Dmitri Shostakovich, Lady Macbeth, and the Soviet Government

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Dmitri Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, has suffered through more social changes than any other work in Russian music history. It brought Shostakovich unprecedented fame, and also brought about his downfall by the Soviet Government. The story behind Shostakovich, *Lady Macbeth*, and the Soviet Government is one of power, as well as the evolution of a nation and how it affected the struggling individual. Here, the artist, his art, the government, and the people are all inextricably linked.

Shostakovich's first opera *The Nose* (1929) had provoked many antagonistic discussions as to the ideological validity of avant-garde experiment in Russian opera. For much time after composing *The Nose*, Shostakovich claimed that he was searching for a "Soviet" topic for his next opera. It seems that he felt pressure after the negative reception of his first opera and it was his hope to better placate his critics.¹

At one point Shostakovich intended on devoting ten years to an operatic tetralogy—a task, which if accomplished, would have surpassed even Wagner's ambitions. In an interview with Leonid and Pyotr Tur Shostakovich said,

> I want to write a Soviet *Ring Of The Nibelung*. This will be the first operatic tetralogy about women, of which *Lady Macbeth* will be the *Rheingold*.² This will be followed by an opera written about the heroine of the people's will movement [Sofia Perofskaya, who organized the assassination of Alexander the Second and was hanged with the rest of the 'First of March Men']. Then a woman of our century, and finally I will create our soviet heroine, who will combine in her character the qualities of the women of today and tomorrow—from Larissa Reisner to...

² Here Shostakovich is referring to Wagner's *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*, a collection of operas commonly known as 'The Ring Cycle' it contains four operas of which *Rheingold* is the first.
It might appear odd that a composer would wish to devote so much time portraying strong women, and their influences upon society, but in reality it was not that unusual for Russia at that time. Though a women’s suffrage movement in Russia never occurred publicly, there did occur a women’s movement of sorts in literature. At the turn of the century writers began depicting women who were strong and influential; Dostoyevsky’s Sonya Marmeladova in *Crime and Punishment*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, and finally Chehov’s *The Darling*, all explored women and their strengths. Taking into account this prominent literary tradition, it does not seem so odd that Shostakovich wished to devote several operas to exploring women and their influence.  

It is said that the story of *Lady Alachen of the Nizhnek Distrit*, originally written by Leskov, was suggested as an opera plot to Shostakovich by his good friend Boris Asafiev. Shostakovich has said that he was fascinated with the story and found it to be “...the most truthful and tragic portrayal of the destiny of a talented, smart and outstanding woman, dying in the nightmarish conditions of pre-Revolutionary Russia, as they say, this story in my opinion is one of the best.” Shostakovich also said that he chose the story of *Lady Macbeth of Misenk District* “Because so far in the development of the Soviet opera very little has

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4 Ibid. pp. 190-1
been taken from our classical Russian literary heritage. And because Leskov's story is full of dramatic and social content. 

Act one was begun in Leningrad on October the 14, 1930, and the opera was finished over two years latter on December the 17, 1932. At the opera's conception, Shostakovich had intended to write the libretto himself so that he would exercise more control over the opera—not unlike Wagner. Unfortunately his libretto left Leskov's story cumbersome and dense. Realizing that he would need help in simplifying his work he contacted Alexander Preis for help. Preis was a fairly successful Leningrad playwright who had helped Shostakovich with the libretto for The Nose. Shostakovich spoke about his approach to the libretto as a composer saying, "...my role as a Soviet composer consists in approaching the story critically and in treating the subject from the soviet point of view, while keeping the strength of Leskov's tale." With Preis's help Shostakovich was able to create a libretto which maintained Leskov's vivid imagery and potent characters while allowing Shostakovich the freedom to be creative in his own right. Shostakovich spoke of the challenge in creating a new work from a preexisting work: "In composing Music to a literary subject one always creates something quite different, a work in its own right. There is no analogy with theater where a novel is chosen and a stage is made out of it. A literary word acquires an entirely new being in music."

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6 Dmitri Shostakovich, "About My Opera" Notes from the Libretto 1932 pp 2
8 Shostakovich, "About My Opera", pp 2
9 Dmitri Shostakovich, "How Music is Born", Literaturnaya Gazeta, Dec. 21, 1965 pp 8
The opera plot is as follows;

The story opens in a small town in the Russian Provinces during the 1860’s (Tsarist Russia). Act One begins with Katerina, the wife of a wealthy merchant Zinoviy Ismaliov; she is bored, loathes her husband and has no children. Her father-in-law Boris Timofeyevich, an elderly lustful man, reproaches her for not producing a heir. Zinoviy must leave for a few days, and Boris forces Katerina to swear to be faithful to her husband in her absence. The servants look on making fun, as they know how unhappy the marriage is.

After Zinoviy leaves, Aksinya, the cook points out a new worker, Sergei; he was driven out of his previous employment for having an affair with his boss’s wife. Aksinya thinks perhaps he could help alleviate Katerina’s boredom.

Scene two begins with a group of the laborers, led by Sergei, harassing Aksinya. Katerina intercedes and berates Sergei for his behavior. He challenges her to a wrestling match and they fight. Boris intervenes and he and Katerina leave together. In scene two Boris is keeping a suspicious eye on Katerina. In her frustration she complains that tenderness exists for all of nature save herself. Suddenly Sergei is there forcing himself into her room and they consummate their relationship.

Act Two, it is late at night and Boris is out pacing around the outside of the house, musing to himself about Katerina. As he decides to “perform his son’s marital duties” he sees Sergei climbing out of Katerina’s window. Enraged he captures Sergei and beats him in front of the household. Sergei is taken to be locked in the cellar. Boris, feeling self-satisfied, commands Katerina to fix him
something to eat. She does so and places rat poison in his food. He dies almost instantly. A priest is summoned and comes to assist the dying man. The scene ends with Katerina lamenting the death of her father-in-law, while the priest rants senselessly.

Katerina is found in her bedroom with Sergei, in Scene five. He sleeps while she is restless. Suddenly the ghost of Boris appears cursing her. Without warning, Zinoviy returns and demands entry, and calls her to account for her infidelity. Katerina and Sergei murder him, and conceal his body in the cellar.

Act three begins with the wedding of Sergei and Katerina, her husband having been declared missing. Katerina is nervous and uncomfortable. While the celebrations carry on a peasant breaks into the cellar to rob Katerina. He finds Zinoviy’s dead body and calls the police.

Scene seven depicts the police whiling away their time by persecuting intellectuals and declaring their own self worth. They interrogate a teacher and declare him a nihilist. News of the murder reaches them and they rush off to disturb the wedding.

Act three ends with the arrest of Sergei and Katerina.

