

‘A Collation of Badly Disguised, Well-Known Themes’: Shostakovich Symphonies in the Parisian Press, 1936–1946

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Abstract

This article examines the reception of Shostakovich’s symphonies in the Parisian press, from the late interwar period to the years immediately following the Second World War. In doing so, it continues the conversation around international responses to Shostakovich’s music in the twentieth century, adding a consideration of the composer’s symphonies in France from 1936 to 1946 to the existing literature on Shostakovich reception in the United States, Britain, and Germany. By interrogating the commentary of Parisian critics and music writers during this period, the article reveals how the reception of Shostakovich’s symphonies in Paris reflects the rising and falling influence of the French Communist Party, and offers a novel way to view the shifts in Franco-Soviet relations either side of the Second World War.

Les enfants qui avaient huit ou dix ans lors de la chute du tzarisme sont à présent des hommes. Dans cette génération neuve, quels sont les musiciens sur lesquels nous pourrions compter, quels sont ceux qui se dégageront des entraves scriabiniennes? Que feront-ils? Qui sont-ils? Existent-ils? Vers quel art tourneront-ils?

(The children who were eight or ten years old at the time of the fall of Tsarism are now men. In this new generation, who are the musicians we will be able to count on, who will free themselves from Scriabinian shackles? What will they do? Who are they? Do they exist? To what art will they turn?)¹

Though the culture of France had long been influential in Russia, it was not until the later part of the nineteenth century that Russian culture became a source of fascination for the French.² At the 1900 Paris Exhibition, France celebrated its recent alliance with Russia by inaugurating the Pont Alexander III – an ornate, Beaux-Arts style bridge named in honour of Tsar Alexander III – and in the wake of the October Revolution, Paris became one of main centres

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- 1 Darius Milhaud, ‘La Vie musicale en U.R.S.S.’, *Le Ménestrel* 88/24 (1926). Translations are the author’s unless otherwise stated.
- 2 On the French interest in Russian music from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, see Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005); Jane Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

for Russian emigration; more than 100,000 émigrés were active in the capital during the 1920s, a marked increase from the population of 15,000 Russians (mainly aristocrats and intellectuals) that had resided in France at the end of the previous century.³ In musical life, during the 1910s and 1920s Paris played host to Stravinsky and Prokofiev, while Diaghilev's Ballets Russes revolutionized the artistic landscape and brought Russian musical and visual artists to the attention of the public. The extensive interest that scholars have shown towards the aforementioned figures and institutions has revealed much about the unique cultural links between France and Russia in the early twentieth century.⁴ From the mid-1920s and throughout the remainder of the interwar period, however, the Parisian public was presented with the music of a new generation of Russian composers: one that, having matured in the USSR, represented something quite different to the composers who had furthered their careers abroad. As shown in the passage quoted in the epigraph – Darius Milhaud's 'La Vie musicale en U.R.S.S.', published in *Le Ménestrel* in 1926 – this new Soviet state and its culture was intriguing for many French artists, especially those with leftist political inclinations. The tone of fascination and curiosity in Milhaud's account reflects an attitude to the USSR that was prevalent among French left-wing intellectuals in these early years of the Soviet state, when its composers were not yet the focus of significant international attention. Just as the study of Russian literature in interwar France has proven to be a fruitful research area in recent years,⁵ tracing the reception histories of musical works can provide an equally interesting lens through which to examine the affinity between France and Russia, or the Soviet Union as it became after 1922. This article focuses on the symphonies of Dmitri Shostakovich in the Parisian press, from the end of the interwar period to the years immediately following the Second World War. In doing so, it continues the conversation around international responses to Shostakovich's music in the twentieth century, adding an examination of France from 1936 to 1946 to the existing literature on its reception in the United

3 Leonid Livak, *Histoire culturelle de l'émigration russe en France, 1920–1950* (Paris: Eur'Orbem Éditions, 2022), 5–6; Marina Gorboff, *La Russie fantôme: l'émigration russe de 1920 à 1950* (Paris: L'Age d'homme, 1995), 30; John E. Bowlit, 'Art in Exile: The Russian Avant-Garde and the Emigration', *Art Journal* 41/3 (1981), 219.

4 On Prokofiev's life outside of Russia, see David Nice, *Prokofiev—A Biography: From Russia to the West, 1891–1935* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); and Natalya Pavlovna Savkina, 'Some Materials Relating to Prokofiev's Life Abroad', *Fontes Artis Musicae* 53/3 (2006). On Stravinsky in France, see Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky: A Creative Spring: Russia and France, 1882–1934* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); Barbara L. Kelly, *Music and Ultra Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913–1939* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013); and Leslie A. Sprout, 'From the Postwar to the Cold War: Protesting Stravinsky in Postwar France', in *The Musical Legacy of Wartime France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013). On the influence of the Ballets Russes, see Davinia Caddy, *The Ballets Russes and Beyond: Music and Dance in Belle-Époque Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Juliet Bellow, *Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); and Joan Ross Acocella, 'The Reception of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes by Artists and Intellectuals in Paris and London, 1909–1914' (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1984).

5 See, for example, Leonid Livak, *Russian Emigrés in the Intellectual and Literary Life of Inter-War France: A Bibliographical Essay* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010); Claude De Grève, 'Des émigrés russes comme acteurs du renouvellement de la critique des classiques russes en France, au XX^e siècle', in *Figures de l'émigré russe en France au XIX^e et XX^e siècle*, ed. Charlotte Kraus and Tatiana Viktoroff (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2012).

States, Britain, and Germany.⁶ In addition to further exploring the unique ties between France and Russia already mentioned – which continued to evolve and fluctuate under the name of Franco-Soviet relations after 1924 (when Édouard Herriot’s government officially recognized the Soviet state) – examining Shostakovich’s French reception is worthwhile for it offers a novel way of studying communist activity in the French capital. Between 1936 and 1946, the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français, PCF) grew significantly in size and influence, and was the main promoter of Shostakovich’s music in Paris. Its associated press outlets were also the principal sources for news from and relating to the USSR, particularly in the 1930s. By interrogating commentary from a range of Parisian critics and music writers, this article will show how the estimation of Shostakovich’s symphonies in Paris between 1936 and 1946 reflects the rising and falling influence of the PCF. Thus, this study not only contributes to the literature on Shostakovich reception, but also provides a gateway into understanding relations between France and the Soviet Union, and sheds light on how facets of French Communism intersected with mainstream musical culture in Paris either side of the Second World War.

In acknowledgement of the drastic changes enacted to the social, political, and musical landscape of France between 1939 and 1944, the discussion in this article will unfold in two main chronological parts: pre-war and post-war. Of the two Shostakovich symphonies premiered in Paris before the war (the First and Fifth), Symphony No. 5 was easily afforded the higher-profile premiere. As larger events tend to generate a greater amount of press coverage, thereby offering greater insight into reception, the examination of Shostakovich in France before the Second World War will centre chiefly around this later work. Another four symphonies (in order of premiere, the Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and Sixth) had their first Parisian performances between 1945 and 1946, but as its premiere was the largest event of the four, Symphony No. 7 will be the focus of the second section. Together, the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies make an interesting pair of case studies in that they share some aesthetic similarities: they make comparable use of structure, instrumentation, and conventional diatonic harmonies, and the fact that both depict a triumphant conclusion after turbulent sociopolitical events in the composer’s lived experience allows them to share some similarities in sentiment (the Fifth, of course, was widely perceived as an answer to Shostakovich’s 1936 denunciation in *Pravda*, while the Seventh bore witness to the siege that devastated Leningrad during the Second World War).⁷ The symphonies are also alike

6 Terry Klefstad, ‘The Reception in America of Dmitri Shostakovich, 1928–1945’ (PhD thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 2003); Pauline Fairclough, ‘The “Old Shostakovich”’: Reception in the British Press’, *Music and Letters* 88/2 (2007); Erik Levi, ‘A Political Football: Shostakovich Reception in Germany’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich*, ed. Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

7 On the *Pravda* denunciation and Shostakovich’s response to it, see Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 84–105; and Pauline Fairclough, *Dmitry Shostakovich* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), 50–64. For analysis of the forms, themes, tonality, and various musical meanings of Symphony No. 5, see Richard Taruskin, ‘Public Lies and Unspeakable Truth, Interpreting Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony’, in *Shostakovich Studies*, ed. David Fanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

in that they share a similar mass appeal.⁸ The Fifth Symphony famously received a thirty-minute ovation at its Leningrad premiere in 1937, and was subsequently performed all over the world; the Seventh had several historic performances and radio broadcasts during the war years, and became internationally recognized between 1942 and 1945 as a symbol of cultural resistance against Nazi forces.⁹ But in spite of the similarities, they initially elicited very different responses from critics in Paris. The purpose of this article is to situate these contrasting responses within the context of French cultural history and to show how studying the reception of these works provides a unique perspective on some of the political and musical differences in French society before and after the Second World War.

The French premiere of Symphony No. 5

On 31 May 1938, a small notice in *Le Figaro*, France's oldest national daily, revealed that Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 would soon receive its French premiere at the Salle Pleyel in Paris.¹⁰ Some eighteen months had passed since Toscanini conducted Symphony No. 1 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, making the Fifth the second Shostakovich symphony to be performed live in France.¹¹ Despite the limited attention his symphonies had hitherto received in France, by 1938 Shostakovich was recognized among French Communist circles as the composer of the song 'Au-devant de la vie', a French-language, workers' chorus adaptation of the theme from the 1932 Soviet film *Counterplan*.¹² This song had become very popular in France via the communal singing movement associated with the Popular Front (Front populaire), the anti-fascist alliance of French Socialists, Communists, and radicals formed in response to the riots of February 1934. Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* had also been broadcast via radio multiple times between 1934 and 1936,¹³ and performed in Paris in a concert piano arrangement by Arthur Rubinstein in November 1935,¹⁴ meaning a middle-class, concert-going audience would have probably have associated his name with this work. Rubinstein's performance – which also featured the French premieres

8 Pauline Fairclough analyses the Fifth Symphony's mass appeal in 'Was Soviet Music Middlebrow? Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, Socialist Realism, and the Mass Listener in the 1930s', *The Journal of Musicology* 35/3 (2018), 337.

9 Taruskin, 'Public Lies and Unspeakable Truth', 32; Dmitri Shostakovich: Symphony No. 7 'Leningrad', op. 60 (1941), facsimile edition of the manuscript with a commentary by Manashir Yakubov (Tokyo: Zen-On, 1992), 9; Fairclough, *Dmitry Shostakovich*, 73–7.

10 'Musique', *Le Figaro*, 31 May 1938, 4.

