



PROJECT MUSE®

A Shostakovich Companion (review)

David Fanning

Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 563-564 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0325>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/376421>

Union of the RSFSR and exercising significant liberality within that role (notwithstanding his later vilification in the West).

Another factor in Schmelz's historical approach is his borrowing of Karol Berger's concepts of "mimetic" and "abstract" music. On one level, there is little really new in Berger's ideas, which are, after all, one of the foundation stones of Adorno's writings on music; but as a later writer, Berger usefully extends these concepts to twenty-first-century culture. Schmelz convincingly applies the same concepts to Soviet music, proposing an aesthetic shift away from the extreme rationality of the early avant-garde's serial works to the overtly "mimetic" spirit of music as disparate as Gubaidulina's *Night in Memphis*, Pärt's post-1968 music, and Schnittke's polystylistic works. Schmelz is surely correct in his view that this "softening" of the avant-garde was a factor in facilitating performances of their music: a culture in which art's social responsibilities were so taken for granted—in however abstract terms—could never embrace the aloof abstractions that were so fashionable in the West. He is slightly coy about offering his own view on the appropriateness of describing Schnittke's music as "postmodern" though (p. 322); surely this is one—even the only—attempt to draw Soviet (and post-Soviet Russian) music into the mainstream of Western scholarly discussion. So long as clear distinctions are made between individual approaches (and assuming that the label "postmodern" itself is useful, which is questionable), it seems to me a constructive, rather than negative, way of "normalizing" the discussion of this repertoire, and I would have assumed Schmelz would welcome it. But this is a very minor query: there is no doubt about the fact that this is an outstanding piece of scholarship, rigorously researched and backed by a sensitive, probing attitude to its complex subject.

PAULINE FAIRCLOUGH
University of Bristol

A Shostakovich Companion. Edited by Michael Mishra. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008. [xx, 609 p. ISBN 9780313305030. \$170.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, indexes.

Writing about Shostakovich has become increasingly like a juggling act. To keep all

the skittles in the air—the life (personal and professional), the background (political and cultural), and the music (in its historical and aesthetic, analytical and critical aspects)—is possible, if at all, only at the cost of frantic exertion. And given that some of these individual topics are already so slippery, failure is virtually guaranteed. Yet to confine the act to only a couple of skittles seems like an easy way out and no fun whatsoever for the audience.

Michael Mishra has gone for the high-risk option. His 265-page essay on "The Life and Stylistic Evolution of Shostakovich," which forms the central part of this book, leans somewhat towards analytical commentary, addressing a lack that he plausibly identifies in the existing literature. But it certainly attempts to keep context and text in judicious balance, not neglecting any dimension that an interested student or amateur would expect him to address. This is in fact the first English-language life-and-works survey of anything like this length for many a year, and it is commendably up-to-date in its referencing (with particular strength in American dissertations). Mishra is independent in his judgments, he moves fluidly between detail and the broader picture, and he adopts a straightforward and unidiosyncratic structure, adhering to the usual chronological divisions and allocating appropriate space according to the relative importance of works. With a mountain of secondary literature to deal with, his prose sometimes gets clogged with dutiful reference to other commentators; yet rarely does his discussion of a major work pass without some valuable insights of his own.

Is that enough? Apart from the obvious facts that not everyone will find Mishra's eclectic approach to their liking on ideological or disciplinary grounds, and that no individual could hope to cover such a range of music and topics without flaw or omission, there are some weaknesses that cannot go unremarked. Even at the top of his game, Mishra's dutiful referencing tends to give the impression of preliminary notes that could usefully have been filtered out as the arguments developed. I for one would happily trade many honorable mentions of those American dissertations for some engagement with a major author such as Levon Akopian, whose *Dmitrii Shostakovich: opyt fenomenologii tvorchestva*

(Dmitri Shostakovich: A Phenomenological Essay [St Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2004]), is the nearest thing to Mishra's Russian opposite number. In fact most of his references to Russian materials are via translations. So far as coverage of works goes, somehow or other the two-piano Suite op. 6 has fallen through the net, which is a shame on at least three counts. The piece is a vital stepping-stone towards Shostakovich's mastery of large-scale form in his breakthrough First Symphony; as the first of his memorial pieces (dedicated to his late father) it shows him exploring musical pathos for the first time; and in quoting it on the last page of his last opus (the Viola Sonata) he rounded off his oeuvre on a note of longed-for benediction that is extraordinarily moving.

Among irksome passing details, I wish Mishra had not let himself get away with telling the reader that so-and-so's observation "begs interesting questions," without then saying what the questions are, never mind the answers (p. 239); similarly he should not have pulled up one of his contributors for telling us that the quotations in Boris Chaikovsky's Second Symphony "bear both personal and cultural relevance" without vouchsafing what that relevance might be (p. 501). A few Russian names have gone slightly awry—for example, Beneditsky for Benditsky (p. 26), Brentanitskaya for Bretanitskaya (p. 327)—and the title of Akopian's book is misspelled in the bibliography, but in general the level of accuracy in the text is commendably high. More frustrating are the large number of slips in the music examples, which themselves are far fewer in number than Mishra's text merits or than the astronomical cost of the book would lead one to expect.

Taken on its own terms, there is far more to praise than to blame in Mishra's central contribution. Yet it is hard not to feel that his sterling efforts would have been better concentrated on honing it rather than on dealing with the reception issues that constitute his three preliminary chapters. Those issues, in particular the *Testimony* debate and the so-called Shostakovich Wars, may have been live when he started work on the book, but they seem very passé now (it feels somehow symptomatic that an opinion held "to this day" is referenced to a radio talk from 1998 [p. 20]). And Mishra's

contribution to the miscellaneous studies that take up the last 200 pages of the book is, like most of the eight others, praiseworthy but somehow less than essential; certainly they do not add up to a "companion" in the usual academic sense. Mishra offers an analytical synopsis of the Fifth Symphony that is engaging in its observations but light on theory. James Morgan steers a steady course through the shark-infested waters of dramatic issues in the two completed operas, and David Haas's probing of Berg's *Wozzeck* for the source of a "Shostakovich mode" is stimulating, even if ultimately he overstates and underargues his case. Andrew Grobengieser on the Preludes and Fugues rather loses sight of his own arguments in a forest of detail; Lyn Henderson on Shostakovich's deployment of passacaglia and serialism treads ground already familiar to scholars; and Richard Burke's essay on cinematographic techniques in the Fifteenth Quartet probably merited its republication, but not in a volume of this kind. John Riley on the film scores and Sofia Moshevich on the piano music give us no more than snapshots of their published monographs (though Mishra's editorial helping hand enhances the value of the latter); and Louis Blois on "The Shostakovich Legacy" is more a record-collector's roundup than scholarship of the kind Simon Morrison has bestowed on Prokofiev (in *Sergey Prokofiev and his World* [Princeton University Press, 2009]). All of which leaves Shostakovich's orchestral, chamber, ballet, theatre, vocal and choral music lacking synoptic overviews.

Quite how the book ended up in this curious less-than-two-in-one guise is anyone's guess. The impression it leaves is that Mishra's survey started as one part of a projected symposium and grew out of all proportion, at the same time as other planned contributions dropped out or proved inadequate. Whatever the case, the rewards for the reader, though not negligible, are hardly commensurate with the Stakhanovite efforts of the author-editor.

DAVID FANNING
University of Manchester

On Russian Music. By Richard Taruskin. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. [407 p. ISBN