistic censorship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Восхождение</th>
<th>Rebirth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Художник-варвар кистью сонной</td>
<td>An artist-barbarian with a lazy brush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Картину гения чернит</td>
<td>Blackens the painting of a genius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>И свой рисунок беззаконный</td>
<td>And over it, senselessly scribbles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Над ней бессмысленно чертит.</td>
<td>His own vandalistic drawing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Но краски чуждые, с летами,</td>
<td>But the foreign paints, with passing years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Спадают ветхой чешуей;</td>
<td>Fall off like tattered scales;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Созданье гения пред нами</td>
<td>The creation of the genius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Выходит с прежней красотой.</td>
<td>Emerges before us with its former beauty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Так исчезают заблужденья</td>
<td>And so disappear the delusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>С измученной души моей,</td>
<td>From my tortured soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>И возникают в ней виденья</td>
<td>And in it appear the visions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Первоначальных, чистых дней.</td>
<td>Of original, pure days.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recent scholarship by Boris Alexandrovich Vasiljev indicates that Pushkin wrote this poem about Rafael’s “Holy Family,” also known as “Madonna with Beardless Joseph” (1506), a painting that according to legend had been “repaired” by an untrained painter but eventually restored to its original form.\(^{18}\) The work resides in the Hermitage, where Pushkin would have seen it while living and working in Saint Petersburg from 1825 as a member of the court of

Emperor Nicholas I. Pushkin scholars long believed that the poem was written in 1819, during the poet’s early creative period. He did not include it in an 1821 publication of works from that era, however, and Vasiljev has established that “Rebirth” in fact dates from 1825 or 1826, during a spiritual crisis coinciding with his return to aristocratic circles.

The structure of the poem is simple and conventional: three stanzas of standard iambic tetrameter with crossed rhymes AbAb, alternating between feminine and masculine endings. But beneath this unremarkable construction, the poem’s content tells a compelling story. Rafael’s painting serves as a metaphor for the dangers and ultimate futility of artistic censorship: a “barbarian” literally “scribbles” over “the painting of a genius,” only to find that with time the original work resurfaces in its “former beauty,” impervious to “vandalism.” Although Pushkin invokes visual art as the suppressed art form, the idea’s relevance to his own situation seems clear. “A poet-barbarian crosses out the words of a genius” would have been a direct critique of the Emperor’s censorship, so he projected his complaint onto another form of art, protecting himself from backlash and denunciation.

Pushkin’s handling of the three stanzas leads the reader toward this broader interpretation. The first two stanzas are impersonal, with no indication of a specific speaker, while in the third stanza possessive first person enters with the words “my soul.” This shift reveals the speaker as the genius from the first two stanzas, and it initiates a replaying of the content of the second stanza, but now as “delusions” that “disappear” from a “tortured soul” rather than “foreign paints” that “fall off” a defiled “creation of the genius.” The blackening paints of stanza one, which drop away in stanza two, are in the end not paints at all; likewise, the “creation of the genius,” with its “former beauty,” reveals itself as “visions” from “original, pure
Pushkin encourages us, then, to interpret the protagonist as any artist who has been in that position—including Pushkin himself.

Pushkin’s interpretation of censorship does not involve action on the part of the artist. The delusions and foreign paints disappear on their own, without human agency. Whether Pushkin believed censorship was justified, or simply inevitable, his torment is apparent. But he accepts it, reminding himself that eventually his art will return to its original form. A moral change takes place in the soul of the artist-genius, beginning with reluctant acceptance of censorship and evolving into a revelation that his art should not and cannot be censored forever. And the mechanism responsible for this change is time. Pushkin knew that even under the harshest circumstances, great art would outlive its oppressors.

How a poem with such powerful political resonance could have been published in the 1828 Nevsky Almanac remains a mystery. If the Emperor censored Pushkin so closely, how could the poet vent his feelings without incurring disapproval, or worse? Apparently the Emperor knew the legend of Rafael’s painting, took the poem at face value, and simply overlooked the figurative meaning. In any case, the poem survived to speak in a different time to a composer living in similar circumstances.
Shostakovich’s “Rebirth”

A century later, Stalin’s ruthless censorship of the arts left Shostakovich terrified. After the Lady Macbeth fiasco of 1936 the composer kept a low profile, first with the cancellation of the premiere of the Fourth Symphony, and then with his decision to refrain temporarily from composing major works. He chose instead to participate in “Pushkin Jubilee” of 1937 by setting three short lyric poems by Pushkin, including “Rebirth.” The choice of Pushkin’s poem suggests a protest against censorship, and the subtleties of Shostakovich’s composition respond to the poetic details in telling and eloquent ways.

