SHOSTAKOVICH and BULGAKOV
'20s satire - literary and musical

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In his memoir *Taming of the Arts*, the emigré violinist Yuri Yelagin records that, at the height of Stalin's Terror, an NKVD officer called Shatilov was appointed head of the Central Music Department in Moscow. So eager to please his superiors was this secret policeman that, during the 1937 National Piano Competition, he decided no 'undesirable elements' ought to be allowed to win any prizes and began arresting and interrogating the finalists.

Of course, thousands of similar arrests and interrogations were then proceeding daily in the USSR, but the conscientious Shatilov hadn't quite grasped the point: these happened out of sight of the foreign press. Hauling concert pianists off to be beaten with rubber hoses was clearly permissible in principle, but not during the National Piano Competition. Shatilov, recalls Yelagin, was accordingly arrested and 'as usual' charged with Trotskyite sabotage. The competition, meanwhile, went smoothly ahead.

This story illustrates several things vital to an understanding of Shostakovich's music, among the more obvious being the routine horrors of Stalinism and its equally routine success in concealing these from the West. The most significant thing about Yelagin's tale, though, is that it is, in its ghastly way, funny. Typical of the Russian political anecdote, its gallows humour is a touchstone for the country's long-standing satirical tradition and stories like it have formed the basis of subversive 'flights of fancy' from Gogol to Voynovich.

An important point is secreted here for whereas in the West the arts are kept apart, only rarely being allowed to shed light upon each other, no such artificial barriers apply in Russia. It is consequently exceedingly difficult for anyone lacking some acquaintance with the tone and techniques of Russian literary satire to penetrate the music which Shostakovich, a lifelong connoisseur of the genre, produced under its influence. More crucially, unfamiliarity with such writing - and in particular the droll, stone-faced state of mind behind it - is bound to restrict one's perceptions of what, in Shostakovich's music, is exactly as it seems to be and what is actually ironic. Those who, relying solely on the label on the packet, assume that the composer's satire is always openly declared and dependably above board are almost certainly failing to hear the lion's share of what he was saying.

To know something of Shostakovich's relationship with the great satirist

Mikhail Bulgakov serves two purposes. First, it provides clues to the state of mind - referred to by Solomon Volkov in *Testimony* as that of the *yurodivy* - in which he seems often to have approached his work. Second, it shows that, even in the '20s when writing pieces as ostensibly 'Red' as the Second and Third symphonies, he is extremely unlikely to have been a Communist.

Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov (Kiev 1891-Moscow 1940) is, to today's post-perestroika Soviet intelligentsia, the most revered writer of his era - indeed the contemporary cult for Bulgakov has precedence only in the Gogol-worship subscribed to by Shostakovich and other young Russian intellectuals 70 years ago. Internationally famous for his masterpiece, the vertiginous fantasy The Master and Margarita (published posthumously in 1966), Bulgakov was known to Russians of the '20s and '30s as an ultra-individualist author of dazzling Stoppardian plays and macabre satirical fables zealously barracked by extreme Leftists and banned by the cultural authorities.

Though Bulgakov and Shostakovich had several celebrated mutual acquaintances (notably, Yevgeny Zamyatin and Yuri Olesha) - and despite coincidentally, and equally half-heartedly, working, during 1930-31, for the left-wing Working Youth Theatre (TRAM)[1] - they appear not to have met till early 1936 when the writer ran into the composer while acting as a literary consultant to the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow.

According to the diary of Bulgakov's wife, Yelena Sergeyevna, Bulgakov, then 45, met Shostakovich, then 29, after the second performance of the new Bolshoi production of Lady Macbeth on 2nd January 1936. That Bulgakov liked Shostakovich and was impressed by his music is clear from the fact that he immediately invited the composer to turn his latest play Last Days into an opera. (Prokofiev, then abroad, was also in the running. Yelena confides that she preferred Shostakovich.) Four days later, Bulgakov invited Shostakovich to his apartment where he read him Last Days, acting all the parts in his customary manner. Shostakovich was enthusiastic - significantly, since, like A Cabal of Hypocrites (Bulgakov's play about Molière), Last Days (about Pushkin) was a sideways glance at some sensitive contemporary topics: censorship, surveillance, betrayal by informers, and the victimisation of the talented by the mediocre.

The visit continued warmly, Yelena serving lunch ('our pies were a wild success'), Shostakovich responding in musical kind at the piano with two dances from The Limpid Stream ('marvellous!')[2]. Unfortunately, shortly after Bulgakov

[1] Having appealed to Stalin for help in 1930, Bulgakov was appointed as a literary consultant to TRAM, a job which entailed vetting playscripts. Detesting the work, he wrote nothing for the company. Coincidentally, he toured the Crimea with Moscow TRAM in late July 1930 while Shostakovich was there writing The Bolt (having done The Shot for Leningrad TRAM two months earlier). There is no reason to believe that they met then. By 1931, like most individualist artists, Bulgakov was exhausted and ill from the pressures of the Cultural Revolution. He gave up working for TRAM in March 1931, shortly before the Central Committee decree banning all Leftist cultural organisations.

