

**Dmitri Şostakovici –representative of the national
Russian music in the 20th century
The opera *Lady Macbeth from Mçensk*, between tradition and
modernity**

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Considered today as being one of the greatest symphonist of the 20th century, Dmitri Şostakovici (1906-1975) imposes by the qualities of his musical talent and his vast artistic orientation. Although dramatically marked by his being born and having lived in the ideological space of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, the great Russian composer (having a Polish ascendance on his father's side) imposes soon in the European musical life as pianist and composer due to his art's authenticity and expressive force, by finding his refuge in his inventive and creative life. Assimilating the whole Russian musical tradition – in the sense of Mussorgski, Ceaikovski and Glazunov's symphonism – Şostakovici continues the great experience of the Russian musical culture by an original symbiosis with the mahlerian symphonism and the musical thinking of his European contemporaries.

Thus, starting from the tradition of the Russian classic music, Dmitri Şostakovici imposes a new frame for the development of the symphonic and chamber expression, without cutting off the relationship with the past.

There are many examples, within his creation, of Şostakovici's relationship with the Russian musical tradition, starting from Glinka, Borodin and Ceaikovski and including Stravinski şi Prokofiev also. The composer pays special attention to Modest Mussorgski's creation, especially to his operas, to his original melodic language, and his vocal writing, where one can identify the declamatory recitative (by whose means Mussorgski had the intuition the natural national expression of the lyrical-dramatic musical language. Şostakovici revises the instrumentation of the opera Boris Godunov and adapts the harmonic language to the requirements of the melody's modal structure.

The melodious character of his creation stems from the Russian song (and the hidden polyphony of the melody). Şostakovici uses the sources of the Russian folklore in a personal manner, by assimilating them and by transforming the musical elements specific to the Russian song, (without avoiding certain connections to the Jewish music and to that of the Asiatic peoples) but especially by transforming the popular song by musical procedures which preserve its intonation and character. The art of attributing to the melodious construction the personality of the popular song is reflected by the composer's tendency of attributing to the musical ideas (both in operas and in symphonic and concerto music) particularities of the popular peasant and city-like song, the latter imposing at a rate which reflects a certain fashion of the

time. Romance as genre is present in Şostakovici's creation in Act I, in Katerina's monologue: Today I am looking out of the window. The national character is revealed in the art of the musical thinking, within the opera, in the psychologic analysis, in the pathos of the symphonic paintings.

But the great tradition of the Russian popular music appears under a new aspect in Şostakovici's creation. The content and the sensibility of his music are anchored in the reality of contemporary life. It is true, his musical thinking deeply anchored in the musical folklore, does not exclude the original but rigorous assimilation of the west-European musical art.

Şostakovici is famous for his born talent of a theatre man. At only 21 he composes the opera "The Godfather" (1928) which relies on the nuvella with the same name by Gogol. Using an expressionist musical language with atonal insertions, the composer underlines the drama elements which borders on absurd, the main character (Ivan Iakovlevici) oscillating between dream and absurd reality. The issue unleashes the moment Ivan discovers with stupor, in the loaf of bread that he was just slicing, his own nose.

In 1932 Şostakovici finishes the opera *Lady Macbeth from Mţensk*, whose realist subject relies on a strongly dissonant musical language. The opera is coldly received by the authorities present at the premiere. Both the subject, considered immoral, and Şostakovici's musical orientation were roughly criticised¹.

The opera *Lady Macbeth from Mţensk* relies on a libretto written by the composer together with A. Preiss, on the basis of a nuvella with the same name written by Leskov. The work for his opera, begun at the end of 1930 and ended in December 1932, in Leningrad, coincided with the period when the composer had ended the 3th Symphony and was working on his 4th. Only in January 1934 the premiere took place, in Leningrad, at the Academic Little Opera, under Zamosud and Zmoliş's direction. Even if the premiere gave rise to heated discussions and vehement critics, throughout the next two years there were 82 representations of the opera! One year later, the opera was represented in Moscow as well. Then, shortly after, the opera entered the foreign stages: first in North America (New-York, Cleveland, and Philadelphia) in Russian, then in a German translation (at the New German Theatre in Prague and Z rri ch, the same year).