Even the basic facts of the song indicate that redemption will be its theme. The piece is through-composed, with an overall move from D minor to D major. The orchestra includes strings, harp, and a plaintive solo clarinet, supporting a solo bass voice. Shostakovich thus efficiently manipulates simple conventions of form, mode, and orchestration to indicate a general poetic meaning: the progress of an individual from darkness to light. The opening motive, on the other hand—A, D, E, F—reminds us of enduring artistic truths, by surveying fundamental elements of Western music: mode 1; disjunct followed by conjunct motion; the dominant and tonic scale degrees; the outline of a triad (see Figure 1).

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19 Ross, The Rest is Noise, 233.
These are the building blocks of the art, the “original, pure” materials to which it returns, and the song recalls the motive at crucial moments: at the first modulation, to F minor (“and over it, senselessly scribbles” Figure 2); at the arrival on an A-major triad (D:V), preparing for the D-major apotheosis (“emerges before us with its former beauty,” Figure 3); and at the final line, m. 25 Figure 4, where it outlines a supertonic triad that sinks back onto the tonic (“of original, pure days”). This simple four-note idea thus ties the work together, leading it ultimately back to where it began.
Figure 2. Shostakovich, "Rebirth," mm. 5-7.

Figure 3. Shostakovich, "Rebirth," mm. 15-17.
The route by which Shostakovich travels from D minor to D major, however, is odd and unsettling. The first two lines of text, clearly in D minor, swerve on the last syllable to a half cadence of sorts, but on the subtonic, which is reinterpreted as v of F minor (v/iii, m. 5) (Figure 5). The unconventional cadence leaves the listener disoriented, though fittingly so, as the final word of this phrase is “чернит” or “blackens,” a poetic parallel of the move to a funereal key.
Figure 5. Shostakovich, "Rebirth," mm. 1-11.
In the third and fourth lines of text (“And over it, senselessly scribbles / His own vandalistic drawing”), the opening melody’s reprise leads to another strange quasi-half-cadence (m. 9), this time on E, the leading tone of F minor. The first stanza thus unfolds as an abrupt, awkward move from D minor to F minor, but with a clear poetic justification: the music “blackens” the opening melodic statement, “senselessly scribbling” the stately Dorian theme with a key traditionally associated with mourning. Shostakovich “vandalizes” his opening motive, in other words, leaving it recognizable but musically and emotionally distorted.

The second verse is harmonically ambiguous until the arrival at the dominant of D in m. 17, causing the listener to feel somewhat more lost than seems appropriate for the text (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Shostakovich, “Rebirth,” mm. 12-17.
But this verse introduces another important motive at m. 10 (see Figure 5), an oscillation between scale degrees 5 and 6 (here momentarily in C-sharp minor) that I will call the “hope” motive in view of its return in D major at the beginning of the third verse (m. 18, “And so disappear the delusions;” see Figure 7). This motive is the stabilizing factor in the second verse, but more importantly, it signals the beginning of the reemergence described by Pushkin’s poetry. While the harmony in the second verse is obscure, then, and while the voice seems to wander uncertainly, the accompaniment points the way forward, suggesting that even in the darkest times, hope exists. That hope begins to realize itself at m. 14 (“The creation of the genius”), which begins in A-flat major—as far away as possible from D—but quickly “emerges” from A-flat and lands on D:V (via an augmented sixth), the first true half cadence of the song and a welcome relief from the unnatural and unsettling experiences of mm. 5 and 9. Musically and poetically this moment gives us something beautiful and pure, and as the voice sings the leading tone, C-sharp, on the last syllable of “красотой” (“beauty”), the accompaniment plays an ascending D major scale from A to A over a dominant harmony, preparing the final redemptive vision.

The third verse begins with the “hope” motive in what seems intended as its definitive form, scale degrees 5-6-5 in D major, played by the violins high in the upper register (Figure 7).
Figure 7. Shostakovich, "Rebirth," mm. 18-29.
Figure 7 (cont.). Shostakovich, "Rebirth," mm. 18-29.
The B natural marks the arrival of the redemptive parallel major, openly illustrating the first half of Pushkin’s final stanza: “And so disappear the delusions from my tormented soul.” The almost 7-octave range between the “hope” motive and the bass, with few middle range notes to fill in the wide space, creates a heavenly, ethereal atmosphere. As the poem shifts in mood, the music shifts in mode and in texture, landing in a redemptive space that is prolonged through the end of the song. A brief moment of darkness (mm. 23-26) reminds us of what we have escaped, but the return of B-natural and F-sharp (mm. 26 and 27 respectively), a reactivation of the ostinato, and a reexpansion of the texture—with the voice safely tucked away in the middle—confirm the “rebirth.”
Pushkin in Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony

One year later, on November 21, 1937, Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 5 in D Minor had its premiere by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra. With this work Shostakovich broke dramatically from the style of *Lady Macbeth* and Symphony No. 4, as was immediately apparent to listeners of all stripes. Optimistic and passionate, yet crafted in a relatively modest and conventional four-movement plan, the Fifth Symphony would be hailed as the prototypical Soviet symphony. Alexey Tolstoy, an influential state-approved critic, heard a Socialist Realist plot translated into tones—indeed, Shostakovich’s own *perestroika*, a restructuring in which a hero who begins in crisis (after the review of his opera), finds his way as a true communist, overcomes capitalism, and dramatizes the ideal dictatorship of the proletariat with a triumphant and optimistic ending.\(^{20}\)

Yet to read the symphony as a depiction of Shostakovich overcoming his private bourgeois decadence is to ignore both the historical and the psychological context, i.e., the Great Purges. No politician, artist, or citizen was safe, including Shostakovich, who felt great pressure to conform and at one stage even packed his bags, expecting to be sent to Siberia. Describing his mood when he chose to withdraw the Fourth Symphony, the composer wrote, “Fear was all around. So I withdrew it.”\(^{21}\) These private reflections did not allude to any change of political opinion, however, or to any kind of genuine sympathy with Stalin. Rather they testify to fear, which drove him to abandon the Fourth Symphony and replace it with the Fifth.

\(^{20}\) Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 522.

\(^{21}\) Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 233.
Although the Fifth was publicly characterized as an “apology” for *Lady Macbeth*, certain features, particularly in the fourth movement, suggest that Shostakovich did not genuinely reinvent himself as a Socialist Realist composer. Subtle but meaningful allusions to “Rebirth,” perceptible only to listeners with a deep understanding of the song, introduce a covert level of personal protest that would go undetected by authorities.

The fourth movement begins in an intense D minor, and with precisely the same four-note motive as the song, presented here boldly in the brass (Figure 8).
Figure 8. Shostakovich, Symphony No. 5, reh. 97.
The motive then takes off with a manic, forced optimism, returning in a thicker orchestration and in a higher register that, for those familiar with the song, recall Pushkin’s artist-barbarian. In this biographical context, however, the poem’s characters have identities: Stalin, censor of Shostakovich’s music, fits neatly into the role of “artist barbarian,” and Shostakovich’s Fifth stands as a “blackened” Socialist Realist piece, laden with hidden protests, “visions of original, pure days,” to be discovered by any listener equipped to hear them.

In the song, the opening motive marked both the vandalism (F minor, m. 5) and the rebirth (mm. 16-17, as preparation, and mm. 25-26, as realization). That dual implication makes the motive a forceful hermeneutic weapon in the symphony. Even as the violence of the opening suggests Shostakovich’s victimization by Stalin and the Pravda critics, the motive’s deeper meaning as a marker of an eventual reemergence tells us where the movement is heading. No one who knows the song can doubt that as the movement progresses, Shostakovich’s true musical personality will make itself felt—if not “in its former beauty,” then at least in some manner reflecting his current private suffering.

It does, by means of a further allusion. Near the end of the movement (rehearsal 120), the violins play a scale up to a repeating motive of A, B-flat, A, which within the tonal context of D minor we hear as 5-6-5 motion.
Figure 9. Shostakovich, Symphony No. 5, reh. 120.
The “hope” motive thus returns, and the harp soon takes over, though the music cannot find its way to the redemptive conclusion of the song. Both the motive and the orchestration (violins and the harp are the most prominent voices) establish the allusion, but here Pushkin’s words are now twice removed: we have no vocal melody, and we have no singer, meaning that we must rely on our own memories to supply the text. But that text is clearly invoked, and its meaning within the symphony is easy enough to discern. In both the song and the symphony, this motive symbolizes confidence that an artwork’s true meaning will eventually find its way to the surface. In this moment, Shostakovich proves Pushkin right, and overturns, privately, the claim that this symphony epitomizes Socialist Realism. The triumph with which the movement ends thus becomes hollow, a boisterous lie, but one silently perceived by listeners who must keep their satisfaction to themselves. At the very moment when Stalin accepted and even revered
Shostakovich’s musical celebration of communism, Shostakovich added a coded protest, hiding his true feelings in plain sight.