Act four finds Katerina and Sergei on their way to a prison camp. Sergei has betrayed Katerina for another prisoner named Sonyetka. When Katerina becomes aware of what happens she pushes Sonyetka into a river and then drowns.
herself after her. The prisoners are then marched off the stage singing about the endless drudgery of life.10

Shostakovich’s portrayal differs a bit from Leskov’s. He felt that because Leskov was a pre-Revolutionary writer, the events in the story needed a slightly different treatment in order to reach the audience.11 He states, “I have treated Lady Macbeth on a different plan from Leskov. [He] approaches the subject ironically; the title indicates a tiny district where the heroes are small people with far meaner and pettier interests and passions that the heroes of Shakespeare.”12 In Leskov’s original story Katerina commits three murders before she is sent to prison. She kills her father-in-law, her husband, and her young nephew so that she could inherit her husband’s estate. Shostakovich, feeling that it was his “problem” to acquit Katerina decided to omit the murder of the nephew. He felt that by omitting a murder of a child, motivated by money he could then leave the audience with the impression of her as a sympathetic character.13

Leskov left it to his readers to come to their own conclusions as to how a woman married to a man she does not love could become a criminal under the influence of rousing passion. Leskov subtly points to a society which is callous and in which a woman was not recognized as a person let alone an individual. He places Katerina against this background and allows her to express her dynamism and individuality only through crime.14 Leskov paints Katerina as a cruel woman,
who has been driven crazy by idleness and murders people who are innocent. Shostakovich on the other hand wanted to explain the events in this way; Katerina is a clever woman, talented and interesting. Due to the hard, dismal conditions of her life and the cruel greedy milieu of the merchants who surround her, her life becomes pathetic and uninspiring. She does not love her husband. Though Sergei has no worth as a character, his love grants her life fulfillment and direction. In the moment in which she decides to murder, she has a sense of self purpose. Shostakovich stated, "It would take a lengthy explanation for me to describe how I justify these acts—this is better accomplished by the musical material, which I consider plays the leading and decisive part in an operatic work."15

The form of Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk differs from traditional Russian opera. The music always progresses on a symphonic plan, flowing without a break save at the end of each act. The traditional Russian opera—for example, Boris Godunov, by Musorgsky—is composed in a series of episodes which are held together by the story itself. The action and music are not continuously developed as they are in a symphonic form, rather the effects are built by sheer repetition. Though the orchestra effectively supports the drama, it never really assumes an identity of its own.16 The complete opposite of this is true in Shostakovich’s Lady Macbeth. In Lady Macbeth the orchestra does not merely accompany but is an integral part of the opera. Every act of the opera—except

15 Shostakovich, "About My Opera", pp 2
the fourth—has multiple scenes. It was Shostakovich’s thought that these should not be separated by pauses but by musical entr’actes, which not only provide cohesion to the music and change of scenery but as well function developmentally. He wrote, “The musical entr’actes, which come between scenes are a continuation and development of the musical thought and play a very important part in the exposition of what is happens on stage.”17 Throughout the entire opera it is Shostakovich’s musical language which gives the work its power. He is skillfully able to use the music to evoke sympathy from the listener and to portray the harshness of life.

In the first scene of the opera, the listener is instantly wooed by the lyrical charm of Katerina’s aria. This aria is then sharply contrasted with the singing of those around her. Boris’s aria is dry and rasping, with exaggerated conversational intonations. The chorus of the clerks is sharp and obstreperous. There is an overall grotesque quality being portrayed in the music.

In the second scene the music is cynical and coarse, representing the ignorance of the workers who harass Aksinya. Their music is unemotional almost to the state of being mechanical. This naturalistic music clashes sharply with Katerina’s monologue. Her music is simple and austere; she is a living protest against the humble status of women.

In scene three, there is a change in Katerina, as she sings “Through the window I saw today” the rhythm becomes palpitating, and grows anxious. Here Shostakovich is resurrecting the Russian popular song of the nineteenth century.

17 Shostakovich, pp. 2
The rhythms begin to resemble the polka and gallop as the scene ends. The music in this scene spans the entire spectrum of naturalism. By the end of the first act it is obvious that two distinct ideas are being sought after in the music; the portrayal of the humanity and vivid emotions of Katerina, and the naturalistic depiction of the more somber side of Russian life.

The second act, has been described by Ivan Martynov as, “Smack[ing] of the erotic and is pervaded by the spirit of criminal adventure.” Shostakovich’s representation of Boris’s illicit longings serve as an interesting pendant to Katerina’s previous aria (“The foal runs after the filly”); here is the contrast of lyricism and cynicism. The naturalism is quite coarse in this scene as the music attempts to depict Sergei’s beating and Boris’s death. The end of scene four is very ironic as it show Katerina lamenting the death of a man she killed.

Katerina’s lament of Boris’s death is an excellent example of realism in Lady Macbeth in that it follows the tradition of the genre of funeral lament which widely applied in Russian popular poetry and Music. In the traditional funeral lament women would wail over the body of the deceased.

Scene five is one of the most explosive scenes in the opera; as the argument between Zinoviy and Katerina degrades, the music turns shrill and vulgar. When the murder of Zinoviy occurs coarse motifs appear, foreshadowing eminent doom of Katerina.

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19 Martynov, pp 39
20 Martynov, pp 40
Act three sees Shostakovich’s use of parody at its sharpest. Here the reckless instrumentation mimics the reckless and somewhat incoherent singing of the drunken peasant. There are galloping rhythms accompanied by snatches of Russian popular song, the confusion climaxes with a sobering jolt as the peasant discovers the dead body and runs off to warn the police. The rhythmic idea from the opening of act three carries over to scene seven at the police station. Here Shostakovich’s music satirizes the police’s stupidity. The chorus, “For a tip or a bribe” becomes a rollicking juvenile waltz, and the recitative of the Sergeant is illustrative of just how petty he truly is; the music is derivative. The galloping rhythm persists as the police gallivant off to the wedding.

In scene eight Shostakovich uses his music to contrast the joyous state of those attending the wedding celebration, and Katerina’s growing feelings of panic. As the phrase “Who is fairer than the sun in the sky?” is sung over and over again the music becomes derisive. Though the guests are happy, Shostakovich is able to manipulate the music so that it seems that they are almost taunting Katerina in her growing despair. In the end, Katerina is racing about the stage confused, as the music races about, replicating her apprehensive state.

The fourth act shows a slightly different side to Shostakovich’s musical language. The song of the convicts “Oh the road where our chains have dragged” shows the simplicity of Shostakovich’s musical prose. Here are new musical colors, sorrowful, which show the suffering of a people. It is here that Shostakovich makes his last attempt to redeem Katerina. By giving her the same musical language as all the other prisoners, he is trying to show that Katerina
could be anyone; in her suffering she becomes universal. Here is tragedy mixed with heroism. It is here as well that Shostakovich makes his most striking statement about the abuse of power and what suffering it causes. He has said, "The suffering people of this epoch—an epoch built on exploitation—is shown in the fourth act."21

Katerina sings for the last time in a gentle lyrical tone "In the wood right in a grove, the water in it is black, black like my conscience"; here is heard her sorrow and remorse for the people she has killed. Her music becomes more passive, as if she is resigning herself to what she must do.

