

Title: Shostakovich's Answer to Stalin: Part II

This lesson can be used as an extension of the lesson plan *Stalin's Reign of Terror: Resistance through Music*, or as a cross-curriculum lesson plan in language arts.

In the continuing study of Shostakovich's compositions, musicologists are now finding that there were many hidden messages in his music. The Fifth Symphony is an example of one of Shostakovich's hidden replies to Stalin's dictatorship. Students will learn about one of Alexander Pushkin's poems set to music by Shostakovich and the use of this musical theme in the finale of the Fifth Symphony as a defiant message to Stalin.

Grades: 7-12.

Language Arts

Music

Social Studies

Essential Issue:

How important or effective is the aesthetic domain of art in resisting oppression?

Objectives:

- Students will recognize the commonality between the expression of Pushkin's poems and Shostakovich's music.
- Students will recognize the connection between Pushkin's poetry and Shostakovich's music.
- Students will internalize the expressive function of art.

Materials Needed:

- Two Poems of Alexander Pushkin Handout
- Alexander Pushkin Biography Handout
- Shostakovich and Pushkin handout

Procedure:

- Hand out poetry worksheet.
- Have students read through the two poems of Pushkin.
- Ask students if they can discern from these two short poems what Pushkin is writing about and if the poems give any clue about the conditions he is living under. Ask students to answer in just a few words, and write their opinions on the board.
- Hand out biography worksheet
- Read over and discuss with students how correct they were in their opinions about what the poems represented.
- Read together Shostakovich and Pushkin handout, then listen to the sampling of the theme music from Shostakovich's Pushkin poem setting. Then listen to the music sampling of the same theme from Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony. Read the descriptive phrase above each sampling first. Music samples are available at ;

www.therestisnoise.com/2007/01/chapter-7-the-a.html

Scroll half way down page to the two samplings.

First sampling is labeled: “In the finale, Shostakovich quotes from his Pushkin setting, “Regeneration.” The final two lines are “And in their place visions arise/ of pure, original days.”

Second sampling is labeled: “Here is the corresponding passage in the Fifth, with the quiet, ominous return of the martial main theme.”

- Students discuss their opinions about:
 1. The need for Shostakovich to express the thoughts of the poem in his music.
 2. Why he had to hide these thoughts.
 3. If they were hidden how effective were they in expressing Shostakovich’s feelings to the audience?

Assessment:

In groups, have students put together a short presentations to the class.

- Decide on a subject that relates to oppression in modern time.
- Create a four line poem about the oppression. The poem can speak directly about the oppression or use circumlocution, as if creating a message that is meant to be hidden.
- Present the poem to the class. While reciting the poem the students are to add expression to the poem. Allow them to use music, dance, dramatic reading, or other means to help express the meaning of the poem.

Estimated Lesson Time: If assessment is done during class: two 45 minute class periods.

Resources:

Ross, A., (2007). *The rest is noise: listening to the twentieth century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Website for listening sample:

www.therestisnoise.com/2007/01/chapter-7-the-a.html

Two Poems of Alexander Pushkin

To the Emperor Nicholas I

He was made emperor, and right then
Displayed his flair and drive:
Sent to Siberia a hundred-twenty men
And strung up five.

Just There, Over the Crowned... (from "Freedom")

Oh, kings! Your crown and your throne
Not by your birth, by Law are given;
You stand over your people own,
But over you stands Law, even.

And woe, woe to the tribes
Where Law sleeps without care,
Where the people or the tsars,
Could govern over Law forever!

Alexander Pushkin Biography

Alexander Pushkin (May 1799-January 1837) was born in Moscow and is known by many as Russia's greatest poet. During a time when most great literature was being written in French and English, Pushkin revolutionized Russian literature with narrative poems, love poems, political poems, short stories, novels, plays, histories, and fairy tales. Pushkin's skeptical mind and sense of irony helped him capture what it means to be Russian,

His nobleman father was active in politics. He was educated at home, mostly by nannies, and later at a school for the privileged children of the nobility. He began writing poetry when he was very young and had his first poem published when he was 14.

In the early 1800's, Pushkin was on the staff of the ministry of foreign affairs, but because his salary was low and his family wouldn't support him, Pushkin turned to poetry as a way of making money. Worse than the lack of money was his lack of freedom. Russians at this time lived at the mercy of a tyrannical state, and Pushkin used his writing as a way of expressing the oppression of the Russian people. He wrote about 130 poems between 1814 and 1817, some of which were outspoken in their political views. Czar Alexander the First exiled Pushkin to the south of Russia because of the political ideas in his 1820 poem "Ode to Liberty."

When Alexander the First's brother, Nicholas the First, came to power in 1825, he invited Pushkin back to the capital, and gave him a government post. However, Nicholas acted as his personal censor, making sure that Pushkin didn't publish anything that would hurt the government. Censors opened his mail, spies followed him, and cut out whole sections of Pushkin's manuscripts.

Pushkin was wounded in a duel and died on January 29, 1837.

Shostakovich and Pushkin

Shostakovich, a Russian composer lived and worked during the time of Stalin. For more than a decade, Shostakovich had been producing scores at an astounding rate: four symphonies, three ballets, two operas, a full-length music hall review, six sets of incidental music for plays, and eight film scores. His newest opera, Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District (1932), was so popular that it was playing simultaneously in Leningrad and Moscow. It was this popularity which drew Stalin to a Moscow performance of the opera in early January 1936. Stalin apparently hated it and either wrote or commissioned an anonymous "review" which appeared on the front page of Pravda, denouncing the opera and its composer and warning that "things could turn out badly" if Shostakovich did not literally change his tune. Understandably, Shostakovich wrote next to nothing in 1936; the only serious work from late in that year is the Four Romances based on four poems by Alexander Pushkin for bass and piano, Op. 46.

The first song of the Four Romances has as its setting Pushkin's poem, "Regeneration:

"Regeneration"

An artist-barbarian with a drowsy brush
Blackens over the painting of a genius
And senselessly draws on top of it
His own illegitimate designs.
But over the years the foreign paint
Flakes away like old scales,
And the genius's work appears again
Before us in its former beauty.
Thus do delusions vanish
From my worried soul,
And in their place visions arise
Of pure, original days.

Shostakovich, like Pushkin, tormented by a tyrant, used this poem to express in his music what he had felt when confronted by Stalin's rule. Shostakovich then took the music of the last two lines of the poem and had it reappear in his famous Fifth Symphony in the final movement just before the return of the odd discordant military theme-- Shostakovich's comment on Stalin's crushing control of artistic expression.