review

Levon Hakobian. ***Music of the Soviet Age, 1917–1987.*** Stockholm: Melos Music Literature, 1998. 493 pp.

Allan B. Ho and Dmitry Feofanov, eds. ***Shostakovich Reconsidered.*** London: Toccata Press, 1998. 787 pp.

David Haas. ***Leningrad's Modernists: Studies in Composition and Musical Thought, 1917–1932.*** New York: Peter Lang, 1998. xvi, 301 pp.

Reviewed by Stephen Blum

During a panel discussion at The Ohio State University shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a distinguished Russian composer contrasted the "static" and "dangerous" East with the "dynamic" West, voicing an unqualified preference for the latter. Hearing this cliché once again set me to thinking about the endless chains of intimidation whose force can be sensed each time that members of one group declare themselves more civilized or more modern—in a word, more "Western"—than members of another. I remembered the opening scene of the novel *Ali and Nino* (first published in German in 1937 under the pseudonym Kurban Said), in which a geography teacher in Baku informs his class that "it is partly your responsibility as to whether our town should belong to progressive Europe or to reactionary Asia" (Said 1972: 1). Such exhortations are the stuff of which dramas and stories (including music histories) are made.

To what extent, if at all, can people speak about their civilization without opposing it to some "less civilized" configuration? Could we imagine a modern musical life from which representations of an exotic, pre-modern musicality had been expunged? Not as a viable project that might engage our energies, it would seem, even if the complaints voiced by musicians who have found themselves cast as exotic others were to elicit more sympathetic responses than they have so far. The USSR was but one of the many twentieth-century states in which attitudes toward perceived tensions between dynamism and stasis (and between centers and peripheries) were articulated by composers and performers.

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Richard Taruskin opens his study of various circumstances in which Russian musical practices have been interpreted through a "myth of otherness" with a string of twelve verbs: the "air of alterity" sustained by this myth has been "sensed, exploited, bemoaned, asserted, abjured, exaggerated, minimized, glorified, denied, reveled in, traded on, and defended against both from within and from without" (Taruskin 1997: xiv). His sentence would apply equally well to many other sets of circumstances in which musical practices have been treated as "other than fully Western" or "not altogether modern"—including, of course, the situations of most musicians in the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union (see further Frolova-Walker 1998). Alterity spreads quickly, as the exotic others of one group find or invent their own "others."

Levon Hakobian's critical survey of *Music of the Soviet Age, 1917–1987* contains more than a few expressions of the author's dissatisfaction with current Western evaluations of Soviet composers. Here are three. The music of Shostakovich "is sufficiently popular throughout the world to satisfy our self-respect, if not [for us] to forget a somewhat neglectful attitude displayed by the same world towards some of his highly talented confrères" (15). "It seems that Western audiences, tired of avant-garde and post-modernist trends of every sort, have found in [Galina Ustvolskaya's] art some important fresh quality—perhaps, a kind of 'new simplicity' having its origins in some fervent, almost barbarian religion" (243). "Maybe, with the next change of musical 'mainstream', the great world which has already appreciated Ustvolskaya will pay some attention to [Boris] Chaykovsky as well" (245). Hakobian articulates his own judgments of composers and works all the more forcefully inasmuch as he sees both predisposition and incentive for listeners inside and outside the former Soviet Union to misinterpret the best of these works. In his view, music became the ideal medium through which humans could, and sometimes did, attain a true understanding of their predicament under the various Soviet regimes. He laments the replacement of belief in "the artist as the bearer of some higher knowledge" with what he sees as a post-Soviet "reluctance to undertake really worthy creative tasks" (332–33).

Hakobian offers several descriptions of artistic projects he considers "really worthy," using a vocabulary that readers of Taruskin's study will quickly recognize. Hakobian praises the Armenian composer Tigran Mansurian (b. 1939) as "a devoted champion of the genuinely national musical heritage" of Armenia (305). The creation of "radically new models of native musical idioms, more personal and better adapted to the requirements of the contemporary international audience" (299) is an achievement he credits to Mansurian, to the Georgian Giya Kancheli (b. 1935), and to another Armenian, Avet Terterian (1929–94), whose work

exemplifies "the contemporary Europeanized artist's ambition to revive the deepest, the most archaic layers of his genetic memory" (302). In his most successful compositions, Sergey Slonimsky (b. 1932) drew upon his "contacts with the most authentic, aboriginal strata of Russian peasant culture, which had passed by the attention of the majority of his colleagues" (327).

