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Shostakovich in memoriam

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Shostakovich and death: A lifelong musical thanatology

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Abstract. The article raises the question of the significance of the theme of death for Shostakovich's creative work. It is argued that the composer's thanatology originates in his childhood compositions, as indicated by a number of titles of completed or conceived opuses; it continues in a number of episodes in the works of his youth and mature creative periods, from *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* to the Eleventh Symphony; and finally, acquires a special treatment in the late period, from the Fourteenth Symphony to the *Suite on Verses of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, where it is signaled by the poetic texts themselves.

Translated by the author

It is proven that the presence of the image of death is not limited to the list of works with an explicitly stated program of this kind. Using the example of two opuses from the early and late periods — the Suite for Piano, Op. 6, and String Quartet No. 12, Op. 133 — the article examines how quotations and stylistic allusions create a corresponding subtext and lead to the formation of an internal narrative focused on the problem of death. The question is raised regarding the degree of the composer's conscious use of "another's words" in such cases where authorial commentary is absent. It is emphasized that quotation allowed Shostakovich to create music as an art of communication, not limited to formal exploration or the setting of new technical tasks. The conclusion is drawn that the existential comprehension and experience of the phenomenon of death forms a kind of dotted line of meaning throughout Shostakovich's artistic biography — perhaps its central theme, with his attitude towards it changing during different periods of his life.

Keywords: musical thanatology, Dmitry Shostakovich, Suite for two pianos op. 6, Quartet No. 12 op. 133, Hector Berlioz, Mikhail Glinka, Modest Mussorgsky, Sergei Rachmaninoff

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All fragments from Russian poetry are translated into English by Natalia Bukhtoyarova

Памяти
Д.Д. Шостаковича

Научная статья

Шостакович и смерть: музыкальная танатология длиною в жизнь

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Аннотация. В статье поднимается вопрос о значении темы смерти для творчества Шостаковича. Утверждается, что танатология композитора берет свое начало в его детских произведениях, на что указывает целый ряд названий осуществленных или задуманных опусов; продолжается в ряде эпизодов сочинений юношеского и зрелого периода творчества от «Леди Макбет Мценского уезда» до Одиннадцатой симфонии; наконец, обретает особую трактовку в поздний период от Четырнадцатой симфонии и до Сюиты на стихи Микеланджело, в которых на нее указывают сами стихотворные тексты. Доказывается, что присутствие образа смерти не ограничивается списком сочинений с обнародованной программой такого плана. На примере двух опусов раннего и позднего периодов — Сюиты для фортепиано ор. 6 и Квартета № 12 ор. 133 — исследуется, как цитаты и стилистические аллюзии создают соответствующий подтекст и приводят к формированию внутреннего сюжета,

сконцентрированного на проблеме смерти. Ставится вопрос о степени сознательности использования композитором «чужого слова» в подобных случаях, когда автокомментарий отсутствует. Подчеркивается, что цитирование позволило Шостаковичу создавать музыку как искусство коммуникации, не ограничиваясь формальными поисками и постановкой новых технологических задач. Делается вывод о том, что экзистенциальное осмысление и переживание феномена смерти является своего рода смысловым пунктиром художнической биографии Шостаковича — возможно, центральной ее темой, отношение к которой менялось в разные периоды его жизни.

Ключевые слова: музыкальная танатология, Дмитрий Дмитриевич Шостакович, Сюита для двух фортепиано ор. 6, Квартет № 12 ор. 133, Гектор Берлиоз, Михаил Иванович Глинка, Модест Петрович Мусоргский, Сергей Васильевич Рахманинов

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Introduction

There are several well-known examples of direct reference to the topic of death in Shostakovich's works—sometimes obvious in their texts or programs, sometimes more subtle. They are often referred to, but direct discussion of this topic is rather avoided. One of the few scholars to dedicate a specific study to it is the French researcher Grégoire Tosser. His 2000 book is titled *Shostakovich's Last Works: The Musical Aesthetics of Death, 1969–1975*. The very title suggests that the author dates the formation of Shostakovich's thanatology to the beginning of his late creative period, assigning four works to this musical aesthetics of death: the Fourteenth Symphony (the first that comes to mind due to its program), the Fifteenth Quartet, the *Suite on Verses by Michelangelo*, and the Viola Sonata [1]. However, they were preceded by at least the corresponding episodes of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1934) and the Eleventh Symphony (1957). If we examine the composer's oeuvre more closely from this point of view, taking into account not only what he wrote, but also what he did not write (which constitutes one of the most significant aspects of any creative biography), as well as the unfinished or lost works—so-called unrealized projects—then the beginning of Shostakovich's "thanatology" will coincide with the very beginning of his creative journey.

