

Against Formalism and ‘Leftist’ Ugliness in Art

In the upbringing of a new socialist, art plays a huge role. This is why questions about art and its creative development are so important to the Leninist Young Communist League. Members cannot stand apart from Soviet art, one must know his tasks, and must contribute to its flowering. This relates fully to all Soviet youths. It is unsurprising therefore, that the speeches of ‘Pravda’ about the compositions of the composer Shostakovich – the opera ‘Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District’ and the ballet ‘The Bright Stream’ – deeply concern the Soviet youth and put in front of them a series of serious issues.

Indeed, what is it about these works, and why are they subjected to such harsh criticism from the central organ of the Party? ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District’ – an opera, is written about a story of the same name by Leskov. However, the composer Shostakovich completely changed the basic plot of Leskov’s story, and in his words, set himself the task of rehabilitating the heroine of the story – the merchant’s wife Katherine Izmailova. The merchant’s wife Katherine Izmailova is represented by Leskov as an evil, carnivorous creature, a child-killer, towering over the foul environment and the dark kingdom. Shostakovich, by all means, tries to make the Soviet public sympathise with the crude, half-animal image of Katherine Izmailova.

Followed by convulsive, hysterical, clanking and roaring music, people wander across the stage, whose whole lives go by in food, drunkenness and debauchery. It is characterised by the expressiveness of Shostakovich’s music, which must portray the love of the clerk Sergei and the merchant’s wife Katherine Izmailova, or the scene of the torture of Sergei in a formalist way. Music in this opera is turned inside out, turned into a crippling tearing noise for ears, and is a collection of chaotic sounds.

But no better is the music of the ballet ‘Bright Stream’. The authors of this ballet aim to portray kolkhoz life, and kolkhoz holidays. But they did not bother to study ballet or the life of kolkhoz farmers. They added the old ballet cliché to the new plot, and on the scene arose a vulgar and puppet-like show. The ballet’s falsehood and nonsense prevails on both the stage and the orchestra. But perhaps, in ‘Bright Stream’ it is clearly obvious why the composer builds his own music in a formalist way, because of the foibles and tricks that he gives out and takes from contemporary music. He does not know or appreciate national creations, and doesn’t like or respect the musical language of the people. But meanwhile, the history of world-wide musical culture, and all art, teaches us that only these artistic works (which are inseparably linked with national creations, national poetry, songs and etc.), are important. This thought was expressed brilliantly by the great Russian critic Belinsky, writing that:

‘National character is not just a virtue, but an essential condition for a truly creative work: if by national character, we are to understand the truth of the depiction of morals, customs and character of one or another nation, of this or that country’

But this is nowhere to be found in Shostakovich’s work. ‘Lady Macbeth’, ‘Bright Stream’ and things like them are unable to deliver any joy to us at all. They do not carry with themselves realistic images, they are devoid of lively language and full of sickly, savage, ugly images. Look at the brilliant works of classical masters, and you will see that, together with great joy of aesthetic pleasure, they bring current knowledge, evoking thoughts about how to live. After all, in the words of Belinsky, ‘art consciousness can help no less than science’. But only this art, which in a highly artistic form truthfully depicts reality, only such art is loved by the masses.

'It should leave its deepest roots in the thick of the wide, working masses'

-Lenin

Exposing the lack of principles, poverty of ideas, the 'Leftist' ugliness seen in 'Lady Macbeth', and the falseness and puppetry seen in 'Bright Stream' is essential not just in music, but in paintings, sculpture, theatre, playwriting and literature. Indeed, formalist gamesmanship, together with crude naturalism, finds itself a place in artistic exhibitions, on the stage of the theatre, and in literary publications. Everyone still wants to convince us that a wooden mannequin with huge shoulders and a tiny head is better and more beautiful than a sculptural portrayal of a living person, but the wonderful beauty of the mighty human body is stored in classic clear proportions. How often lack of talent and pitiful ignorance hide behind formal innovation!

However, critics are sometimes unable to expose the lack of talent of artists who cram their work with countless gimmicks and flourishes. There was once an exhibition of the artist Barto in Moscow, filled with dark daubs in the frames. Absolutely nobody could understand what the artist shows in his paintings, and only the critics went, gasped and admired them, just like in the witty tale of A. Tolstoy, 'The Pig-Artist'. Even now, the school of Filinov in Leningrad has not disappeared, having gained scandalous glory with its portrayals of six-legged tarantula-like people, with heads but without skulls.