The terms in which these judgments are couched—"genuinely national heritage," "radically new models," "genetic memory," "most authentic strata"—are fundamental to Hakobian's understanding of musical creativity. He is well aware of the changing criteria through which "authenticity" is recognized, which he attributes to the variable responses of composers to the problems confronting them at specific times and places. Nonetheless, in describing the problems and responses he repeatedly invokes such abstractions as "the very nature of oriental music" (140) and "the genuine archetypes of Russian music" (326). These abstractions provide stable frames of reference for his evaluations of composers: Hakobian's approach to the writing of cultural history centers on narration of exemplary lives. The underlying dramatic situation remains the same: a composer struggles to reconcile demands of the modern world with truths that many of the composer's contemporaries would prefer to suppress.

One such career is that of Aram Khachaturian (1903–78), who, according to Hakobian, attempted "a really organic synthesis of the native [Armenian] heritage with the established European principles of moulding large instrumental forms" (138–39). The terms of the problem were imposed upon the composer, whose gifts did not prove fully adequate to the task; Hakobian finds that his "large symphonic forms . . . only too often are rather loose and badly connected" (141). Weighing the strengths and weaknesses of Khachaturian's work should have helped "his younger colleagues to advance towards more organic forms of bringing the cultural stock of particular nations together with the achievements of the 'big world' culture—and, thus, to rise above the 'base line' of writing, to create some spiritual values of broader importance" (143). Hakobian's rhetoric incorporates appeals that were addressed to several generations of readers sharing an interest in musical development throughout the USSR.

Hakobian has little to say about music in the Muslim republics of the former USSR, since "only in Azerbaijan and, to a lesser degree, in the Northern Caucasus and the Volga region, the tendency of combining native melodic material with imported means of its development has brought to [*sic*] richer artistic results" (122). Despite the title, he is primarily concerned with Russian music and especially with Shostakovich, to whom he devotes almost a quarter of his 325-page essay. For Hakobian's purposes, the exemplary life par excellence is that of Shostakovich, who

became "a great tragic and symbolic figure" after having emerged in the 1920s as the "most prominent champion of the [musical] 'avant-garde' " (76).

In 15 pages of absorbing interest (76–90), Hakobian interprets Shostakovich's first opera, *The Nose* (completed in 1928), as a work that squarely confronts and dramatizes an "overpowering sensation of a preposterous fissure that cuts the universe" (89). Hakobian hears three simultaneous "plots" in Shostakovich's score: a sequence of "genre caricatures" linked to the scenes rather than to the actions of Gogol's story; "recitative with short arioso fragments" for the main narrative; and ostinato figures in scenes that develop a deeper, underlying concern with "persecution, humiliation, and the massacre of a victim" (86). Hakobian's remarks on *The Nose* may stimulate further attention to contrapuntal juxtapositions of multiple plot-lines in other compositions. He sees the opera as one of the founding works of what he calls "the 'gnostic' branch of Soviet music" (89), which culminated in the music of Edison Denisov (1929–96), Alfred Schnittke (1934–98), and Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931).

Hakobian adamantly insists that "no musical symbol is adequately translatable into verbal language" (58). This position places him in opposition to several interpretations of Shostakovich's music that lean on remarks attributed to the composer in *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov* (Volkov 1979). Hakobian finds particularly harsh words for the explications offered in Ian MacDonald's *The New Shostakovich* (1990), which in Hakobian's view transform the fruits of a great composer's musical thinking into predictable and uninteresting expressions of political dissidence. Hakobian is more concerned with this use of Volkov's book than with the unresolved issue of the extent to which the book derives from conversations held between Shostakovich and Volkov during the years 1971–74. Hakobian is not about to exchange his exemplary life of a gnostic for the portrait of a steadfast dissident that MacDonald extracted from Volkov's work.