However, this semantic dotted line remains insufficiently understood by researchers: Shostakovich's understanding of the theme of death included not only works in which it was verbally articulated, but also those in which it was indicated by the author's own cryptic script, the meanings of which remain to be deciphered. Two such works—the beginning and the end of the journey—will be at the center of reflections on Shostakovich's thanatology.

Inevitable Thanatos

It is entirely evident that the image of death, for Shostakovich as for any true artist, was inseparable from his worldview. For some, it looms in the distance for a long time (as long as they manage to keep it there by sheer will), while for others, it comes to the forefront early on. Shostakovich belongs to the latter group. In this regard, he can perhaps only be compared to Hector Berlioz—though Shostakovich engaged with the theme of death artistically at a far younger age. This biographical parallel is hardly coincidental, not least because Berlioz was a significant figure

in the musical atmosphere of Shostakovich's youth. Having befriended Ivan I. Sollertinsky and fallen under his profound intellectual influence, Shostakovich witnessed his mentor's passionate enthusiasm for Berlioz. As artistic director of the Leningrad Philharmonic, Sollertinsky dreamed of restoring Berlioz as a permanent fixture on its posters. We do not know to what extent Shostakovich shared this sentiment, but it is well-documented that he knew many of Berlioz's works intimately and considered the Requiem a masterpiece, which he listened to repeatedly.

For the French composer, the theme of death became an obsession, evident even in his youth. The simplest explanation lies in his experience as a medical student in an anatomical theatre; the shock of what he saw and experienced marked most of his subsequent works. This is apparent in the starkly physiological soundscape of the conservatory cantata *The Death of Cleopatra*—a kind of mono-opera depicting the heroine's death "in real time" with a meticulous recording of its shocking details; the fatal blow of the guillotine and the subsequent grotesque sarcasm of the otherworldly finale in the Fantastic Symphony; the frightening naturalism of the crypt scene in *Romeo and Juliet*; and an attempt at reconciliation with death as a form of sleep in *Lélio* and *The Death of Ophelia* [2]. Berlioz presents two starkly contrasting embodiments of this persistent image that haunted him from youth—two possibilities for accepting the inevitable. These are given form in the traditional sacred imagery of the Requiem and, conversely, in the equally ancient motifs of "metamorphosis" and pantheistic transformation — a dissolution into existence—found in the vocal cycle *Les Nuits d'été*, set to poems by Théophile Gautier. While it is hardly certain that Paradise existed in Berlioz's worldview, he embodied Hell with utmost clarity.

Or let us recall the images of death in Sergei Prokofiev, a senior contemporary and constant antagonist of Shostakovich. It was the latter who once made an unflattering, laconic comparison of his colleague with Berlioz. From a Shostakovich's letter to Boleslav Yavorsky in 1940 (23 January): "Yesterday I listened to Berlioz's Requiem for the second time. It is a genius work. I listened to Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky*. This is not a work of genius. I did not like it."[1]

[1] [Shostakovich, D. D.] (2000). Pisma k B. L. Yavorskomu [Letters to B. L. Yavorsky]. In I. A. Bobykina (Ed.), *Dmitrij Shostakovich v pismakh i dokumentakh* [*Dmitry Shostakovich in Letters and Documents*]. Antika, p. 129.

Prokofiev, in turn, offered similarly unflattering assessments of Shostakovich's film music (though without such pointed comparisons), revealing their fundamentally different approaches to the genre.

But it is in Prokofiev that the kinship with Berlioz becomes clear, particularly in his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, where the depiction of the dying Tybalt, cursing, is distorted by hideous convulsions. Prokofiev finds a different language for the prophecy of his own departure: the measured ticking of a clock in the coda of the Seventh Symphony, written by the composer as he stood on the threshold of death—not a "children's symphony," as it is often interpreted, but a true testament. It ends in a Pushkin-like manner; this is the farewell of a deeply religious person—"And I do know: that younger living / Will play at my forgotten tomb, / And nature, lustrous, unforgiving, / Will glare in ins eternal bloom."[2]

