



Bolshoi's dazzling bolt from the blue

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A ballet score by Shostakovich received its world première at the weekend – 74 years after it was written. Ismene Brown reports from Moscow

The Moscow winter is long, and the snow falls almost continually. February is an unpicturesque month, as dirty snow banks up either side of the treacherous roads and life-threatening pavements; to keep them clear through the winter is evidently one of those pointless tasks.

One might well think that Russia's Soviet legacy is no less difficult to clear a path through. But a titanic job of clearance was achieved last weekend – the world première of one of the 20th century's greatest ballet scores by one of the titans of music. Russia's

one of the 20th century's greatest ballet scores by one of the giants of music, Russia's controversial genius Dmitri Shostakovich.

For the first time in 74 years his 1931 score *The Bolt* rang out from a theatre pit, and its story was told in ballet on the stage above, in a new production by the Bolshoi Ballet. The occasion's official importance was emphasised by the presence a few seats away from me of Shostakovich's widow, Irina, and two dozen Russian TV channels. Not far away were the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and his wife, the singer Galina Vishnevskaya, close friends of Shostakovich, who died in 1975, worn out by years of struggle under his Soviet masters.

Even if the new production by the Bolshoi's director-choreographer Alexei Ratmanský lacks the biting satirical originality that surely was present in the original staging, the first night was a dazzling and overwhelmingly moving occasion.

This is captivating theatrical music by a stupendous young composing talent, full of acid caricature and robust comedy, not yet weighed down with the shadows and storms that were soon to break into his life.

It also stands at a crossroads in Russian ballet theatre, fascinatingly representing a road not taken. *The Bolt* is the last post on a road into modern ballet that the Soviet Union recoiled from, while Europe and America forged ahead.

But a world première? After 74 years? In circumstances that could have occurred only in the early Soviet Union, the first full performance of *The Bolt*, in the Kirov Theatre, Leningrad, on April 8 1931, was its last. It is still debated whether this was the official première or the final dress rehearsal, but certainly the press were out in force, and the theatre management were expecting trouble.

They got it. The audience erupted in competing catcalls and applause, and the official critics gave it a frightful mauling for its un-Soviet lack of ingratiation.

The horrified theatre management hastily pulled it off and substituted the classical warhorse *Don Quixote*. The ballet score was never published, and the incident was described as one of Shostakovich's "most serious formalist errors".

What was so terrible about *The Bolt*? Shostakovich and the acclaimed avant-garde choreographer Fedor Lopukhov found it very hard to understand. After all, this everyday tale of an idle worker who tries to get even for being sacked by throwing a bolt into the factory machine was plumb in line with the fashion for industrial entertainments.

The drive for post-revolutionary progress was well in swing in the late '20s when a rash of factory incidents by disgruntled, underpaid workers put the wind up the Soviet regime. They commanded composers and playwrights to inspire the people to less bourgeois behaviour.

Key achievements in the musical genre included Avramov's Factory Hooters Symphony and the TurkSib symphony, dedicated to the construction of the Turkmenistan-Siberian railway, by Shostakovich's own teacher, Max Steinberg.

Young Shostakovich was, at 24, the golden boy of Soviet composition, and it would be another five years before he was attacked by Josef Stalin as a musical criminal. He had already divided opinion the year before with a ballet about football, *The Golden Age*, but even veteran musicians knew him to be the brightest light in new music.

The Bolt's story was harder-going than Soviets beating Fascists at football. Shostakovich told a friend: "Comrade Smirnov has read me the libretto... Its theme is extremely relevant. There once was a machine. Then it broke down (problem of material decay). Then it was mended (problem of revitalisation), and at the same time they bought a new one. Then everybody dances around the new machine. Apotheosis. This all takes up three acts."

This was not the time to be anti-social and refuse so high-profile a commission. Besides, composer and choreographer saw an opportunity for fun here. They made the idler a comic anti-hero, and the story was embellished with workplace aerobics, acrobatics, dancing machines, plenty of the latest jazz dance, and a scene satirising the church.

