

AN OPEN LETTER TO SHOSTAKOVITCH

DEAR DIMITRI SHOSTAKOVITCH,

May I, an English composer, send you belated but none the less warm congratulations and greetings on the occasion of your jubilee ? In your fifty-first year and at the height of your creative powers your works are deeply loved by thousands in many countries; your fellow composers respect and admire you as a master and as one of the great creative minds of this century.

As the most outstanding composer to develop entirely in the Soviet age it is inevitable that you should have come to be regarded as the exemplifier of Soviet musical aesthetic principles, as has, in literature, your distinguished colleague Sholokhov.

Myself a Marxist, I consider it necessary and important to try to understand the nature of the influence that the Soviet system and Communist Party have had and continue to have on the development of your work. It goes without saying that I dismiss as valueless the opinions of those American critics who find themselves able to nominate your Tenth Symphony for the award of the best symphonic work composed in any country during the last two years and at the same time cite you as an instance of a great artist destroyed by a political tyranny.

If you had at no time identified your work with the life of the Soviet people or accepted the leadership of the Party on aesthetic matters then, of course, it could be said that your being a Soviet composer was merely a geographical and historical accident that had no bearing on the character of your work. But your own words and actions have shown this to be not so. The with-

drawal, on your own initiative, of your Fourth Symphony in 1936 before the first performance and following criticism of your earlier works by the Party, the long period of thought preceding the appearance of your Fifth Symphony in 1937 and your statement that the latter was your 'reply to just criticism' show that you were seriously and with conviction striving to integrate your work with the life of your people. Moreover, the deep humanity, maturity and directness of expression of the Fifth Symphony did much to convince the world, and not only Marxists, of the validity of the Party criticism at that time and of the fruitfulness of its effects. This conviction was substantiated by most of your subsequent major works, culminating in the great Piano Quintet of 1940.

The Decision of the Central Committee of the Party in 1948, while affirming no new principles, did, however, indulge in sweeping condemnation of the major works of yourself and of your distinguished colleagues. Your apparently ready acceptance of the Decision in the face of the overwhelming evidence that the Soviet people deeply loved your work was, at the time, very puzzling to us. It was difficult to believe that the people who had been so moved by your 'Leningrad' Symphony in 1941 were ready to condemn it as 'bourgeois formalism' in 1948. We had to wait until 1956 for the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU to give us the only too clear explanation, namely that to have opposed the Decision would have led to certain artistic (and probably physical) annihilation. In the meantime, Marxists like myself, lacking knowledge of the facts, had no alternative but to maintain our loyalty to Socialism, defend the Soviet Union as the first Socialist State and hope that you and your colleagues would not be dismayed by the onerous burden of 'perfecting Soviet music' that Zhdanov had placed upon your shoulders.

We were not encouraged by the works produced by Soviet composers, including yourself, immediately following the Decision. It was difficult to believe that the mind that conceived 'The Song of the Forests' was indeed the same as that which had given us the Fifth Symphony and the Piano Quintet. However, in 1953, in the relaxed atmosphere of 'Collective Leadership' your Tenth Symphony appeared and with relief we saw that your creative powers had survived unimpaired. We were further re-assured by the Twenty-four Preludes and Fugues in 1954 and the great Violin Concerto in 1955.

We Marxists believed that a new relationship between creative artists and the Party, beneficial to both, had begun and that instead of 'Decisions' there would be recognition of the truth of Lenin's statement (in a letter to Clara Zetkin) that 'It goes without saying that literary activity is least of all subject to mechanical equalisation or levelling, to domination of a majority over a minority. It goes without saying that in this sphere it is

absolutely necessary to ensure larger scope for personal initiative and individual inclinations, full play for thought and imagination, form and content.' Recent congresses such as that of the Writers' (with Sholokhov's great liberating speech) and the increasing cultural contacts between the USSR and other countries seemed to strengthen this belief. It is true that Khachaturian's pre-congress statement of 1955 confined itself to an attack on bureaucracy and did not go as far as Sholokhov's in attacking interference by the Party leadership in question of aesthetics; nevertheless, there was no reason to doubt that composers were at one with their literary colleagues in desiring the establishment of this new relationship.

Events of recent months have, however, dashed the hopes of Marxist intellectuals throughout the world that the CPSU had in fact created conditions for a new era of cultural freedom and evolution of Marxist thought. The Soviet refusal to re-establish Jewish cultural autonomy in the USSR, the forcible removal of great thinkers like Lukacs and Harich from active political and cultural life in their countries, with the connivance of the Soviet Government, are clear evidence of a return to pre-1953 methods of domination by the Central Committee of the CPSU (with or without 'collective leadership') of all forms of political and cultural thought, activity and organisation both within the USSR itself and in the countries closely linked, politically and economically, to her, with the exception of Poland and China where the popular forces have been strong enough to prevent it.