Shostakovich's case is special. The theme of death attracted him at about the same time it first strikes any child's imagination: psychologists note that children's awareness of the finitude, irreversibility, and inevitability of their own death—what is called "the thanatization of childhood"— typically emerges between the ages of 8 and 10.[3] However, the acuteness of this awareness depends on psychological development, and certainly not every child strives to embody the insight of mortality and the transience of all existence through artistic means, no matter how meager they may be. Eight-year-old "Miten'ka" dealt with this existential experience in exactly this way, and the reason for this lies in the era that made death an inseparable companion of his childhood and, later, adolescence. His self-awareness and growing up coincided with the beginning of World War I: one of Shostakovich's first works was "a long piece called Soldier" from 1914: by his own definition, "a poem on military themes in connection with the world war."[4] We will not take into account other early plans from the same period that had tragic endings, where the heroes meet their death—such as the opera *Taras Bulba*,

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[2] Pushkin, A. S. (1950). *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij: v 10 t.* [*Complete Works: In 10 volumes*] (Vol. 3). Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, p. 132

[3] Gavrilova, T. A. (2009). Problema detskogo ponimaniya smerti [The Problem of Children Understanding of Death]. *Psikhologicheskaya nauka i obrazovanie, 1*(4). URL: https://psyjournals.ru/journals/psyedu/archive/2009_n4/Gavrilova (accessed: 25.08.2025).

[4] D. D. Shostakovich—D. R. Rogal-Levitskomu. (2000). O moikh sochineniyakh. Pis'mo ot 22 sentyabrya 1927 goda [About My Compositions. Letter dated September 22, 1927]. In Bobykina I. A. (Ed.), *Dmitrij Shostakovich v pismakh i dokumentakh*, pp. 186, 476.

conceived in 1915–1916; the music for Mikhail Lermontov's poem *A Song about Tsar Ivan Vasilyevich, a Young Oprichnik and a Stouthearted Merchant Kalashnikov*; as well as music for Nikolai Gogol's story *Terrible Vengeance* (both lost works date from 1917–1918). So little is known about them that it is impossible to judge what constituted the main interest for the budding composer in these plots. However, the *Funeral March in Memory of the Victims of the Revolution* (1918) is not merely a tribute to the musical rhetoric of the era. It is a composition inspired by an event that became a psychological shock for the entire Russian society: the murder by revolutionary sailors of the arrested deputies of the Constituent Assembly, Andrei I. Shingarev and Fyodor F. Kokoshkin. They were unarmed, taken by surprise at night in a prison hospital where they were being treated, and killed by a brutal, drunken mob. This crime, regarded by modern historians as marking the beginning of the "Red Terror," was felt by contemporaries as the final verdict on the previous system of humanistic values—already shaken by the war, but not yet completely crushed at that time [3; 4]. That the Shostakovich family, like other Petrograd families, discussed this event with horror is evidenced by the opus of a 12-year-old child.

Images of war continued to haunt the teenager. This is evident in the piece *Longing* from his piano cycle, Op. 5 (1918). Its original title, *Soldier Remembering the Homeland*, directly echoes his earlier piano piece, *Soldier* (1914) [5, p. 20]. Another significant connection lies in the Piano Sonata of 1920–1921 (preserved only in fragments). It is written in the same key of B minor—a key clearly imbued with mournful connotations—as the *Funeral March* of 1918. However, for a time, the conservatory's academic routine, and particularly the didactic focus of composition assignments, suppressed these existential themes.

Suite for Two Pianos in F minor, Op. 6: An Attempt at a Narrative

The young Shostakovich's renewed fixation with the imagery of death in his music was triggered by a profound personal tragedy—the death of his father on February 24, 1922. The *Suite in F minor for Two Pianos*, Op. 6, dedicated to the memory of Dmitry Boleslavovich Shostakovich, was completed almost a year later, on February 14. However, this second version, revised under pressure

from his composition teacher Maximilian O. Steinberg, was soon rejected by the composer, who returned to his initial, independent draft. In the famous questionnaire on the psychology of the creative process, which he completed at the request of Roman Gruber in 1927, Shostakovich retrospectively framed the genesis of the Suite as the first act of his creative defiance against the "school" norms of composition. He singled out this meticulously documented episode as the inaugural milestone in his artistic maturation—a hard-won assertion of autonomy achieved through resistance to his teacher's pedagogical authority and open conflict with him.[5] The Suite for Two Pianos in F minor, the most monumental work from the composer's early period (predating the First Symphony), has rarely attracted researchers' attention.[6] Apparently, this is because the composition is perceived as insufficiently original and lacking in linguistic independence—a tradition established by the initial responses to the work. For instance, after the successful Leningrad premiere, the Moscow one was assessed as "a work of anemic academicism."[7] Such was the review in the newspaper *Iskusstvo trudyashchimsya* [*Art to the Workers*], which accused the young Leningrad author of a lack of originality.