The composition of the orchestra is the following: flute piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, clarinet-bass, 2 bassoons, counter-bassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba-bass, timpani, 2 harps, celesta, strings. The orchestra that performs on the stage presupposes an orchestra made of 4 cornets, 2 horns alto, 2 horns tenors, 2 horns baritone, 2 horns bass, 2 trumpets. The

¹ Pravda diary, Moskow, 1936

composer introduces *orchestra interludes* at the end of the *second scene* of the *first act* as well as at the end of the *second scene* of the *third act*.

The opera is a musical drama based on the idea of compassion towards woman's condition in the contemporary society. It could be interpreted, from the subject's point of view, as a tragic metaphor. Šostakovič considered it a "satiric-tragedy" where he magnificently mixes the tragic, the sarcasm and the grotesque. The emphasis of the "material" side, of human's degradation to the level of pure physiology constitutes a parable.

The composer stresses exactly the toughest, cruelest moments, the murders, trying to accomplish thus a "metaphoric" analogy between the expressionist artistic elements and the nightmare reality that he and his compatriots were experiencing. The repulsion that some scenes from the second act as well as the final scenes create hints at the cruel reality. The composer finds the most appropriate elements and musical means for keeping up the action and the characters' descriptions.

The Soloists are dedicated stylized melodic pages, with difficult elements in what concerns the interval leap. Orchestration is also authentic, by emphasizing some instrumental "voices" who are demanded a harsh timbre (scene V, trombones – every second, with a timbre that marks the resonance of the brass). The concise reasons have the purpose of convincing the audience of the realism of the dramatic situations.

The second version of the opera, called *Katerina Ismailova* will be worked upon between 1949 and 1962. The composer revises two orchestra interludes from the perspective of the sonorities and orchestration, which he moderates; he will do the same in the case of the marital betrayal scene, scene from where he will eliminate some asperities, sarcasms and realistic even grotesque underlinings. Šostakovič preserves, just like in the first version, the antithesis, achieved by symphonic means, between the lyric pathos and the grotesque of the dramatic situations. The climax is represented by *passacaglia* – a masterly page, which makes the relationship between the scenes four and five; the bass tunes the theme which will be rendered by 11 polyphonic variations. The characters are outlined with the precision of a talented dramatist. Šostakovič combines the new gains of modern language (terse thematic motifs, exploitation of voice resources of each separate voice, by using both *spoken statement* and *popular melodic motifs*, of the *arioso* and of the *recitative secco*) with the melodic sources of the Russian opera, where the popular song and the *mass* impressive scene resound (as in the choral pages inspired from Musorgski's creation). This type of melodic constructions can be found in *Katerina's* monologue where the heroine sings a *song* inspired from a *Russian romance*, *The song of the dove pair*, or the chorus of the workers (as a consequence of Musorgski choral pages). The composer uses the *arioso* in the vocal writing and the spoken and sung statement. One can also identify the lyric genre much spread in 19th century Russia – the Russian lyric romance (*chart 3*).

The opera is built up by the combination between the variable numbers of the *arioso*, the melodic motifs and the *secco recitatives* and the lively choral scenes are at turns with the orchestra interludes. Katerinei Ismailova's last monologue, from the last scene, is composed in the declarative style. One can also find intonations specific to the Russian popular melodies in the last scene of Şostakovici's opera.

As early as the *first Act*, after the short Prelude delivered in an open, almost harsh timbre, (with a well-controlled vibrato) of the clarinet, the voice of the soloist soprano – Ekaterina presents an ample musical monologue made of two episodes: a tense one which evolves in a difficult melodic line, in great leaps of discordant intervals, the voice being accompanied by the bassoon and then by the clarinet, bassoon and undertone strings, according to the symphonic thinking of the composer (the individualization of the individual timbres within a dense yet clear writing); the second episode of the melodic monologue is impregnated with inflexions particular to the popular song (reminding of a cradle song) and which reveals a *Romance* that lost its nostalgic-meditative character, full of bitterness, dissatisfaction and hopelessness with sarcastic accents (the voice being accompanied by bassoon and counter-bassoon).

