

AQA AoS7: Shostakovich

KS5

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Introduction: passion, power and politics

In February 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many Russian opera and classical music figures became the focus of scrutiny regarding their political views and stance in relation to the Russian leadership. International artists including Anna Netrebko and Valery Gergiev were dropped from performances and removed from high-profile positions. This echoes a long history of Russian musicians and composers involved in the unavoidable intertwining of politics and classical music.

As you entered a darkened room in 2017's *Opera: Passion, Power and Politics* exhibition at London's V&A museum, you were confronted with an image of a young bespectacled composer hunched over a piano, scribbling on manuscript paper. There were echoes of distant explosions. Flashes of light illuminated opera scores and Soviet propaganda. The composer was Dmitri Shostakovich, who wrote most of his Symphony No. 7 amid the siege of Leningrad in the summer of 1941, before being evacuated to Moscow. As he recalled, 'Neither savage raids, German planes, nor the grim atmosphere of the beleaguered city could hinder the flow'.

Lady Macbeth

Shostakovich had already experienced a turbulent early career as a Soviet composer. His second opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, first performed in 1934, was initially successful both in the Soviet Union and abroad. However, in 1936 the composer was requested to attend a performance at the Bolshoi Theatre where he soon realised that several powerful Soviet Union leaders, including Joseph Stalin himself, were also attending. He noticed the men leave the theatre early, clearly unimpressed. A subsequent article in the Communist Party's official newspaper, *Pravda*, criticised Shostakovich and his 'bourgeois tastes' saying that his music 'quacks, grunts, growls and suffocates itself'. The composer was officially denounced, and fortunate to survive the paranoid and brutal Soviet leader's Great Purge that soon followed. He was able to gain political favour again, despite a further denunciation and rehabilitation in 1948.

This complex and tempestuous relationship with political powers was an important aspect of Shostakovich's life and work, and has coloured interpretations and assessments of his music. His work is often ambiguous and complex, using traditional structures and tonality, but pulling at their seams. The music is full of character, wit, biting sarcasm and emotional intensity. Irony and ambiguity pervade much of his work, and provide a key to its enduring fascination.

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Shostakovich before 1941

Overview of Shostakovich's music

Shostakovich had a long career, and his music encompasses an enormous variety of characteristics, techniques and influences. He wrote 15 symphonies, 15 string quartets and a complete set of 24 Preludes and Fugues for piano, as well as music for film, ballet and the opera stage.

The AQA specification lists musical elements to examine and identify in Shostakovich's works. Here is a brief guide to some of the more general aspects to listen for in his music, before a closer look at specific examples of his major works:

Scales and melody

- ▶ Influence of Russian folk music and Jewish melody (eg his song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* Op. 79 and Piano Trio Op. 67), sometimes quoting traditional songs or using pastiche melodies.
- ▶ Use of modes, diminished and octatonic scales, and chromaticism in his melodies. He experimented with serialism (his String Quartet No. 12 uses tone rows, for example) but generally his melodic writing has a tonal or modal character.
- ▶ Symbolic melodic leitmotifs, eg DSCH (which in some notation spellings becomes: D, E flat, C, B natural) referring to a version of his own name, **D**mitri **SCH**ostakovich.

Rhythm

Shostakovich was fond of simple, strong or pungent rhythms echoing older music, for example waltzes, folk rhythms or military marches, but often with unexpected syncopations and asymmetrical lengths of bars or phrases.

Harmony and tonality

Shostakovich primarily composed within a tonal harmonic framework, but with:

- ▶ idiosyncratic shifts into unexpected keys.
- ▶ non-functional chromaticism.
- ▶ combinations of tonal centres (eg bitonality).
- ▶ added notes to make the chords richer, more dissonant or 'scrunchy'.

His music happily used plain major triads or bare 5ths side by side with jazz-influenced chord extensions and dissonant clusters. He employed canons or parallel moving chords to create distinctive harmonic progressions and his own unique interplay between consonance and dissonance.

Sonority and texture

Shostakovich's sound is characterised by extremes and dramatic playfulness. In his concertos he moved away from rich, voluptuous Romantic textures of previous Russian composers like Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky to something leaner, cleaner and more intimate. Like Mahler, his symphonies use eclectic combinations of textures to create vivid dramatic narratives, switching between solo or tutti unison lines and muscular, complex orchestral colours. The sound can be warm and lush in more Romantic-influenced passages, and at other times deliberately harsh and spare.

