

SHOSTAKOVICH'S ANSWER TO STALIN: RESISTANCE THROUGH MUSIC

Title: Using music to expression the inexpressible.

An influential 20th century composer Dmitri Shostakovich (born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg, Russia-died August 9 1975, Moscow, U.S.S.R.) lived and composed in Russia during the time of Stalin's dictatorship. Many of his works reflect his internal struggle against the evils of Stalin's regime. By looking at the man, his life and one of his most prominent works students will experience an important part of Russian culture. They will learn how Stalin attempted to control Russian culture, and how Shostakovich along with other artists, resisted Stalin's power through their art. Shostakovich, through his music, connected with listeners and allowed them to find a certain release in identifying with his musical comments on Stalin and his regime.

Grades: 7-12

Social Studies Music

Essential issue: How does an artist's work relate to the people who are living in an atmosphere of fear and repression? How does the artist's expression of resistance translate to the audience? Is this a viable form of resistance?

Objectives:

- Students will recognize that not all forms of resistance involve violent or obvious statements.
- Students will recognize that it is important for a people to have a spokesmen for their feelings that they themselves cannot express because of fear.
- Students will recognize the courage that it takes to "Speak Out" in times such as Stalin's reign.

Materials needed:

1. Readings from: "*Testimony-The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*"
2. Video: <http://video.pbs.org/video/1295305133> PBS Video "Keeping Score-Shostakovich Symphony No. 5".

Procedure:

- 1 Students will first read excerpts from the book "*Testimony-the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich.*"
2. Students will discuss the following statements or questions.
 1. Why would Stalin want to control the culture in Russia?

2. In what way did he achieve this?
 3. What was one way that Shostakovich countered the anti-Semitism that was still prevalent in Russia in the 1950's?
 4. Discuss Shostakovich's statement "Art destroys silence."
 5. What did Shostakovich mean when he said "the majority of my symphonies are tombstones?"
3. Students will then view the PBS video, "*Keeping Score-Shostakovich Symphony #5*."
 4. After viewing students will discuss the following questions.
 1. What were some of the reasons people were living in fear under Stalin?
 2. How relevant do they believe music is to resisting oppression on either a personal or public level.
 3. Did Shostakovich actually achieve anything worthwhile for the people of Russia in the 1930's?
 4. Is there anything in Shostakovich's music relevant for the present times?

Extended Work:

Research to find other music that "speaks" a message of resistance. The music can be in any genre. Then in essay form tell:

1. What is the name of the composer(if known)
2. What is the music's title
3. What world culture does the music represent
4. What event does the music refer to.
5. In your opinion how does the music speak this message of resistance?

Assessment:

Students will either discuss or answer in essay form what they think the three note "dead end" represents in the Fifth Symphony and why Shostakovich wrote it into his symphony.

Estimated lesson time:

With video (55minutes), approximately three 45 minute class periods.

Resources:

"*Testimony The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*" as related and edited by Solomon Volkov and a new foreword by Vladimir Ashkenazy 25th Anniversary Edition. Limelight Editions, Pompton Plains, NJ (2006).

PBS Video "*Keeping Score-Shostakovich Symphony No. 5*".
<http://video.pbs.org/video/1295305133>

READINGS

Testimony-the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov

The following reading refers to the method that Stalin used to control art in Communist Russia.

“The situation was becoming increasingly dangerous. All dictators try to create an apparatus for managing “their” art; the one that Stalin built is still the most effective the world had ever known. He secured from Soviet creative figures an unprecedented degree of submissiveness in the service of his continually shifting propaganda goals. Stalin strengthened and perfected the system of “creative unions.” Within the framework of this system, the right to work (and therefore to live as an artist) comes only to those officially registered and approved. The creative unions of writers, composers, artists, et al. were formed, beginning in 1932, as bureaucratic organizations with strictly defined ranks and with equally strong accountability and constant cross-checking. Every organization had a branch of “security services,” or secret police, as well as innumerable unofficial informers. Any attempt to circumvent one’s union ended badly: various forms of pressure and repression were always ready. Moreover, obedience was rewarded. Behind this well-oiled and smoothly running mechanism stood the figure of Stalin, an inevitable presence that often gave events a grotesque, tragicomic coloration.” (pp. xxx-xxx1)

Shostakovich often resisted complying to Stalin’s dictates as presented through the composer union. Even though Shostakovich would write music to satisfy the composer union he also was often criticized strongly when it became obvious his music was not adhering to the “approved” party dictates.” As a result Shostakovich lived in an atmosphere of fear for himself and his family.