11 For a record of Symphony No. 1 in the French press, see Henry Sauveplane, 'Les Concerts', *L'Humanité*, 17 December 1936, 8. Shostakovich's piano music had also been performed in Paris by Arthur Rubinstein in late 1935. See 'Lundi 18 Novembre – Salle Gaveau', *L'Art musical: théâtres, concerts, TSE, disques, cinéma* 1 (1935), 33.

12 'Au-devant de la vie', a choral arrangement of a song from Shostakovich's soundtrack to the 1932 Soviet film *Counterplan*, was sung at left-wing rallies in France from December 1934. See Pascal Ory, *La belle illusion: culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire, 1935–1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994), 325; and Christopher Lee Moore, 'Music in France and the Popular Front (1934–1938): Politics, Aesthetics and Reception' (PhD thesis: McGill University, 2006).

13 See, for example, 'Les Ondes Rouges', *L'Humanité*, 7 March 1934, 6; 'Les Émissions soviétiques', *L'Humanité*, 13 December 1935, 6.

14 'Bruits de coulisses', *Paris-Soir*, 3 November 1935, 4.

of (excerpts from) Shostakovich's 24 Preludes for Piano, op. 34, and the Polka from *The Golden Age* (*Zolotoy vek*), op. 22 – was well received; in his December 1935 summary of recent Parisian recitals, the journalist, composer, and pianist Henri Gil-Marchex wrote that Rubinstein had had 'la bonne idée' of programming Shostakovich for this performance. Gil-Marchex was a Parisian with an internationalist outlook: he had toured to Japan as early as 1924, and since produced several publications relating to Japanese music. His column suggests that he also took some genuine interest in Shostakovich's music, endorsing it and situating it among composers with whom his French audience would have been familiar: 'Shostakovich! All musicians must remember this name . . . The music of Shostakovich is reminiscent of Darius Milhaud and Prokofiev, of Georges Auric and Béla Bartók.'¹⁵ With this article Gil-Marchex became the first French writer to comment on Shostakovich's trademark musical irony, noticing that the melodies he heard in Rubinstein's recital were 'always very apparent, very sincere', yet that many of the accompanying lines would seem almost banal were it not for their 'deadpan flair', which gave the impression of cheekiness or mocking.¹⁶

A handful of French critics had evidently shown an interest in Shostakovich's music in the mid-1930s, but the occasion of the Fifth Symphony's arrival in Paris marked the greatest attention it had received in the concert space thus far. Scheduled for 14 June 1938, the event was programmed and sponsored by Le Chant du Monde, a publishing house founded only months earlier by Léon Moussinac, the cinema critic at the PCF organ *L'Humanité*, with the support of prominent French musicians and fellow Communist Party members. In May 1938, Le Chant du Monde had begun to complement its printed and recorded music with live concerts: the first of these, 'La musique et le peuple', offered a truly diverse programme of 'grands classiques' (excerpts from works by Beethoven, Bizet, Fauré, Mozart, Méhul, Schubert, Smetana, and Strauss), performed alongside extracts from the contemporary music of Spain and the USSR (music by Rodolfo Halffter and Lev Knipper).¹⁷ It also featured seven popular songs from the French provinces, performed in choral arrangements prepared by Milhaud, Auric, Marcel Delannoy, Arthur Honegger, Maurice Jaubert, Charles Koechlin, and Henry Sauveplane (Le Chant du Monde's artistic director).¹⁸ The organization's second concert of June 14 1938 was less ambitious in variety but more grandiose in scope, comprising three pieces for symphony orchestra:

15 'Chostakovitch! Tous les musiciens doivent retenir ce nom . . . La matière musicale de Chostakovitch fait songer à la fois à Darius Milhaud et Prokofieff, à Georges Auric et Béla Bartok.' Henri Gil-Marchex, 'Musique: A travers les concerts', *Paris-Soir*, 6 December 1935, 9.

16 'Une ligne mélodique toujours très apparente, très franche est soutenue par des formules d'accompagnement qui seraient presque banales si une verve très pince-sans-rire ne leur donnait une allure gouailleuse'. Gil-Marchex, 'A travers les concerts', 9.

17 'Un grand concert populaire', *L'Humanité*, 17 May 1938, 7; Henry Sauveplane, 'La musique et le peuple à la Gaité-Lyrique: Donner aux chants populaires de notre patrimoine national l'expression qu'ils méritent. . .', *L'Humanité*, 17 May 1938, 7.

18 'La musique et le peuple à la Gaité-Lyrique: Le premier Concert de "Chant du Monde" fut un triomphal succès', *L'Humanité*, 19 May 1938, 7.

Koechlin's *Symphonie d'hymnes* (1936), Auric's *Ouverture* (1938), and Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony as the centrepiece.

With the programming of this concert, it seems that Sauveplane and the Chant du Monde committee had made an effort to place Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony among French music that would complement both its musical language and sentiment. Sauveplane was a member of several left-wing cultural groups at this time, including the *Fédération musicale populaire* (FMP) and the *Comité de vigilance des intellectuels antifascistes*, and this engagement is reflected in his grouping together of Shostakovich with Koechlin and Auric. All three composers produced high-quality yet accessible orchestral works, and Koechlin's radical leftism and Auric's democratic values would likely have appealed to at least a similar sector of the public as the one interested in hearing a Soviet symphony in 1938.¹⁹ Furthermore, *Le Chant du Monde* offered discounted tickets to members of workers' associations who attended this performance (see notice in [Figure 1](#)), a decision that ties in with the Popular Front movement to make high-art accessible to all social classes. Thus, before the Fifth Symphony had been heard in Paris, or even substantially promoted in the press, it already appears that it is being used as propaganda by the French Communist artistic figures who organized its first performance.

This sentiment continued in the press's coverage of the Fifth Symphony leading up to its French premiere. Three days before the concert, Sauveplane promoted *Chant du Monde's* upcoming programme in the conservative, anti-communist *Le Figaro*, one of the leading newspapers of the period.²⁰ In awe of the work's immense scale and emotive subject matter, Sauveplane sang the praises of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, writing that the composer was 'imbued by what he calls "affirmation of life which illuminates Shakespearian tragedies"', and suggesting that the piece was 'indisputably conceived . . . as a vast lyrical tragedy'.²¹ *Le Chant du Monde's* director assured the *Figaro* readership that they would not be disappointed by the forthcoming premiere: 'We will appreciate the brilliant development of his musical thought, and in any case, we can notice sure signs of an already affirmed genius.'²² *L'Humanité*, which had the fourth highest circulation of any French newspaper at the time, published similarly enthusiastic comments. Leading up to the premiere, it described Symphony No. 5 as 'the essential work of the young master', (*'l'œuvre capitale du jeune maître'*),²³ and painted another flattering portrait of the young composer on the day the

19 On Auric's musical populism, see Colin Roust, 'Reaching a "Plus Grand Public": Georges Auric as Populist', *The Music Quarterly* 95/2 (2012); and Colin Roust, 'The Popular Front Years and World War II', in *Georges Auric: A Life in Music and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

20 Ivan Chupin, Nicolas Hubé, and Nicolas Kaciaf, 'L'"Âge d'or" de la presse (1870–1939)', in *Histoire politique et économique des médias en France* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012), 49.

21 'L'auteur, très pénétré de ce qu'il nomme "l'affirmation de la vie qui illumine les tragédies shakespeariennes" a incontestablement conçu la Cinquième Symphonie comme une vaste tragédie lyrique.' Henry Sauveplane, 'Trois importantes premières auditions', *Le Figaro*, 11 June 1938, 8.

22 'On appréciera l'étonnant développement de sa pensée musicale, et en tous cas l'on y peut remarquer le signe certain d'un génie déjà affirmé.' Sauveplane, 'Trois importantes premières auditions', 8.

23 P. R., 'La musique: les disques, les concerts', *L'Humanité*, 11 June 1938, 8.



Figure 1 Advertisement for Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony in *L'Humanité*, 8 June 1938, 7. Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

work premiered: 'In the last few years, Shostakovich has produced a large number of works, all of which have been remarkable.'²⁴

The same *Humanité* article also contained two paragraphs (shown in the second column in [Figure 2](#)) that served as a brief listening guide to the Fifth Symphony: 'The subject is, as the author himself says, "the formation of a personality".' After paraphrasing in French Shostakovich's famous description – that 'it was man, with all his sufferings, that I saw at the center of this work, lyrical from start to finish. The finale of the symphony resolves the tragically tense moments of the opening movements in a life-affirming, optimistic plan'²⁵ – the author added the following comments on the composer: 'The musical and dramatic movement of his symphony progresses and grows through dazzling contrasts of shade and light, contrasts obtained by a wise economy of means of expression, which is the

²⁴ 'En quelques années, Chostakovitch a produit un grand nombre d'œuvres, toutes marquantes'. 'La Cinquième Symphonie de Chostakovitch au concert de "Chant du Monde"', *L'Humanité*, 14 June 1938, 7.

²⁵ Translation from Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 102.

**POUR LA PREMIÈRE FOIS A PARIS
CE SOIR SALLE PLEYEL ...
... la cinquième symphonie
de CHOSTAKOVITCH
au concert de « Chant du Monde »**

Le jeune compositeur soviétique Dimitri Chostakovitch, qui comptait déjà parmi les musiciens les plus marquants de notre époque depuis le jour où Toscanini s'était fait le parrain de sa « Première Symphonie », aura sa « Cinquième Symphonie » jouée ce soir au cours d'un concert de musiques moderne donné par le « Chant du Monde ».

Chostakovitch est né en 1906 à Lénin-grad et fit ses études musicales au Conservatoire de cette ville. C'est également là qu'il a fait ses débuts à la Philharmonie académique d'Etat.

En quelques années, Chostakovitch a produit un grand nombre d'œuvres, toutes marquantes. Citons son « Concerto pour piano et instruments à vent » (1933), une « Sonate pour piano » (1926), vingt-quatre préludes pour piano également (1934), une « Sonate pour violoncelle et piano » (1934), cinq symphonies (la première date de 1925-26), deux opéras, « Le Nez », d'après Gogol, et « Lady Macbeth du district de Mzensk », d'après Jeskou, des ballets, de la musique pour films et pour le théâtre, dont une musique de scène pour « Hamlet » de Shakespeare, qui fut jouée au théâtre Vakhtangov en 1932.