When the murder occurs the music becomes frantic, but only momentarily. As soon as it is clear that she and Sonyetka are dead the music returns immediately to the simplicity and woe of the convicts. The implication being that Katerina is only one suffering person of many, her wretched life is easily forgotten. The prisoners march off stage still singing, leaving the listener with the impression that it will carry on forever; suffering is eternal.

Shostakovich diverges from the traditional Russian opera in his use of musical motifs. These motifs are not leitmotifs in the Wagnerian tradition, as Shostakovich himself has said, "The music of Lady Macbeth contains no so-called leitmotifs; never the less each character has its own musical characteristic."22 These 'musical characteristics' serve as a reference to a tone or

21 Shostakovich, "About my Opera" pp. 3
22 Neef
state of mind associated with a character. This use of musical ideas is more parallel to Verdi's use of "reminiscence motifs" than to Wagner's leitmotiv.

The seven following 'musical characteristics' are found throughout the opera:

a) Katerina's Frustration:
   Found in the beginning of bar 2.
   Soprano:

   \[ \text{Sheet Music} \]

b) Sleeplessness:
   Two measures before 3.
   Bassoon:

   \[ \text{Sheet Music} \]

c) Boris's attitude to Katerina's marriage,
   Katerina and Sergei's Kisses:
   Appears in the opening line.
   Oboe:

   \[ \text{Sheet Music} \]

d) Power and its abuse:
   Two before 30.
   Brass:

   \[ \text{Sheet Music} \]

e) Male Worthlessness:
   Found at 32.
   Alto Flute:

   \[ \text{Sheet Music} \]

f) Katerina's self assertion:
   Found at 94.
   Soprano:

   \[ \text{Sheet Music} \]

g) Arousal:
   Found at 58
   English Horn:

   \[ \text{Sheet Music} \]

The very first musical line heard in *Lady Macbeth* is the oboe line. The oboe plays the first "musical characterization", which later is used when Boris

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sings about Katerina’s marriage, and when Katerina and Sergei kiss. The theme of Katerina’s frustration appears in the very beginning of the opera and is sung by Katerina in her opening line “Oh, I don’t feel like sleeping anymore”. It is followed almost immediately by the theme of sleeplessness, which occurs in the bassoons while she sings, “No, I can’t sleep”.

The theme of power and its abuse appears in Boris’s dissertation on women. The theme occurs after he sings “You’d like to hook some youngster... No, don’t try that, the fence is high, the dogs are loose and I’m always on the alert.” It is prominently played by the trombones, to display Boris’s power. The first instance of the theme of male worthlessness coincides with the first appearance of Zinoviy, Katerina’s husband. The alto flute accompanies him—with the theme—while he sings about how untrustworthy the workers are.

The Musical characterization of Arousal occurs during the entr’acte between act one and two, and is played by the English horn. It foreshadows Boris’s lustful desires and Katerina’s affair with Sergei. Katerina’s musical characterization of self assertion occurs in act two. She interrupts the men while they harass Akskina and sings “So you enjoy mocking women?” The motif is her vocal line, and foreshadows her growing power.

Shostakovich has spoken a lot about how his conception of each character affected how he attempted to musically portray them. It was paramount that he be able to solicit the proper emotional response from his audience.

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*24* Here is listed the musical example and its first occurrence in the opera. The numbers refer to score numbers and not measure numbers.
Shostakovich has been quite extensive in his defense of Katerina, even though she commits crimes that "are not compatible with ethics and morality."

She was a victim of the narrow minded provincial petty happenings of her environment, conveniently these happenings belonged to the "bad old days of Tsarist Russia." Shostakovich feels that it is the love that saves her from her own useless life, he says, "it turns out that a crime is worth committing for the sake of that passion, since life has no meaning otherwise anyway." He believes that in her passion she becomes a type of genius, but when she loses this love, her life no longer has any worth. She would rather die than return to the tired existence of life without love. In response to those who would reproach his defense of her he states, "Those that criticize Katerina do so because she is guilty, because she is a criminal. But that's the common consensus. I'm more interested in the individual."

Shostakovich attempted to make Katerina sympathetic through her music. Katerina's musical language is comprised of lyrical passages. In Katerina's music there is no sarcasm, instead Shostakovich has tried to musically express the infinite grief and joy that she experiences. He has said, "All of her music has as its purpose the justification of her crimes." Katerina is his hero.

The other characters, according to Shostakovich, are all products of the "dark and hopeless merchant life." The negative aspect of the remainder of the

25 Shostakovich, pp.2
26 Wilson, pp. 8
27 Testimony, pp. 107
28 Shostakovich, pp 9
29 Shostakovich, Testimony, pp 107
characters is shown in the music. The music becomes sarcastic as Shostakovich breaks the lines to make it seem angular, and cartoon like. The scherzos seem almost demonic, the vocal lines banal, and waltzes are so exaggerated that they become a parody.\(^{31}\)

For Shostakovich, Sergei the clerk represents the "evil genius" that appears in Katerina's life when it is at its lowest point. He is nothing more than a petty cad whose goals are to achieve wealth and "to satiate himself with the sweetness of a woman's body" as he says. Shostakovich has said the following about Sergei, "I have rather complicated feelings about Sergei... He's a bastard of course, but he's a handsome man, and more importantly, attractive to women... The audience had to understand that a woman really couldn't resist a man like that."\(^{32}\) Shostakovich sees that Sergei is flattered by Katerina's attention, but when they are put into hard labor, he no longer finds her desirable, and without a thought leaves her for someone new and fascinating.\(^{33}\) Shostakovich attempted to have the music strip Sergei down to his true inner nature. He has said, "It was my problem as a composer to lay bare the inner workings of every character."\(^{34}\) He accomplishes this with Sergei by writing lyrics that are insincere and theatrical. Sergei's suffering becomes nothing more than pretense. Through Sergei's we see a slick Kulak\(^{35}\) who would have easily

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\(^{30}\) Shostakovich, pp.2

\(^{31}\) Sollertinsky, pp. 71

\(^{32}\) *Testimony*, pp 111

\(^{33}\) Shostakovich, pp.3

\(^{34}\) Ibid, pp.3

\(^{35}\) Russian for peasant
become the next merchant exploiter. Even after he has been sentenced to hard labor, he is still contemptible and vulgar, he will never change.

Boris Timofeyvich is described by Shostakovich as a tough and strong old man. He is the quintessential master kulak, who knows no bounds in achieving what he wants. He is foul tempered and mean. It is interesting to note that he never speaks to Katerina without screaming. 36

In contrast Shostakovich views Zinoviy Borisovich, Katerina's husband, as a moron. Unlike his father he is a small pathetic man. Shostakovich has said that Zinoviy is, "More like the frog who tried to blow himself up to the size of a bull." 37 Zinoviy's musical characterization shows his desire to overcome his fathers domineering nature; it bullies and tries to show his power but to no avail. Even though he is presented as the boss in his own house the music shows him as a petty moron who wields no respect.