Other, more straightforward similarities between Shostakovich’s song and his Fifth Symphony exist, but apparently no Soviet critic’s suspicions were aroused. Both the fourth movement and the song start in D minor and end in D major. Both endings also emphasize A, or indeed overemphasize it, before reaching a cadence in D. In “Rebirth,” the final eleven measures focus largely on the dominant scale degree in the upper accompaniment. In the fourth movement of the Fifth Symphony, every instrument except the brass plays repeated eighth-note A’s for the last thirty-two measures before the final resolution in D major (Figures 10 and 11).
Figure 10. Shostakovich, Symphony No. 5, reh. 131.
Figure 11. Shostakovich, Symphony No. 5, reh. 134+6.
The poem’s ethereal transfiguration thus becomes something different in the symphony: a wail, a siren, or in any case a shrill indicator that D major here stands for both a compulsory Socialist Realist celebration and a hope not yet realized. The poem and the song end with the art free from censorship, but the symphony does not. The artist’s soul is filled with “visions of original, pure days,” but the artist’s world is not there yet.

Although the credibility of Solomon Volkov’s *Testimony* has been called into question, the evidence he provides about this work matches what we hear in the music. Shostakovich said of those who applauded the Fifth Symphony yet claimed to have been tricked by Stalin, “I’ll never believe a man who understood nothing could feel the Fifth Symphony. Of course they understood, they understood what was happening and they understood what the Fifth was about.” Here Volkov observes, appropriately enough, that the Fifth Symphony was written during the height of the Great Purges. It may be, then, that Shostakovich explicitly acknowledged what seems clear from the work itself: that the Fifth Symphony did not embody a victory for Socialist Realism. It was only meant to seem like one.

Although Pushkin died ninety-nine years before Shostakovich composed his Fifth Symphony, the two artists were kindred spirits. Both produced art while living under oppression, and both attempted to undermine that oppression in subtle and clever ways. At the distance of yet another century, the oppressors are gone, the artists continue to be admired, and the works exist once again in their original, pure form.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


ACADEMIC VITA
Celeste Belknap

Education
- Penn State University 8th Semester
  - Semester of Graduation: Spring 2019
  - Dean’s List (7 semesters)
  - Schreyer Honors College (7 semesters)
  - Paterno Fellow
  - Double major in Violin Performance (BM) and Russian (BA)
  - Council on International Educational Exchange Study Abroad Summer 2017
    - Russian Language Program

Selected Awards and Scholarships
- Marjorie Jane Brewster Memorial Scholarship (2018-19)
  - The most prestigious School of Music scholarship, awarded to a senior to support one year of graduate study; my essay “Pushkin’s ‘Rebirth,’ Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony, and the Art of Coded Protest” was the first academic submission ever to win the award.
- Penn State School of Music Director’s Award (2017-18)
  - Award recognizing excellence in performance and community leadership; given in honor of former Director Sue Haug.
- Erickson Discovery Grant (summer 2018)
  - Competitive fellowship supporting undergraduate student engagement in original research, scholarship, and creative work under the direct supervision of a faculty member; four of seventy-three awards in 2018 were given to students in the arts.
- Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (2016-2017 and summer 2017)
  - U.S. Department of Education competitive fellowships to support foreign-language study; my summer 2017 grant funded eight weeks of resident study in Saint Petersburg, Russia.
- School of Music General Scholarships
  - Two renewable scholarships (the Esber Memorial Award in Music, and the Music Activities Fund), and a Roger and Rosalie Dietz Scholarship (2017).
- Liberal Art and Schreyer Scholarships
  - One renewable scholarship (the Schreyer Honors College Academic Excellence Scholarship), the Schumacher Honors Scholarship, and the Hintz Scholars in Liberal Arts Award.
- Jury Recognition (2018)
  - Awarded to the top jury exam in the undergraduate string area which consists of approximately 60 students.
- College of Arts and Architecture Creative Achievement Award (2019)
- Student Marshal, Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures, College of the Liberal Arts
Performing Experience

- Penn State Philharmonic Orchestra and Chamber Orchestra (primarily a graduate-student ensemble)
- Performed in violin masterclasses with:
  - Akemi Takayama (violin professor at Shenandoah Conservatory and concertmaster of Roanoke and Williamsburg Symphony Orchras, 2019)
  - Philip Setzer (violinist in Emerson String Quartet, 2018)
  - Lin He (violin professor at Louisiana State University and concertmaster of Baton Rouge Symphony, 2017)
- Violinist in Penn State jazz combo (2017); Penn State School of Theatre’s sitzprobe for South Pacific (2017); Penn State Thespians’ Into the Woods (2016); Penn State Thespians’ MasquerAIDS (2017)
- Violinist for Penn State Opera Theatre’s Così fan Tutte (2017)

Extracurricular Activities

- Penn State Dance Marathon: dancer (2018); Vice President of organization “Encore” (2018-present); volunteer fundraiser (2015-2018)
- Instrumental Ambassador for Penn State’s Performing Arts Council (2018-19)
- National Society of Collegiate Scholars member (2016-present)
- Peers Helping Reaffirm, Educate, and Empower club (2016/2017)