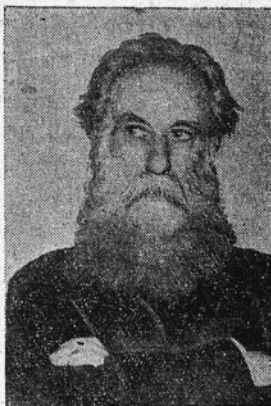
On se souvient que Chostakovitch fut violemment critiqué dans la presse soviétique, en particulier pour son opéra « Lady Macbeth du district de Mzensk » et pour sa « Quatrième Symphonie », œuvres jugées trop savantes et trop formalistes.

Sa « Cinquième Symphonie » lui a acquis de nouveau, semble-t-il, tous les suffrages. On jugera pourquoi.

Le sujet en est, dit l'auteur lui-même, « le devenir de la personnalité ». C'est l'homme précisément qui se trouve au centre de la conception de cette œuvre, dont la structure est tout entière lyrique. Le final de cette « Cinquième Symphonie » résout la tension tragique des premières parties sur le plan optimiste de la joie vitale.

Le mouvement musical et dramatique de sa symphonie progresse et s'accroît à travers d'éblouissants contrastes d'ombre et de lumière, contrastes obtenus par une sage économie de moyens d'expression, ce qui est le signe distinctif d'une véritable maîtrise orchestrale.

On peut affirmer que cette œuvre dé-



Charles KOEHLIN, prix Crescent 1938, dont la Symphonie d'Hymnes sera également exécutée au concert de « Chants du Monde » ce soir salle Pleyel

montre un génie certain et déjà affirmé.

Figure 2 *L'Humanité's* article on Shostakovich and the Fifth Symphony, 14 June 1938, 7. Credit: BnF.

distinctive sign of true orchestral mastery. We can confirm that this work reveals a certain and already affirmed genius.²⁶ As the final affirmation about Shostakovich is almost identical to the one published in *Le Figaro*, it is reasonable to assume that this unsigned article was also written by Sauveplane, or that it had at least been prepared from a Chant du Monde press release. Whether provided by Sauveplane or not, the propaganda value of this description is still worth remarking on, as it appears to reflect French Communist values by encapsulating

26 'Le sujet en est, dit l'auteur lui-même, "le devenir de la personnalité". C'est l'homme précisément qui se trouve au centre de la conception de cette œuvre, dont la structure est tout entière lyrique. Le final de cette "Cinquième Symphonie" résout la tension tragique des premières parties sur le plan optimiste de la joie vitale. Le mouvement musical et dramatique de sa symphonie progresse et s'accroît à travers d'éblouissants contrastes d'ombre et de lumière, contrastes obtenus par une sage économie de moyens d'expression, ce qui est le signe distinctif d'une véritable maîtrise orchestrale.' 'La Cinquième Symphonie', 7.

both French and Soviet tastes. The attribution of Shostakovich's masterful orchestration to his 'economical means of expression' seems to be appealing to the tastes of the Parisian public, which would no doubt have been accustomed to the 'stripped-down' style and focus on simplicity that marks a lot of the music from the interwar period in France. On the other hand, the aesthetic points identified by the composer himself (that the work is lyrical, depicts the 'making of a man', and conveys a sense of optimism at the end) clearly align with the doctrine of socialist realism. But neither in this article nor elsewhere in the press was the symphony discussed in relation to this term – which was only four years old at this time – meaning the unidentified author may have viewed it as presumed knowledge, or perhaps not crucial to appreciating the work.

After Symphony No. 5 was performed in Paris and broadcast live over Radio Tour Eiffel, the discourse surrounding its inherent value was no longer one-sided.²⁷ On behalf of the prestigious *La Revue musicale*, Claude Chamfray announced that: 'We must confess our disappointment regarding the Fifth Symphony of Shostakovich. This composition by the Russian musician is no more than a collation of badly disguised, well-known themes. Nothing is new in this symphony. No trace of originality. We truly expected better from Shostakovich!'²⁸ While the culture at *La Revue musicale* was certainly elite, Chamfray was not necessarily opposed to the unpretentious musical language used in the Fifth Symphony, as the same review of the June 1938 concert complimented the accessibility (and quality) of the Auric overture commissioned especially for the occasion.²⁹ However, since Chamfray's body of articles and interviews in *La Revue musicale* reflects a primary interest in French composers – among them Messiaen, Auric, Poulenc, Henri Tomasi, Florent Schmitt, Emmanuel Bondeville, and Serge Nigg – perhaps this preference for Auric's work was simply spurred by the author's national pride.

In the *Mercure de France*, a long-running, bimonthly literary review, leading critic René Dumesnil also pointed out the Fifth Symphony's lack of originality. An unquestionably learned man, Dumesnil wrote prolifically on music and literary history, with musical publications up to 1938 concerning such diverse topics as Mozart, Wagner, and contemporary French composers. Yet, with no ostensible interest in music of the Soviet Union, Dumesnil was predictably unimpressed after hearing the Fifth Symphony. Even before the concert had started, he was displeased with the amount of detail provided in the programme, which consisted of the French translation of Shostakovich's 'formation of a personality' description. The critic's sarcastic remark, '*Voilà qui aide à comprendre*', indicates that he did not feel this information to be sufficient to understand the meaning of the work.³⁰

27 'La Radio', *Le Figaro*, 14 June 1938, 5.

28 'Nous avouons notre déception en ce qui concerne la Cinquième Symphonie de Chostakovitch. Cette composition du musicien russe n'est qu'un assemblage de thèmes connus et à peine déguisés. Rien de nouveau dans cette symphonie. Pas un accent original. Vraiment, on attendait mieux de Chostakovitch!' Claude Chamfray, 'V^e Symphonie: Chostakovitch', *La Revue musicale* 185 (1938), 53.

29 Roust, 'The Popular Front Years and World War II', 124.

30 René Dumesnil, 'Musique: Dimitri Chostakovitch: Cinquième Symphonie – Koehlin: Symphonie d'Hymnes, concert du "Chant du Monde"', *Mercure de France* 964 (1938), 209.

Dumesnil thought that the music itself fortunately communicated more than the accompanying text, but he also described the symphony's fundamental idea as '*nébuleuse*'. His overall assessment was that

It has major flaws of which the most significant is to repeat at times until satiety, and even, in certain passages, until it is overwhelming [*jusqu'à l'accablement*], which creates an effect of unbearable length. Excessive developments are always tedious; but when, from one end of a long work to the other, we seem to be getting nowhere instead of moving forward, we give the most willing listener a profound *ennui*; we put them to sleep.³¹

Jean Prudhomme, critic of the moderate republican daily *Le Matin*, put forward a similar assessment to Dusmenil, admitting that the work was 'interesting', but also that it was repetitive, too ambitious, and lacking in balance.³² Most severe though were the words of composer and outspoken music critic Florent Schmitt. Understanding Schmitt's attitude to Soviet music requires some nuance: he had shown an interest in Russian music since his youth, and his writings as a critic convey a strong interest in Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky; yet, he was also a fierce nationalist, and the anti-Semitic views he expressed in the 1930s coupled with his later sympathy for the Vichy regime should certainly colour how we read his assessment of a Soviet symphony.³³ With that said, Schmitt's criticism was published in *Le Temps*, arguably the most important newspaper of record of the interwar era, so his opinions would have been disseminated widely. His extensive review declared that the Fifth Symphony of Shostakovich 'comprises four movements, three of which are completely insignificant'. He elaborated:

The initial *Allegro*, synonymous with platitude, boredom and self-importance, is built, one could say, like the interior of a cannon, the only difference being that the empty space is surrounded by cheap lead instead of high-quality steel. Themes – if there are any – are poor and uninspired. The orchestra was unpleasant and inconsistent. I hardly had a better impression of the inoffensive little waltz that followed, which claimed to replace the traditional scherzo . . . As for the final march, it is accordingly devoid of all ideas, and of a vulgarity that makes [Auric's] Overture seem supremely aristocratic. But the *Andante* makes amends for all the previous and subsequent errors. Almost shamefully, it contains some music, even a beautiful melody that develops considerably, reaching a kind of rough, fierce grandeur, exactly

31 'La musique, heureusement, vaut mieux que ce texte. Elle a de grands défauts, dont le principal est de répéter parfois jusqu'à satiété, et même jusqu'à l'accablement, certains passages, ce qui produit un effet de longueur insupportable. Les développements excessifs sont toujours fastidieux; mais quand d'un bout à l'autre d'un long ouvrage on semble piétiner au lieu d'avancer, on donne à l'auditeur le mieux disposé un ennui profond, on l'endort.' Dumesnil, 'Musique: Dimitri Chostakovitch: Cinquième Symphonie', 209.

32 'L'œuvre est intéressante'; 'il se répète, s'écoute trop volontiers, déclame plus qu'il ne s'exprime et ne sait pas toujours conserver l'équilibre'. Jean Prudhomme, 'Théâtres: Les Grands Concerts', *Le Matin*, 19 June 1938, 6.

33 Jann Pasler and Jerry Rife, 'Florent Schmitt', *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

like I had noticed in *Lady Macbeth*, and because of which I will retain some regard for this composer.³⁴

With leading critics highlighting its simple construction, issues in the quality of its musical material, and how it represented some degree of aesthetic or stylistic shift away from *Lady Macbeth*, there was clearly a divergence between how the Fifth Symphony was promoted in the Parisian press leading up to its French premiere, and how it was received after the fact. To account for this disparity, it may be helpful to focus on Schmitt's last point: the perceived differences between the 1937 symphony and the 1932 opera, which had been denounced in the Soviet Union two and a half years earlier. The infamous 'Muddle Instead of Music' article from January 1936 nowadays plays a crucial role in the story of the Fifth Symphony's inception; indeed, the accusations of bourgeois vulgarity levelled at the composer by the Soviet Communist Party organ, *Pravda*, go a long way towards explaining any changes in musical style or sentiment that one might notice from *Lady Macbeth* to Symphony No. 5. Interestingly, however, this context was barely discussed in the press leading up to the premiere, and not at all after it. To explore why this may have been the case, it is worth considering some political factors that may have affected how critics wrote about and perhaps even thought about Shostakovich's music in the 1930s: the state of Franco-Soviet relations, and the control that the PCF had over the dissemination of Soviet news in Paris.

