

London dances to Russia's tunes

Ismene Brown

Last Updated: 5:04PM BST 14 Jul 2006

[Previous](#)

1 of 2 Images

[Next](#)

Igor Belsky's ballet Leningrad Symphony, set to Shostakovich's Seventh

As London prepares for a festival of Russian ballet, music and opera, Ismene Brown talks to the powers behind the Mariinsky's Shostakovich celebrations

A revelatory close encounter with the most misunderstood and tragic giant in classical music is about to be held in London. The giant - with his white, shuttered face, and eyes blinking through thick glasses at a hostile world - spent his life pouring out music that was seized upon by officials, musicians and critics to see what political messages could be extracted from it. He was Dmitri Shostakovich, and there was no one quite like him.

More heated and intemperate debates have been held about the Soviet Union's master composer than any other: about whether this symphony glorifies Stalin or whether that string quartet is code for fierce dissidence. You'd think it impossible to listen to a note of his music without an Enigma machine at your side.

Valery Gergiev, the director of the Mariinsky (formerly Kirov) Theatre, has come up with a grand plan to rebut these fatuities, commanding, on the centenary of the composer's birth, a fabulous spread of Shostakovich's work to be set before the world's cities. All 15 Shostakovich symphonies are being performed, under Gergiev's own baton (at the Barbican), along with all his less well known operas and ballets, in a celebration that the conductor hopes will convince the world to see the composer differently. London receives the most generous (and colossally expensive) share of the festivities: Gergiev is bringing no fewer than 420 Mariinsky players, dancers and opera singers for a 10-day £1 million season at the London Coliseum.

Most of the stage works are new to Britain. The early ones buzz with an acid contemporary satire, a brash, young, Spitting Image type of mockery and comment that makes for extremely entertaining theatre, as well as raising difficult questions about how to stage them today. The later "Soviet" productions from the chilly 1960s are the work of a sick, cowed Shostakovich moulded into more "acceptable" form.

Much as Gergiev wants to throw the focus on music, not politics, what made Shostakovich such a great theatre composer was that he was a cutting-edge political commentator, long before he became the subject of political commentary himself. His first splurge of operas and ballets - *The Nose*, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, *The Golden Age*, *The Bolt* - all written before he was 30, show an awesome talent, capable of both piercing tragedy and surreal parody. The Broadwayish melodiousness of 1960s works, such as the Offenbachian operetta, *Moscow Cheryomushki*, or the cartoonish ballet *The Young Lady and Hooligan*, prove that no one could write a sweeter tune than Shostakovich, either, when required by monstrous politicians with cloth ears.

The question is, whether he should have. It's a question that, in this festival, Gergiev doesn't intend to answer. "I don't force myself to think that everything I hear should be linked to everything I can read about it," he says. "I think the music itself is the issue. So I try to make an effort to hear it as if it wasn't 'told' many times, with someone saying, 'this is the way to hear this music', or 'on this page it says Hitler five times, there it says Stalin 10 times'. This doesn't help me, personally."

The conductor hopes it is the younger, unfettered Shostakovich in a young, still relatively untainted Soviet Union who will at last be recognised by a Western public until now distracted (and rather put off) by the constant political debate.

"Shostakovich grew up in a city where there were fantastic, unbelievable figures around, like Eisenstein or Meyerhold," says Gergiev. "Everybody still remembered Rimsky-Korsakov and Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Pavlova, Chaliapin. And Shostakovich knew very well what Stravinsky was composing in Europe - my own teacher lent him his score of Petrushka.

"That period following the Civil War, the early '20s, was a tremendous creative time. All these designers, poets, Futurists, people producing sensational works, they were brutal in a way, hungry, eager to change things - they didn't know what would happen in six or seven years. No one knew who Josef Stalin was. When Prokofiev came back [from Paris] in 1927, he found Petersburg a phenomenal city, he found artistic juices there more powerful than in the West.

"So I welcome it if you listen for this in the music, rather than listening for Stalin or Zhdanov."

The heavy, tired irony of Gergiev is partly thanks to his shattering work rate (he is trying to refurbish the Mariinsky Theatre and build new concert halls, while whirling around the world conducting virtually everything the prolific Shostakovich wrote for orchestral forces). Partly, too, it is thanks to the national habit of double-speak that Russians developed in Soviet times - officials delving between the lines of banal talk to infer inner thoughts, citizens speaking in code.