A few years later, the composer himself became disillusioned with his early work, dropping it from his concert programs and considering it a "complete failure," "almost a copy... of Glazunov and Tchaikovsky."[8] The few modern researchers who have written about the Suite, on the one hand, like Vladimir Yu. Delson, see in it an anticipation of "polyphonism and neo-Bachian linearism of Shostakovich's musical thinking in general" [10, p. 22], while others, like Olesya Bobrik, believe that its music "could indeed be perceived as outdated even a few years after its creation" against the backdrop of Shostakovich's more recent compositions [9, p. 132].

[5] See Shostakovich o sebe i o svoikh sochineniyakh. Anketa po psikhologii tvorcheskogo protsessa [Shostakovich on himself and his compositions. Questionnaire on the psychology of the creative process] [September 2–10, 1927]. In I. A. Bobykina (2000), p. 472.

[6] An exception were the works of Vladislav O. Petrov, dedicated to Shostakovich's piano duets [6; 7; 8, pp. 30–44], in which the Suite for Two Pianos is examined both from the point of view of the presence of an epic beginning in it and from the position of the embodiment of a musical-dramatic conflict in it.

[7] Ivanov, Iv. (1925, May 5–10). Shebalin, Shostakovich. *Iskusstvo trudyashchimsya* [*Art to the Workers*], (23), p. 9 (as cited in [9, p. 132]).

[8] [Shostakovich D.] O moikh sochineniyakh [About My Compositions]. In I. A. Bobykina (2000), p. 187.

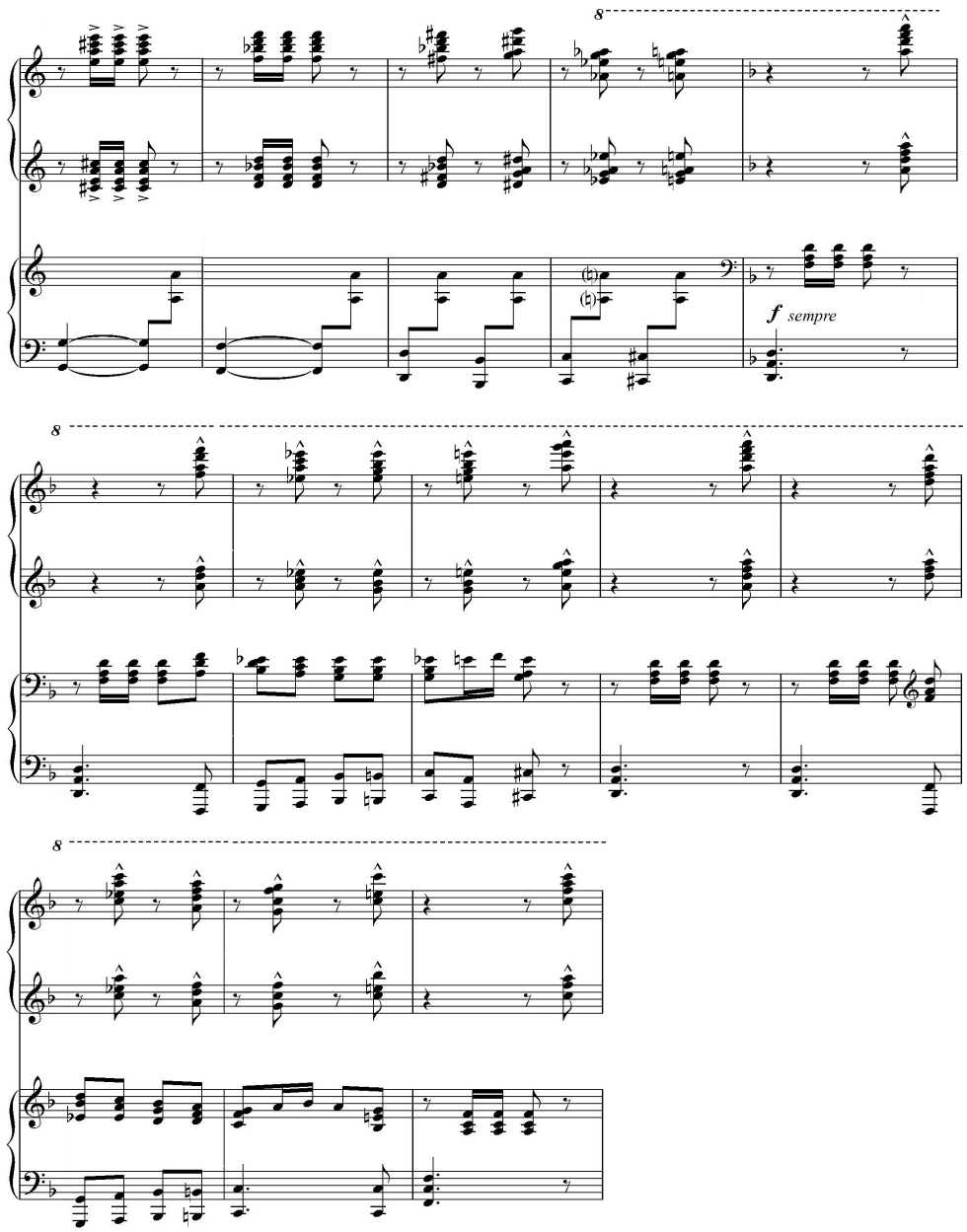
Consequently, stylistic interpretations of the work range widely—from detecting "an affinity for the Bach-Taneyev style" [10, p. 22] to identifying such features as "bell-like sonorities" and "alternation of lyrical 'nocturne-like' passages with energetic march rhythms" reminiscent of Rachmaninoff [9, p. 130], along with affinities to Prokofiev's scherzo-like writing [11, p. 203].