We have people coming forward, fearfully astounded that, in the opera of Shostakovich, both the naturalism and formalism are exposed at the same time. It is said that formalism and naturalism are phenomena that are mutually exclusive of one another. But in fact, naturalism and formalism are brothers, and often accompany one another. This is easily seen reading, for example, several chapters of the work of a Western-European arch-formalist. Excerpts from this, apparently, as the best example of literature, are published by the Moscow journal 'Foreign Literature'. This work is written in such English, that he does not understand the English themselves; and the style reminds one of delirious ravings of a crazy linguist, stirring up all well-known languages in a monstrous mixture. However, the obliging translator still tried as hard as possible to clearly recount the disgustingly natural scene of the hero of the story's visit to the toilet and all physiological details of this visit. Not by chance, we mentioned Jones:

'The petty bourgeois Western roots of formalism are clear to us in all its forms and transformations. Undercover, crawling slowly and slyly, dragging our country to a poisonous rot, to a formalist mould.'

Not without reason, the 'untiring troubadour' of 'Leftist Ugliness', Sollertinsky, glorified the formless, wild music of the decadent German composer Alban Berg, and the psychopathic nonsense of the composer Krenek. And even now, we have people quietly admiring the most reactionary of the works of the emigrant composer Stravinsky, his 'Symphony of Psalms', full of orthodox Catholic spirits, whose headline bears the dedication: *'In the name of Almighty God'*.

'In art, the dead hold the living in their grasp, especially, when we do not fight hard enough against the tendencies of the hostile-class, which are arising in art, or which are filtering through to us from the bourgeoisie formalists of the capitalist West, and are sometimes carefully-masked by all kinds of 'Hallelujah' verbiage.'

There are people, who do not understand at all, nor want to understand. Uninvited lawyers, trying to defend the errors of Shostakovich, make an effort to prove that 'they beat the

talented composer' and others in the same spirit. The remarkable Soviet pianist and pedagogue, professor Heinrich Neuhaus, at the meeting of Moscow's composers, said correctly that:

'The young composer Shostakovich must have the greatest gratitude for the party because it corrected him on time, and showed him the correct way.'

Shostakovich should in his creation entirely free himself from the disastrous influence of the ideologists of the 'Leftist Ugliness' type of Sollertinsky and take the road of truthful Soviet art, to advance in a new direction, leading to the sunny kingdom of Soviet art.

There are however people wishing in their own way to return the huge movement of Soviet art, wishing to direct it to the incorrect course. There are very few of them, but they should receive a strong rebuke. At the same meeting, the former head of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians, L. Lebedinsky, stood out, trying to retroactively rehabilitate the direction condemned by the party. Lebedinsky has tried to falsify the problem of the creation of Soviet musical classics, claiming that the late composer Davydenko was a Soviet model. He had courage to publicly call for Soviet composers to follow the orientation of Davydenko, and 'his direction'.

There is no doubt that Davydenko himself, if he was alive, would sharply protest against the attempts to return Soviet music to this path, from which Davydenko distanced himself in his own posthumous and highly-talented works. No, the vulgarisers and simplifiers will not succeed in twisting Soviet music from its path.

Never before have perspectives of Soviet art been so bright and clear, as they are today. The words of the leader of the people, of comrade Stalin; of the leader of the Soviet government, comrade Molotov; with the composer Dzerzhinsky and conductor Samosud, and the central organ of the Party's criticism of the opera and ballet of Shostakovich; set up great and difficult tasks for Soviet Art. Socialist realism in art can be born only to the fertile, rich juices and forces of the soil of the national creation. The combination of the great skill of past classics with the simple, immensely rich, mighty and clear language of the national, artistic creation, -- only such a combination can give birth to art of a high, socialist realism. To learn from Shakespeare and Beethoven, from Pushkin and Glinka, Ostrovsky and Mussorgsky, to draw upon the inexhaustible source of the creation of all people of our homeland – here is the task of the workers of art, from the young student to the grey master.

'Komsomolskaya Pravda' 14th February 1936.

Translated from the Russian by Nikhil Sharma.