Visiting St Petersburg last month for the Mariinsky's White Nights music festival, I found local audiences just as interested as in rediscovering their problematic national icon in their own new-world terms.

With her moon-pale skin and long, slender limbs, Uliana Lopatkina is the most addictively exalting of the Mariinsky's classical ballerinas, but she too is swept up in the Shostakovich experience. She will be dancing for the first time the Young Girl in Igor Belsky's rarely performed 1962 ballet, Leningrad Symphony, to Shostakovich's epic Seventh war symphony.

Now aged 32, she was a baby when the composer died, but her grandparents knew all about this work, its 1942 première broadcast over national radio to exhort a starving, dying Leningrad, heroically enduring the monstrous 900-day siege by Hitler's army.

"I regret so much not having danced this work before," she tells me. "I love this Seventh symphony so much, I grew up with it from childhood, and it's a dream come true to perform it."

In her fervour, this exquisitely refined artist so lost control of her emotions in a recent rehearsal that she smacked herself hard across the face, cutting her lip. "My teacher wept with me; she said, 'This is in the music.' I feel I have the chance to live our grandparents' life a little bit - to feel like them just a little, to understand this terrible news that their lives had so drastically collapsed, their dreams destroyed, and all tenderness, hopes, family life, all the things that any young person dreams about, are destroyed."

I wonder how she judges Shostakovich's life. She answers: "If you had a gift like his, if you were a witness of those events and his circumstances, you might understand how it was for him, but you could never enter the composer's soul even so."

This desire to slough the burden of guilt that Shostakovich himself was often so willing to bear permeates Gergiev's enterprise, evident in the new stagings. But how can a 1930s satire or a 1960 "approved" operetta be restaged now, with hindsight muddying everything up? For the 1930 football-ballet score *The Golden Age*, the current management ducked the question by asking Noah Gelber, a young American choreographer ignorant of the ballet's history, to come up with a "fresh" approach. This is an example of an ideal communist libretto being set to music by a subversive composer. It's hilarious to listen to, its sharpness highlighted by the staging's muzzily evasive (though still football-centred) sentimentalism.

Inevitably the big ballet scores will remain the most frustrating - how to handle their satire poses great intellectual challenges, and the music demands choreographers with the bravura skills to match its energy, character-colour, referential jokes and inquisitiveness.

By contrast, the operas need less help. *The Nose* is a blast of acidulous fun, with a superb libretto (Gogol's story), begging for a British staging. Moscow, Cheryomushki, about the council flat waiting list, is extraordinary - *EastEnders* meets Offenbach. Those who love the great *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* have a rare chance to see the composer's 1960s rewrite of it, Katerina Izmailova, which he did in order to get the opera off the banned list - it has less sex, less social provocation, but perhaps a different sort of pain.

When Gergiev conducts both - Katerina Izmailova at the Coliseum, and Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk at the Proms - it will be a gift for analysis: whether, as he puts it, "the Katerina Izmailova revision introduces a total failure, or a wise move from such a great man."

If listeners can find an answer to that question from the Mariinsky's heartwarminglly extravagant enterprise, it may begin to undo a lifetime of misunderstanding. IB

- The Mariinsky Theatre's 'Shostakovich on Stage' is at the London Coliseum, July 20-29.
- The Bolshoi Ballet performs 'The Bright Stream', Royal Opera House, Aug 10-11.
- 'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk', BBC Prom 49, Aug 20.
- Gergiev's Barbican Shostakovich symphony cycle continues until Dec 6.
- 'Shostakovich on Film', Barbican, Sept-Dec (020 7638 8891).

- **Related Articles**

- [**The jewel in the Bolshoi's crown**](#)
- [**Richard Arnell**](#)
- [**Isadora Duncan: sublime or ridiculous?**](#)
- [**Maurice B?jart**](#)
- [**Olga Lepeshinskaya**](#)
- [**Russia threatens to bar Europeans who deny Red Army 'liberated' them**](#)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3653821/London-dances-to-Russias-tunes.html>