Shostakovich takes the relationship of these two men who are both so involved in Katerina's life and musically exposes them. For instance, when Zinoviy returns home and finds Sergei and Katerina together, the music gives the listener the impression that he will deal with them severely. His entrance is proceeded by fanfares which give the idea that something terrible will happen; but the dread being foreshadowed comes from an unexpected source. When he tries to make good on the musical promises of power, he is murdered. 38

36 ibid. pp 3
37 ibid. pp 3
38 ibid. pp. 3
Shostakovich has commented that the secondary characters also play an important role in the opera's musical conception. The priest, the police officers, the drunk and the hard labor criminals all gave Shostakovich a chance to explore the cynical and negative aspects of his music.

Sonyetka could also be easily dismissed as another shallow and cruel character with her taunting of Katerina, but her music tells otherwise. Though her lines are somewhat forceful implying her strength she is in reality nothing more than a naïve child. As she taunts Katerina, the music becomes light and playful, it lacks the angular quality of the more satirized characters.

Shostakovich is portraying a small school child making fun. Sonyetka is not one dimensional however; she is embittered by the injustices that she has suffered, but she has persevered and still maintains a "youthful passion and feminine spirit." She is the closest that Shostakovich comes to creating a second positive character; and once again it is a woman. Sonyetka, however, is not a heroine, as she lacks the experience of self sacrifice for passion and individuality. It is easy to see however the parallels between Sonyetka and the early Katerina. Though their immediate background is different—merchant's wife and street urchin—they both have suffered as women, and they both were in need of the love that Sergei could give. Had Sonyetka not died it would be easy to see how she would meet a similar fate to Katerina—seduced and then abandoned when her usefulness ceased. Nadezhda Welter, who was the original Sonyetka in the Leningrad production has said the following about her character, "In the last scene, it is not
so much cruelty but the daring of a degraded street urchin that dictates her image. Uncontrolled and hasty in her whims, she cruelly torments Katerina out of envy for her genuine passion; she laughs at the joys of love which she herself has never experienced.**

_Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk_ was accepted first in Moscow at the Nemirovich-Danchenko theatre and then in Leningrad at the Maly. The Leningrad Maly theatre began its staging in March of 1933, with Smolich as the director, Dmitriev as the stage designer and Samosud as the conductor; this was the same team that worked together on Shostakovich's first opera _The Nose_. Work went so well on the opera that an extremely successful private performance was given to Arkadiev—the chief of the Arts division—before its premiere to the public. The Leningrad theater premiered the opera on the twenty-second of January, 1934. Two days later _Lady Macbeth_ opened in Moscow under the baton of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenka. Strangely enough the Moscow production billed the opera as _Katerina Izmailova_ and not _Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk_. The two productions were attended by Shostakovich; publicly he supported both productions. Though privately he confided that he felt that the Leningrad production was superior because “[it] reaches the audience. It sustains the tension and interest throughout and evokes sympathy for Katerina.”

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39 Wilson, pp 100
40 Wilson, pp 100
41 ibid pp 94
42 Sollertinsky, pp. 74
43 Wilson, pp. 94-5
44 Ibid. pp.95
A year after the Leningrad premiere the theater reported a record number of fifty performances of Shostakovich’s opera. The opera ran successfully in Moscow and Leningrad for almost two years. It also was performed abroad; the London radio played extracts and performances were given in The United States, Denmark, Sweden and Czechoslovakia. Two years after the premiere, Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk had achieved such popularity that the Bolshoi Theater decided to stage a new production of the opera. It opened on December 28, 1935 under Alexander Melik-Pashayev’s conducting. At this same time the Leningrad Opera theater brought there production of Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk to Moscow. With the Leningrad additional production there were three different versions of Shostakovich’s opera going on in Moscow at once.45

Obviously people took up Shostakovich’s opera with great enthusiasm. An edict from the Leningrad state director of theaters said that it was “The most important development in Soviet Musical Theater.”46 The critics reception of Lady Macbeth was—for the most part—amazingly positive. Shostakovich’s opera was hailed as new genre unto itself; the tragic satire opera. Many seemed to feel that this composition was a giant step forward for Russian arts. Sollertinsky gave Lady Macbeth high praise saying, “One can state with absolute sincerity that since The Queen of Spades, there has been no work in the history of Russian musical drama of the scale and depth of Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk District.” The critic Ostretsov stated that “[Shostakovich] has torn off the masks and exposed the false and lying methods of the composers of bourgeois society. Shostakovich brings off with

45 Sollertinsky, pp.76.
great success a new genre of tragic satire. Finally, the conductor Nemirovch-Danchenko, who worked on the Moscow production stated, “Shostakovich’s music shows in its vividness and variety of rhythms its enormous spirit, deep lyricism and astonishing wealth of orchestral color.”

Shostakovich’s opera did not go without negative criticism; Igor Stravinsky said after his first hearing of the opera that it was, “...lamentably provincial; The music plays a miserable role as illustrator in a very embarrassing realistic style.” But this naturalism was again defended by yet another critic who said “[naturalism] originated from the desire to give the utmost extension to the subject and to better to convey the atmosphere in which the action takes place.”

The largest criticism given to the opera at the end of its two years of whirlwind successes was spoken by Zhitomirsky, on the alteration of Leskov’s original tale, but even he could not keep from praising the opera. “They removed from Leskov’s story all the poetic pages which illustrated the deluded beginnings of Katerina Izmalov’s love...they introduced primitive satire into the opera...Yet it is in the final scene of Lady Macbeth that Shostakovich revealed with incredible force the expression of human sorrow and despair of the lost soul.”

It seemed that there wasn’t a person in all of the USSR who did not love Lady Macbeth of Mzensk; but all of this was about to change.

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47 ibid pp74
48 Seroff, pp 197
50 Ibid. pp 197
51 Wilson, pp 96
52 ibid. pp 95
On January 26, 1936, Shostakovich was ordered to attend the new Bolshoi theater performance of *Lady Macbeth*. It seemed that Stalin himself would be attending. Shostakovich described the evenings events in a letter to his good friend Sollertinsky saying,

Comrade Stalin, and Comrades Molotov, Mikoyan and Zhdanov were all present. The show went very well. At the end I was called out (by the audience) and took a bow. I only regret that I did not do so after the third act. Feeling sick at heart, I collected my brief-case and went to the station.....I am in bad spirits. As you can guess I kept thinking to your namesake and what didn't happen to me.52

The last sentence of the letter is a reference Ivan Ivanovich Dzerzhinsky whose name and patronymic were identical to Sollertinsky's. He was considered a composer of limited talents, his major credit being the opera, *Quiet Flows the Don*. Stalin had recently attended a performance of this opera and during intermission had Dzerzhinsky visit him in the state box. In contrast, the government envoys had demonstratively left before the end of *Lady Macbeth*; evidently after the third act.53 Shostakovich's feelings of foreboding were correct. Two days after the walk-out the article “Muddle instead of Music” appeared in *Pravda*, the Russian party newspaper. Shostakovich’s downfall had begun.