Taneyev, Glazunov, Tchaikovsky, Bach, Rachmaninoff, and also Prokofiev — such an associative chain does not offer any semantic or figurative particular paradigm of the composition. That is, until we address the matter of quotations. It is the quotation, with its precise referentiality, that endows initially vague stylistic allusions to "other people's voice," with semantic potential. And such an "other people's voice" does indeed emerge in the text of the Suite. Despite the fact that it has gone unnoticed in the literature on Shostakovich, it is quite easy to identify. In the 2nd movement (Fantastic Dance, *Allegro vivo*), a "signature" bolero rhythm appears at m. 41, growing increasingly recognizable until, by mm. 58–70, it crystallizes into an unambiguous quotation (*Example 1*).

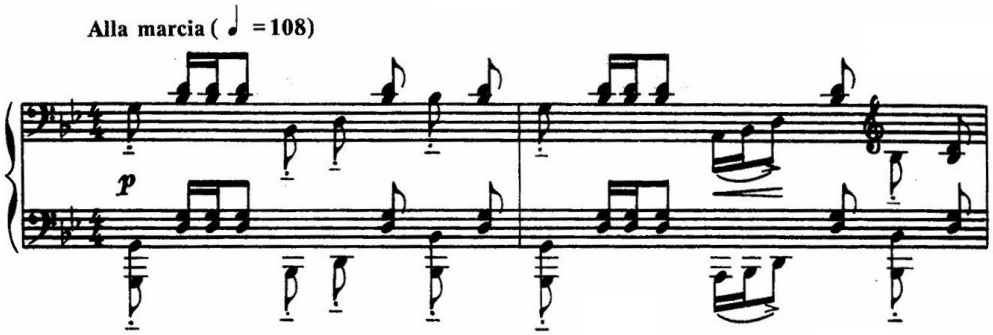
This explicit reference to Rachmaninoff's famous *Prelude in G minor*, Op. 23, No. 5 [6, p. 76] (*Example 2*), casts new light on the less recognizable but foundational "bell-like" leitmotif of fourths that sounded earlier: it opened the work, defining the imagery of the entire 1st movement (Prelude), and then latently arose in the 2nd movement. From the midpoint of the second movement, these elements begin to rhyme as deliberate nods to Rachmaninoff: the near-literal quotation from the *Prelude in G minor* now dialogues with imagery from another celebrated Rachmaninoff work—the *Prelude in C-sharp minor*, Op. 3 No. 2.

It is from the middle of the 2nd movement that they begin to rhyme as references to Rachmaninoff: an almost exact quotation from the *Prelude in G minor* with the image of another famous Rachmaninoff piece—the *Prelude in C-sharp minor*, Op. 3, No. 2 (*Examples 3, 4*).