Structure

Shostakovich mainly used traditional forms (Classical-style symphonic movements, sonata form, dance forms, fugues, etc) but often as a starting point or template, with a subversive twist or unexpected rule-breaking. In many pieces there are vivid dramatic, narrative elements with unconventional transitions or juxtapositions between sections and the use of ostinato, drones, motivic themes, quotations and cadenzas to structure the music.

Examples of works

We'll now take a closer look at music from different points in Shostakovich's life, with different approaches to help analyse and understand these works.

Piano Concerto No. 1

This chamber-like Concerto was written in 1933 and shows influences of early film music, drawn from his experience as a young man playing the piano for silent films in local cinemas. The sense of ambiguity and irony is clearly present in this early work, juxtaposing grotesquely humorous moments with tragedy and vulnerability. Even amid the melancholic beauty and sincerity of the second movement, there's a sense of dry wit, ending with a musical 'joke' playing on the expectations of the final E minor cadence.

Listening questions on the second movement

- 1 The movement is in 3/4. When the piano enters (with a trill) how many bars does the piano play in octaves before the two hands diverge?
Answer: nine bars (10 may be acceptable as there is a pause bar).
- 2 After a loud, climactic section, the music dies away to a single repeated E on violins. When the rest of the strings join, what is the interval between the first and second violin parts?
Answer: 3rds
- 3 What is the only other instrument used other than piano and strings, and how is the instrument instructed to be played?
Answer: Trumpet, muted (con sord)
- 4 This other solo instrument plays a 19-bar passage. Notate the short phrase the piano plays at the end of this first passage. (The phrase is answered by the other instrument.) It begins on octave Cs and the motif appears several times in the movement.
Answer: See score at fig 35 (correct notes = C B C B flat C A C A flat B G)
- 5 a) In the final seven bars, what note is played that is not in an E minor triad?
Answer: F natural
b) Which two different instruments play this note?
Answer: Piano and violins
- 6 Describe the mood of this movement and how do aspects of the music (harmony, melody, texture etc) create this mood?

Symphony No. 7 'Leningrad', first movement

As mentioned in the introduction, this Symphony links with Shostakovich's experience of war and a city under siege. Its legacy and meaning, even its origins (with some of the music perhaps conceived before the war) are complex and disputed. Shostakovich initially gave the movements titles 'War', 'Reminiscence', 'Home Expanses' and 'Victory'. However, he quickly removed these and left the movements with tempo markings only, allowing the music to be more ambiguous with room for interpretation.

The work achieved mythic notoriety when the composer smuggled microfilms of the score on a plane to Tehran, where they travelled west to receive the first European performance in London in 1942, and soon after in New York. This was only three months after its Russian premiere.

The Symphony begins within a seemingly traditional and transparent orchestral language. A strong, rousing Lydian-mode melody begins in 4/4 with military interjections and V-I perfect cadences in the timpani. But a darker, more ambiguous presence is here with shifts to a minor feel (adding E flat to the mode) and clashing 'cluster' chords with major against minor in bar 8 and again at figure 2. Five bars before figure 4, you hear a sense of bitonality with a D major phrase in the high winds answered by a B flat major phrase in strings and low winds.

A solo flute cadenza-like passage brings the music into a pastoral second subject from figure 6. Here again we see this use of 18th- and 19th-century traditions: the cadenza; the idea of a sonata form 'second subject'; a pastoral, folk-like bare 5th ostinato drone from cellos and basses; the eight-bar tune in G major; Baroque-like melodic sequences. This all seems to belong to symphonies from previous eras.

This quickly becomes subverted, however, and pulled into the 20th century. The initial pastoral melody and accompaniment slip awkwardly and chromatically into B major, before more chromatic shifts bring us back to G major. In the next section, we feel the sands shift beneath our feet with:

- ▶ unusual bar lengths distorting the rhythms.
- ▶ shifts of harmony (eg rising chromatic intervals) to produce tonal ambiguity.
- ▶ the exposed extremes of the violin register (from fig 11).

Perhaps most telling of all, Shostakovich doesn't go on to develop these themes as earlier composers would. Instead, a quiet snare drum ostinato sets us off on a vast journey of ratcheting tension and drama where the composer repeats a seemingly innocuous theme until it becomes a seething mechanical monster.

