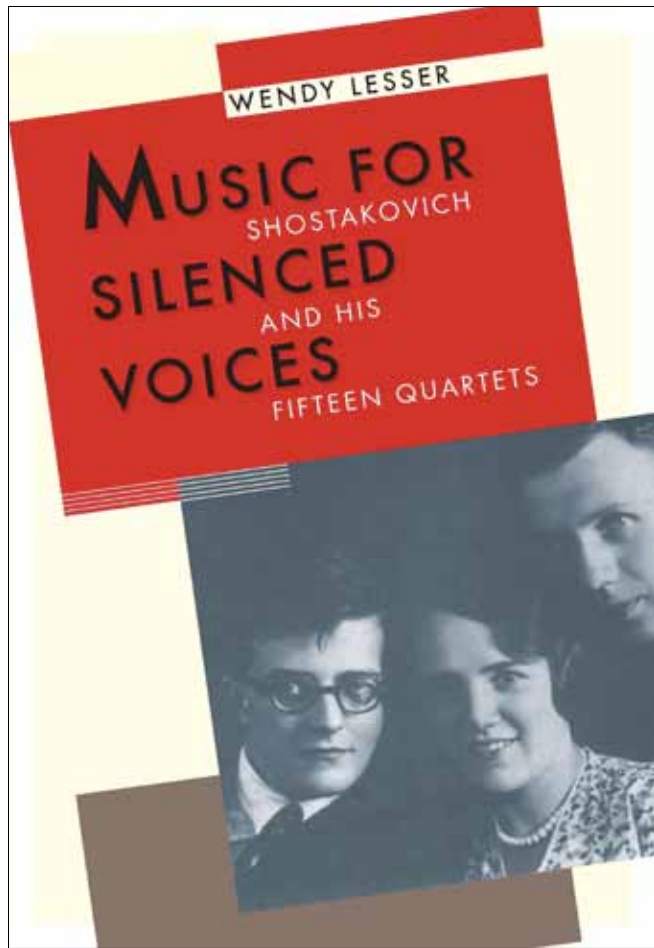


BOOK reviews



MUSIC FOR SILENCED VOICES: SHOSTAKOVICH AND HIS FIFTEEN QUARTETS BY WENDY LESSER


(YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS)

By Mark Zuckerman

Start the idea of great Twentieth Century Russian composers and three names likely spring to mind: Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, and Dmitri Shostakovich. Of the three, only Shostakovich spent his entire creative life in the Soviet Union. He came of age just as Joseph Stalin came to power in 1924 and navigated Stalin's 30-year reign, surviving him by almost a quarter century. He is probably best known internationally for his large works – 15 symphonies, 6 concerti, and two operas – and in Russia for these, numerous film scores, and incidental music. Not as well-known are his chamber works, including 15 string quartets.

While a career as a composer is rarely a bed of roses, pursuing one in Stalinist Russia was particularly thorny, especially for someone with Shostakovich's gifts. Today's composers might gripe about their inability to attract sufficient attention or about getting an unflattering notice. However, none risk scrutiny by a despot whose bad review could have dire effect, not just on their careers but on their lives – and a ruthless paranoid like Stalin proved he had no compunction about banishment, imprisonment, torture, or even murder for people who displeased him.

Shostakovich learned early on that his high-profile pieces would attract the attention and criticism of the regime, so he fit his symphonies with narratives that resonated with Soviet objectives and



became circumspect in his utterances, public and private. His chamber music had a more specialized audience and attracted much less attention from the authorities, so perhaps in these pieces Shostakovich felt he could let his hair down and be self-revealing.

At least that's the premise behind *Music for Silenced Voices: Shostakovich and His Fifteen Quartets* by Wendy Lesser, published by Yale University Press. The idea of interpreting a segment of Shostakovich's body of work as autobiography provides an intriguing framework for a penetrating biography. The book's structure mimics Quartet No. 15, Shostakovich's final quartet; the chapter titles (Elegy, Serenade, Intermezzo, Nocturne, Funeral March, Epilogue) are from the quartet's movements.