[2] Further entries document Madame Bulgakov's shocked - and naive - reactions to the Pravda attacks on Lady Macbeth ("I suppose Shostakovich was mistaken to tackle such a gloomy and painful subject") and The Limpid Stream ("I feel sorry for Shostakovich, he's been drawn into hack-work; the authors of the libretto were just trying to please"). By March,

and Shostakovich had begun preliminary work on the opera, Pravda attacked the Moscow Art Theatre's revival of A Cabal of Hypocrites and both it and Last Days were immediately cancelled. For the second time in his career, Bulgakov's star fell, this time never to rise again. (Like Pasternak, Mandelstam, and Akhmatova[3], he was eventually driven to compromise and, in 1939, attempted to sweeten Stalin with Batum, a biographical play about the dictator's revolutionary youth - but to no avail.)

Bulgakov's first fall had occurred at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1929 when, at the insistence of the extreme Leftists of the Proletkult, his work had been banned outright for several years. The climax of a struggle that raged throughout the '20s, Bulgakov's defeat served symbolic notice on the individualist artists with whom Shostakovich had identified soon after leaving the Leningrad Conservatoire in 1925. The question is: How early had the composer been aware of this conflict and of those figures, like Bulgakov, whose reputations were largely identified with their resistance to the tyranny of the Left?

Guided by older students at the Conservatoire, the teenage Shostakovich is likely to have found a modern substitute for his beloved 19th century satires (Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin) in the magazine squibs of Zamyatin, Pilnyak, Katayev, Zoshchenko, and Bulgakov, published (so far as Leningrad was concerned) in the 'right wing' journal Russia between 1924 and 1925. At that time, Bulgakov's feuilletons were seized on avidly by the young non-Party intelligentsia, it being generally considered neck-and-neck between him and Zoshchenko for the title of the country's funniest writer. Since, however, most of their jokes were at the expense of the dogmatists of the Left, these writers had as many enemies as admirers and the war of words between the two camps was continuous, public, and bitter.

Along with his exchanges with the Leftists of the Proletkult, Bulgakov, like Zamyatin, was throughout the '20s engaged in battles with the state censor, Glavlit, notably over The White Guard, his 1924 novel about a bourgeois family in Kiev during the Civil War which, because it dealt with a 'counter-revolutionary' subject, was suppressed half-way through its serialisation. Shostakovich

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the anti-Formalist campaign was in full swing ("in Pravda they are printing one article after another, and one person after another is being sent flying"). Her entry for 29th January 1938 records that "this evening we're going to listen to Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, which has created such a sensation." No further references to Shostakovich occur. (Source: J.A.E. Curtis, Manuscripts Don't Burn, Cambridge University Press, 1991.)

[3] Bulgakov met Akhmatova in Leningrad in July 1933. Himself a highly magnetic character, he was accustomed to recharge himself by contact with people - usually artistic - of similar charisma. Uninterested in poetry, he was nevertheless very struck by Akhmatova (and she by him). That her beauty and wit had a stimulating effect on him is clear from the fact that, soon afterwards, while still in Leningrad, he was seized by "devilish" inspiration and began what was to become the definitive version of The Master and Margarita, a novel he had started in 1928 but scrapped after three drafts in 1930. By October, he had written 500 pages and worked out the final structure of the book, which he finished in this draft in July 1936. Later, during Akhmatova's evacuation in Tashkent, Bulgakov's widow and literary executor Yelena Sergeyevna showed her the manuscript of The Master and Margarita which the poetess read avidly, glancing up every so often to remark "He's a genius".

may or may not have been among those following Bulgakov's novel when it was spiked, but it seems certain that he read the author's notorious novella The Fatal Eggs, published in the literary anthology The Depths in February 1925 and serialized during the same year in Red Panorama[4]. This work, in which Bulgakov satirised the monstrous productions of a mad 'Science' - an established non-Party codeword for Communism (self-designated as the only 'scientific' theory of history) - founded his reputation among the liberal young who delighted in decoding its author's veiled references to contemporary events, which could be highly specific[5].

Discerning the vein of subversion in The Fatal Eggs, Leftist organisations like RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) and the Komsomol (Communist Youth Movement) began to target Bulgakov and when, in 1926, he produced another 'mad scientist' allegory in the form of his venomously anti-proletarian satire Heart of a Dog, Glavlit was persuaded to step in to suppress it and the Cheka (secret police) raided its author's apartment. (The novella remained unpublished in Russian until 1968 - and then only abroad.)

