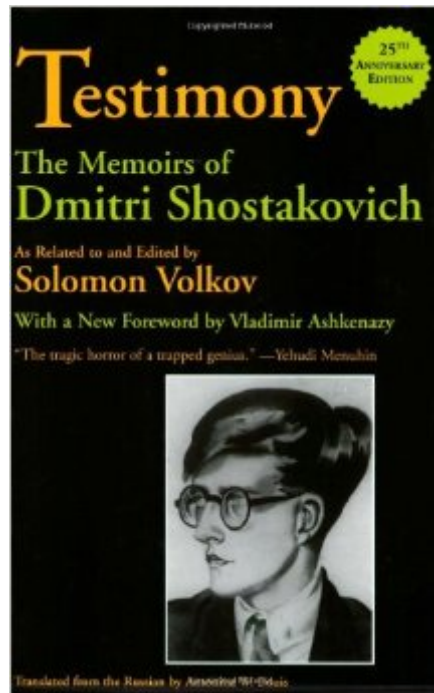


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Testimony: The Memoirs Of Dmitri Shostakovich



Synopsis

(Limelight). This is the powerful memoirs which an ailing Dmitri Shostakovich dictated to a young Russian musicologist, Solomon Volkov. When it was first published in 1979, it became an international bestseller. This 25th anniversary edition includes a new foreword by Vladimir Ashkenazy, as well as black-and-white photos. "Testimony changed the perception of Shostakovich's life and work dramatically, and influenced innumerable performances of his music." New Grove Dictionary

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Dmitri Shostakovich, now over thirty years removed from his death in 1975, represents one of the greatest virtues in art: that it can break painful silences and transcend an oppressive few for the good of many. Unlike the minor roles that classical composers hold in society nowadays, the premiere of a Shostakovich symphony, string quartet, or song cycle was a major, socially relevant happening. In extraordinary instances like his Seventh and Eighth Symphonies (written in 1941 and 1943), Shostakovich's work attracted millions of listeners throughout the world. It is a separate issue as to whether or not the composers of today have isolated themselves from the masses, but Shostakovich's music was certainly a willing and able contributor to the betterment of mankind. By the time that Shostakovich and musicologist Solomon Volkov are said to have begun work on 'Testimony' in 1971, the 65-year-old composer was much a living record of Soviet cultural history. Shostakovich's pensive look was conditioned by the Bolshevik Revolution, its difficult aftermath, the Second World War, persecutions at the hands of Josef Stalin, and a continuous siege on Russian

artists of every medium. According to Volkov, these experiences had grown cobwebs in Shostakovich's mind; no Soviet citizen discussed history under the Stalinist regime, which was equally heart-wrenching and dangerous. Letters, diaries, and other written records were destroyed to prevent 'guilt by association' and avoid one's sentence to the Gulag. Fear and paranoia were inevitable results: even during the slow 'Thaw' under Nikita Khrushchev, Shostakovich remained largely silent (except for his music) and kept memories under wraps.

Testimony: The Memories of Dmitri Shostakovich has undergone a lot of scrutiny since it was published in 1979. It was accepted as authentic by many at the time, was treated as a fraud and by others and with skepticism by people like Maxim Shostakovich. Seventeen years later, I think that we can accept this book as memories related to Solomon Volkov by the composer; this year a new edition of the book will appear in Russia with a foreword by Shostakovich's daughter Galya and Maxim. Their acceptance of the book has helped to convince me that it is authentic. However, this is hardly a comprehensive book of memories. The book covers Shostakovich's professional life rather than his personal life; there is little mentioned about the composer's family. His wife Nina is mentioned only once in noting that Lady Macbeth was dedicated to her. The important people in Dmitri Shostakovich's professional life, like Glazunov, Tikhachovsky and Meyerhold are much more fully portrayed, and there are some interesting anecdotes about them and many of Shostakovich's colleagues. But perhaps what is most fascinating parts of the book deal with the frustration and horror with which Shostakovich describes life under Stalin. I found this part of the book chilling and reading it gave me a fuller understanding of what life is like not only without freedom but to live with fear. The book reads like an interview but without the questions that are being asked of the composer. It is as if a series of anecdotes were collected together to form each chapter. But what has always convinced me that the majority of Testimony reflected the composer's thought is that these anecdotes square with encounters with the composer that were recorded by his friends and colleagues.

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