

Dmitri Shostakovich

- Biography -

Dmitri Shostakovich, born on 12 September 1906, can be regarded as the most significant Russian composer of the twentieth century, along with Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev. Encouraged by Alexander Glazunov during his first years of study in Petrograd, he received a solid grounding under Leonid Nikolayev, among others. Despite early auspicious intentions to concentrate on piano playing, composition finally ended up receiving the lion's share of his energies. The successful premiere of his First Symphony in 1926 may have helped to confirm this decision. Shostakovich's relationship to political developments in the socialist and Stalinist Soviet Union was outwardly ambivalent.

His engagement as well as opposition to the system marked his life and personality to an extraordinary degree. Of great significance was the ban on his musical drama "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" during the 1930s. In 1936 the notorious article in "Pravda" appeared, accusing Shostakovich of deviating from the leftist point of view, of a bourgeois, decadent stance. Remarkably, despite all disappointments and repression, the composer stood firm and reappeared before the public just one year later with his Fifth Symphony, which enjoyed a triumphant success. Following the German invasion of 1941, Shostakovich worked on his Seventh Symphony, the work that was to make his name known round the world. Especially after 1948 the composer found himself sharply attacked as a perpetrator of "Formalism", despite several Stalin prizes. Having meanwhile moved to Moscow, Shostakovich resigned the teaching position that he had held there. He distinguished himself with works that "appeared" to be exponents of Socialist Realism and withdrew more problematical works, including the First Violin Concerto and the song cycle "From Yiddish Folk Poetry".

After the death of Stalin in 1953, Shostakovich's life became more relaxed. However, he remained reserved and his behaviour difficult to assess. He was loyal to the Soviet Union and long active as Secretary of the Composers' Union of the USSR. Little by little his earlier work was revived. The opera "The Nose" was performed again, as well as the Second, Third and Fourth Symphonies. Sikorski Music Publishers championed the publication of the original version of "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk", which had meanwhile become known in a "harmless" version as "Katerina Izmailova". Shostakovich visited Germany in several occasions, including West Berlin for the German premiere of his Fifteenth Symphony.

Dmitri Shostakovich died in Moscow on 9 August 1975.