The greatest scandal, though, was still to come. Towards the end of 1926, The Days of the Turbins, Bulgakov's dramatisation of his novel The White Guard, negotiated a censorship obstacle-course in rehearsal at the Moscow Art Theatre to set off the hottest literary controversy of the '20s, being, so far as ordinary people were concerned, far more comprehensible than the Zamyatin-Pilnyak witch-hunt of 1929 (qv. The New Shostakovich, pp. 65-7). There can be no doubt as to whether Shostakovich knew about this for the play's first night (5th October 1926) was a sensation surpassing that of the première of his First Symphony five months earlier. It instantly became 'the only show in town' and, for over a year afterwards, metropolitan Russia spoke of little but the Bulgakovshchina (Bulgakov Affair).

The first 'Soviet' art-work to depict the Whites as human beings rather than devils incarnate, The Days of the Turbins touched a public nerve, creating a vogue in which theatre-goers went to see it again and again. (It was still running three years later when its author was finally banned from the Soviet stage.) Even Bulgakov's enemies were to some degree won over. Many pro-Bolsheviks, accustomed to vilifying him as a Tsarist reactionary, found themselves fascinated by this poignant tale of a privileged family under revolutionary siege.

[4] Diaboliad (which included The Fatal Eggs) was the only full-length book by Bulgakov to be published in the Soviet Union during his lifetime (Mospoligraf, May 1925, in an edition of 5000). Apart from a couple of instalments of The White Guard, published in 1925, and two slim volumes of feuilletons, it is the only Bulgakov work Shostakovich could have known apart from the plays.

[5] For example, thousands of bourgeois "hostages" taken during the Civil War were, from 1920, shipped to the Solovetsky Islands (Solovki) in the White Sea, embarking for their hellish destination at Archangelsk. Though this was never officially acknowledged, everyone in Leningrad knew about it and when, in 1923, news slipped into Pravda of the prison-revolt of the SRs (consigned to Solovki after Lenin had repressed them in 1922), neither general surprise nor public discussion was forthcoming. In The Fatal Eggs, Bulgakov referred to the creeping wave of political arrests in a casual digression about a "chicken-plague" supposedly spreading over Russia which, in the north, had got only as far as Archangelsk "since, as everyone knows, there are no hens in the White Sea".

The hard Left, however, remained unmoved and amongst the applause every night at the Art Theatre there were invariably angry shouts of 'Counter-revolution!' from the Proletkult. Nor was the opprobrium limited to freelance extremists, press condemnation of The Days of the Turbins being violent and ubiquitous. Leopold Averbakh[6], later to direct the Cultural Revolution of 1929-32, led the anti-Bulgakov chorus, supported by the seedy RAPP playwright Alexander Bezymensky (who declared that the play 'personally insulted' him by portraying 'class enemies' in a favourable light) and by the Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (who castigated the work's 'whining' and called for legal 'reprisals' against its author).

During the late '20s, no educated person in Russia could have avoided having an opinion on the Bulgakovshchina and it is obvious enough from his contemporary friends and acquaintances which side Shostakovich was on. According to the Sollertinskys' Pages from the Life of Dmitri Shostakovich, the composer saw The Days of the Turbins in Moscow in January 1928 and was disappointed to encounter a revised ending. Under pressure, Bulgakov had been obliged to renounce the ambiguity of his original closing scene to make the coming of Communism clearly positive. The 'new ending' accordingly consisted of playing the Internationale off-stage as guns fired a salute to the Bolsheviks - a yurodivy solution as deliberately crass as Shostakovich's finale to his Fifth Symphony and Prokofiev's enforced revision of the last pages of his Seventh.

Information so far available suggests that the young Shostakovich subscribed neither to mainstream Communism nor to the extreme Left. The question of what, if anything, he positively believed in is more complex. Certainly he was a contradictory character at this age, but the haughtiness observed by film director Leonid Trauberg[7] represented only one aspect of a personality too complex for all but a few intimates to penetrate. It is, for example, conceivable that the satirical 'bourgeois' waltz he wrote for New Babylon - about which the fervently left-wing Trauberg exulted 'Shostakovich has put in so much hate!' - genuinely embodied feelings formed in him under the influence of late '20s iconoclasm. On the other hand, Trauberg's report that Shostakovich 'hated' his taste for light music (saying 'You're an idiot, you don't know Brahms and Mahler') is arguably best understood as a misunderstanding of the composer's sly mockery of his dogmatic pseudo-proletarianism.