Elements to listen out for

- ▶ **Parallel major chords** harmonising the strings' theme fig 33, clashing with the underlying E flat major ostinato.
- ▶ The **repeated downbows** six bars after fig 38, to give a more brutal sound.
- ▶ The deliberately **unbalanced orchestration** of the new dissonant phrase played by all the upper winds, horns and upper strings at fig 39, creating a huge unison sound obliterating the theme in the brass. It feels as if the orchestra is waging war on itself.
- ▶ The low 3rds rising and falling **chromatically** like a stricken warship at fig 41, deliberately out of sync with the theme, again destroying the sense of tonality and phrase structure.
- ▶ A countermelody made with a fixed **pentatonic scale** (with lots of 4th and 5th intervals) at fig 43.
- ▶ **Static harmony** with big blocks of repeated chords from fig 45 (A major, then E diminished 7th).
- ▶ Rising tutti **octatonic** scale three bars before fig 52.

At figure 52 we get the recapitulation that a traditional sonata form would require, but it is a fiercer, more distorted and dissonant version of the first theme. The lingering presence of the martial theme is here too (fig. 55). The second theme at fig. 57 is again stranger, with a much weaker grip on tonality. It is a warped version with more fluid, stretched-out, chromatic version of the melodies and more dissonant harmonies. A peaceful, serene return to the tonic is not the last word as the snare ostinato returns once more and a foreboding echo of the martial theme returns to end the movement.

String Quartet No. 8, third and fifth movements

Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 8 was his only substantial work to be written outside of Russia: it was composed in 1960 during a visit to East Germany. It has a deep personal significance for the composer, looking back at his past, and responding to the horrors of war. The DSCH 'name theme' is the basis for each movement of this quartet. Shostakovich also uses several quotations from his earlier works.

Here are two creative tasks to help understand Shostakovich's approach to convention, tonality and irony and get to know this Quartet.

Creative listening and composing exercise

In the third movement, after a descending solo violin introduction, Shostakovich sets up a conventional, almost trite waltz ostinato accompaniment in G minor.

- ▶ Listen to the phrase in bars 20 to 25. (You could listen from the start of the movement and pause at bar 25 or isolate these five bars to listen to a few times).
- ▶ Transcribe these first five bars using the template shown below, filling in the missing bars or note heads.
- ▶ Once this has been done correctly, compose a four-bar 'answer' to this phrase by filling in the blank bars and missing noteheads in the lower system.
- ▶ Use the following rules:
 - ▶ The violin tune plays an answering phrase in staccato crotchets using tone or semitone movement, or repeated notes only.
 - ▶ Violin 2 must play a sustained trill for four bars.
 - ▶ Keep the viola and cello part the same but change **at least one note** by a **semitone up or down** (repeat the same chord throughout the four bars).

Allegretto

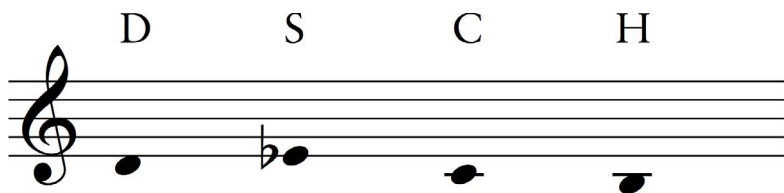
Listen to bars 20 - 24 of the 3rd movement.
Transcribe this first line of music in violin 1, viola & cello.
(TIP: the cello and viola notes form a G minor triad)

Compose your own answering 4-bar phrase.
Violin 1: Tone or semitone steps and staccato crotchets only.

After completing the task, play through the different attempts using piano, other instruments or music software. Discuss the effect of each version (emphasising that there isn't a right or wrong answer). Then look at the score, listen to Shostakovich's solution, and discuss his approach. Notice the use of the DSCH theme in the first-violin melody and the use of diminished chords and diminished or chromatic scale movement replacing a more traditionally functional G minor harmony.

Creative composing exercise

Take the DSCH name motif (notated below) and compose **three** versions or arrangements of the motif to express **three** contrasting characters or emotions. This could be harmonising the phrase, finding a rhythm, adding dynamics, articulation, etc. Focus on short, sketched ideas of one or two bars' length.



After this exercise, identify the different ways Shostakovich uses the motif in each movement of the Quartet, and discuss the character and emotion achieved in each case.

