

**An Analysis of Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District**

Kyler A. Effner

Ball State University

HONR 189: Music and Power

Professor Galit Gertsenzon

4/30/2026

## **An Analysis of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District***

Shostakovich's famed opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, was initially greeted by praise and renown for its inventive storytelling, bold themes and daring topics, along with the timeliness with which it coincided with the Soviet sexual revolution (WELLS, 2001). However, public success was rather finite for the piece, as a singular review in a Soviet magazine tore down the opera's credibility and legacy within a few paragraphs and painstakingly penned alliteration. Consequently, Shostakovich, along with many other famous musicians, artists, and authors, was shunned by Soviet society — an act that left the composer fearing for his life (Mulcahy, 1984). The question remains though, why exactly was the opera shunned and banned throughout the country despite its relevance and resonance with the Soviet citizens? It could be argued that the Soviet regime, and in turn Stalin, were extremely adamant about cultivating Soviet culture and the way it was presented to those within the country, as well as those on the global scale. Ultimately, the banning of the opera was a result of the violent and sexual nature of its contents, the depressive theme and ending, and the experiential nature of the music that was riddled with dissonance and other more modern musical elements — all of which directly contradicted the proposed and preferred portrayal of Soviet culture and society.

### **Soviet Sexual Revolution and Shostakovich**

*Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* was notable in its depiction of both violence and sexual dalliances among the characters. However, the depiction of Katerina as a sexual entity and the music accompanying these scenes was partially a result of content within the novella that inspired the opera, and the current sexual revolution taking place in the Soviet Union. This time period within the country was characterized by increased sexual freedoms for men and a general callousness toward women, leading to rape and prostitution becoming increasingly more

common. Contraception at this time was virtually nonexistent and abortions were virtually illegal as well, resulting in massive amounts of abandoned children that began to tour the countrysides and cities in gangs. On the opposite side of the coin, divorce rates began to triple from 1924-1927, and many women began to speak about what the new Russian woman could look like (WELLS, 2001). It was these “new ideas about the roles of sex and love in Soviet society, and male-female relationships in particular, [that] exacerbated the conditions and added to societal confusion” (WELLS, 2001, p. 177). This confusion and changing ideals surrounding the sexual nature of those within the Soviet Union, especially women, was a large part of the discussion surrounding Shostakovich’s opera and its crude sensibilities.

The work was intended to portray a new Soviet society which ended up putting the opera in the center of ideological clashes within the country, specifically surrounding love and sex. Scenes such as the harassment of Aksinya, the maid in Katerina’s household, as well as the love scenes between Katerina and Sergei, led the opera to be more overtly sexual than the source material. This is also partially due to Shostakovich’s composition of Sergei’s initial advancement toward Katerina. The music used during this particular scene was described as “naturalistic” of sex and violence in the *Pravda* article. The use of trombone in the love sequences accentuates this, as jazz was popular among many Soviets, but also was associated with dancing and consequently moral corruption at this time. Therefore, the use of jazz sequences and trombone to illustrate Sergei’s mood was rather scandalous. Additionally, the music emphasizes the insinuation that the first love scene between Katerina and Sergei is a rape scene. Katerina sings that she wishes for Sergei to leave her alone and let her go, echoing the lyrics sung by Aksinya as Sergei harasses her. Eventually, Katerina ceases to sing and the trombone slides down to finish the song, and therefore the “act of love” (WELLS, 2001).

While the problematic sexual behavior conducted by Sergei, including his harassment, presumed rape of Katerina, and eventual switch to another woman after him and Katerina are sent to Siberia, could be the presumed culprit to offend Stalin's tender sensibilities. It is rather assumed that the heroine reminded him too much of a disliked colleague. Alexandra Kollontai had many theories surrounding the "new Soviet woman," many of which Stalin disagreed with or openly opposed. It is thought that Shostakovich based many of Katerina's actions, specifically in regard to her sexual nature, off of the theories Kollontai held in regard to women in the Soviet Union (WELLS, 2001). After Stalin's death, Shostakovich revised the opera so that it held less vulgarity, and even changed the name to *Katerina Ismailova* (Taruskin, 1989).

### **Shostakovich's Career**

Shostakovich had been an early supporter of the Russian Revolution, and his early symphonies were seen as the "darling" of the Soviet cultural establishment (Mulcahy, 1984). However, the government's praise of his work did not remain steady throughout his career. *Lady Macbeth* was a monumental success throughout the country upon its debut, but after Stalin attended one of its performances and left halfway through, sentiment began to change. An article in *Pravda* was released the next day, without an author, criticizing the story, the music, and by extension Shostakovich. This marked the beginning of cultural repression in regards to musicians within the Soviet Union (Mulcahy, 1984).

