

MY OPERA, LADY MACBETH OF MTZENSK*

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVITCH

I BEGAN to write the opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtzensk*, at the end of 1930 and completed it in December of 1932. Why did I select just this novel by Nikolai Leskov for its subject?

First, because very little of our heritage in Russian classic literature had been utilized in the development of Soviet opera. Second—and this was most important—because Leskov's narrative is imbued with rich dramatic and social content. There is, perhaps, no other creation in all Russian literature which so vividly portrays the position of women in old, pre-revolutionary Russia.

But I have given *Lady Macbeth of Mtzensk* a different treatment from that of Leskov. As will be seen from the title itself the novelist approached his subject ironically. The name indicates an insignificant territory, a small district; and the characters are little people, with passions and interests not comparable to those in Shakespeare's play. Moreover, Leskov an outstanding representative of pre-revolutionary literature, gives us no illuminating interpretation of the incidents which are developed in his story. As a Soviet composer, I determined to preserve the strength of Leskov's novel, and yet, approaching it critically, to interpret its events from our modern point of view.

Accordingly, the subject itself has been somewhat altered. In Leskov's novel Ekaterina Lvovna Izmailova, the heroine, commits three murders before she is sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. She kills her father-in-law, her husband and her nephew. As I proposed to justify the action of Ekaterina Lvovna and

*[This opera, soon to be seen and heard in America, is the first of a projected cycle of four in which the composer, Shostakovich, plans to trace the condition of women in Russia. *Lady Macbeth* is of 1840, the second will be set in the Czarist period of about 1860, the third in the 1917 revolution, and the fourth will present woman in Russia today.]

create an impression of a definite personality, deserving of sympathy, I omitted the third murder, undertaken solely to make herself the heir of her slain husband.

Now to arouse sympathy for Ekaterina was no simple matter. She has committed a number of crimes against accepted moral or ethical laws. Leskov presents her simply as a cruel woman who "wallows in fat" and murders innocent people. But I have conceived Ekaterina as a woman clever, gifted and interesting. Set by fate in gloomy, miserable surroundings, belonging to a merchant class which is hard, greedy and "small", her life is sorrowful and pitiable. She does not love her husband, she has no happiness, no recreation. There now appears Sergei, a clerk hired by her husband, Zinovy Borisovich. She falls in love with this young man, an unworthy and negative creature, and in her love she finds joy and the purpose of her existence. In order to marry Sergei she commits her series of crimes. When Boris Timofeevich, her father-in-law, catches Sergei after a meeting with her and orders him to be lashed, she is inspired by a desire for revenge. She poisons her father-in-law for the sufferings inflicted upon her lover. Sergei now urges her to marry him and, together with Ekaterina, he strangles her husband. Thus in her love for Sergei Ekaterina sacrifices all of herself. On the discovery of the crimes they are sentenced together to Siberia "at hard labor". When she finds that he no longer loves her and has turned to the prostitute, Sonetka, she drowns her rival and herself. Without Sergei's love, life has lost its only interest.

It is unnecessary for me to relate the action further. For I have justified it chiefly by the musical material. It is my belief that in opera music should play the principal and the deciding role.

I have tried to make the music of the opera as simple and expressive as possible. I do not agree with the theories, at one time current among us, that in the modern opera the vocal line must be absent, or that it should be no more than speech in which the intonations are to accented. Opera is above all a vocal production and singers should occupy themselves with their real duty—that is, to sing, and not speak, recite or intone. Thus I have built all the vocal parts on a broad cantilena taking into account

all the possibilities of that richest of instruments, the human voice.

The musical development progresses constantly and on a symphonic form; in this respect I have abandoned the old operatic formula of construction on individual parts. The musical stream flows unbroken and is interrupted solely by the ending of each act; it resumes its course in the following one, not piece-wise, but by developing further on a grand symphonic scale. This must be taken into consideration during the production of the opera, as in each act, except the fourth, there are several scenes and these scenes are separated not by mechanical pauses but by musical entr'actes during which the change of scenery takes place. The entr'actes between the second and third, fourth and fifth, sixth and seventh and between the seventh and eighth scenes are merely the continuation and further development of preceding musical ideas and play a great part in the characterization of what takes place on the stage.

And now a few words in regard to the principal personages and their musical characterization. The most important is, of course, Ekaterina, a dramatic soprano. Her musical language is shaped completely by my idea that she must by every means evoke sympathy. In her music there are a tender and warm lyricism, a sincere, profound sorrow in suffering, and also joy in moments of happiness. The musical language given to Ekaterina Lvovna has been designed for the one purpose of justifying this "criminal." To quote the famous words of Dobroliubov about Leskov's character she is "a ray of light in a kingdom of gloom."