The image of the USSR in the 1930s French press

The public of pre-Second World War France had a relatively limited knowledge of the Soviet Union, as only prominent intellectuals were treated to highly controlled tours of the state, many of whom were communists.³⁵ Jan C. Behrends writes that these *compagnons de route* were 'expected to give an "authentic" picture of life in the Soviet Union upon return',³⁶ which made reliable descriptions hard to come by, and meant that many positive opinions on the Soviet Union were informed by biased, second-hand descriptions published in

34 'La cinquième symphonie de Shostakovitch comprend quatre mouvements, dont trois parfaitement négligeables. L'*Allegro* initial, synonyme de platitude, d'ennui et de suffisance, est construit, pourrais-je dire, comme l'intérieur d'un canon, avec cette différence qu'ici le vide s'entoure d'un plomb vil au lieu du noble acier. Thèmes – si ce sont là des thèmes – indigents, banals. Orchestre laid et sans consistance. Je n'eus guère meilleure impression de la petite valse inoffensive qui suit et qui prétend remplacer le scherzo traditionnel . . . Quant à la marche finale, elle est à l'avenant totalement dépourvue d'idées et d'une vulgarité auprès de laquelle l'*Ouverture* de tout à l'heure paraîtrait suprêmement aristocratique. Mais l'*Andante* rachètera à lui seul toutes les erreurs d'avant et d'après. Chose presque inavouable, il contient de la musique, voire une belle mélodie qui, se développant largement, atteindra à cette sorte de grandeur fruste et farouche que j'avais remarquée, précisément, dans *Lady Macbeth*, et grâce à quoi je ne dénouerai pas encore les derniers liens de la sympathie que j'avais ressentie pour ce musicien.' Florent Schmitt, 'Les Concerts', *Le Temps*, 25 June 1938, 3.

35 Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 289.

36 Jan C. Behrends, 'Back from the USSR: The Anti-Comintern's Publications on Soviet Russia in Nazi Germany (1935–41)', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10/3 (2009), 535.

French Communist press sources. It follows, then, that no coverage of *Pravda*'s infamous 'Muddle Instead of Music' denunciation appeared in the French press in January or February 1936; not even in *L'Humanité*, which had regularly reported news from the Soviet Union since it became the PCF organ in 1920. It is likely that *L'Humanité* had access to information regarding the Soviet Union's tightening constraints on cultural production, given that an analysis of why Shostakovich's opera and ballet works did not correspond to the *époque socialiste* was distributed in Communist International's weekly bulletin, distributed in France as *La Correspondance internationale*.³⁷ But it would almost have been surprising if the PCF organ had published a truthful account of the severity of Shostakovich's situation in 1936, as French left-wing intellectuals in the interwar years were generally reluctant to accept reports that the Soviet Union was not the political utopia they imagined it to be.³⁸ This was presumably the case with the newspaper's editor in chief, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, a founding member of the PCF who had spent two years working as a journalist in the USSR prior to his appointment at *L'Humanité*. From Moscow, Vaillant-Couturier had reported on Stalin's first five-year plan and worked as secretary of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW);³⁹ upon returning to Paris in 1932, he formed the French section of the IURW, known as the Association des Écrivains et Artistes révolutionnaires (AEAR). Comprising artists and writers of communist, communist-sympathizing, or other anti-fascist alignments, the AEAR was subsidized by the PCF and complied with directions from the Soviet Union.⁴⁰

Taking these networks into consideration, it is difficult to imagine that, in 1936, Vaillant-Couturier would have been uninformed of a development that would have impacted as severely on Soviet artistic life as the denunciation of one of its most celebrated young musicians. At the same time, it would be understandable if the culturally engaged intellectuals with close ties to the Soviet Union who operated the French Communist press were hesitant to share news of Shostakovich's denunciation, since Soviet authorities did not want information that negatively impacted the USSR's image to circulate throughout Western countries (Stalin's suppression of the 1937 census results being the clearest example).⁴¹ Furthermore,

37 L. F. Boross, 'La lutte autour de la création musicale de l'époque socialiste', *La Correspondance internationale* 12 (1936), 328–29.

38 Further information on this phenomenon can be found in Stéphane Courtois, 'La gauche française et l'image de l'U.R.S.S.', *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 9 (1987); François Dosse, *La saga des intellectuels français, 1944–1989* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018); David Drake, 'Fascism, Anti-fascism, Communism, Anti-communism and Pacifism', in *French Intellectuals and Politics from the Dreyfus Affair to the Occupation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Andrew Sobanet, *Generation Stalin: French Writers, the Fatherland, and the Cult of Personality* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018); and Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940: From the Red Square to the Left Bank* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

39 Initially known as the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature, the IURW was a global network of proletarian writers active from 1925 to 1935. Membership was open to any writer who opposed fascism and imperialist war. James Francis Murphy summarizes the genesis of this movement in *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 36–9.

40 For further information, see Nicole Racine, 'L'Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (A.E.A.R.), la revue "Commune" et la lutte idéologique contre le fascisme (1932–1936)', *Le Mouvement social* 54 (1966).

41 Jean-Paul Loubes, *Paul Vaillant-Couturier: Essai sur un écrivain qui s'est empêché de l'être* (Paris: Éditions du Sextant, 2013), 146.

Shostakovich's music had already been embraced in France through the efforts of the Popular Front, and this coalition was, in early 1936, on track to win the legislative elections of April and May.⁴² The PCF was finally in a position to achieve real political power as part of this alliance, so it would have surely been counterproductive for its organ to share that the composer of a beloved French Communist anthem had been denounced by the state. Thus, the editorial staff at *L'Humanité* was likely aware of the attacks against Soviet composers in January 1936; however, having PCF supporters learn of an attack at the hands of the state to which they looked for inspiration would have been detrimental to the cause. It is therefore easy to imagine a situation in which an editorial decision factored into *L'Humanité's* lack of reporting on Shostakovich's first denunciation in the USSR.

In the musical press, there was a more overt reluctance to engage with the issue of Soviet musical censorship. An unnamed correspondent for *La Revue musicale* began their December 1936 review of *Lady Macbeth* in London by stating that '*La Revue musicale* avoids any incursion into the political domain',⁴³ a preface that alludes to extra-musical controversy around the work without directly explaining it. If a decision had been made at an editorial level that concert reviews were not the right place to do so, the publication's two accounts of 'Musical Life in Moscow' from March and November 1936 may have been more suitable – but neither of these mentioned the *Lady Macbeth* affair either.⁴⁴ These reports were part of a broader series called '*Musique à l'étranger*', which provided brief, introductory backgrounds on musical life in countries with which *La Revue musicale's* readers were likely unfamiliar. However, the Soviet instalments were delivered by the young Soviet composer and musicologist Julien Krein (Yulian Kreyn), who had returned to Moscow in 1934 after studying and working in Paris since 1928. As Kreyn's musical language had been heavily influenced by French music, he was in a difficult position professionally and politically after returning to the USSR, and was clearly not in a position to discuss musical censorship.⁴⁵

In July 1937 the Parisian Catholic daily *La Croix* listed Shostakovich as one of many names affected by 'the war on Trotskyists',⁴⁶ but no specific details of the event were provided. It was not until June 1938 – almost two and a half years after *Pravda's* denunciation of *Lady Macbeth* – that a French newspaper explicitly mentioned the affair in relation to Shostakovich's music.

42 For an early record of 'Au-devant de la vie' being sung by workers' choruses in Paris, see 'À Bullier, des milliers de travailleurs acclament l'Union soviétique', *L'Humanité*, 6 December 1934, 2. The song grew in popularity throughout 1935, and even more so in 1936 when it appeared in a *Front populaire* propaganda film subsidised by the PCF. See Jean Renoir, dir. *La Vie est à nous*. Written by Jacques Becker, Jacques B. Brunius, Jean Renoir, and Pierre Unik (Paris: Collective Films/Parti communiste français, 1936). Christopher Moore demonstrates how songs like Shostakovich's were used in the *Front populaire* campaign in 'Socialist Realism and the Music of the French Popular Front', *The Journal of Musicology* 25/4 (2008).

43 '*La Revue musicale* s'interdit toute incursion dans le domaine politique'. 'Chostakovitch', *La Revue musicale* 170 (1936), 433.

44 Julien Krein, 'La Vie musicale à Moscou', *La Revue musicale* 164 (1936), 226; Julien Krein, 'La saison musicale à Moscou', *La Revue musicale* 169 (1936), 365.

45 Galina Grigor'yeva, 'Krein Family: (3) Yulian Grigor'yevich Krein', *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com.

46 'La chasse aux trotskystes en Russie', *La Croix*, 9 July 1937, 7.

It appeared in *L'Humanité* on the day Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 was set to premiere in Paris, and of course, the political alignment of the publication influenced how the story was framed: 'We remember that Shostakovich was violently criticized in the Soviet press, particularly for his opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, and for his Fourth Symphony, works judged too scholarly and too formalist. His Fifth Symphony has won him all the votes once more, it seems. We shall soon see why.'⁴⁷ Rather than shocking its readership with news of such 'violent' criticism at the time of its occurrence, and presumably in an attempt to preserve a utopian image of the USSR, *L'Humanité* appears to have withheld any comment on *Pravda's* condemnation of *Lady Macbeth* until June 1938, when it could be recounted as a way to highlight the triumphant genesis of Shostakovich's newest symphony. In the meantime, the French Communist press continued to promote *Lady Macbeth* in France as before; building on the earlier broadcasts in 1934 and 1935, Parisian listeners received a Swiss production via radio a week after the publication of 'Muddle Instead of Music',⁴⁸ and in March 1936 excerpts from the score were performed live in a concert of Soviet music organized by the FMP, the musical wing of Vaillant-Couturier's AEAR.⁴⁹

That only *L'Humanité* mentioned Shostakovich's denunciation explicitly raises the question of whether people beyond the French Communist demographic were aware of Shostakovich's situation in the USSR, or whether the PCF organ was simply the only outlet willing to talk about it in its pre-performance coverage. We may wonder if the non-communist critics whose reviews I cited earlier had been willing or able to place the work in the appropriate political context, would this have changed the way they interpreted the music? Would this have made them more hostile to the USSR, perhaps more sympathetic to the composer? As these questions are impossible to answer, it will be most productive to take a closer look at how the Fifth Symphony was discussed in both the Communist press and elsewhere after its first French performance.

Bias, style, and taste in the Parisian reception of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony

Although I have led with less favourable reviews of the Fifth Symphony, it would be wrong to suggest that its initial French reception was entirely negative. Naturally, the French Communist press continued its defiant praise of the work after its premiere, with Jean Loiseau in the monthly journal *Regards* describing it as a work of the 'very first order', one that would be 'enough to class Shostakovich among the greatest composers of the present

47 'On se souvient que Chostakovitch fut violemment critiqué dans la presse soviétique, en particulier pour son opéra "Lady Macbeth du district de Mtsensk" et pour sa "Quatrième Symphonie", œuvres jugées trop savantes et trop formalistes. Sa "Cinquième Symphonie" lui a acquis de nouveau, semble-t-il, tous les suffrages. On jugera pourquoi.' 'La Cinquième Symphonie de Chostakovitch', 7.