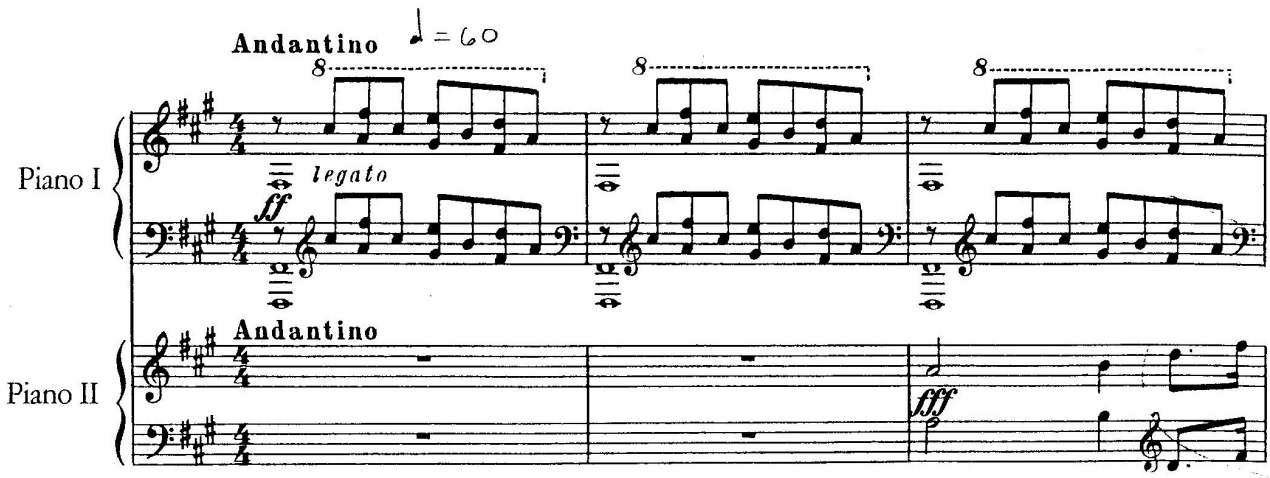
Further, the implementation of the main leitmotif at the culmination of the 3rd movement (Nocturne, *Piu mosso*, mm. 42–55) and the 4th movement (Finale) confirms the fate theme as central to the Suite. It is also highlighted in its own way by the another Rachmaninoff leitmotif, based on the rhythm of the bolero. An echo of the same rhythm using the chord progression from Rachmaninoff's Prelude is repeated several times in the cycle's finale, which is structured around the genre formula of the funeral march, including its particularly expressive sound in the coda (*Example 5*).



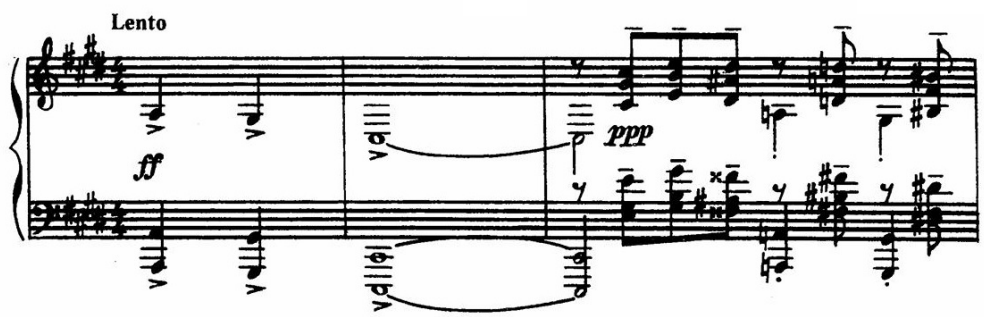
Example 1. Shostakovich D. Suite for 2 pianos.
II. Fantastic Dance, mm. 58–70