MacDonald is one of the principal contributors to *Shostakovich Reconsidered,* a collection of disparate materials assembled with the avowed purpose of defending Volkov's account of his role in the preparation of *Testimony.* In his preface to the English version of *Testimony,* Volkov (1979: xvii) claimed to have organized the shorthand notes made during his conversations with Shostakovich and shown them to the composer, who signaled his approval by signing the first page of each chapter. Before the book was published, Volkov may or may not have known that seven of his eight chapters open with material that, as Laurel E. Fay pointed out in a review (1980), had already been published under Shostakovich's name. If Volkov had not already noticed these striking resemblances, he ought to

have thanked Fay for, in effect, helping him to catch up on his homework. Surely a situation in which an artist, while dictating memoirs to an amanuensis, recapitulates long passages from earlier articles would have warranted comment, and one might expect a musicologist working closely with Shostakovich during the years 1971–74 to have looked at the collection edited by Danilevich (1967), in which four of the passages in question are reprinted.[1]

Fay's entirely pertinent questions, along with other expressions of skepticism regarding Volkov's account of the book's genesis, are termed "unjust criticism" by the editors of *Shostakovich Reconsidered,* Allan B. Ho and Dmitri Feofanov. They have responded by scripting a mock-trial in which they cross-examine Volkov's critics (46–237) and argue a case in his defense (238–98). Any judge who insisted upon civility in her courtroom would repeatedly ask Ho and Feofanov to refrain from the vituperative language of which they are so fond. The unsupportable charge that "Fay has been content to regurgitate material handed to her on a Soviet platter" (287) is but one example of their addiction to language that approaches the defamatory. Authors who are in a position to present a reasoned argument have no need to cook up such fantasies. Nor do they need to criticize positions that no one has advanced, as Ian MacDonald does in the long coda with which the book concludes (643–723). MacDonald evidently labors under the delusion that Richard Taruskin, among others, has tried "to resuscitate the old 'official' version of Shostakovich" (721). Just as Ulysses S. Grant claimed to recognize only two tunes, one of which was *Yankee Doodle* and the other of which was not, MacDonald's worldview allows for only two "versions of Shostakovich": his own *New Shostakovich* and all others, lumped together as "the old 'official' version." The fact of the matter is that admirers and detractors of any major creative figure inevitably produce multiple versions of the life—one of the criteria by which we may recognize "major" figures.

The most interesting portions of the Ho and Feofanov collection are the articles and interviews placed between the mock-trial and the final diatribe. Shostakovich as a public speaker is vividly evoked in Vladimir Zak's contribution (495–506), which may cause some readers to remember that the Russian text of *Testimony* remains unpublished and cannot be compared with the style of Shostakovich's letters or with memories of his speech.[2] The editors, to their credit, have included contributions that do not fully support their own positions. While some of the differences are easily resolved, others are not. Both the editors (195) and Timothy L. Jackson (632–38) state that the finale of Shostakovich's Fifteenth Symphony opens with a quotation from *Die Walküre,* but Lev Lebedinsky accurately identifies the source of the quotation as *Götterdämmerung* (477).

More problematically, to illustrate his thesis that "programmes of dramatically conflicting ideas" (480) can be identified in Shostakovich's symphonies Lebedinsky interprets the Eleventh Symphony (first performed in 1957) as a protest against the brutal deployment of Soviet troops in Budapest, hence "a product of the anti-totalitarian liberation movement in the USSR" (475). The distinguished theorist Lev Mazel' takes issue with Lebedinsky's insistence on forcing "the disparate elements of the work into a single linear conclusion" (489). Mazel' assumes that the Eleventh Symphony, like any work of musical art, is "multi-layered and multipartite" (484), enabling listeners to coordinate references to more than one sequence of events and ideas.

An unbridgeable gap separates Mazel''s approach to music analysis from that adopted in Timothy Jackson's study of "Dmitry Shostakovich: The Composer as Jew" (597–640), which offers still another portrait of Shostakovich as an exemplary figure. Jackson is pleased to have discovered "the rosetta stone to intertextuality in Shostakovich" (600), namely what he sees as an "irrational self-identification by a non-Jew as a Jewish composer" (599). Jackson's evidence consists of a group of musical figures he regards as quotations and allusions, and his argument depends on the "unequivocal" meanings he assigns to these figures. The flexibility of his criteria may be illustrated by his claim that the famous D–E-flat–C–B ("DSCH") motive is "the same tetrachord" that serves as the subject of the initial fugue in Beethoven's C-sharp Minor Quartet, op. 131, "but with the boundary major third expanded by a semitone to a perfect fourth" (602). By the same reasoning, Jackson might just as well have posited an equivalence between DSCH and BACH, with the so-called boundary major third (actually a diminished fourth) "contracted by a semitone to a minor third." He chose the Beethoven subject in order to claim that "Beethoven's classical language is given a bitter, 'Jewish' twist by Shostakovich" (602). The confidence with which Jackson announces his discoveries seems excessive, given the number of tenuous links in the chains he constructs.