If further evidence of this regression were needed it is provided unmistakably by the Message of the Central Committee on April 2nd, 1957, to the Second Congress of the Soviet Composers. As in 1948 there is no recognition of the unity of culture that Gorki stressed in 1934, only a sweeping condemnation of 'bourgeois modernistic art,' 'extreme individualism' and 'departure from the classical heritage' and the complaint that 'the modern theme had not found its proper embodiment in Soviet Music' Terms like 'melodious' and 'lyrical' appear undefined as do sweeping, unsubstantiated statements such as 'History has not known such a responsive and appreciative audience as existed in the Soviet Union' with the implication that if a Soviet work is not liked by audiences then it must be the work itself that is at fault. There is no mention of the inadequate musical education and low standards of performance to which Soviet musicians have constantly drawn attention in recent years. In spite of the lip-service paid to the composers' 'active participation in the struggle of the working masses' and confidence that they would produce 'works worthy of the Soviet people victoriously building Communism' there is a clear implication that composers, even after nearly forty years of socialism, cannot yet be trusted to work out their problems for themselves and in their own way. There is no recognition of the

composer's responsibility to himself as well as to his people, of the possibility of slow, unspectacular development, the necessity for experimentation, even if unsuccessful, the close study of the work of composers in other countries, irrespective of their political systems and, most important of all, that the artist is discovering new regions of consciousness and not merely reflecting those already experienced by his fellow men.

The development of culture is fortunately not dependent on the truth of such a Message but on the existence of conditions that make possible the opportunity for fearless refutation of error and the full use of such opportunity. The absence of these conditions in the USSR in recent years has led inevitably to the impoverishment of aesthetic criticism. Both Khachaturian and Oistrakh have, among others, recognised this phenomenon but neither have, so far, seen fit or dared to point to its cause.

Not only Marxist musicians but many other composers in England, of widely differing political, philosophical and religious opinion, are profoundly disturbed by our growing isolation from the lives of the men and women of our country. The situation is neither of our choosing nor to our liking, however much the Central Committee of the CPSU, in labelling us 'bourgeois decadents' may think otherwise. The renaissance of operatic and choral composition in our country in recent years, particularly in the setting of texts concerned with real human experience such as Tippett's 'Child of our Time' and 'Midsummer Marriage,' Rawsthorne's 'Canticle, of Man' and 'Song of Lidice,' Bush's 'Wat Tyler' and 'Voices of the Prophets,' Britten's 'Peter Grimes,' Vaughan Williams' 'Pilgrims Progress,' Searle's 'Shadow of Cain' and my own 'Pilgrims of Hope,' reflect the earnest desire of our poets and composers to integrate their own thought and Sensibility with that of their fellows. We Marxists who believe, however, that only through socialism can the sensibility of our people be developed to the point where this integration is fully achieved are not helped in our efforts to convince our fellow composers of the truth of our convictions by the example of the USSR where it is evident that erroneous opinions, however well intended, are not permitted to pass unrefuted and where the artist is accepted only in so far as he is willing and able to reflect prevailing opinions and attitudes.

My loyalty to the working people includes defending my fellow worker-intellectuals whenever they are deprived of the opportunity to make their full contribution to the cultural development of their countries, and this is true not only when they are citizens of the USA. Is this not equally the loyalty of Soviet intellectuals and most of all of their greatest representatives among whom you yourself must be numbered? Throughout the worst phases of the 'cold war' we Marxists defended you and your people against the vicious attacks of the imperialists. Your call to us to defend

Peace met with a ready response and we devoted all the strength at our disposal to the prevention of a third world war, frequently at the expense of our own creative work and in the face of persecution. We, like you, saw this action as necessary in the fight for socialism.

But today the very principles of socialism are being attacked not only by their avowed enemies, whom we have long recognised, but by those who claim to be its leading exponents. The workers, students and intellectuals of Poland and Hungary, by their actions in recent months have shown that they have not lost the vision given to them by Blake, Marx, Engels, Morris, Lenin, Plekhanov, Gorki, Lukacs and others but are ready to give their lives to make that vision a reality. The hope that socialism will one day conquer the world lies with such as these and not with those others who remain silent in the face of crimes committed in the name of socialism.

It is for these reasons that I call upon you to take your places alongside these brave men and women. But if there is silence from you do not blame us if we conclude that the tyranny in your country is such that you have been deprived of the right to speak; you will have understood that, in such circumstances, we could no longer be expected to look to the USSR as a leading socialist country or one which had any claim to speak in its name.

Greetings,

BERNARD STEVENS.