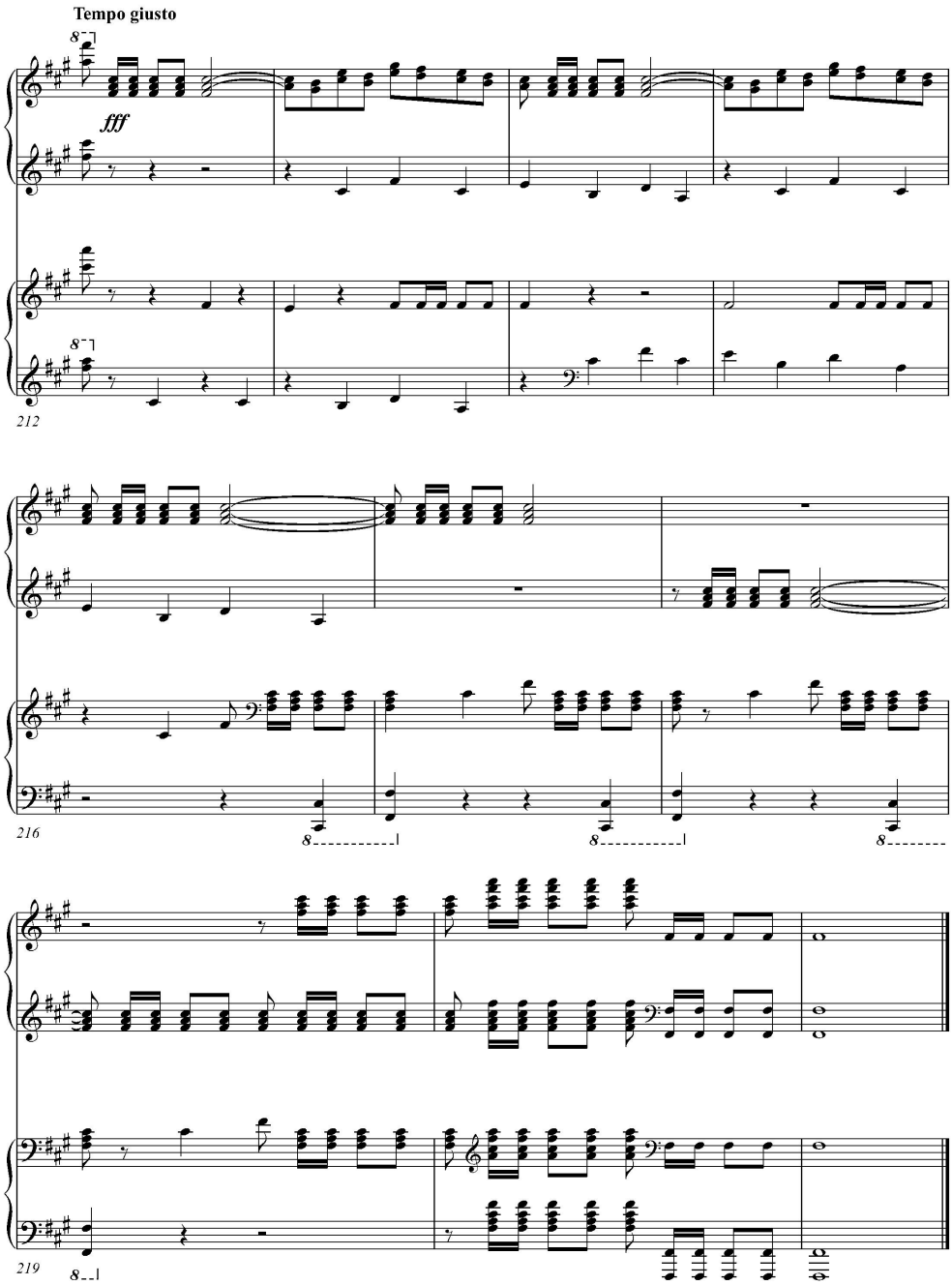
Example 2. Rachmaninoff S. *Prelude in G minor* op. 23 No. 5, mm. 1–2



Example 3. Shostakovich D. *Suite for 2 Pianos*.
I. Prelude, mm. 1–3



Example 4. Rachmaninoff S. *Prelude in C-sharp minor*, Op. 3 No. 2



Example 5. Shostakovich D. *Suite for 2 Pianos*.
IV. Finale, mm. 212–221

Thus, this act of quotation provides the key to understanding to the cycle's overarching concept and its hidden program, clarifying the ambiguous imagery of the 2nd movement. Its title—Fantastic Dance—likely carries a subtextual reference to Rachmaninoff's deeply symbolic "danse macabre motif," to which he paid generous tribute. Both the Fantastic Dance and the Nocturne, viewed from this perspective, emerge not as dramatic digressions from the principal narrative line but rather as alternative angles of displaying the same theme of fate.

The Suite's dedication to his father proves to be more than just a mere tribute: the theme of death, fate, and protest against the greatest injustice constitute the composition's program, not explicitly stated but clearly expressed through musical means. And quotation becomes the primary means of its realization.

It is obvious that Shostakovich's creation of the *Suite for Two Pianos* in terms of genre was provoked by two similar works by Rachmaninoff: his Suites for Two Pianos No. 1 (1893) and No. 2 (1901). It is characteristic that Shostakovich himself did not mention Rachmaninoff's name among this work's predecessors. Such omission is a very typical feature of the attitude of many authors to the painful question of original models and borrowings—a kind of creative Oedipus complex, particularly characteristic of artist's establishing their names. Nevertheless, in Gruber's questionnaire, filled out by the young Shostakovich, Rachmaninoff's name appears in the list of his favorite composers.[9] Arguably, the Suite stands as virtually his sole early creative testament to this admiration.

