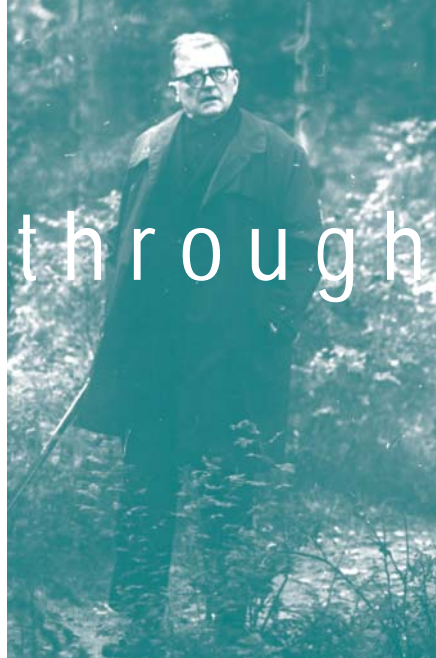


# 'Laughter through Tears'

As the centenary of the birth of **DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH** is celebrated, **JUDITH KUHN** explores the suggestion that the Jewish elements in his music were a statement of dissidence



One of the curious facts of 20th-century music history is the attraction of Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-75) to the inflections of Jewish folk music and to texts about Jewish life. This attraction is especially surprising, since he was not Jewish himself. In a time when official policies were often openly anti-Semitic, Shostakovich's 'Jewish elements' were provocative and, in the case of his Thirteenth Symphony, outspokenly dissident. On anti-Semitism, as on other important issues posed by his life and times, Shostakovich's music often goes 'against the grain' of official Soviet culture, examining and questioning it.

Shostakovich's most pointedly 'Jewish' works – those with texts about Jewish life or obvious Jewish musical elements – appeared in three clusters.

Firstly, in 1944, as news became available about the Holocaust, and as a surge of domestic anti-Semitism removed prominent Jews from Soviet cultural institutions, Shostakovich used Jewish folk-music inflections in the finale of his Second Piano Trio and throughout his Second Quartet.

Then, in 1948-52, the final years of Stalin's rule, Soviet Jews were targeted by official press campaigns against 'rootless cosmopolitanism'. Jewish cultural institutions were closed and hundreds of Soviet Jews were arrested and executed. Jewish musical features appear in the scherzo of Shostakovich's First Violin Concerto (1948), the third and fourth movements of his Fourth Quartet (1949), and throughout *From Jewish Folk Poetry* (1948), a song cycle that sets the texts of Jewish folk songs. Several of his *Twenty Four Preludes and Fugues* for piano (1951), most pointedly Nos. 8 and 22, also include Jewish musical inflections. Finally, the first song in his *Four Monologues on Texts by Aleksandr*

*Pushkin* (1952) sets a grim poem about the hardships of Jewish life. Of these works, only the *Preludes and Fugues* could be heard before Stalin's death in 1953.

Finally, in 1962, the first movement of Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony was inspired by the controversial poetry of Yevgeny Yevtushenko. It sets 'Babiy Yar', Yevtushenko's outraged poem about famous instances of anti-Semitic injustice, including the wartime massacre of Jews at Babiy Yar, near Kiev. The Thirteenth Symphony was to be the composer's most openly dissident work.

Today, despite many disputes about the composer's political views, there is general agreement that the 'Jewish elements' in his music reflect a heartfelt gesture of solidarity with Soviet Jews. Israeli musicologist Joachim Braun has gone further, suggesting that Jewish elements represented a concealed language of dissidence for the composer, communicating resistance to a select group of listeners.

Whatever Shostakovich's compositional intentions – and they are notoriously difficult to pin down – it is clear that the syncopated dances of Jewish klezmer music, with their 'laughter-through-tears' ambivalence, oom-pa accompaniments and flattened,

oriental scales have given his music, particularly his string quartets, a special 'tang' that is one of the most recognisable features of his style.

Controversies continue to swirl around Shostakovich's music, however, and the ones concerning *From Jewish Folk Poetry* have been among the most vituperative. Written shortly after the composer had been denounced as a 'formalist' by the Communist Party Central Committee, the song cycle seems to represent the composer's ironic 'take' on the Party's demands that he incorporate folk melodies into his works. Its initial eight songs, written during the summer of 1948, tell of the hardships of Jewish life: the death of a baby, hunger, cold and penury, imprisonment by the Tsar, separations from loved ones. But three final songs, written later in October, describe the joys of Jewish life under the Soviets. The final song, 'Happiness', includes this text:

'Doctors, Doctors, our sons have become doctors! Oi!  
A star shines over their heads! Oi!'

By 1955, when these songs were first publicly performed, the intervening 1952 'Doctors' Plot' arrests of prominent Jewish doctors would give these words new associations. Although these could not have been intended by the composer when he wrote the cycle in 1948, they intensified the work's meaning for those attending the performance.

Laurel Fay, Shostakovich's authoritative biographer, has argued that the heroism of Shostakovich's decision to write *From Jewish Folk Poetry* has been overstated. In a controversial 1996 New York Times article, she suggested that Shostakovich's decision to write the song cycle in 1948 represented a sincere

The syncopated dances of Jewish klezmer music, with their 'laughter-through-tears' ambivalence, oom-pa accompaniments and flattened, oriental scales have given his music, particularly his string quartets, a special 'tang' that is one of the most recognisable features of his style.

attempt to comply with the Party's 1948 directives to make greater use of folk music and write more songfully. Fay points out that the surge of Jewish arrests and the Party's 1949 campaign against 'rootless cosmopolitans' did not take place until months after the song cycle had been written. In the spring of 1948, the government appeared to be anything but

ologists and other cultural critics. These events all seemed to target Jewish members of the cultural establishment, and the composition of the Fourth Quartet appears, quite clearly, to be the composer's spirited response to them.