48 'Radio', *Paris-Soir*, 3 February 1936, 7.

49 Jean Train, 'La Musique – Concert soviétique', *L'Humanité*, 22 March 1936, 8. For information on the FMP in 1930s France, see Ory, *La belle illusion*, 298–302; and Jane Fulcher, *The Composer as Intellectual: Music and Ideology in France 1914–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 211–23.

century'.⁵⁰ No mention was made of the *Pravda* denunciation, but this would probably have been a lot to ask of Loiseau since he did not specialize in music – he was actually an expert in camping and hiking, and most of his articles in *Regards* between 1937 and 1938 provided detailed plans and helpful tips for his readers' outdoor adventures. Nonetheless, the French Communist journal had been directed by Moussinac, the founder of *Le Chant du Monde*, up until 1936, and as Moussinac's replacement was the Communist poet and screenwriter Pierre Unik, we can assume that the journal's editors kept up to date with news from the Soviet Union.⁵¹

The French Communist daily *Ce Soir* also featured a review of the *Chant du Monde* concert, prepared by the composer and conductor Daniel Lazarus, then artistic director of the Paris Opéra-Comique. Like Loiseau in *Regards*, after only one listening of the Fifth Symphony, Lazarus felt that it proved Shostakovich to be 'a true musician of our time, from whom we can expect the greatest things'.⁵² Lazarus saw the work as fitting into a legacy of classical masterworks, and noted how

it leaves an impression of wholesome, pure, and almost naive grandeur; it is devoid of arbitrariness and prejudice; it does not lower the horizon; it does not fight *against* a doctrine or school. It 'lives' splendidly a musical destiny, with which we join in with joy and confidence, because above all, that's what it is – it is a work, it is music, that gives us *confidence*.⁵³

From this optimistic and evocative assessment, we can glean that Lazarus was aware that Shostakovich was expected to compose according to the doctrine of socialist realism – he appears to imply that the composer had embraced it willingly, rather than fighting it – but once again, the term itself was not used, nor was the concept explained in any precise detail. *L'Humanité*, on the other hand, went a step further, providing an allusion to Shostakovich's denunciation in *Pravda*; however, it was even more fleeting than the announcement published by the same newspaper on the day of the Fifth Symphony's premiere. The critic, writing under the initials E. B., began by making similarly encouraging comments to those of Loiseau and Lazarus: 'Overall, we received the impression that this was very sincere, fresh music. Shostakovich has certainly not been spoiled by recent events. He seems to completely ignore

50 'Œuvre de tout premier ordre... cette V^e Symphonie suffit pour classer Chostakovitch parmi les plus grands compositeurs du siècle présent'. Jean Loiseau, 'Le courrier des Loisirs: Le 2^e concert du Chant du Monde', *Regards* 232 (1938), 15.

51 Unik was one of the writers of *La Vie est à nous*, the French Communist propaganda film that featured Shostakovich's 'Au-devant de la vie'.

52 'Saluons donc un véritable "musicien" de notre temps, dont nous pouvons attendre les plus grandes choses.' Daniel Lazarus, 'La musique', *Ce Soir*, 21 June 1938, 6.

53 'Sa *Cinquième Symphonie*... se relie directement aux œuvres maîtresses de la musique de tous les temps. Elle laisse une impression de grandeur saine, pure et presque naïve; elle est dépourvue d'arbitraire et de parti pris; elle n'abaisse pas l'horizon; elle ne combat pas *contre* une doctrine ou une école. Elle "vit" splendidement un destin musical auquel nous nous associons avec le joie et *confiance* – car c'est surtout cela, c'est une œuvre, c'est une musique qui nous donnent *confiance*.' Lazarus, 'La musique', 6; original emphases.

what has been written in the last forty or fifty years, and remembers only Tchaikovsky.⁵⁴ Presumably, the *Humanité* reviewer chose Tchaikovsky as a point of reference due to the emotional magnitude they perceived in the symphony (especially its opening movement), which allowed them to look past the work's unfashionably large scale. Yet they were also complimentary about Shostakovich's technical ability, and the freshness they perceived in his composition:

At first, it is confusing, but as we listen, our impression changes. And, when we arrive at certain, bolder passages [*marqués 'au trait noir'*], loaded with an unrelenting and dynamic force, expressed with technical means used so economically that they do not exceed those that Schubert must have had, we come to envy Shostakovich. Thanks to his naivety, thanks to this brand new musical spirit, he restores the vigour to accents that we believed to have been dulled for a long time. And most of all, we would like to speak of the end of the symphony's first movement. During a lengthy, sustained, and masterfully composed episode, he grips you, he disturbs you. He moves you. We can no longer deny the spark of genius in Shostakovich, which erases any reservations we might have had regarding certain lengths and repetitions.⁵⁵

The references to music of the late nineteenth-century in this review bring us again to the issue of style, or the kinds of music that a French audience would have been judging Shostakovich's symphony against. Comparing the Fifth to a popular nineteenth-century master such as Tchaikovsky not only rejects any inference of Soviet cultural policy lowering the standard of artistic production, it also frames in a positive light the symphony's expansive, nineteenth-century-inspired structures, which would no doubt have sounded *passé* to some French critics of the 1930s, though not all of them. The musical language employed in Symphony No. 5 is certainly unlike the complex and innovative (yet arguably inaccessible) brand of modernism characteristic of some French symphonic works of the period – Schmitt's *Symphonie Concertante*, op. 83 (1932), for example – but there are elements of similarity in others, such as Honegger's *Mouvement Symphonique No. 3* (1932–33).⁵⁶ Auric – who, as already mentioned, eschewed musical elitism in favour of

54 'Nous avons surtout reçu l'impression d'une musique très sincère et très fraîche. Chostakovitch n'est certes pas gâté par des réminiscences récentes. Il semble ignorer complètement ce qui s'est écrit depuis quarante ou cinquante ans . . . pour ne se souvenir que de Tchaïkowski'. E. B., 'Chostakovitch, Auric, Koechlin, au concert de "Chant du Monde"', *L'Humanité*, 18 June 1938, 8.

55 'Au début, c'est déroutant, mais en cours d'audition, l'impression change. Et, quand on arrive à certains paspages [*sic*] marqués "au trait noir", chargés d'une force implacable et dynamique exprimés avec des moyens techniques tellement économisés qu'ils ne dépassent pas ceux dont devait disposer un Schubert, on en vient à envier Chostakovitch. Grâce à sa naïveté, grâce à cet esprit musical tout neuf, il redonne toute leur vigueur à des accents que l'on croyait émoussés depuis longtemps. Et nous voudrions surtout parler de la fin du premier morceau de sa symphonie. Pendant un long épisode, soutenu et mené de main de maître, il vous tient, il vous émeut. Il vous bouleverse. On ne peut plus alors dénier à Chostakovitch l'étincelle du génie et tout cela efface toutes les réserves que l'on aurait pu formuler au sujet de certaines longueurs et répétitions'. E. B., 'Chostakovitch, Auric, Koechlin', 8.

56 Emily MacGregor provides an interesting analysis of Honegger's often-overlooked *Mouvement Symphonique No. 3* in 'The Symphony in 1933' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2016).

reaching a wider audience – also comes to mind when noting the accessibility of the Fifth Symphony’s musical language. Barbara Kelly has detailed how Tchaikovsky’s influence was still present in the music of interwar France – specifically in Poulenc’s *Les Biches* (1923) and Stravinsky’s *Mavra* (1922), and famously in the latter composer’s pastiche work *Le Baiser de la fée* (1928). Kelly has also shown how efforts to work ‘against the grain’ were just as valuable in France between the wars, as seen in the activities of groups such as the Société musicale indépendante (of which Koechlin, programmed alongside Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 5, was a member) and La Jeune France (whose 1936 manifesto advocated for a spiritual, neo-Romantic aesthetic).⁵⁷ Thus, although it might be tempting to attribute the limited praise of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony to the taste of the public in 1930s France, this would clearly be an unnuanced conclusion to draw. This public had a wide variety of tastes and personal artistic preferences, which in addition to political factors would have played their part in the reception of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony in 1938.

Although only the French Communist press focused exclusively on the positive attributes of Symphony No. 5, there were other voices on the spectrum of critical opinion who perceived flaws in the symphony, but acknowledged them in an optimistic and diplomatic manner. In the popular daily *Paris-Soir*, the dominant tabloid of the period, Gil-Marchex was still clearly taken by Shostakovich’s music. He admitted that ‘the Soviet composer is not afraid to use the most conventional of forms’, but declared that ‘it is the sincerity of his Romantic lyricism that miraculously prevents him from falling into banality’.⁵⁸ Similarly, Michel-Léon Hirsch stated in the influential *Le Ménestrel* that, ‘in spite of the forms of both the first movement and the Adagio, the work attests to a high-aiming, interesting and audacious personality’.⁵⁹ Hirsch appears to have had no philosophical investment in the Soviet Union, but as a notable translator of Czech and an employee of the Institut français de Prague, like Gil-Marchex he must also have been interested in intercultural and international exchange during the 1930s.

Although there are subtle differences in each of the critical responses to Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony, one factor they have in common is the absence of any discussion of the ‘Muddle Instead of Music’ controversy. This absence has both similarities and contrasts with the reception of the same work in the British and American contexts. In her study of Shostakovich’s reception in the British press, Pauline Fairclough details how the early reception of Symphony No. 5 did not mention the infamous reprimand, but there was ‘no clear reason for this’ since the *Manchester Guardian*, *News Chronicle*, and the *Daily Telegraph* had reported on it between February and March 1936.⁶⁰ The film concert premiere of the symphony was also preceded by a talk that provided at least a simplified account of the

57 Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 224–5.

58 ‘Le compositeur soviétique ne craint pas d’utiliser les formules les plus conventionnelles . . . Cependant la sincérité de son lyrisme romantique lui permet miraculeusement de ne point tomber dans la banalité’. Henri Gil-Marchex, ‘Le Chant du Monde, La Jeune France, Une Ouverture de Georges Auric’, *Paris-Soir*, 15 June 1938, 6.

59 ‘Il n’en demeure pas moins qu’en dépit des formules du premier mouvement et de l’Adagio, l’œuvre atteste une personnalité intéressante, audacieuse, et qui vise haut.’ Michel-Léon Hirsch, ‘Concerts divers: Le Chant du Monde’, *Le Ménestrel* 5330/25 (1938), 171.

