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Stalin Didn't Like This Opera, but Audiences Still Do

"Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" by Dmitri Shostakovich, a tale of love and betrayal once banned in Soviet Russia, is returning to the Metropolitan Opera.

By David Belcher
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When Joseph Stalin gives your opera a scathing review in Pravda, history is bound to find a spot for you.

Such was the case for Dmitri Shostakovich, whose "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" has certainly taken its place in the history books as a classic modern opera, but also as an infamous moment in opera history. In 1934, it was the toast of Leningrad, as St. Petersburg was known then, before setting off on a tour of the Soviet Union for nearly two years. But it was turned into a reviled piece of music after Stalin, wanting to see what all the fuss was about, attended a performance in January 1936 in Moscow.

The Soviet leader called it "muddle instead of music, an ugly flood of confusing sound" and "a pandemonium of creaking, shrieking and crashes" in a review attributed to him in Pravda, then the official newspaper of the Communist Party. The opera was banned for decades in the Soviet Union, and Shostakovich feared being arrested. It returned to Russian stages, in a revised version, in 1962 under Nikita S. Khrushchev (though Shostakovich's original opera is the standard now).

As "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" returns after eight years to the Metropolitan Opera on Sept. 29 (for six performances through Oct. 21), the timing feels suddenly urgent against the backdrop of Russia's war in Ukraine. This production, which premiered in 1994, was first directed by Graham Vick, who died in 2021, with sets and costumes by Paul Brown in a vaguely 1950s setting. For some, the opera stands as testament to one composer's patriotism, but also to his disdain for the ruling party, all wrapped up in dissonant, volatile music and a raw depiction of lust, violence and the struggle for truth and freedom.

"I think every single note he wrote was about him and how he saw the world he was living in, and in that context 'Lady Macbeth' is an absolutely seminal work," said the British director Tony Palmer, whose film "Testimony" in 1988 starred Ben Kingsley as Shostakovich. "Most of the Russians knew instinctively that Shostakovich spoke for them, which says a lot about the power of his music. That's why it will always resonate, particularly at this moment."

Keri-Lynn Wilson, the conductor, leading a rehearsal. This production will be her Metropolitan Opera debut. Evan Zimmerman/Met Opera

That resonance feels particularly strong for the conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson, who is making her Metropolitan Opera debut with this production.

“The parallel right now is that Putin is trying to destroy artistic expression just as Stalin did,” Ms. Wilson said, referring to President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia. “This opera, to me, feels like a direct affront to that, so this is a vehicle for me to channel this incredible anger that I have toward Putin.”

Ms. Wilson, who is Canadian with Ukrainian roots, for the past several months has been conducting the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra, which she conceived this spring, and organizing with her husband, Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera. They helped line up the Ukrainian musicians, as well as performance dates and funding, with the assistance of the Ukrainian government, for a tour across Europe (and in Washington and New York), so moving from that experience to “Lady Macbeth” felt like a natural segue, she said.

“I have cousins who are fighting, and they are writing to me and thanking me for what I’m doing with the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra,” Ms. Wilson said. “What it is for me is the feeling of doing justice to show that we can really perform Russian music while shouting at Putin.”

Anger is a theme that runs throughout “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk.” Based on the novella “Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District” by Nikolai Leskov, it tells the story of Katerina, a woman trapped in a loveless marriage who falls in love with a village worker named Sergei. The opera’s depiction of their affair is highly sexual, and after a couple of heat-of-the-moment murders gone wrong, the lovers are exiled to a Siberian labor camp and Sergei takes a new lover. The tragic ending, on an icy river, has some of Shostakovich’s most jarring and riveting music. It was a huge success — for a brief spell.

“What a lot of people don’t realize is that there was an 18-month gap between opening night of this opera and when Stalin went to see it,” Mr. Palmer said. “There were more performances of this opera in Russia those 18 months than operas of Wagner, Puccini or Verdi.”

Shostakovich in the early 1940s. He feared being arrested after “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk” was banned in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. Sovfoto/Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

Despite his fear of backlash after Stalin’s review, Shostakovich continued to be incredibly prolific. In 1937, he unveiled his Fifth Symphony, which was a triumph both with the Communist Party apparatchiks, who saw it as the composer honoring the roots of classical Russian music, and with the intelligentsia of Russian culture who saw it as a requiem for the Great Purge, which Stalin had unleashed the year before.

“Shostakovich put everything that he defends as a human and a composer into ‘Lady Macbeth,’ but his genius is that he found a way to compromise and exist in that world after that,” said Kirill Karabits, the Ukrainian-born chief conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in England. “He wanted to remain true to himself but write in a way that satisfied the authorities.”

“His music after ‘Lady Macbeth’ is different because it has so many layers,” he added. “He was hiding his criticism. Are his finales happy endings? Or are they happy endings through struggle?”

Ms. Sozdateleva in rehearsal. She will make her Metropolitan Opera debut with “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk.” Evan Zimmerman/Met Opera

For the Russian soprano Svetlana Sozdateleva, making her Metropolitan Opera debut in a role she has sung several times in Europe, the opera stands on its own for what Shostakovich intended as an artist and a human being: the power of love and betrayal.

“The most important thing for me is the theme of all-consuming powerful love and how important it was for Shostakovich to portray such deep feelings and create such a complex character,” Ms. Sozdateleva said. “What’s remarkable is that by the end of the opera, she is a murderer, but the audience is sympathetic to her.”

Shostakovich’s understanding of his heroine — and his own reality in the Stalin era — plays into the opera’s rocky history, not to mention its legacy as bold art full of messages and even musical notes that are still being deciphered.

“If you wrote a line of poetry that said, ‘Stalin was a bad man,’ then you were dead,” said Mr. Palmer, the director of the Shostakovich film. “But if you wrote a harsh tune that says it, it was a lot harder to prove.”