Lesser discusses each of the quartets chronologically but organizes the biography thematically by what she presents as the composer's personal subject matter for each quartet. Some of the evidence is concrete, such as the extended silence by the second violin opening No. 12 as a tribute to the recently deceased second violinist of the Beethoven Quartet (the group for which Shostakovich wrote almost all of his quartets). Interpretations of other quartets are more speculative. But even if it were simply a conceit, and the purported evidence entirely discounted, the organizing principle proves effective in illuminating a fascinating life.

The reason is Lesser's obvious love for and involvement with the music, which spurred considerable research and motivated her immersion in Shostakovich's private and public life. She writes in a warm, engaging way, effortlessly managing a breadth of events, vignettes, and observations that shed light on a wide assortment of facets belonging to a complex personality, including, but not limited to, the facts of his life and his musical interactions. For example, she encourages us to compare the career of Shostakovich, who toiled as a servant of the Soviet state and adopted (or was forced to adopt) attitudes of great subtlety, with that of Alisa Rosenbaum, a contemporary from the same home town (St. Petersburg) who left Russia for America to become Ayn Rand, a chief exponent of libertarian absolutism. She describes the poignant friendship between Shostakovich and Benjamin Britten, two composers who were quite literally worlds apart but who had great admiration for each other's work. And she describes delicately, but frankly, the combination of passion and practicality in Shostakovich's love life. Her subject emerges as multi-layered, befitting a creative personality whose life circumstances resist superficial analysis.

Worthy as this biography is on its own, the book also delves into the music. In addition to a valuable discography as an appendix, there are descriptions of each quartet interspersed with the biographical material. Lesser is a skillful writer with an impressive body of literary work but no formal musical background, making her attempt to explain the musical essence of each of the 15 Shostakovich quartets ambitious, if not audacious. She is up front about her approach, setting the bar pretty high nevertheless:

I have sometimes borrowed from the languages of literary and art criticism, both of which have a stronger tradition of impressionistic response than one usually finds in academic music criticism. I have tried to remain faithful to the specific demands of music... Still, my approach ... is essentially that of a writer, and this entails certain pitfalls... The line between correct interpretations and incorrect ones is bound to be fuzzy and inconstant... But there are wrong interpretations, wrong assumptions, wrong pathways in approaching an artwork...

Readers of *New Music Connoisseur* undoubtedly would appreciate that there are musically rigorous forms of music criticism where the language ventures into the realm of "impressionistic response." Presumably, there are "academic" forms of literary and art criticism (that may be just as dry as "academic music criticism") but these aren't the ones whose languages Lesser is appropriating – so it's hard not to read this as an evasion, at least in part. But perhaps we can appreciate Lesser's precarious position and, in view of her close listening and her courage in venturing into this territory, allow her the leeway to communicate what she hears in her own way.

Ultimately, though, however valiant the attempt, the result is disappointing. Portraying each of the 15 quartets as if it were essentially a work of drama ignores a wealth of information – some of it essential, even as an introduction to the uninitiated – and wears thin after the first few quartets. The lack of musical sensibilities hides even the most basic formal aspects of these pieces – ones that could be described without resorting to technical vocabulary – an irony, considering Shostakovich was known (and criticized by the Stalinist commissariat) for being a formalist. There

are some observations that betray limitations in aural acuity. And there are flights of fancy into the opaque, as in this comparison from the description of Quartet No. 5: "The repetitions are both obsessive and probing, not reassuring as they are in Bach..."

Given the reward a reader gets from the biographical sections, it's extremely tempting to allow Lesser the privilege to include what amounts to a personal diary. However, she occasionally undermines her credibility by violating her own criteria, as with this passage excerpted from a multi-page comparison of Shostakovich to Schoenberg:

Whereas Arnold Schoenberg invented his arithmetical serialist technique to break the hold of Romanticism on music, Shostakovich is using a variant of the technique to do something very different... Perhaps he even believed that twelve-tone serialism, as strictly practiced by Schoenberg and his most obedient acolytes, could hamper the composer's creative role. What Shostakovich was doing in the Quartet No. 12 was not to capitulate to serialism's rigid rules, but to adopt certain aspects of the twelve-tone approach as an enhancement to his available palette.

