



Shostakovich: A Life

Laurel E. Fay

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For this authoritative post-cold-war biography of Shostakovich's illustrious but turbulent career under Soviet rule, Laurel E. Fay has gone back to primary documents: Shostakovich's many letters, concert programs and reviews, newspaper articles, and diaries of his contemporaries. An indefatigable worker, he wrote his arresting music despite deprivations during the Nazi invasion and constant surveillance under Stalin's regime.

Shostakovich's life is a fascinating example of the paradoxes of living as an artist under totalitarian rule. In August 1942, his Seventh Symphony, written as a protest against fascism, was performed in Nazi-besieged Leningrad by the city's surviving musicians, and was triumphantly broadcast to the German troops, who had been bombarded beforehand to silence them. Alone among his artistic peers, he survived successive Stalinist cultural purges and won the Stalin Prize five times, yet in 1948 he was dismissed from his conservatory teaching positions, and many of his works were banned from performance. He prudently censored himself, in one case putting aside a work based on Jewish folk poems. Under later regimes he balanced a career as a model Soviet, holding government positions and acting as an international ambassador with his unflagging artistic ambitions.

In the years since his death in 1975, many have embraced a view of Shostakovich as a lifelong dissident who encoded anti-Communist messages in his music. This lucid and fascinating biography demonstrates that the reality was much more complex. Laurel Fay's book includes a detailed list of works, a glossary of names, and an extensive bibliography, making it an indispensable resource for future studies of Shostakovich.

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