The climax would have the workshy saboteur unmasked and a rousing factory pageant showing the USSR's omnipotence. All this Lopukhov choreographed in a new, grotesque, anti-ballet style with daring lifts and splits, and observational vernacular comedy.

It was in similar spirit that Shostakovich made the music for Soviet bureaucrats, industrial negotiators and the hordes of virtuous Young Communists – wonderful cartoon portraits using wheedling bassoons, harrumphing horns and pernickety xylophones. Turning its back on old-fashioned story-telling, *The Bolt* was a mocking vaudeville of separate numbers with splendidly graphic titles: "The Installation of the Machines Pantomime", "Dance of the Women in Shabby Coats", "The Naval Disarmament Conference" and "The Red Army dances".

But, unknown to the creators, times were changing. The damning epithet "formalist" was being coined and was being hung around Shostakovich's neck; "socialist realism" was soon to sweep away satire and unruly young imagination, and the dour years of having to please petty official opinion were about to set in.

After *The Bolt*, Shostakovich composed one more ballet, *The Bright Stream*, in 1935, using some of the *Bolt* music. Following closely on Stalin's condemnation of his shocking opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in early 1936, another article appeared in *Pravda* a few weeks later about *The Bright Stream*.

The article was probably written by the new head of Leningrad ballet, Agrippina Vaganova – a great classical conservator, but extremely narrow-minded – and it was titled "Ballet Lies".

Shostakovich's disgrace meant certain burial for his most visual scores, the operas and ballets. He hated the idea of theatre music being played without the stagings they were written for (and *The Bolt* is far from the only major ballet score to be stalled by the failure of its choreography – *Swan Lake* and *Romeo and Juliet* both flopped in their first stagings).

Without the stagings, the ballets became invisible. Half a century later *The Golden Age* was to be re-choreographed at the Bolshoi by Yuri Grigorovich, but though he also started on *The Bolt* its music was unpublished and incomplete. Not until 1995, when the Russian conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky, a deep supporter of Shostakovich, recorded the full ballet in Sweden, did the music finally resurface.

Ratmansky, the Bolshoi's director, is new in his job, a young man aiming to move the world's largest company out of old habits and reconsider its past with new eyes. With Shostakovich's centenary occurring next year, Ratmansky set about bringing all three ballets back to the stage: choreographing *The Bright Stream* last year and now *The Bolt*, and restaging Grigorovich's *The Golden Age* next year.

The Bolt is much the trickiest to stage, because of its mischievous outlook. There was an edge and robustness to the thinking of young Soviet artists in that time that is quite absent now. The satire on church and village values that animated Lopukhov and Shostakovich in 1931 could not, insists Ratmansky, be reimaged now – because the church is now beloved in Russia, even among politicians.

That difficulty with imaginatively identifying with stresses and forces of the Soviet '20s made Ratmansky decide it would not be possible to revive the old designs either, even from the sparkling sketches of costumier Tatiana Bruni.

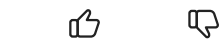
I was sorry about this, since, though Semyon Pastukh and Galina Solovieva's new designs are splendidly atmospheric, with vast, lurching robots and cute, Spearmint Rhino-type Red Army girls, they lack the graphic flair of the Soviet Constructivist period, and Ratmansky's choreography is retrospectively modern-classical. The impression, paradoxically in these progressive political times, is of ballet art going backwards.

I also found it sad that some of Russia's painful, more recent past had not been seized upon – especially after I heard from Ratmansky about his school lessons in atheism and the mandatory allegiance of all priests to the KGB throughout the Soviet era. But then it takes a certain kind of mind, perhaps a Pina Bausch or a Matthew Bourne, to use dance now as a medium for satire.

Ratmansky told me that he could not hope to recreate that 1931 ballet, but he wanted to repair a wrong. "We wanted to create a new ballet, give life to the ballet music of Shostakovich, put a piece of history back on stage."

Though I hope other choreographers will give sharper visual style to this unusual and instantly appealing music, I feel that Ratmansky deserves the highest credit here. He may not have produced a definitive new Bolt, but he has given the full ballet score to the world to play with, a marvellous gift.

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