*Pravda* set the precedent for operatic composition, claiming that each piece should have a socialist theme approved by the Party, must contain a positive plot and/or happy ending, and the music must be realistic with no modern musical elements. Essentially, the article ceased the revolution among music and other art forms throughout the Soviet Union, effectively allowing for Stalin to dictate the correctness of art. Shostakovich had previously been known for his

inventive melodies, including those contained in *Lady Macbeth* (Mulcahy, 1984). The opera was characterized by a combination of traditional Russian folk sounds, songs reminiscent of music halls, and military bands or circuses. As a composer, Shostakovich had used these differing melodies to highlight Katerina as a deserving heroine surrounded by fools and those out to get her. While his inventive approach to composition and the soaring melodies or lack thereof aided in the storytelling of the opera, it was condemned by *Pravda*, and therefore no longer allowed within the Soviet musical sphere (Taruskin, 1989).

Shostakovich was one of the first victims of the new approach to art, but certainly not the last (Taruskin, 1989). *Lady Macbeth* became Shostakovich's second and final opera; however, the events that resulted from the *Pravda* article did not deter him from future compositions. His music post-*Lady Macbeth* was more geared toward the preferred genres of the Party, resulting in the death of any future inventive compositions he might pursue. The new rules surrounding music left many composers, especially Shostakovich in fear of being charged with formalism — a crime that was not clearly defined but seemed to be subject to Stalin's whim. In an effort to return himself to a reputable place within Soviet society, Shostakovich continued to compose, but this time on approved Soviet themes (Mulcahy, 1984). His Eleventh and Twelfth Symphonies returned him to Soviet favor and he became a “model of a loyal Communist artist” (Mulcahy, 1984, p. 76).

Shostakovich began to give speeches in favor of the regime and its policies, but the genuine nature with which he did so has since been contested. After Stalin's death, Shostakovich began to compose on slightly more dangerous topics including the condemnation of Russian and German anti-semitism. This faced much disapproval from Soviet authorities, yet the death of Stalin had allowed for the composer to grow more bold (Mulcahy, 1984). After Shostakovich's

death, a posthumous memoir and autobiography titled *Testimony* exposed his dislike for the regime and its oppressive nature toward his art. It detailed how Shostakovich had played the Soviet regime by hiding his true message within his music; however, the authenticity of these claims are also contested. The book was supposedly curated from a variety of interviews and meetings that Shostakovich had with a young scholar. However, the audiotapes for these interviews can not be procured, and Shostakovich's guarantee of authenticity is only provided on the pages with information that is not expository of his true attitude toward the Soviet Union (Taruskin, 1989). Regardless, the composer's contested history with the regime opened room for a conversation regarding cultural oppression within the Soviet Union, allowing for the magnitude of the stories he was telling to be broadcast further due to their controversial nature.

### **Conclusion**

Shostakovich's brilliant composing lent itself to the storytelling of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* by curating personalities for the characters through the melodies played and the instruments used. He allowed for an often negatively portrayed heroine to garner sympathy from an audience that would later turn on him. It was this innovativeness that he applied to his composition, that unleashed the cultural oppression so frequently thought of when regarding the Soviet Union. The vulgar, violent, and sexual nature of the show caused disapproval to rain down from Soviet officials and led to the many restrictions that artists and musicians then had to maneuver around. However, while the story was condemned for its explicit nature that conflicted with the approved culture of the Soviet Union and the music was banned for its difficulty to understand, Shostakovich still continued to compose. His symphonies now enter a larger conversation about artists' acquiescence to oppressive regimes or their ability to push back in

hidden ways. Ultimately, *Lady Macbeth* was banned for being an affront to Soviet society, while the man behind it continued to play on.

## References

- Mulcahy, K. V. (1984). Official Culture and Cultural Repression: The Case of Dmitri Shostakovich. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 18(3), 69–83.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3332676>
- Taruskin, R. (1989, March 20). *The Opera And The Dictator: The peculiar martyrdom of Dmitri Shostakovich*. The New Republic.  
[https://www.istitutobellini.it/sites/default/files/file\\_docenti/taruskin\\_the\\_opera\\_and\\_the\\_dictator.pdf](https://www.istitutobellini.it/sites/default/files/file_docenti/taruskin_the_opera_and_the_dictator.pdf)
- WELLS, E. A. (2001). “The New Woman”: Lady Macbeth and sexual politics in the Stalinist era. *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 13(2), 163–189.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s095458670100163x>