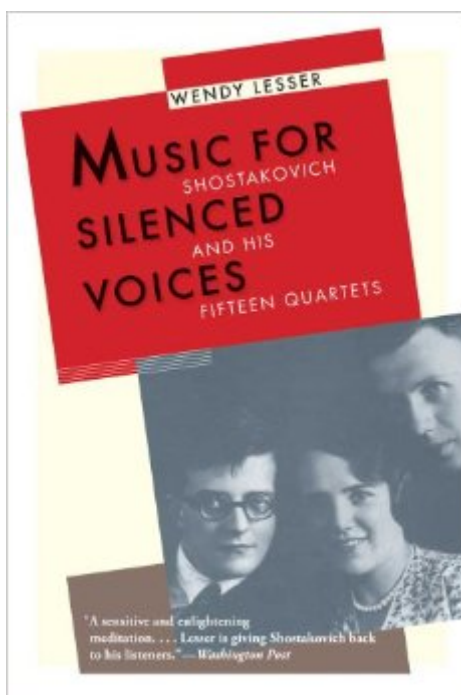


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Music For Silenced Voices: Shostakovich And His Fifteen Quartets



Synopsis

This work looks at Shostakovich through the back door, as it were, of his 15 quartets, the works which his widow characterized as a 'diary, the story of his soul'.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

My review of this fine book is unavoidably influenced by the fact that I have been a huge fan of Shostakovich for many years, and not all Shostakovich either ... yep, it's his string quartets that speak to me so personally. Imagine my excitement when I learned about Music For Silenced Voices. The title is aptly chosen; while his symphonies were often carefully written to avoid disfavor with the Communist regime, Shostakovich felt no such need to censor or disguise himself in the fifteen string quartets he composed during the last four decades of his life. Shostakovich's Russia was a country defined by its government - a gray, faceless world of ministries and bureaucrats. The brilliant composer suffered the indignity of having his work criticized and even suppressed by Stalin and his stooges, if the powers-that-be decided that the work failed to adequately promote nationalistic ideals. Such a completely irrational set of rules and restrictions silenced some, but not all, of Shostakovich's voice. Of necessity in order to have his music heard at all, he made sometimes major concessions in his large-scale writing. But the composer's quartets allowed him to create music that was often darker, but somehow more personal, in my opinion, than most of his symphonic work. How does a book like this manage to turn the exquisite sound of the fifteen quartets into a narrative? Again, I must claim a bias; I already love this music, so I am probably

inclined to be generous here. I do believe that Wendy Lesser has done a superb job of collecting source material to tell a very specific story. The events (both personal and global) that took place during his life were always sure to leave their mark on the mood of Shostakovich's work.

Wendy Lesser has done her homework! This 'biography' is obviously a work of love as the author informs us of her introductions to the brilliant quartets of Dmitri Shostakovich and how the immediacy of his pure music, music written out of the limelight (the positive and negative focus) of his endurance of Soviet condemnation, is more sensitive to his reactions to his life and the people who surrounded his life. Her writing style approaches conversation and that is an aspect that makes this volume such a pleasure to read. Lesser does indeed understand music and has found a manner in which to evaluate in words her perceptions of the various aspects of the compositions she address in a way that even novices will find understandable. But the really superb part of this book is the technique Lesser uses to offer up the life of one of the greatest composers of the 20th century, tracing his life from childhood to youth and his introduction to composition, through the period of Stalinism when he was condemned for his decadent Western music, his music from the 4th symphony and his operas were banned from performance, nearly losing his life at the Zhdanov Decree in 1948, how he had the courage to 'bow down' (very much with tongue in cheek) to the demands Stalin placed on him, falling from the stance of being the finest composer in Russia to being penniless until Stalin once again allowed his works to have performances in the USSR. With Stalin's death and with the eventual changes or softening of policy against the arts Shostakovich regained his status and has been influential in music since that time. The author's choice of examining the fifteen quartets as the inner map to revealing the true character and life of Dmitri Shostakovich is a wise one.

The chapters of Wendy Lesser's book on the string quartets of Shostakovich carry the same titles, and are arranged in the same order, as those of the six consecutive Adagio movements of the Fifteenth Quartet: Elegy - Serenade - Intermezzo - Nocturne - Funeral March - Epilogue. As I glanced at the Contents when I first opened the book, I wondered why and kept wondering as I read through the book to the end. I find a clue in something Dr. Sigrid Neef has written concerning the Fifteenth Quartet in her excellent liner notes for the complete set of Shostakovich's quartets by Borodin Quartet (BMG-Melodiya): "In the wake of Tchaikovsky, Adagio was not simply a tempo marking in Russian music but a mode of musical thinking implying an act of remembrance." Ms. Lesser includes herself among those who have felt that Shostakovich may have known that the end

was near, and in the Fifteenth Quartet, his last, had written an elegy to himself (p. 261). Doesn't a true elegiac work imply looking back and commemoration as well? In borrowing the titles, then, has she intended a book that is itself a literary 'Adagio', an act of remembrance honoring the life and works of Shostakovich? For her it had to be "the life first then the music." She goes on, "Only after learning something of the biography have I been able to hear what was there all along in the quartets." She says it after having accepted that "for the most part the life is a smoke screen that gets between you and the art." Of correct interpretation, "[E]ven the artist is not the ultimate authority in this regard, for he may well have given rise to something that is larger than his own intentions.

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