The suffering folk of that epoch are presented in the fourth act—"at hard labor." There is no darker picture of the old days than that of the halting place of convicts, of broken people moving under guard through the far off expanses of the former Russian empire, to penal servitude. How unforgettable is the picture drawn by Dostoevsky in his "Memoirs of the House of the Dead": the little girl who gave him, a convict "at hard labor," a kopeck, and the peasants in the villages who sacrificed their bread to the "unfortunates." Such reactions I intended to arouse for the prisoners in the fourth act of my opera.



THE FATHER
Boris Timofeevitch



SCENES FROM LADY MACBETH OF MTZENSK

By DMITRI SHOSTAKOVITCH

The illustrations on this page are of the Nemirovitch Dantchenko production staged last spring in Moscow. On February 5th the Cleveland Orchestra, under the auspices of the League of Composers, will present the only New York performance of this work at the Metropolitan Opera House. Artur Rodzinski will direct this as well as two earlier performances in Cleveland, where the work will receive its premiere.



DMITRI
SHOSTAKOVITCH
Caricature by
IRINA SCHMITT



Katerina and her lover, Sergei



At the Left

ACT I—Her father-in-law forces Katerina to kneel before her husband who is about to go on a journey.



THE HUSBAND
Zinovy Borisovitch



THE LOVER
Sergei



THE MAID
Xenia



ACT IV—Katerina and her rival, Sonetka, whom she drags to death with her.



The Sketches of the four
acters are drawn by V. BELAIEV.
designs for the Moscow production
are by V. V. DMITRIEV.

All the remaining members of the cast—Boris Timofeevich, Zinoviy Borisovich, Sergei, etc.—are but expressions of the dismal and hopeless existence of the merchant class of that period. Izmailov's clerks are potentially the same future merchants as the Izmailovs, they cheat and short-change so that in time they themselves may open their own little shops and become real merchants. These characters I have endowed with negative traits.

Sergei, the clerk, is the evil genius who turns up in Ekaterina Lvovna's hard life. He is a "small" scoundrel whose aim in life is to attain security and, as he says, "to satiate himself with woman's sweet flesh." Because of him Ekaterina murders her father-in-law and her husband. When she is no longer a rich merchant's wife, but a common convict, without a moment's thought he throws her aside and finds a new woman. He has picked up a little "culture," reads books and expresses himself in high-sounding language; his outlook upon the world is servile and mean.

Thus for Sergei the music is insincere, showy, theatrical; his sufferings are affected; through his handsome, gallant exterior peers the future "kulak." He is a Don Juan, not in the sense of the famous legend, but a cruel, cunning, criminal. Even in Siberia "at hard labor" he still remains a "small," coarse person.

Boris Timofeevich, Ekaterina's father-in-law, is a solid and powerful old man, who stops at nothing to gain his desires. His son, Zinoviy Borisovich, Ekaterina's husband, is a pitiable wretch the "frog that longed to be an ox". When he tries to speak authoritatively as the master in his home, the music exposes him and we see a weak, pathetic, specimen of the merchant class.

The task of the singers in these roles is both difficult and exacting, they must act as well as they sing to "carry" the opera to the audience. A great role is played by the chorus, which is one of the most active elements in the opera; its movement must be genuine and convincing.

A final word in regard to the general musical character of the opera. As previously stated, it is written from first to last note upon a symphonic form; the orchestra must therefore never be reduced to a mere accompaniment. On the other hand it must not be elevated to such a position that it will distract from and stifle the action of the stage.

SHOSTAKOVITCH'S OPERA, LADY MACBETH OF MTZENSK

Four Excerpts from the Piano and Vocal Score

Allegro



ACT I—SCENE 3

An orchestral passage. Katerina, after her husband's departure, falls into the arms of Sergeï, the clerk, who becomes her lover.

Andantino

VOICES

PIANO



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ACT I—SCENE 2

Zinovy Borisovitch, the husband, hears from a worker that the mill dam has burst.

Largo



ACT II—Entr'acte, SCENES 4 and 5
A passacaglia, in which the composer states his attitude toward the tragedy.

Allegro ♩ = 112

VOICES

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ACT II
A workers' chorus, which begins as a folk-song and turns into a cry of rebellion.