Shostakovich had, after all, cheerfully orchestrated the ultra-bourgeois foxtrot Tea for Two more than a year earlier - and, in the teeth of Komsomol menaces, soon afterwards inserted it into his first ballet The Golden Age. (To young Leftists of the period, the foxtrot was an archetype of Western decadence and only the boldest, least 'serious' people dared dance it.)

During the Bulgakovshchina, to attack the author of The Days of the Turbins was to attack the 'internal emigrés' or 'old people' of the supposedly superseded bourgeois society. Like the anti-Communist writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, Bulgakov

[6] As brother-in-law of Genrikh Yagoda, head of the GPU (secret police), Averbakh, like Yagoda, was shot during the Terror in 1939. He may have been the prototype for Bishop Charron in Bulgakov's A Cabal of Hypocrites.

[7] Theodore Van Houten, Always the Unexpected, Buren, 1989.

was notorious for speaking and dressing in old-fashioned 'gentlemanly' style ('like a Tsarist', his enemies said) - indeed, at one stage, in a confessed spirit of épater le prolétariat, he took to wearing a monocle. If Shostakovich found these traits objectionable, he seems to have been unusually careful to hide his distaste.

In reality, Shostakovich and Bulgakov had so much in common that the former's attitude to the latter's sardonically stylised social obsolescence is likely to have been closer to relish than repugnance. Bulgakov's 'Aesopian' manner of ironic obliqueness was probably as influential on Shostakovich's own double-edged style as the nod-and-wink mock-innocence of his friend Zoshchenko. (All three artists were, at one time or another, accused by conformist critics of 'turning Soviet reality into a joke'.)

The literary tastes of Shostakovich and Bulgakov were likewise close, each harbouring a love of Gogol and a rare - and suspiciously coincidental - penchant for Chekhov's eerie parable The Black Monk. (Bulgakov was also obsessed by the Faustian hubris of Bolshevism, a motif hinted at by Shostakovich in his Twelfth Symphony.) Similarly charismatic, both men displayed a gift for poker-faced mimicry and a chameleon ability to modify their character at will. (Shostakovich seems to have developed this talent for reasons of self-preservation; Bulgakov, a consummate actor, apparently did it for the pure fun of confusing people.) Bulgakov even shared Shostakovich's semi-respectful dislike of Mayakovsky, with whom he waged a languid feud throughout the '20s - a rivalry akin to his attitude to Meyerhold, for whom his respect was far smaller[8].

All of this suggests that, even during his period of 'anti-bourgeois' iconoclasm between 1927 and 1931, Shostakovich's true allegiance was to the distanced, ironic, and apolitical individualism of writers like Bulgakov, Zamyatin, Zoshchenko, Olesha, Pilnyak, Leonov, and Katayev (all of whom were then regularly attacked by Leftist critics as 'bourgeois' and 'right-wing'). It is, on the other hand, clearly out of the question that the composer had anything in common with the dour Proletkult for whom satire was by definition counter-revolutionary. (That he didn't work again with Meyerhold after The Bedbug suggests he was deliberately steering clear of the 'Left' art represented by the director and such other big names as Mayakovsky and Eisenstein.)

It is not hard to picture the young Shostakovich following Bulgakov's progress during the '20s with admiration and an eye for anything he could steal. Zoya's Apartment, the playwright's brothel farce designed as a scandalous follow-up to The Days of the Turbins; his satire on Meyerhold, The Crimson Island (described by a German newspaper as 'the first call for press-freedom in the USSR'); his outrageous surrealist dream-play Flight - all of these would have been meat and drink to Shostakovich. They were in any case huge hits with the public. When Bulgakov was brought down by RAPP in May 1929, all four plays were running to packed houses in many Soviet cities. Begun eight months later, A

[8] Bulgakov saw Meyerhold as a flashy manipulator, wilfully unfaithful to the text. The Fatal Eggs, written in 1924 but set futuristically in 1928, refers drily to "the late Vsevolod Meyerhold, who, of course, died in 1927 during rehearsals for his version of Pushkin's Boris Godunov when a platform full of naked boyars collapsed on him".

Cabal of Hypocrites - beneath its 'period costume' (dramatizing Molière's struggle with Louis XIV's religious inquisition) - is a grim satire on the Proletkult conspiracy that ruined Bulgakov's career. Shostakovich, needless to say, spent his life battling the same cabal.

For Mikhail Bulgakov, everything depended on 'tone'. At rehearsals, he would assume every role in the cast to convey the sounds, nuances of expression, tempi (sic), and atmospheres he wanted. Shostakovich was similarly pernickety and, were he alive today, would no doubt be doing the same vis-à-vis performances of his own work. His affinity with Bulgakov is nowhere more significant for, without the right 'tone' - which ultimately means the right meaning - there is no performance.

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