This is by far the longest comparison with another composer in the book (most are throwaways, like the Bach comparison quoted above) and the only one so hostile. It's also, quite simply, wrong – at least about twelve-tone music, Schoenberg, and his "acolytes" – and betrays an ignorance of both the aesthetic and the music of these composers. This parroting of received wisdom (in this case, not so wise) is incompatible with a work of serious scholarship.

Lesser wants to portray Schoenberg as the real totalitarian composer while promoting Shostakovich as the embodiment of personal expression. In reality, Schoenberg was the one who held fast to his artistic convictions, come what may; he was (to pursue Lesser's earlier comparison between contemporaries Shostakovich and Ayn Rand) Howard Roark (of Rand's *The Fountainhead*) to Shostakovich's Gail Wynand, who knuckled under to the Ellsworth Tooheys of the commissariat.

The further Lesser gets from Shostakovich's life, the shakier her ground. In the Epilogue, where she attempts to discern the appeal of Shostakovich's quartets and why Shostakovich wrote the way he did, she wanders under-informed into the terrain of Euro-American musical history of the 1950's:

Shostakovich was in many ways *less* isolated than his Western counterparts. For whereas he was patently eager to communicate with his audience ... many mid-century European and American composers were at best uninterested in and at worst virulently disdainful of the people who came to listen to classical music. In 1958, ... Milton Babbitt published a piece in *High Fidelity* ["Who Cares if You Listen?"] that became a kind of credo for the rest of his profession... This kind of breathtaking but far from atypical narcissism did not, I think, end up being very helpful to either American composers or their potential audiences.

First Schoenberg and now, not surprisingly, Babbitt, pilloried here yet again for his *High Fidelity* article with the sensationalized title that most critics never get past. Lesser actually quotes from the article itself, although she proves no different from other critics by missing the import of what Babbitt says. By now, with the passage of more than half a century, we might expect a more dispassionate reading of this article that appreciates Babbitt's actual message – which is, essentially, three things, none of them so unreasonable:

First, that composers ought to be provided with environments where they can develop their art free from commercial and social pressures – in other words, to enjoy the kind of support and access to resources the Soviet system provided Shostakovich (whatever the related perils), to pursue the kind of internal artistic direction Lesser believes Shostakovich followed in writing his quartets. The success of composers making their living as faculty in institutions of higher learning has gone a long way toward realizing this objective.

Second, that composers writing highly specialized music would attract niche audiences of highly specialized listeners, more like the specialized audience for Shostakovich's string quartets (albeit somewhat smaller, perhaps) than the mass audience for his symphonies. Babbitt was shrewd in choosing his audience for this proposal: readers of a fledgling magazine for audiophiles. Audiophiles were a brand new, specialized group who cared about the enhanced listening made possible by recent advances in audio technology (e.g., the development of commercial stereo recordings, which was just months old when Babbitt's article appeared) and who wanted to turn their living rooms into listening spaces superior to the concert hall. What better source for potential recruits? Given the current ubiquity of individual listening devices with personalized playlists, and today's proliferation of niche musical markets, we should credit Babbitt with prescience.

Babbitt's third point was that he considered musical dilettantes useless, at best, or at worst, actively harmful. In his view, they perpetuate romantic yet unrealistic myths about the world of music and engage in uninformed, imprecise chatter that is accepted as meaningful musical discussion. It's understandable that Lesser might take umbrage at this. However, in a way, her simplistic assessment of the complex musical culture of the 1950's proves Babbitt's point. At the very least, after arguing quite eloquently that Shostakovich was the victim of unfair criticism – and backing it up with careful, thorough investigation and perceptive analysis – she would do better to respect that the same treatment might be due the topic she dismisses with such casual disdain. Ditto for her editors at Yale University Press.

Despite these flaws (and doubtless there are those who consider them not all that serious), *Music for Silenced Voices* is a worthwhile book, written by a music lover mostly for other music lovers. Those readers who come to it unaware of the Shostakovich quartets likely will want to get to know them and will be grateful for the introduction. ■