



Russian giant faces a counter-revolution

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WHEN the British decide to place a composer on a pedestal, we can be sure that someone - also British - will invariably try to knock him off it. Sibelius, Berg, Elgar, even Stravinsky have all suffered in their time from such assaults upon their greatness. And now, mostly in London, it is happening to Shostakovich.

The immediate inspiration for this act of vandalism has been an ongoing concert series combining Beethoven symphonies with Shostakovich string quartets, an idea you might think to be sufficiently bold and imaginative - at least in the context of much of today's programme planning - to warrant support, especially as the chamber music is in the hands of the perceptive Borodin Quartet. Instead it has provoked a new campaign to revive Shostakovich, which may be strengthened by the complete cycle of Shostakovich symphonies upon which the RSNO embarks this season.

The essence of the attack is that Shostakovich is unfit to stand comparison with Beethoven, and that placing them side by side merely emphasises Shostakovich's shortcomings. But the campaign runs deeper than that, for what is being claimed is that few of Shostakovich's works are worth performing at all, and that recent attempts to find coded anti-Stalinist messages in them - thereby making them seem emotionally ambiguous and thus more "interesting" - are simply a waste of time. Whatever sardonic subtext is now thought to lie beneath the crudely populist finale of the *Fifth Symphony*, the music - so its opponents argue - is as empty and vulgar as it was before.

Though antipathy to Shostakovich is nothing new, it has been revived with fresh abrasiveness in the *Spectator* by Robin Holloway, a good English composer and bracingly intelligent critic. Comparing Shostakovich's string quartets with Beethoven's, he has insisted, is like comparing a housing estate with the Acropolis. Nor are the symphonies much better: "Battleship-grey in melody and harmony, factory-functional in structure; in content all rhetoric and coercion, exercises or instructions in communal lament and celebration." Their effect, he adds, is all the worse for the "horrifying fluency and competence" with which they are executed. Yet however justified Holloway's contempt for Shostakovich's "portentous slow music

and mirthless faster music" may or may not be, it is unlikely to stop admirers of the composer, including this critic, from responding to good performances of that music the way we do - in a state which is spellbound, hushed, moved, disturbed, lacerated.

Through these bare, bleak, sometimes whispered notes, we have been enabled to traverse an important chapter in musical and political history. But it is a message which, to Holloway and others, seems beside the point. It's not merely that much of Shostakovich's music is bad, but that it lacks, as Holloway puts it, "inner musical necessity".

But this is a gibe easily made against a composer you happen to dislike. As such, it is just one more manifestation of the old litmus test, whereby a critic is dipped into a piece of music and we see what colour he turns. The mirthlessness of Shostakovich's fast music has always seemed to me one of its devastating assets. It is what makes his short Ninth Symphony, in Beethovenian terms, an anti-ninth symphony, and gives this superficially humorous work its dark underlay. It's not that the music is delivering coded messages. The message is there for all to hear, provided you are in tune with it. It is Holloway's misfortune that he isn't, which does not make Shostakovich a bad composer, though it does make Holloway in this case seem a bad listener.

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