Analysis of irony

Here are the ways in which Shostakovich plays with expectation and creates a sense of irony and dark humour in the third movement of the Quartet:

- ▶ The violin B natural clashing with the B flat of G minor chord, creating a sense of bitonality.
- ▶ A deliberately extreme distance between lower parts and violins in the main melodic motif (mostly more than two-octave gap).
- ▶ An unnerving bar rest after establishing a familiar four-bar phrase pattern. This creates a sense of an ironic 'false start'.
- ▶ Shifts of emphasis and stability with off-beat chords and abrupt changes of time or phrase lengths, for example from figure 42.
- ▶ Explosive changes of dynamic and unexpected extremes (fortissimo violin 2 high E flat in bar 44).
- ▶ Unconventional non-functional chord changes within familiar tonality. He creates humour from juxtaposing complexity with banality. A good example is bars 43-45, where chromatically shifting bars 4ths and 5ths end with a 'perfect cadence' into G minor.
- ▶ Abrupt changes of style and material without a sense of preparation or traditional development. For example, fig 44 feels like we've switched to a different piece in a different style and texture. This material simply peters out, as the main melody takes over again.
- ▶ The subverted 'drone' from fig 46 – a cello drone would normally be low, but this is absurdly high, at the top of the cello register. It becomes more like the whine of a distant siren or unseen mosquito. This E drone is totally at odds with the G minor waltz, creating a sense of incongruous bitonality.

Sincerity and self-expression: fifth movement

Shostakovich himself dedicated this Quartet 'In remembrance of the victims of fascism and war', and the mood of this final movement is sombre, with a greater sense of sincerity. This movement shows the more Romantic, 'heart-on-sleeve' aspect of the composer (see also the slow movement of his Piano Concerto No. 2). We lose any sense of biting irony or menace. This is replaced with intimacy and warmth in the texture, harmony and melodic themes. His name theme DSCH is now used to express a different part of his personality.

Irony and sincerity: links with other 'subversive' composers**Irony**

- ▶ American composer Charles Ives (1874-1954)
- ▶ Russian composer Alfred Schnittke (1934-98)

Both composers were famed for their musical wit, playing with conventions and familiar idioms, often directly quoting other composers and ironically juxtaposing different styles.

Sincerity

Other composers responded to Soviet politics in a different way, eschewing irony for deep sincerity and religious meaning:

- ▶ Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina (b1931) (supported by Shostakovich during her studies)
- ▶ Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (b1935)

Their music is very different in style, but both absorbed Western contemporary ideas and a deeply religious, mystical aesthetic to their music, reacting against the socio-political atmosphere in the Soviet Union and the banning of Western music.

In this fifth movement, Shostakovich employs a familiar fugue structure (see also his early 24 Preludes and Fugues for piano for more of his use of this form). Many of the fugal elements are strictly traditional and would be recognisable to Bach or Beethoven:

- ▶ An exposition with four entries of the main subject at the tonic (cello, bar 1), dominant (viola, bar 7), tonic (violin 2, bar 11) and dominant (violin 1, bar 15).
- ▶ A countersubject played by each part.
- ▶ A development section using the subject and countersubject.
- ▶ The subject returning using a stretto device (bar 54).

Shostakovich's deep love and respect for older music is clear, but what makes this DSCH and not BACH? Has he become too respectful of the past and lost his own identity? We must listen carefully to hear the dialogue between tradition and innovation, a few cracks in the antique vase to see the composer's unmistakable fingerprint. This is most evident in the harmony. While C minor is a clear basis for this movement, Shostakovich uses the chromatic DNA of his DSCH theme to pivot into different, unconventional chords and tonal areas, for example the chromatic slide into a G major chord in bar 34. In bars 40-41 we see a microcosm of this unique harmonic approach: The first half of each bar is an unfamiliar, unstable and ambiguous chord resolving to a familiar E minor chord.

There is also another theme like an extra guest at the party. The opening phrase in the first violin at the start of the movement is taken from the first movement (bar 50), like a wistful memory of a lost folk song that comes back as a fragment at the very end of this final movement (violin 1, bar 81).

Befitting a master of allusion and quotation, there are several musical quotations from Shostakovich's own past peppered throughout the String Quartet No. 8, including his First and Fifth symphonies. Perhaps most telling is the presence of themes from *Lady Macbeth*, the opera that had such a tumultuous impact on his early career.