The article “Muddle Instead of Music” was prominently displayed on the third page of *Pravda* as an unsigned editorial. It was rumored that Stalin himself had written the article as the writing was coarse—it seems he was fond of referring...
to things as "muddles", but it is also quite possible that the article was written by David Zaslavsky, who was a high ranking party official and journalist. The editorial begins by stating, "At no time and in no other place has a composer had a more appreciative audience. The people expect good songs, but also good instrumental works and operas." The article claimed that from the very beginning of the opera the listener is dismayed by dissonance which could have only been done deliberately; it is nothing more than a "confused stream of sounds." What few musical phrases appear are drowned in what the author refers to as "a grinding and squealing roar." Latter Pravda makes an analogy between Shostakovich and a man lost in the woods, "If the Composer chances to come [to a ] clear and simple melody, then immediately as though frightened he throws himself back into a wilderness of musical chaos." In other words, it is hopeless to try to listen to Lady Macbeth, "To follow this 'music' is most difficult: to remember it, impossible."

The author of "Muddle instead of music" then turned his attention as to why Shostakovich would create such a wretched work. The main theory of the author is that Shostakovich composed with the intention of "rejecting opera" and disassociating himself with anything that is traditional. Pravda declares that Shostakovich has replaced all of the beauty in opera with their polar opposite; where there should be singing there is instead, "Shrieks." Expression in Lady

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54 Testimony pp. 114
55 Pravda, pp. 3
56 ibid pp. 3
57 ibid. pp. 3
58 ibid. pp. 3
Macbeth is usurped by wild rhythm. Passion is not expressed by lyricism but by "musical noise". He continues saying, "The author [Shostakovich]... was forced to borrow from jazz its nervous, convulsive and spasmodic music in order to lend 'passion' to its characters." Here the criticism is multifaceted: obviously the author is indeed saying that Shostakovich's music is "Spasmodic", but he is also accusing him—in an underhanded way—of stealing from an American musical tradition, and in so doing he accuses both Shostakovich and Americans of writing music that is "Convulsive."

The author then attacks Shostakovich in his use of "naturalism", citing the love scenes which are accompanied by music that is described as coarse and naturalistic with its "quacks, grunts and growls". The author also found fault with the depiction of the deaths of the characters, as well as the violent beating which occurs on stage as being naturalistic.

Next the article attacks Katerina herself describing her as a "predatory merchant woman who scrambles into possession of wealth through murder [yet] is pictured as some kind of victim." It is obvious that Shostakovich's conception of Katerina as a suffering, intelligent woman "...surrounded by monsters" was not accepted by the author of the Pravda article.

The author next addresses the idea that Lady Macbeth is the beginning of a new genre of "tragic satire", and comments, "there is no question of satire

59 ibid. pp 3
60 ibid pp 3
61 ibid. pp 3
62 ibid pp 3
63 Testimony pp. 107
here." The author explains that Shostakovich is merely employing an underhanded device to try to rationalize the terrible deeds of Katerina, and intellectualize her "coarse and vulgar learnings." 64

By far the most ridiculous accusation made by the *Pravda* article was that of formalism. Formalism as a term came into general use in 1932. Anything and everything could be classified as formalistic. The perimeters of what was to be considered formalistic was set by *Pravda* and varied greatly. Most artists worked while trying to keep *Pravda*’s latest edict in mind, and if accused would immediately repent their mistake. The accusation reads, "...his music would only reach the effete ‘formalists’ who had lost their wholesome taste." 65 Later the accusation is expounded upon when the author concludes that Shostakovich abandoned the people of USSR and his duty as a composer for a more European individualistic style of music, which was base. He states, "The power of good music to infect the masses has been sacrificed to a petty-bourgeois ‘formalist’ attempt to create originality...." 66 The author backs up his claims by citing *Lady Macbeth*’s success abroad, where the audiences are bourgeois, "Is it not because the opera is absolutely unpolitical and confusing that they praise it? Is it not explained by the fact that it tickles the perverted tastes of the bourgeoisie with its fidgety, screaming neurotic music?" 67

It appears most evident to the author of this editorial that Shostakovich never once thought about what a true “soviet” audience expects in their music.

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64 *Pravda*, pp. 3
65 ibid pp. 3
66 ibid. pp 3
Though it can probably be assumed that what the author really means when he refers to the Soviet audience, is in reality the Soviet government. The author then reminds his readers of what it is the Soviet people want, "...the demands of Soviet culture [are] that all coarseness and wildness be abolished from every corner of Soviet life." In other words, naturalism and originality will not be tolerated by the government.

In summation the author makes the argument that Shostakovich does not lack musical genius, it is the absence of proper motivation which ruins his music, "All this is not due to lack of talent, or to lack of ability to depict simple and strong emotions in music. Here is music turned deliberately inside out in order that nothing will be reminiscent of classical opera or have anything in common with symphonic music or with simple and popular musical language accessible to all." A week after Pravda dropped this first bomb, a second editorial appeared denouncing Shostakovich’s ballet, The Limpid Stream. Here the criticism’s are similar, the music is said to be vulgar and stylized. As well the editorial sees Shostakovich’s composition as a national affront stating, “The music is without character...the composer apparently has only contempt for national songs...”

Before Pravda’s editorials any criticism or dislike expressed about Lady Macbeth would have been considered merely a type of “domestic quarrel” and not truly significant. When the state becomes involved in, it is entirely another

67 ibid. pp 3
68 ibid. pp 3
69 ibid. pp 3
It was plain to see that Shostakovich had inadvertently hit a nerve with the government, and that they decided to make an example out of him.

The Soviet people responded as their government expected them to. Following the two Pravda articles streams of critical letters were sent to the composer's union, with people declaring, "Down with Bourgeois aesthetics and Formalists." "Down with Formalist confusion in music." And finally, "Long live music for the millions."

It seemed necessary for the composers union to respond to events that had taken place; after all Shostakovich himself was a member of the union. The Moscow composer's union of Soviet composers summoned all of its members as well as critics to a series of "creative discussions". What should have been a fair trial turned into a hearing, as the verdict had already been handed down.

For three days-Feb. 10, 13, and 15—the Moscow composers union held session denunciating Shostakovich and his work, as well as those whom he had been influenced by, and those who he in turn influenced. The hall did not have enough room for all who wanted to attend, and at the end of the three days there were still more people left on the list of those who wished to speak.