The instrumental interlude brings again to the foreground the bassoon which creates the preamble of the *recitative – arioso* when the short dialogue between the *baritone* and the *soprano* takes place (Serghei – Katerina) on intonations that perfectly blend with the dialect of the Russian language. The episode is strongly symphonized (brass, wood wind instruments, strings that back up the instruments' solos well individualized of the blowers, from which the oboe stands out).

The next declarative monologue belongs to the baritone. In the drama's growing tension, Katerina develops a melodic line in a declamatory style, with leaps of great intervals.

A new colorful element is introduced by the composer in the musical drama by the choral assembly (the chorus of the female and male workers). Without using the popular quotation, Şostakovici animates the scene by the dancing character of the music. The tragic-grotesque climax of *the Second Act* is preceded by the dancing rhythm in triple meter of a *Polka*, a short, revealing episode.

Besides these clear hints which send to different popular sources, the music of the opera *Lady Macbeth from Mçensk (Katerina Ismailova)*, having the status of singleness (as other famous examples from the 20th century modern opera literature: *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Claude Debussy, *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg, *Oedipus* by George Enescu) naturally integrates in the expressionist tendencies – with atonal inflexions of the European music during Şostakovici's life. Despite the authentic modernity of the writing, the musical substance of the opera reveals the spiritual and cultural appearance with ancient Russian roots.

Generation colleague with Aram Hacıaturian (born in 1903 at Tbilisi) and Dmitri Kabalevski (born in 1904 at Sankt-Petersburg), Şostakovici represents the climax of the Russian musical culture due to his vast creation that contains all genres.

As important representative of the 20th century Russian symphonism, Dmitri Şostakovici will give to the musical world *15 Symphonies* (of the 24 that he intended to compose), *15 String Quartets* (of the 24, that he had intended to compose), *6 Solo Instrumental Concertos* (2 for the piano – of which one with trumpet, 2 for violin and 2 for cello) and a *Concertino for two pianos*, interpreted by the composer with his son, the pianist Maxim Şostakovici. He also composes *3 Operas: The Godfather* (based on Gogol, 1928), *Lady Macbeth from Mţensk* (based on Leskov, 1932), revised two years later and getting the new title *Katerina Ismailova* and *The Player* (based on Gogol, 1941, unfinished). Şostakovici's creation contains also *3 Ballets: Golden Age* (1929-30), *The Scarab* (1930-31), *The Clear River* (1934-35) and *an Operetta: Moscow, Neighborhood Cernomîşki* (1958, which was a great success).

The orchestral and stage music is more representative, containing also random creations. An important segment of his creation is represented by the music written for different film scripts (the most famous being *Alexander Nevski*). The repertory of his vocal-symphonic creations consists of *The Oratorio (Cântarea Pădurilor, 1949)* and *The Cantata (Execuţia lui Stenka Razin, 1964, based on a poem by Evtuşenko)*. Besides these, many chamber instrumental creations ranging from duos to octets: *2 Sonatas for Piano, Sonatas for viola, for violin and for cello with piano accompaniment*, as well as *Melodies for different voices and piano (From the Hebrew poetry, for soprano, contralto and piano)*, *4 Monologues*, based on Puşkin, *Spanish songs for voice and piano* and *Lieds for voice and orchestra (Fables, Romances)*.

His diverse activity as pianist, composer, and professor left his blueprint on the musical Russian and universal culture. His critic spirit was well-known by his contemporaries. Even if his opinion was feared, the young musicians had great confidence in the composer's opinion, which they always considered honest and fair, unbiased and grounded on strong musical arguments. Şostakovici actually encouraged and backed up the young musicians.

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