60 Fairclough, ‘The “Old Shostakovich”’, 269–71.

denunciation – it was just absent from the work’s initial reviews. The fact that British critics presumably knew of this context but did not discuss it in print suggests that it is possible that French critics too were aware of the *Pravda* denunciation, and likewise chose not to discuss it. However, there are some relevant points of difference between the British and French press here. First, is that the latter did not publish adequate reports on the denunciation in early 1936. Of course, it is possible that newspapers from England or elsewhere were read by Parisians, or that the news had travelled by letter or word of mouth, or even radio transmission. There is also the case of André Gide’s *Retour de l’U.R.S.S.* (published in France in November 1936), which contains paraphrased comments made by a Soviet artist on Shostakovich’s situation – although the description is deliberately cryptic, and hardly a focus of the book overall.⁶¹ Second, the two spaces are not exactly comparable since there is a small but not insignificant time difference: Symphony No. 5 premiered at the Salle Pleyel almost eighteen months before the British film premiere in November 1939, and the concert premiere in the Queen’s Hall in London took place another four and a half months after that. The first performances in the United States, on the other hand, was closer to the time of the of the French one, with the initial NBC broadcast occurring in April 1938, and the concert premiere taking place in Boston in January 1939.⁶² Yet Terry Klefstad has shown how both the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune* reported on the denunciation within weeks of it occurring,⁶³ and when critics began to review the Fifth Symphony, many blamed its ‘uneven qualities and lack of originality’ on its status as a socialist realist work: ‘The *Lady Macbeth* affair was fresh in their minds, and they were well aware of Shostakovich’s new explicit obligation to compose more simply for the masses.’⁶⁴ Furthermore, Klefstad mentions how the symphony’s concert premiere was accompanied by programme notes detailing the condemnation, and speculates that these notes played a role in the Fifth Symphony’s early, ‘fairly negative’ critical reception in the United States.⁶⁵ In short, as there were allusions to the denunciation in France, and as it appears to have been known about in the rest of Western Europe and the United States, it is unclear whether

61 André Gide, *Back from the U.S.S.R.*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (London: Secker and Warburg, 1937), 74–5. In the passage in question, Gide recounts a conversation he allegedly had with an unnamed artist, to whom he refers simply as ‘X’: “‘You see,” explained X, “it wasn’t at all what the public asked for; not at all the kind of thing we want nowadays. Before this he had written a very remarkable ballet which had been greatly admired.” (He was Shostakovich, whom I had heard praised in terms usually reserved for geniuses.) “But what is the public to do with an opera that leaves them with no tunes to hum when they come out?” (Heavens! Is this the stage they’re at? I thought to myself. And yet X is himself an artist and highly cultivated, and I had never before heard him say anything that was not intelligent.) “What we want nowadays are works everyone can understand, and understand immediately. If Shostakovich doesn’t feel that himself, he will soon be made to, by losing all his listeners.””

62 Klefstad, ‘The Reception in America of Dmitri Shostakovich’, 156.

63 Klefstad, ‘The Reception in America of Dmitri Shostakovich’, 140–1. Unlike the *New York Herald Tribune*, the historical, Paris-based *International Herald Tribune* (presently titled the *New York Times International Edition*) did not report on Shostakovich’s denunciation at this time, for it published fewer reports than its New York-based sister publication, targeted primarily at English-speaking businesspeople in Europe.

64 Klefstad, ‘The Reception in America of Dmitri Shostakovich’, 151.

65 Klefstad, ‘The Reception in America of Dmitri Shostakovich’, 152–3.

French critics were genuinely unaware, or they collectively decided that it would be in poor taste to discuss such an event in the context of a concert review. Either scenario leaves us wondering whether the critics of *La Revue musicale*, the *Mercure de France*, *Le Matin*, and *Le Temps* would have criticized the musical style of the Fifth Symphony in the same way had they been willing and/or able to place the work in the appropriate sociopolitical context.

Absent to abundant: Shostakovich symphonies during and after the Second World War

Following the premiere of the Fifth in June 1938, no further Shostakovich symphonies (or any other works by the composer) were performed in French concert halls until after the Second World War.⁶⁶ Unlike Germany, which instated a wartime ban on Soviet music after 1941,⁶⁷ no ‘official’ measures appear to have prevented the performance of Soviet music in France from 1939 to 1944. Several factors beyond the lukewarm reception of the Fifth explain the absence of Shostakovich’s music in this period, however. The first is logistical: Shostakovich did not complete his Symphony No. 6 until November 1939, so it would have been an impressive feat for any French orchestra to acquire the parts and secure a performance of the Sixth before the establishment of the Vichy State in June 1940. (For some perspective on this matter, seven months elapsed between the Fifth Symphony’s premieres in Leningrad and Paris). Although Yannick Simon and Jane Fulcher have shown that musical activity in France in no way ceased under Vichy, the musical landscape was certainly reorganized in this period into one that favoured quintessentially French works, which Fulcher has categorized as those with neoclassical elements or based on French folklore.⁶⁸ The state valued these traits, Fulcher suggests, for their ability to assist in the restoration of national identity and the dissemination of France’s cultural prowess – ideals with which Soviet music was clearly incompatible.⁶⁹ A further explanation for the absence of Shostakovich’s music in France from 1940 to 1944 was that his music was championed primarily by French Communist organizations in the 1930s, and the German presence made it impossible for this promotion to continue: *Le Chant du Monde* put its publishing on hold until after the war; *L’Humanité* was banned by the government in August 1939; and *Ce Soir*, Paris’s other Communist daily, ceased voluntarily in 1940.⁷⁰

66 One exception to this statement is Léonide Massine’s *Rouge et Noir*, a ‘symphonic ballet’ choreographed to the score of Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 1, which was performed in Paris by the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo in May 1939. See Albert Duret, ‘Le Mouvement musical à l’Étranger: Monaco’, *Le Ménestrel* 5378/21 (1939), 151.

67 Levi, ‘A Political Football’, 290–1.

68 For precise structural changes to musical life in Occupied France, see Yannick Simon, ‘La “Drôle de guerre”’, in *Composer Sous Vichy* (Lyon: Symétrie, 2009). Jane Fulcher explores how the state used music to forge a national identity in the Second World War years in *Renegotiating French Identity: Musical Culture and Creativity in France during Vichy and the Occupation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

69 Fulcher, *Renegotiating French Identity*, 6.

70 Although it was not legally allowed to publish until August 1944, *L’Humanité* produced a number of clandestine issues between 26 October 1939 and 18 August 1944. See *L’Humanité*: Notice de périodique, *Gallica*, <https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb327877302>.

Musical life in Paris regained much of its former cosmopolitanism after August 1944, as a generation of French musicians who had spent their formative years in a restricted artistic climate led the way into a new era of radical experimentation.⁷¹ For comparatively conservative Soviet music, though, the years immediately following the Second World War were also favourable. With French Communists forming a third of Charles de Gaulle's post-Liberation government,⁷² the wartime ban on French Communist activity was lifted, and the PCF's membership grew from less than thirty thousand in 1939 to half a million by 1945, peaking at 5.5 million in 1946.⁷³ The signing of the USSR and the French Republic's Treaty of Alliance and Mutual Assistance in December 1944 boosted Franco-Soviet relations to an all-time high, and a new friendship society, the Association France-URSS (AFU), was established in January 1945. The mission statement of the AFU, which remained active until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992, was to 'promote, in the interests of the nation and peace, mutual knowledge and friendly cooperation between the two countries' (*Favoriser, dans l'intérêt de la nation et de la paix, la connaissance mutuelle et la coopération amicale des deux pays*). In early 1945, the society stated in its internal bulletin that its principal objectives were to continue to celebrate victory, help rebuild France from the devastation of the war, work towards the security and grandeur of France, and tie in with the country's republican traditions.⁷⁴ Of course, like other international friendship societies, the AFU formed part of the Soviet Union's cultural diplomacy strategy and was coordinated by the USSR, yet its French presidium comprised mostly PCF and SFIO members, some whom were important figures in artistic life, such as the composer Auric and the playwright Charles Vildrac.⁷⁵ The AFU promoted Soviet culture in France throughout the century by organizing business and tourism visits to the USSR for French citizens, and in France, hosting Russian delegates, offering Russian language classes and screenings of Soviet cinema, and presenting showcases of Russian and Soviet art and music. The French premiere of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 on 9 May 1945 – the first live performance of a Shostakovich symphony in Paris in almost seven years – was one of the society's earliest musical events.

The French premiere of Symphony No. 7

With Charles Munch directing the Orchestre de la Société des Concerts at the Opéra de Paris, the long-awaited premiere of the Seventh Symphony generated both excitement

71 For an overview of post-war musical experiments in Western Europe, see David Osmond-Smith, 'New Beginnings: The International Avant-Garde, 1945–62', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

72 The remainder of the Free French government was made up of the Socialist Party (Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière) and de Gaulle's Christian Democrats (Mouvement républicain populaire).

73 David Bell and Byron Criddle, 'The Decline of the French Communist Party', *British Journal of Political Science* 19/4 (1989), 516.

74 'Les buts et les moyens d'action de France-U.R.S.S., *France-URSS: bulletin intérieur réservé aux secrétaires des comités départementaux et locaux* 3 (February 1945), 1–2.

75 Faye Bartram, '35mm Bridges: Cultural Relations and Film Exchange between France and the Soviet Union, 1945 to 1972' (PhD thesis, University of Iowa, 2017), 111; 'Liste des membres du comité directeur', *France-URSS: bulletin intérieur réservé aux secrétaires des comités départementaux et locaux* 3 (February 1945), 3.

and intrigue from the French public. Henri Sauguet, one of the most important composer/critics in 1930s and 1940s Paris, captured this sense in the socialist journal *La Bataille*: ‘We were waiting with keen curiosity to hear this work from a musician better known in France for the glory that surrounds his name in his own country, rather than from his works, which have been performed here only rarely.’⁷⁶ In 1945, the public awareness of the events that inspired Symphony No. 7 led to it receiving a very different reception to that of the Fifth Symphony in 1938.⁷⁷ The most obvious difference here pertains to the amount of publicity it received: more commentary appeared on the 1945 premiere of Symphony No. 7 than it did for either Shostakovich symphony heard in Paris before the war. This increase in profile can be attributed first to the improved state of Franco-Soviet relations, and second to the sheer popularity that the ‘Leningrad’ Symphony had garnered in the West since 1942, when it was broadcast into the homes of millions of Allied listeners when Henry Wood and Arturo Toscanini led performances for the BBC in London and the NBC in New York. By 1945 the work was internationally recognized both as one of Shostakovich’s masterworks and as a heroic symbol of resistance against the Nazi forces. Of the symphony’s French premiere, Jacques Le More wrote in the Resistance-affiliated journal *Gavroche*: ‘The “Leningrad” Symphony comes to us preceded by a reputation as a masterpiece.’⁷⁸

The amount of publicity that the Parisian press afforded the real-life, extra-musical events that inspired the Seventh Symphony’s inception is reminiscent of the US premiere of the same work three years earlier. As Christopher Gibbs has shown, the American press ‘prepared the public’ by publishing extended articles on the Seventh Symphony in the lead up to its first performances, fostering an understanding of the political and musical content of the work before a note had been played.⁷⁹ The Parisian press does not appear to have prepared its readers in the same way; however, given the international attention the symphony had received since being introduced in the United States and Britain, the concert-going public seems to have been familiar with the work and its extra-musical meaning regardless. The famous circumstances under which it was composed and

76 ‘On attendait avec une vive curiosité cette œuvre d’un musicien plus connu en France par la gloire qui entoure son nom dans son pays que par ses œuvres, qui n’ont été jouées ici que peu souvent.’ Henri Sauguet, ‘La 7^e Symphonie de Chostakovitch’, *La Bataille*, 10 May 1945, ‘Dimitri Chostakovitch’, Fonds Montpensier, Bibliothèque nationale de France Département de la Musique, 2 rue de Louvois, 75002 Paris, France.