The predominate tone of the discussions was set by Pravda's statement, "All this is not due to lack of talent, or lack of ability to depict simple and strong emotions in music." The composer's union took this to meant that they were not

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71 Martynov, pp. 207
72 ibid. pp 208
73 ibid pp. 210
to attack his talent, but his tendencies—which were in the wrong direction—were to be attacked. 74

Cheliapov began the discussion by talking about the term formalism, and its definition. He stated,

Every composition should be considered formalistic in which the composer fundamentally does not have as his aim the preventing of new social meanings, but focuses his interest only on inventing new combinations of sounds that have not been done before. Formalism is the sacrifice of the ideology and emotional content of a musical composition to the search for new tricks in the realm of musical elements, rhythm, timbre, harmonic combinations, .... This is, regrettably only a general definition, which must be fitted to each individual. 75

In the beginning the union was split into three distinct groups. The first felt that there was no necessity for change, they saw no problem with Shostakovich's music. To them, he was not a negative influence.

The second group seemed bent on destroying Shostakovich completely. They viewed him as a rival, and claimed that there was no excuse for his behavior, and no chance for redemption.

The third and largest group disagreed with Shostakovich's latest formalist compositional tendencies, but felt that if he were to abandon formalism, he would be redeemed. 76

The debates between these three groups were at first extremely tense and emotional. At first Shostakovich's friends passionately defended his music. Mikhail Chulaki said: "Personally, I liked Lady Macbeth, I still do. I can't

74 ibid. pp. 211
75 ibid. pp. 211
76 ibid. pp. 212
imagine how some comrades after an article in Pravda can say, 'No, I don't like it anymore,' when they haven't even heard it a second time." 77

The debates grew more furious, and in confusion the speakers brought up subjects that had no relation to Shostakovich. In a frenzy of self-criticism they denounced everything and eventually turned on one another. The second group, which was growing in numbers, repeatedly pronounced Shostakovich as the one responsible for all evils.

Neuhaus, head of the Moscow conservatory spoke about where Shostakovich strayed from Leskov's great tale, he said,

The difference between the Lady Macbeth of Leskov, and the Lady Macbeth of Shostakovich is great. Leskov's story is written with the heart's blood: one can feel that the man was shaken by a terrific vision, and from this comes its tremendous power, the force of the language, the poetical images. This is awe-inspiring tragedy. With Shostakovich this is all lost; it is on account of skepticism and in some place cynicism. Cynicism should not be tolerated in art.

While these heated arguments were preceding Pravda clarified its position by laying further blame upon Shostakovich's good friend and critic, Sollertinsky.

The opprobrium read as follows,

The editorials of Pravda have caught off guard the masked defenders of decayed bourgeois music. This is the reason for the bewilderment and anger of these men. The idolater of the trend which disfigured Shostakovich's music, the untiring troubador of leftist distortion, Sollertinsky, correctly appraised the situation when he declared at the session of Leningrad music critics that 'there is nothing more for him to do in Soviet musical art and that he will terminate his activities.' The mask is torn off! Sollertinsky speaks his own language. 78

77 Sollertinsky, pp. 77
78 Martynov, pp. 214
This article makes reference to the Leningrad faction of the Composer’s union, which was also meeting at this time. During the first meeting Sollertinsky publicly declared that if Shostakovich’s music was to be considered formalist and elitist than there would be nothing left worthy of being called Soviet art. Here Pravda is mocking Ostretsov who had earlier stated about Lady Macbeth “[Shostakovich] has torn off the masks and exposed the false and lying methods of the composers of bourgeoisie society.”

The composers who were in attendance at the Moscow meeting latched upon the Pravda article. Here was a way to divert attention from themselves, and place upon not just Sollertinsky but upon all music critics.

The accusations grew against Shostakovich; not only was he guilty of composing music that went against the good of the people, but he had allowed his talent to be led astray by critics. Cheliapov spoke with paranoia about works of music in their midst that they never they never realized formalist and bourgeois because of the critic’s influence. He said,

To our disgrace, some bourgeois critics gave a more correct appraisal of the work of our composers than did our own critics. A Prague paper, which is sympathetic to us, commented on the cello sonata of Shostakovich after its presentation in Prague, said that it is the perfect model of bourgeois music. And our critics never mentioned one word of this.

79 Seroff, pp 197
80 Ibid, pp 215
Cheliapov also warned against the dangers of composing for critics. He reminded his audience that "...to consider western criticism is rule by which we should measure our own soviet works is to turn everything inside out." 81

During the first two days of these "creative discussions" Sollertinsky made an attempt to boycott. He made his opening statement defending Lady Macbeth and then walked out on the Leningrad proceedings. He sat in the hallway right by the door as a way of marking his protest against the actions of Shostakovich's former "friends" and colleagues. 82 Behavior such as this was not conducive to Sollertinsky's career, as the editorial in Pravda proved.

Shostakovich was concerned for his friend and told him that he should vote for "Any resolutions" if the pressure became too much to bear. He knew that Sollertinsky would irreparably damage his career if he kept on supporting him.

Finally at the closing remarks of the composer's union meeting Sollertinsky spoke out against Shostakovich. He delivered a long speech during which he repented his sins and ripped apart Shostakovich's first opera The Nose. Sollertinsky made every effort to leave Shostakovich's name out of the speech, and didn't really address the opera Lady Macbeth except to say that he was reviewing his opinions. He ended his speech by retracting his earlier statement about there being nothing worthy left in Soviet music. He stated, "I have decided to study the musical folklore [of Russia] among which will be the folklore of the Caucasus, and am

81 Ibid pp. 215
82 Wilson, pp. 112
now studying for this purpose the Georgian language." This last remark must have made Stalin very happy as he himself was a native Georgian.

Even Shostakovich's teacher Maximilian Steinberg abandoned him. He assured everyone that he was never in favor of Shostakovich's formalist trend, saying, "When Shostakovich came to me with his Aphorisms (1927) which were an expression of the new trend Shostakovich was taking under Sollertinsky's influence, I told him that I could not understand them--that they were foreign to me. After this he did not come to see me anymore." 84

In the end there wasn't one single person who was willing to come out against Pravda's editorial. No one was willing to admit that the arguments of formalism were incoherent nonsense. All the members of the Moscow composer's union voted against supporting Shostakovich's music. It was emphasized that the editorial articles in Pravda expressed, "...the attitude of the working class toward art...". They were documents on "...the question of politics in art which have come from the party." 85 In Moscow, it had been decided that Shostakovich was beyond redemption.

The Leningrad faction of the composer's union as well took Pravda's words to heart. They took a unanimous vote in support of the Pravda editorials. They categorized Shostakovich's music as formalistic, and blamed his critics for encouraging him. Unlike Moscow, Leningrad's meetings did not degrade into a

83 Martynov, pp. 217
84 ibid. pp. 216
85 ibid. pp. 212
viscous manhunt. Instead they acknowledged that Shostakovich was wrong and informed the public that it was their hope that they could set him right again. 86

The only person who did not have a say during all this madness was Shostakovich himself. He refused to attend the debates which decided his fate, and the Soviet musical publication Sovietskaya Musica which covered the debates at the composer’s unions never printed a statement from him or a word in his defense.