“The constant anticipation of arrest affected his mind. For nearly four decades, until his death, he would see himself as a hostage, a condemned man. The fear might increase or decrease, but it never disappeared. The entire country had become an enormous prison from which there was no escape.” (p. xxx)

In the next reading Shostakovich explains his main motivation for composing his symphonies from the 1930’s onward.

“Naturally, fascism is repugnant to me, but not only German fascism, any form of it is repugnant. Nowadays people like to recall the prewar period...saying that everything was fine until Hitler bothered us. Hitler is a criminal, that’s clear, but so is Stalin.

“I feel eternal pain for those who were killed by Hitler, but I feel no less pain for those killed on Stalin’s orders. I suffer for everyone who was tortured, shot, or starved to death. There were millions of them in our country before the war with Hitler began.

“The war brought much new sorrow and much new destruction, but I haven’t forgotten the terrible prewar years. That is what all my symphonies, beginning with the Fourth, are about, including the Seventh and Eighth.

“Actually, I have nothing against calling the Seventh the Leningrad Symphony, but it’s not about Leningrad under siege, it’s about the Leningrad that Stalin destroyed and that Hitler merely finished off.

“The majority of my symphonies are tombstones. Too many of our people died and were buried in places unknown to anyone, not even their relatives. It happened to many of my friends. Where do you put the tombstones for Meyerhold or Tukhachevsky? (two of Shostakovich’s closest friends murdered by Stalin) Only music can do that for them. I’m willing to write a composition for each of the victims, but that’s impossible, and that’s why I dedicate my music to them all.

“I think constantly of those people, and in almost every major work I try to remind others of them.” (pp. 155-156)

This reading refers to the premier performance of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony.

“November 21, 1937 can be considered a watershed day in the musical fate of Shostakovich. The hall of the Leningrad Philharmonic was overflowing: the cream of Soviet society--musicians, writers, actors, artists, celebrities of every kind--had gathered for the premiere of the disgraced composer’s Fifth Symphony. They were waiting for a sensation, a scandal, trying to guess what would happen to the composer, exchanging gossip and jokes. After all, social life went on despite the terror.

“And when the last notes sounded, there was pandemonium, as there would be at almost all later Shostakovich’s major works. Many wept. Shostakovich’s work represented the effort of an honest and thoughtful artist confronted by a decisive choice under conditions of great moral stress. ...

“ ‘This is not music; this is high-voltage, nervous electricity,’ noted a moved listener of the Fifth, which to this day remains Shostakovich’s most admired work. The symphony made it clear that he spoke for his generation, and Shostakovich became a symbol for decades.” (p. xxxi)

Shostakovich always felt it was important to stand up against anti-Semitism, everywhere, especially in Communist Russia. In response to a poem “Babi Yar” by Yevtushenko he wrote his 13th Symphony. In this symphony there are five poems by Yevtushenko, one which describes the horror of the massacre of at least 33,000 Jewish men, women and children at Babi Yar in the Ukraine.

“...when I read Yevtushenko’s “Babi Yar, the poem astounded me. It astounded thousands of people. Many had heard about Babi Yar, but it took Yevtushenko’s poem to make them aware of it. They tried to destroy the memory of Babi Yar, first the Germans and then the Ukrainian government. But after Yevtushenko’s poem it became clear that it would never be forgotten. That is the power of art.

“People knew about Babi Yar before Yevtushenko’s poem, but they were silent. And when they read the poem, the silence was broken. Art destroys silence.” (pp. 158-159)