77 Shostakovich dedicated Symphony No. 7 to his home city of Leningrad, which at the time of composition (1939–41) was under siege by Axis forces. The work’s premiere in Leningrad remains legendary; in short, the Leningrad Radio Orchestra overcame the city’s depleted musical forces and an ensemble of starving musicians performed the symphony on 9 August 1942. Loudspeakers disseminated the performance across Leningrad and to the German troops stationed outside the city, an act that Laurel Fay has described as psychological warfare. See Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 130–3.

78 ‘La *Symphonie de Léningrad* nous arrive précédée d’une réputation de chef-d’œuvre.’ Jacques Le More, ‘Deux Symphonies pathétiques’, *Gavroche*, 10 May 1945, 7.

79 Christopher Gibbs, ‘“The Phenomenon of the Seventh”: A Documentary Essay on Shostakovich’s “War” Symphony’, in *Shostakovich and His World*, ed. Laurel Fay (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 65–72.

premiered were also detailed in an extensive programme note provided at the first French performance.⁸⁰

As Shostakovich did not attach any explicit extra-musical meaning to his First Symphony, and neither of his earlier titled symphonies (nos. 2 and 3) were performed in France before the war, the press coverage of the ‘Leningrad’ was the first instance in which French critics consistently drew upon their knowledge of the relevant extra-musical context to situate and critique Shostakovich’s music. As a result, many appointed the piece with seemingly human or life-like characteristics; for example, Alexis Roland-Manuel – another prominent composer/critic – described the symphony as, ‘not an epic’ but ‘a personal diary’, from which the audience could learn ‘about the heroism, selflessness and loyalty of Russian hearts and souls’.⁸¹ He wrote that the music ‘speaks to us in a tone of constant moderation and restraint, with the liberated confidence of a one-on-one conversation’.⁸² In *Le Monde*, Dumesnil began his assessment by stating that, on account of the symphony’s ‘vast proportions . . . one becomes lost in its developments, the organisation of which escapes us because of their very length’; yet, he ended the same review by describing the finale as ‘heroic’, and the overall work as ‘conscientious, headstrong and assiduous’ – three adjectives typically ascribed to sentient beings rather than musical works.⁸³ Dumesnil was one of the toughest Parisian critics to please when it came to Soviet music, so the fact that he was able to find meaning in this manner is testament to the work’s relatability.

Broadly speaking, responses to the Seventh Symphony were very warm, but there were several Parisian critics along with Dumesnil who encountered minor difficulties in regard to the work’s structure. The same features perceived as flaws in the Fifth – namely the excessively large scale and repetitive nature – are not only present, but stretched to new heights in the Seventh: a typical performance lasts seventy-five minutes, and the twenty-two bar ‘invasion’ theme is repeated twelve times in the first movement. Even the kindest assessments, such as Sauguet’s, acknowledged the Seventh Symphony’s unusual length and repetitiveness, yet he does not frame these traits as detrimental to the work overall:

What is initially most striking upon hearing the symphony is that it is full of life. Despite its length . . . we feel neither tiredness nor boredom. The four movements unfold without pointless repetition and without the composer running out of steam. Shostakovich is never short of ideas, even if they are not particularly creative

80 See Armand Pierhal, ‘La Musique: Chostakovitch, Barraud, Poulenc’, *La Nef* 7 (June 1945), 151.

81 ‘Ce n’est pas une épopée, c’est un journal intime . . . sur l’héroïsme, l’abnégation et la fidélité des cœurs et des âmes russes’. Alexis Roland-Manuel, ‘La Septième Symphonie de Chostakovitch’, *Les Lettres françaises*, 12 May 1945, Fonds Montpensier.

82 ‘La musique nous parle d’un ton presque constamment modéré, retenu, qui est celui de la libre confiance, de l’entretien d’homme à homme.’ Roland-Manuel, ‘La Septième Symphonie de Chostakovitch’, 5.

83 ‘C’est un monument de si vastes proportions . . . on se perd dans ses développements, dont l’ordonnance échappe en raison même de leur longueur . . . Un decrescendo sur un mouvement rapide le relie au finale, de caractère héroïque . . . Cet ouvrage consciencieux, volontaire et appliqué’. René Dumesnil, ‘Deux symphonies russes’, *Le Monde*, 8 May 1945.

or beautiful. But the life that drives them is so intense, so authentic, and so profoundly musical that we feel as if we are being swept away by the current of a river.⁸⁴

Jean Wiéner came to a similarly positive conclusion: that any structural weaknesses could be overlooked in favour of the emotive, life-like qualities of the work as a whole:

Its proportions are gigantic, and its subject matter is so powerful that not for a moment – not even during the very long developments we sometimes encounter, and despite a bias, in some places, towards a dark, evenly stubbornly dark orchestration – do we experience boredom, because everything here is consistently simple and direct . . . In each movement there is the same sense of constant grandeur without pomposity, a way of expression that is so true, so human, that we feel completely drawn in from the opening measures.⁸⁵

A review of Soviet music by Wiéner, however, should be viewed through a similar lens as the one used for the French Communist promotion of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony in 1938. The composer, critic, and pianist was a member of the PCF from 1938 until his death, and he was one of the first foreign musicians (alongside Milhaud) to visit the USSR as a guest of the state. Yet his opinion was shared by others – in *La Nouvelle équipe française*, for example. *La Nouvelle équipe française*, or *La Nef* for short, was formed in Alger in 1943 by the French writers-in-exile Lucie Faure and Robert Aron, who moved the journal back with them to Paris after the Liberation. The poet and art critic Raphaël Miranda, writing under the anagram pseudonym Armand Pierhal, was concise in the assessment he prepared for this socially and politically oriented publication; Pierhal revealed that all he wrote in his notebook during the performance of the Seventh Symphony was: 'Lasts an hour and ten minutes and not boring for a minute.'⁸⁶

While his praise was less forthcoming, Claude Rostand represents another faction of French critics who enjoyed the symphony seemingly against their will. In *Carrefour*, a weekly magazine covering French and international news, Rostand's stern yet poetic words describe a listening experience that is impossible to paraphrase:

84 'Ce qui frappe tout d'abord à l'audition de cette symphonie est la vie dont elle est emplie . . . Malgré sa durée . . . on n'éprouve ni lassitude, ni ennui. Ses quatre mouvements se déroulent sans qu'apparaisse chez leur auteur ni essoufflement, ni vaine répétition. Le musicien n'est jamais à court d'idées, si celles-ci ne sont pas toujours d'une grande invention ni d'une belle qualité. Mais la vie qui les anime est si intense, si authentique et toujours si profondément et uniquement musicale que l'on est emporté par elle comme par le courant d'un fleuve.' Sauguet, 'La 7^e Symphonie de Chostakovitch'.

85 'Ses proportions sont gigantesques, et sa matière si forte que pas un instant – même durant les très longs développements qu'on y rencontre parfois, et, malgré un parti pris, à certains endroits, d'orchestration sombre, et tenacement sombre – on ne frise l'ennui. Car tout ici est toujours simple et direct . . . Il y a dans chacun des mouvements ce même souffle, cette constante grandeur sans emphase, cette manière d'expression si vraie, si humaine, qu'on est entièrement d'accord, dès les premières mesures'. Jean Wiéner, 'Chostakovitch à l'Opéra', 11 May 1945, Fonds Montpensier.

86 'Dure une heure dix et n'est pas ennuyeuse une minute'. Pierhal, 'Chostakovitch, Barraud, Poulenc', 151.

Here is a symphony in which, among a scattering of ideas from Russian folklore, we encounter themes of a rare vulgarity that seem to lag behind the harmony classes of every conservatoire in the world. Here is a symphony in which astoundingly basic and clichéd melodic, harmonic and rhythmic material is used with the most aggressive insensibility and superb shamelessness . . . To top it all off, here is a symphony in four movements that lasts an hour and ten minutes! And yet! Here is a symphony in which we are not bored for a minute, which already renders it successful, but from which we are also left dazzled and shaken. We know that it evokes the fighting spirit of the Russian people under siege, which is neither an original theme nor one of particularly sophisticated thought. However, the music contains nothing emulative, descriptive or picturesque. Rather, it is evocative, or powerfully suggestive, from the horrifically purple-tinged palette of skies filled with bombs to the most optimistic elation, full of confidence and radiance.⁸⁷

As the preceding commentary demonstrates, even the critics with less respect for the symphony's musical configurations still felt drawn in by the Seventh Symphony's heroic storyline, allowing it to receive a considerably warmer reception in Paris than the Fifth in 1938. Unlike in the American context, where Gibbs has demonstrated how it took a second listening for critics to see past the work's length and perceived derivativeness, the narrative of Hitler's army laying siege to Leningrad would have been painfully relatable for music critics and their audiences in a Paris only recently liberated from Nazi Occupation.⁸⁸ As such, they were able to draw meaning and emotion from the notes and forms of the piece, rather than taking them at face value: a phenomenon not nearly as prevalent in the reception of Symphony No. 5 seven years earlier.