While, in many cases, Shostakovich's uses of 'Jewish elements' respond to times of crisis for Soviet Jews, it would be

## Jewish music expresses an existential irony that was central to Shostakovich's life-view

anti-Semitic, having taken a prominent and early position in support of the new state of Israel in an attempt to gain a foothold in the Middle East.

In fact, however, the Kremlin's support of Israel masked its concurrent domestic concerns about the emergence of a Jewish political force within the Union. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, formed by the government in the early 1940s to mobilise Jewish support for the war effort, had become the focus for a newfound sense of ethnic identity among Soviet Jews. The growth of this 'Jewish nationalism' was profoundly disturbing to the Soviet government and in late 1946 its Minister of State Security began to assemble evidence against the Committee. In January 1948, Solomon Mikhoels, the Committee's charismatic chair, was murdered, reportedly by order of Stalin himself. Fay notes that the Kremlin portrayed Mikhoels' death as an accident and suggests that Shostakovich could not have known of the murder. Immediate and public suspicions were, however, expressed among his colleagues, and there is good reason to believe that Shostakovich, who was close to Mikhoels' family, knew of these. Some musicologists have suggested that Shostakovich may have intended his song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, written during the summer of 1948, to serve as a requiem for Mikhoels.

Although it is impossible to resolve questions concerning the composer's precise motivation for *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, there is little doubt about what provoked the Jewish folk-music inflections in the Fourth Quartet, written between March and December 1949. The months between November 1948 and March 1949 had seen the dismantling of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and other Jewish cultural institutions, a surge of arrests of prominent Jews, the intensification of the anti-cosmopolitan press campaign in January 1949, and Party-led meetings censuring music-

too simple to say that Shostakovich used Jewish musical inflections only to protest against anti-Semitism. Shostakovich loved the ambivalence of Jewish folk music, its combination of cheerful melodies and sad harmonies. Like klezmer music, Shostakovich's works include many lively dances written over dark harmonies. Musicologist Esti Sheinberg has suggested that the ambiguities and contradictions of Jewish music express an existential irony that was central to Shostakovich's life-view.

Shostakovich's interaction with Jewish music may have given him a language for political statement, but also, in the midst of a world of enforced optimism and banal political narratives, it enabled him to express an existential philosophy that was subtle and complex, acknowledging the ruptures, contradictions and uncertainties of life.

Judith Kuhn received her PhD from the University of Manchester with a dissertation on Shostakovich's first six string quartets. She now teaches at the University and is working on a book on Shostakovich's quartets.

### Recommended recordings

Shostakovich: *String Quartets 1-13*, Borodin Quartet, Chandos  
 Chostakovitch, *Trios, op. 8 and 67*, Copland, Trio (*Vitebsk*), Trio Wanderer, Harmonia Mundi  
*Shostakovich Plays Shostakovich*, vol 2 (includes the composer's historic recording of *From Jewish Folk Poetry*), Dmitry Shostakovich, piano, Nina Dorliak, soprano, Aleksandr Maslennikov, tenor, Eclectra  
*Symphony No. 13 ('Baby Yar')*, Sergei Aleksashkin, bass, Mariss Jansons, cond. Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Bavarian Radio Chorus, EMI  
 Shostakovich, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, No. 1, op. 77, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, No. 2, Op. 129, Lydia Mordkovich, violin, Neemi Järvi, cond., Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Chandos.

## SHOSTAKOVICH'S JEWISH SOURCES

Shostakovich received an intense exposure to Jewish music in the early 1940s. **Venjamin Fleyshman** (1913-1941), one of Shostakovich's first composition students, had begun work in 1939 on *Rothschild's Violin*, an opera based on Chekhov's story about an old miser who, on his deathbed, repented of his anti-Semitism and gave his violin to a Jewish klezmer musician. Fleyshman was killed in September 1941, leaving his opera almost complete, but largely unorchestrated. Upon learning of his death, Shostakovich asked for a copy of *Rothschild's Violin*. He then completed and orchestrated the opera, working on it at the same time as he was composing his Jewish-inflected Second Piano Trio.

Composer **Mieczyslaw Weinberg** (1919-1996), was another source for Shostakovich's exposure to Jewish music in the 1940s. Of Polish-Jewish extraction, having lost his family during the German occupation of Warsaw, Weinberg sent his First Symphony to Shostakovich, who arranged for the younger composer to settle in Moscow in 1943. The two composers became close friends and began a lifelong custom of showing each other works in progress. Weinberg's works make pervasive use of Jewish folk idioms in serious art music, and may have served as models for Shostakovich.

**Moisey Beregovsky** (1892-1961), a fine Jewish ethnomusicologist, defended his doctoral dissertation on 'Jewish Instrumental Folk Music' in January 1944 at the Moscow Conservatory, where Shostakovich was then teaching. Beregovsky, who had been transcribing and recording Jewish folk music for 20 years, is now credited with having preserved the Eastern-European Jewish folk tradition. His collection of klezmer pieces was circulating in the Moscow Conservatory in early 1944 while Shostakovich was working on *Rothschild's Violin* and his own Second Piano Trio.

Fleyshman, Weinberg and Beregovsky together provided a rich confluence of sources for Jewish music for Shostakovich in 1943-44, as he wrote his first obviously 'Jewish' works.