



## Shostakovich: A Life

*By Laurel E. Fay*

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### **Shostakovich: A Life** By Laurel E. Fay

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

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

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

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

Fay, an academic specializing in Russian music, notes in her introduction to this careful and detailed study of the Soviet composer's life and work that "there is not a single even remotely reliable resource in Russian, English, or any other language for the basic facts" about him. She has therefore set herself dutifully to sort fact from tendentious politicizing as best she can. Whether from the "right" (a dutiful Soviet official biography) or the "left" (Solomon Volkov's highly suspect Testament, which suggested the composer was a closet rebel against state conformism all his life), Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975) was certainly the pre-eminent composer who lived his entire creative life under the Soviet regime (Prokofiev escaped to Paris for an extended period). As such, he became, perforce, a cultural icon, despite his occasional fallings from grace with the Kremlin. One of the virtues of Fay's book is her picture of the endless mundane tasks to which Shostakovich was subjected: rote speeches, statements, interviews, appearances at conferences. In many ways his life was that of a senior civil servant, a role he performed with extraordinary conscientiousness. As a personality, however, he remains profoundly elusive. Fay reports that Shostakovich was frequently witty and sardonic, but gives few glimpses of this side of him. More importantly, it is never explained whether his apparent equivocations about deplorable aspects of Soviet artistic policy sprang from cowardice or cynicism. What is certain was that this enormously prolific, hard-working artist left behind a legacy of powerful, often agonizingly somber, work that is even more striking considering the circumstances. Often feeble health, worries about money and personal security under which he wrote. Fay has done a notable job of clearing the brush; a more substantial and penetrating portrait remains to be constructed on that cleared site.

Illustrations not seen by PW. (Nov.)

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From Library Journal

The Cold War has ended, but writers on Shostakovich now face its effects on information, as Fay's own published criticism of some Shostakovich-related work has shown. This meticulously documented biography bravely offers a thoughtful, painstaking search for the truth regarding the great, tormented composer's actions and public reaction to his music, but sources themselves often conflict. For example, Fay presents a dozen versions of what happened and why regarding the 1936 withdrawal of the Fourth Symphony, some from the same people at different times. Other facts are equally elusive, and Fay leaves many questions open. A chronological report with a smattering of insights from Fay, this important contribution to Shostakovich scholarship presents the result of many years of study in archives and published accounts. A groundwork future scholars will appreciate. For academic and large public libraries. A Bonnie Jo Dopp, Univ. of Maryland Lib., College Park

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From [Booklist](#)

The USSR's foremost composer, Shostakovich (1906-75), combined romanticism and modernism. His preference for programmatic music led him to include elements of folk song along with dissonance in many compositions, and his forays into the twelve-tone idiom produced memorable melodic strains woven into a romantic fabric. Raised in St. Petersburg, he lived there and in Moscow, teaching students, performing, and serving on various national arts councils for most of his life. He supported the Communist regime by composing music with historical programs, but he eventually denounced the most egregious transgressions of the Stalin years. Most important to his reputation, his music was played throughout the West. Fay's well-written but pedantic biography does little to bring out the man Shostakovich. Instead, Fay represents him through his music, especially his operas, songs, and choral symphonies, arguing that it is in the librettos and

poetic texts of Shostakovich that his sadness and dissent are most evident. So far, the music of this prodigious figure has endured, continuing to be played for its aesthetic value, regardless of its politics. *Alan Hirsch*

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