His feelings on the subject of Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk were expressed in more subtle ways. Less than a year after all of these events occurred, Nicolas Slonimsky asked him to compile a list of his works. Shostakovich was to mark with asterisks those works which he did not feel were representative of his style. Here was Shostakovich’s chance to repent for his wrong doings, here was his chance to disown Lady Macbeth and be re-accepted into the Soviet mainstream. When he delivered his list to Slonimsky, Lady Macbeth stood unmarked. 87

The only statement Shostakovich made in defense of his opera occurs in a letter written to fellow composer Balanchivadze right after the voting of the composer’s unions he said,

One must have the courage not only to kill one’s work but to defend them. As it would be futile and impossible to do the latter, I am taking no steps in this direction. In any case, I am doing much hard thinking about all that has happened. Honesty is what is important. Will I have enough in store to last for long, I wonder? But if you ever learn that I have disassociated myself with Lady Macbeth you will know that I have done so one-hundred percent. I doubt that this will happen soon, however. I am a ponderous thinker and am very honest in all that concerns composition. 88

86 ibid. pp 216
87 ibid pp 217
88 Wilson, pp 113
Shostakovich obviously loved *Lady Macbeth* very much, and felt that what mattered is that he did not admit to being a formalist composer. To him that would have been a lie, and would only justify the government's, and the composer's union's behavior towards him. Shostakovich knew that all who spoke out against his work were not being honest, he knew that he alone had been "honest in all that concerns composition."\(^9\)

Although *Pravda*’s editorials and the consensus reached by the composer's unions were not official governmental bans upon all of Shostakovich's music, his music nonetheless, his music disappeared from repertoires across the country. Productions of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk* ceased. It was as if Shostakovich had never existed. There no longer was any mention of him in *Sovetskaya Musica*, except for an occasional publication of a nasty review of his music from abroad. Shostakovich, at his most lonely and desolate composed his fourth symphony, which he then did not allow to go to performance. He was too afraid of what would happen.\(^9\)

It is easy to see, musically, why Stalin would have been displeased with *Lady Macbeth*. He himself has said that the purpose of Soviet composers is to write music which expressed the ideas and passions which would motivate new soviet heroes.\(^9\) He also stated that “Music must be lyrical, must express optimistic emotions and the joy of living and not be introspective or melancholy.

\(^9\) ibid pp. 113-4  
\(^9\) Martynov, pp. 230  
\(^9\) Cooper, pp. 59
The texture must be simplistic. Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*, was the opposite of everything that Stalin felt good Soviet music ought to be; it was melancholy, introspective, angular, sarcastic, and pessimistic in its predictions.

The accusations that *Lady Macbeth* was Bourgeois, are a little harder to understand. Obviously, there is nothing bourgeois about the story; it paints the merchant middle class of the nineteenth century in a very unfavorable light. Both the text and the music shows the downtrodden servants scoffing at their masters. The symphonic music portrays the drab atmosphere and the moral sufferings of the oppressed. Shostakovich showed the idle corrupt existence of the merchant class with bitter sarcasm and irony. Why was the government whipping up all of these accusations?

What is even more puzzling about the government's reactions was that they occurred with *Lady Macbeth* and not with his first opera *The Nose*. *The Nose* (1929) received terrible reviews from almost all of the Soviet critics. One critic stated, "It cannot be considered a Soviet opera; rather an example of decadent Western traditions, of outlived genre in the process of extinction." Here was an opera that the public was deeming Bourgeoisie and yet the government left Shostakovich in peace; despite all of the accusations of western influence and negative press. Why then attack *Lady Macbeth*, a work so revered by the Soviet people? The mere fact that the Soviet government chose to become involved with *Lady Macbeth* and not *The Nose*, shows that the matter was of far more importance than a mere criticism of a musical score. After all the

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92 ibid. pp 59
government could have privately requested that Shostakovich change the score, before they destroyed his career. The articles in Pravda signified that it was of vital importance to the state itself, for Pravda was a political organ that did not as a rule, review musical events.

The answer lies firstly in the political environment of the USSR during the time that Lady Macbeth was written and produced. Prior to 1934, the Soviet government was a little more relaxed. With the end of the civil war in 1922, communist Russia settled down and by 1924 the government had declared an open policy for artists. The Soviet government allowed its artists more freedom of expression, and refused to condone monopoly by anyone particular group, and called instead for free competition among all. There for composers and painters, were, for the most part allowed to express them selves as they wished. Any disagreements amongst artists or composers was considered a domestic quarrel of sorts, and the government left them to work it out amongst themselves.

On December 1, 1934 all of this changed. Kirov, a high official of the Leningrad Soviet and a close friend to Stalin was assassinated. A wave of paranoia and fear of treason swept the country. The official report was that a conspiracy had been discovered within the soviet party ranks in Leningrad. The plan was supposedly to assassinate all of the Soviet Party leaders simultaneously. Thousands of arrests were made and about four hundred

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93 Wilson, pp 74
95 Martynov, pp 222
suicides were reported within the next few days. It was the beginning of one the first great purges. It is estimated that over seven million people were arrested between 1936 and 1939. In the end fifty of the most prominent members of the communist party were arrested. These were men who had helped to rebuild the country after the revolution, and whom the people had trusted. The arrests of these men damaged the peoples firmly entrenched belief that their leaders were above suspicion.

The trials of those arrested were held over the next two years. Reports of the trials were published by the Peoples Commissariat of Justice of the USSR. They stated that from 1936-1938, in Moscow, an outlandish plot to seize power from the Soviet leaders had been developing for the last few years by members of the communist party in high officials positions. The government manipulated the words of the accused men to explain how the conspirators in all the key positions in the Kremlin were able to "wreck" the country during the early 1930s. It was theorized that these conspirators had as their ultimate goal the defeat of the Soviet nation in a war with Germany. When Germany attacked, it would have been impossible for the Soviet Nation to mobilize any troops as the conspirators would having eliminated the heads of the government would have also dismantled the army. The Soviet people were bombarded with one distorted rumor after another, the confidence of an entire nation was smashed.

96 ibid. pp. 222
97 Martynov, pp. 223
98 ibid. pp. 223
The accusations made by the government show just how apprehensive they were about a war with Germany. Soviet Russia had been uneasily watching the spread of Fascism and the complete failure of the European powers to stop its aggression. The Soviets were aware that an invasion was imminent. Stalin knew that before he would be able to win the war, he would have to eliminate any internal weakness. The assassination of Kirov triggered Stalin to do just that.

The arrests were only the first step in the eradication of flaws. The next step was to build the self-confidence and solidarity of the Russian people. Stalin realized that he needed the Soviet people’s full support in the instance of a war. He stressed the love for “rodina” or fatherland, and reminded the Soviet people that they should be proud of who they are.

The freedom of the arts ended as Stalin now insisted that artistic talent must contribute to the socialist program. He was well aware of the influence that all forms of art could have upon the people. He realized how dangerous it was to allow artists free reign to depict the Russian character with criticism or pessimism.

It seems that the government’s reaction to Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was fueled by the practical desire to make an example out of him. If they could reprimand Shostakovich it would be very likely that the other composers would fall in line.