Programme music and political influence

Although I have suggested that an awareness of the events that inspired Shostakovich's symphonies played a large role in determining how they were received in France, I do not mean to imply that French critics harboured a preference for symphonic music with a narrative, politically charged or otherwise. This statement can be affirmed by briefly looking at the French reception of Shostakovich's subsequent two symphonies, both of which arrived in France with

87 'Voici une symphonie où, à côté de quelques rares idées issues du folklore grand russe [sic], on rencontre des thèmes d'une rare vulgarité et qui semblent avoir traîné dans tous les devoirs d'harmonie de tous les conservatoires du monde. Voici une symphonie où sont utilisés, avec le plus superbe sans-gêne et l'inconscience la plus agressive, tous les poncifs les plus communs d'un matériel mélodique, harmonique et rythmique du plus effarant rudimentaire . . . Voici enfin, pour couronner l'ensemble, une symphonie en quatre mouvements qui dure une heure dix ! Eh bien ! Voici une symphonie ou non seulement on ne s'ennuie pas une minute, ce qui est déjà un succès, mais encore dont l'on sort secoué et ébloui. On sait qu'elle évoque la lutte des peuples russes et leur espoir dans l'issue finale, thème dont on ne peut pas dire qu'il soit très original, ni d'un grand raffinement de pensée. Il n'y a, dans ces pages, rien d'imitatif ni même de descriptif ou de pittoresque. Tout est en évocation, et en très puissante évocation : depuis la palette atrocement violacée des ciels de bombardements jusqu'à l'exaltation optimiste de la plus rayonnante et forte confiance.' Claude Rostand, 'Chostakovitch, ou du pire au meilleure', *Carrefour*, 12 May 1945, Fonds Montpensier.

88 Gibbs, "The Phenomenon of the Seventh", 77–80.

similar programmatic titles ('Stalingrad' and 'To Victory', respectively). These symphonies are quite different in scale and character when compared with the Seventh, and outside of the Communist press they were not afforded the same warm reception after their French premieres in 1946. Symphony No. 8 fared comparably poorly in Paris as it initially did in the USSR, though for different reasons;⁸⁹ the main concern for Parisian critics was that the work was not successful in conveying the war-themed narrative suggested by its title (even if this title was not appointed by the composer himself). A similar verdict was reached for Symphony No. 9, though it was the tenor of this work that critics found perplexing: the musicologist and critic Marc Pincherle, for example, wrote in the periodical *Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques et scientifiques* that, upon first listening, the finale of the Ninth Symphony reminded him of 'a merry procession of bohemians searching for a Muscovite Robinson Crusoe, rather than the profound joy of a people faced with the miracle of a return to normal life, after years of unspeakable hardship'.⁹⁰ Yet in the context of this study, what is most interesting in the reception of these later symphonies is that their Parisian debuts prompted reflections on the Symphony No. 7 that are in complete disaccord with this work's initial press coverage. After the French premiere of Symphony No. 8 in March 1946, journalist and *homme de lettres* Jean Réande made the following statement in *Gavroche*: 'Programmatic music rarely has our approval due to the many failures it causes, and if the Seventh Symphony ('Leningrad') was rather disappointing in this regard, the Eighth Symphony ('Stalingrad') was equally far from success.'⁹¹ When Symphony No. 9 was performed in France a month later, critics in Paris seemed to have grown tired of the programmatic thread altogether. Roland-Manuel, who previously expressed his admiration for the 'Leningrad' Symphony, wrote in the Communist journal *Les Lettres françaises* that, with regard to Shostakovich's latest symphonies: 'Whatever one thinks of the music, it is the work of a true symphonist . . . It is valuable in itself, regardless of what it is supposed to express. Indeed, what it is *supposed* to express. These symphonies play out as if the titles they carry or the subject matter they propose were fabricated.'⁹²

That the Seventh Symphony fared so well in Paris in 1945 was probably due to a combination of factors, chief of which must surely have been the novelty of the work's sheer size and magnitude, as well as the excitement that had surrounded it internationally in the three years leading

89 Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 137–8.

90 'Le finale de cette Neuvième, dédié à la Victoire, fait songer à quelque joyeux cortège de rapins en route pour un Robinson moscovite, plutôt qu'à la joie grave d'un peuple devant le miracle du retour à la vie normale, après des années d'indicibles épreuves.' Marc Pincherle, 'La musique : In memoriam Granados – La IX^e Symphonie de Chostakovitch', *Les Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques et scientifiques*, 28 March 1946, 6.

91 'La musique à programme a rarement notre agrément en raison des nombreux "échecs" dont elle est la cause, et si la 7^e symphonie (*Leningrad*) fut assez décevante sous ce rapport, la 8^e symphonie (*Stalingrad*) fut également loin d'être une réussite.' Jean Réande, 'Il y a loin de la coupe aux lèvres', *Gavroche*, 18 April 1946, 6.

92 'Quoi qu'on pense de cette musique, elle est d'un véritable symphoniste . . . Elle vaut, par elle-même, indépendamment de ce qu'elle est censée d'exprimer. Il y a plus : censée d'exprimer . . . tout s'y passe comme si le titre qu'elle porte ou l'argument qu'elle propose étaient postiches.' N.B. There is humour that I am unable to translate in Roland-Manuel's use of the word 'postiche', which refers both to a fabrication or ornamentation, and an unconvincing hairpiece. Alexis Roland-Manuel, 'La Neuvième Symphonie de Chostakovitch', *Les Lettres françaises*, n.d. 1946, Fonds Montpensier.

up to its French premiere. Perhaps these features seemed somewhat less appealing by 1946, after the public had received three, overtly programmatic Shostakovich symphonies within the space of two years. Moreover, the fact that the ‘Leningrad’ Symphony premiered in France soon after the Liberation seems to have allowed critics in 1945 to forgive musical aspects that would ordinarily have displeased them, and focus on the emotional relatability of the wartime epic.

A political angle also provides a satisfying explanation for why the Seventh Symphony enjoyed a more positive reception in 1945 than it did less than a year later in 1946. Communism was one of the most popular political forces in France immediately following the Liberation, largely due to the Resistance efforts of French Communists, as well as public opinion concerning the Soviet Union after its wartime sacrifices. From 1946, however, the strength and influence of the PCF began to weaken; de Gaulle, who had united the politically divided Resistance, resigned early this year, and by June the provisional government was facing leadership challenges from an anti-communist alliance of radical and conservative parties. Under the logic already employed in this article – that an alignment with the PCF prompted critics to praise Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony regardless of what they thought of the music – the praise for the Seventh Symphony in 1945 as opposed to 1946 could be a result of the broader appeal of communism. This idea is supported by the political affiliations of authors and journals that praised Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony at the time of its French premiere. Unlike in 1938, where the Fifth Symphony’s most positive reviews appeared in French Communist publications, the nature of the three-party government made political affiliations in post-war France more fluid.⁹³ Aside from Dumesnil’s in *Le Monde*, most of the Symphony No. 7 reviews cited earlier reflect some relevant bias, some more explicitly than others: one review was written by a Communist Party member (Wiéner); another (Roland-Manuel’s) appeared in the Communist journal *Les Lettres françaises*; *La Nef* and *Gavroche* were affiliated with the Resistance; and the remaining reviews (by Sauguet and Rostand) were published by *La Bataille* and *Carrefour*, journals respectively associated with the two non-Communist parties in France’s post-war governing alliance: the Socialists and Christian-Democrats (Gaullists). Simply put, there were more avenues for communist-sympathizing (but not necessarily French Communist) activity in 1945 than there were in 1938 or 1946, which may have led to a greater number of critics feeling partial towards a musical representation of heroic Soviet resistance.

Concluding thoughts

In 1926, Milhaud proclaimed that it was time for the music of the young Russian school to be presented to the West;⁹⁴ a decade later, Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 1 was presented live to

93 Of course, the government at the time of June 1938 was also an alliance of communists, socialists, and radicals; however, the Popular Front had no communist ministers in its cabinet, and had been riddled with dysfunction since June 1937. By the end of September 1938, the radical faction had seized control of the party and it dissolved shortly thereafter. See Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Society and the Making of the Republic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 181–2.

94 Milhaud, ‘La Vie musicale en U.R.S.S.’, 267.

the Parisian public. The Fifth followed two years later, and after a period of absence for Soviet music during the war, the Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and Sixth received their French premieres throughout 1945 and 1946. By focusing on the initial reception of the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, it has become clear that there was a shift in French perspectives on Soviet music in the pre- to post-war eras, and in both cases, French Communist and Franco-Soviet groups in Paris undoubtedly influenced the responses that Shostakovich's symphonies elicited, as well as mainstream musical culture more broadly.

In the case of Symphony No. 5 in June 1938, Parisian critics noticed changes in what Shostakovich had produced compared with *Lady Macbeth*, but they did not link these changes to the denunciation that occurred in the USSR at the beginning of 1936. It is therefore hard to deduce whether this information had not been circulated widely in Paris, or whether there was unspoken agreement that concert reviews or other reports on Shostakovich's music were not appropriate places in which to discuss it. The points of overlap and dissimilarity with the British and American reception of the Fifth Symphony – and of course its afterlife in the Soviet context, where, according to Richard Taruskin, its perceived meaning was not separated from the composer's autobiography until the Khrushchev era – stress the uniqueness of the French context, and the value of studying Franco-Soviet relations through a specifically musical lens.⁹⁵

As for the Seventh Symphony, even though it is similar to the Fifth on a musical level, its Parisian premiere in May 1945 elicited an entirely different response. Critics with varying musical preferences across a broad political spectrum based their initial assessments not solely on the music they heard at the premiere, but also on the relatable and inspiring narrative that Shostakovich had explicitly attached to the work – a narrative that had received international attention for a number of years leading up to the work's first performance in France. Furthermore, it appears significant that this premiere took place while the musical public was in the process of returning to normal life after Vichy France and the German Occupation: premiering the 'Leningrad' Symphony at such a unique and sensitive moment in French history seems to have allowed it to resonate widely. The initial reception of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 in Paris also illustrates how the political environment of post-Liberation France generated more avenues for communist-sympathizing activity than the interwar period, and lastly, it speaks to a post-war increase in the awareness and discussion of the USSR and its composers.

Clearly, the influence of organizations such as the PCF, Le Chant du Monde, and the AFU in both of these case studies cannot be overstated. In 1938, the promotion and positive reception of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony came almost entirely from Communist-funded channels, while in the years immediately following the war, the AFU was a prominent supporter of subsequent Shostakovich symphonies. With all of these factors considered, it is evident that although we are now almost two decades on from the first publication on Shostakovich's reception outside of the Soviet Union, it is still an area worth investigating, for each study

⁹⁵ Taruskin, 'Interpreting Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony', 48.

has the potential to reveal a unique perspective on the relationship between music and the political context in which it is received.

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