Another work in which an author finds what he is looking for in Shostakovich's music is David Haas's study of *Leningrad's Modernists,* a revision of his 1989 University of Michigan dissertation. Haas considers writings of Boris Asaf'yev and five works by three composers: the first two symphonies of Shostakovich; the Nonet op. 10 and the Second Symphony of Vladimir Shcherbachov (1887–1952); and the Septet op. 2 of Shcherbachov's student Gavriil Popov (1904–72). He also devotes an interesting chapter to Shcherbachov's compositional pedagogy. Haas regards his four subjects as "Leningrad's four most renowned modernists" (xii) and sees 1927 as the pivotal year for their modernist projects, with the first performances of

Popov's Nonet and of the Second Symphonies of both Shostakovich and Shcherbachov. Neither the Shcherbachov Nonet (1918–19) nor Shostakovich's First Symphony (1924–25, first performed 1926) is a fully modernist work as Haas interprets the term.

Haas tends to push his claims too far, as he does in maintaining that the five works he has chosen "exemplify the techniques, compositional concerns, and the past and present influences that shaped music in the 1920s" (xiii)—a heavy burden to place on three symphonies and two chamber works, particularly when the five works have been selected in order to compare three from the year 1927 with two that are earlier. One of Haas's main questions—"was there really [in Leningrad] a school of modernists with a shared aesthetic?" (36)—would require a study of broader scope, informed by reflection on the problematic terms in which the question is posed. What does it mean to claim that a school "really" existed, and what kinds of evidence might count against such claims? It is conceivable that *school* and *modernist* are not the best terms in which to describe the relationships we can infer from the available evidence.

Haas builds his case for a modernist school by moving from writings of the period to his own analysis of the five scores. The key terms of his discussion are Asaf'yev's "linearity" and "processual form." Regrettably, his treatment of both topics suffers from undue emphasis on themes, extracted from their contrapuntal context. For instance, Haas quotes the initial themes of the first movement of Shostakovich's First Symphony in two separate examples (exx. 7.2 and 7.3, pp. 159–60), without so much as mentioning, let alone analyzing, the contrapuntal relationship between them. It makes no sense to speak of "linearity" in the music of Shostakovich without considering the coordination of simultaneous lines. The counterpoint with which the First Symphony begins is anchored by a series of three suspensions (see ex. 1)—an echo of Fux's fourth species that is not out-of-place in a graduation exercise.

Without his abiding interest in counterpoint of all kinds (one of the constants of his long career as a composer), Shostakovich would not have produced the masterpieces that keep people arguing about their meanings and implications. His works can make reference to a wide range of social interactions by demanding that players and listeners learn to hear unprecedented juxtapositions of older and newer textures (as in the "counterpoint" of three plots and three types of music that Hakobian hears in *The Nose*). The compositions do not in themselves require us to imagine their creator leading an exemplary life as progressive, reactionary, gnostic, dissident, loyalist, self-identified Jew, modernist, or whatever. It is only for about two centuries that various institutions surrounding musical life in the West have nourished the desires of countless

Example 1: The contrapuntal framework in six passages in Shostakovich, Symphony No. 1, first movement.

(1) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(2) 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18

(3) 51 52 53 54 55 56 57

(4) 88 89 90 91 92 93

(5) 288 289 290 291 292 293 294

(6) 300 302 303 304 305 306 307 308 309 310

listeners to envision a creative personality as "revealed" in works of music. Such projects are often thrown off course by music that probes and dramatizes conflicting desires in ways that cannot be attributed to a "split personality." It is not the least of Hakobian's merits that his portrait does justice to the native shrewdness, powers of empathy, and gift for satire that made Shostakovich a formidable musical dramatist.

Notes

1. In his review of the autobiography by Miles Davis in collaboration with Quincy Troupe (1989), Scott DeVeaux notes passages that may reveal a tendency on Davis's part "to tell favorite stories the same way each time he tells them" as well as others that look more like "cribbing from previously published accounts" without acknowledgment (DeVeaux 1992: 91). It is entirely legitimate for reviewers to comment on such matters.

2. Ho and Feofanov provide a list of half a dozen persons who are said to have seen the Russian text (217–18).

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