So concerned was the government of making an example of Shostakovich’s experiences that an entire propaganda play was written about it. The play, *Ilya Golovin*, written by Sergei Mikhalkov depicts Shostakovich’s
downfall after Lady Macbeth. The story is blatant in its message and reference to Shostakovich that it would be impossible for anyone to miss the example that the government was making out of him.

The main character (Shostakovich) is named Golovin—which in Russian means cerebral, or villain—is shown living the life of luxury. He and his wife are petty and elitist. A critic is present (Sollertinsky), and he pointedly quotes American lionizations of Golovin's works. Life is disrupted when Golovin finds an attack against himself in Pravda, calling his work, "incomprehensible and formalist". The critic makes a hasty exit, and his daughter enters. Being a "good earnest communist" she informs her father that Pravda was right.

Golovin is now hiding because he is too much of a coward to face his critics. Everyone has deserted him, and he listens to American radio programs which praise him calling him "he great composer who is being persecuted in the USSR." An old Red Army friend arrives, and urges to compose music like he used to. He has brought his men with him and they sing a melodious early work by Golovin. Golovin cries and professes to see the light. He immediately sets to work on a non-formalist piano concerto.

The ending shows a changed modest Golovin, returning from a "fighters for peace" in Paris. He tells his wife how moved he was to witness an enormous demonstration in which "five hundred thousand men, women, and children
cheered Stalin." Golovin then delivers a monologue in praise of Stalin and there ends the play.99

For his amazing portrayal of the "truth" about Shostakovich, the United States and Stalin, Sergei Mikhailkov earned the Stalin prize for drama in 1949. A year after that he was given a permanent appointment RFSFR writers’ union as first secretary.100

Making an example out of Shostakovich was only one of the reasons why the government could have felt it necessary to make accusations against Shostakovich’s work. Shostakovich was popular with the people. The mere fact that his opera could play successfully in three separate theaters in the same city proves how revered he was. He was in a position to have a great influence over many people. This must have been very threatening to Stalin. There was only room for one man of power in his government.

What was probably even more threatening was the message that Shostakovich sends in his opera. At first glance Lady Macbeth seems to deal with the shortcomings of the merchant class, but a closer examination reveals a slightly different interpretation.

He has said, "So you see that even though my opera’s plot did not deal with out glorious reality, actually there were many points of contact, you have to

100 ibid.
look for them.” In Shostakovich’s sarcastic portrayal of life in the Tsarist regime there are several “points of contact” that could easily be applied to the Soviet state. The police, could easily be the soviet police. Shostakovich’s nasty portrayal of them as self-inflated and persecuting intellectuals, would not have sat well with Stalin.

Another possible “point of contact” is with the church. The Soviet state eliminated much of the Church’s power, and Shostakovich’s depiction of the blubbering priest could easily represent the priests who no longer spoke for themselves, but rambled party nonsense.

The final parallel that could be drawn between Tsarist Russia and Soviet Russia is with the prisoners. The suffering which is shown at the end of the opera could easily be the many people who were arrested by Stalin during his first great purge. When Shostakovich speaks of a legacy built on the suffering of and exploitation of the common people, he could be speaking of those who toiled daily for the benefit of the state with no reward.

*Lady Macbeth* is also the story of an individual’s struggle; a woman who is in conflict with her environment and finds that it is only by committing violent crimes that she becomes free. This notion of acceptable violence for the sake of individuality is not singular to Shostakovich. Nicholas Till in *Mozart and the Enlightenment*, speaks about this particular role of the protagonist,

For the rebels without cause of Strum und Drang the problem was how the individual could maintain his personal integrity in a society that exerted

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101 *Testimony*, pp. 109
102 Wren, pp. 609
103 Shostakovich, pp. 3
all its powers to dispossess him of it. In many Strum und Drang works an apparently criminal deed is seen as evidence of the possession of sincere emotion—the sign of a potentially great soul."104

Katerina is this individual which Till speaks of. She is not recognized by her society. At the opening of the opera she is a woman who passively sleeps her days away. She becomes a heroine because she is able to break free from a life which was so desperately holding her back. The extremes that she goes to alter her circumstances only proves how trapped she was. Katerina metamorphoses from a woman whose fate is decided by those around her to a woman who is actively involved in making her own fate. It is Katerina who kills Boris, and it is Katerina who initiates Zinoviy's murder.

Katerina is the extreme embodiment of the idea that the need of the individual is greater than the need of the collective. Shostakovich himself has said that with Katerina he is "more interested in the individual."105 This can be seen in his blatant depiction of sexual love, when his society regarded such things as anti-social. Sexuality itself is the most personal form of individuality. Katerina was a woman who needed to be loved, and did not care of what others thought about her needs. All that mattered to her was herself and Sergei, and in her selfish individuality she becomes the heroine of the opera. She sacrifices everything she has known for a love which brings her individuality. Though she feels remorse for the wrongs she has done, she at the same time refuses to go back her previous life of submission and drudgery; that is, a life without freedom and a life without love.

These are ideas that were not safe to express in Soviet Russia. It would seem that the government knew what Shostakovich was saying in his opera, and they retorted by extolling the need of the many and accused Shostakovich of the most horrible crime of all; originality.  

On November 21, 1937 Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony was premiered. *Pravda* now doted on him, speaking of the "grandiose vistas of the tragically tense Fifth Symphony with its philosophical search." Shostakovich was lucky, his Symphony was taken to be a portrayal of the triumph of the human spirit. Shostakovich was amazed for that was not what the Symphony was about at all.

Latter in his life he talked about the meaning behind the symphony,

The rejoicing [in the Fifth Symphony] is forced, created under threat... It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, "Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing," and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, "Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing."

Shostakovich wrote the Fifth Symphony just as he had written *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, with honesty. He stood by his compositional work, even though it meant professional suicide. He was reinstated to the Government's good graces, even though he never gave into their pressure. His nightmare was temporarily over.

It is easy to see why Shostakovich felt so much empathy for Katerina. They both lived their lives governed by their passions. They both believed that a

\[105*\] Testimony, pp. 107
\[106*\] Pravda, pp. 3
\[107*\] Wilson, pp. 231
\[108*\] Testimony, pp. 183
life without passion was not worth living. They both realized the power of individuality, and they both would rather sacrifice all that they had than to live a stagnant life without passion, governed by anyone other than themselves.

Katerina needed Sergei and in a sense, Shostakovich needed Katerina.

After many years of strife, Shostakovich was still able to look back upon his opera with love. In his most elegant description of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*, Shostakovich speaks of a life that most certainly was his as well as hers,

"It's about how love could have been if the world weren't full of vile things. It's the vileness that ruins love. And the laws, and the properties and the financial worries and the police state."^{109}

^{109} *Testimony*, pp. 108


---*About my Opera*: Notes from the libretto of the Nemirovich-Damchenko production. Translated by Gurfasky. 1934.


*Pravda* translated by, Oakley, M. Moscow: January 28, 1936.