Another obvious Rachmaninoff parallel—Shostakovich's unfinished opera *The Gypsies*, based on the same Pushkin plot as opera *Aleko*—was not completed. While its exact chronology remains unclear, composition likely coincided with the Suite Op. 6 in the early 1920s. Destroyed by the composer in 1926 piano score of *The Gypsies* nonetheless survive in any fragments [5, pp. 27–28]. Even in his later years Shostakovich associated a narrative of Pushkin's *The Gypsies* with fatality. Having invoked *Aleko*, we might recall a testemony from the composer's friend Isaac Glikman dating to the mid-1960s—a famous memoir episode capturing Shostakovich's reaction to Party pressure regarding his forced membership. Recounting these agonizing events, Shostakovich concluded with a quotatio "And there is no defense against fate."[10]

[9] See Shostakovich o sebe i o svoikh sochineniyakh, p. 475.

[10] Glikman, I. D. (Ed.). (1993). *Pisma k drugu: Pisma D. D. Shostakovicha k I. D. Glikmanu* [Letters to a Friend: Letters from D. D. Shostakovich to I. D. Glikman]. Kompozitor, p. 161.

This associative chain naturally extended to—and was tinged by—his perception of Rachmaninoff's music, from whose diverse output he singled out precisely those works of tragic import.

Thus, one of Shostakovich's very first opuses once again raises questions about the specifics of his programmatic nature, the role of quotation in it, and the composer's signature "secret writing," about which, it would seem, so much has been written and said.

Programmatic Elements, Quotation, and Cryptography

Indeed, the interplay between concealed and revealed meanings in Shostakovich's works remains a perennial focus for scholars. The discourse typically follows several key trajectories: the use of musicale monograms (including the author's—DSCH), quotation and self-quotation. Most likely, the most large-scale use of self-quotation with the inclusion of "other people's voice" (from Beethoven to Berg, from Mahler and Richard Strauss to Galina Ustvolskaya) is demonstrated by the Viola Sonata op. 147 (1975). Sensational in their conclusions, observations by Ivan Sokolov on the central section of the 3rd movement, published in 2006, reveal the meaning of its development as a consistent recollection of all of Shostakovich's symphonies (except the 11th Symphony, which does not contain the author's themes) [12]. This radical technique ultimately reveals the significance of the Viola Sonata as the composer's final musical statement, his opus magnum. Moreover, the use of the author's monogram DSCH in various works by Shostakovich by default includes the figure of the lyrical hero, identified with the author, in the intonational plot of the work.

However, cases of Shostakovich quoting other authors do not always find a sufficiently convincing analytical explanation. Thus, the complex of quotations noted by various researchers in the *Fifth Symphony* does not form a coherent semantic (or even stylistic) unity: here, the operas *Carmen* [13, p. 748], *Onegin* and *Ruslan and Lyudmila* [14, p. 242–245] as well as scores by Berlioz, Richard Strauss and Mahler [15, c. 151–155; 16], which are so different in their possible plot subtexts, are named.

The question is inevitable: to what extent was the composer himself aware of these allusions. Is it necessary to imply the presence of semantic subtexts behind them, or are we dealing with the result of an unconscious play of sound associations, reflecting the formal similarity of motives? The case of another of Shostakovich's final works, his 15th Symphony, emphasizes the ambiguity of the answer. Even the composer seemed uncertain about the meaning behind his own deliberately documented quotations from Rossini, Wagner, Glinka, and Beethoven, or whether they shared any conceptual unity. His confused confession says at all: "I myself don't know why these quotations are there, but I couldn't not include them, I couldn't not..."[11]

However, the use of quotations remains for interpreters, one way or another, a marker of the semantic depth of a work, a reason to search for its semantic subtexts—that very cryptography that is largely incriminated to the work by the era itself. Consider conductor Vladimir M. Yurowsky's reflections on programmatic music itself—starting with Mahler's symphonies, he makes a broader generalization:

> ...the absence of textual explanations in Mahler's later symphonies does not mean the absence of an internal program in them. I am convinced that such a program exists in all of Mahler's works—as, incidentally, it does in Bruckner's and even Brahms's symphonies, despite the latter's supposed adherence to "absolute music". Frankly, I am rather skeptical of the doctrine of "pure art", especially when applied to the Romantic 19th century, and likely to the 20th as well (at least to many of its representatives). Another thing is that the music of Debussy or Stravinsky often truly expresses only "itself" (to borrow the latter's term), which cannot be said about the music of Shostakovich, Britten or Henze. All of them were in some sense the heirs of Tchaikovsky and, of course, Mahler [17, p. 23].

I would like to subscribe to these words. But let's listen to the opinion of Shostakovich himself. He touched on this topic more than once, although it must be understood that none of his statements can be interpreted with a full degree of trust. The very conditions in which these confessions were made never provided the composer with unlimited freedom of expression. And yet, we cannot completely ignore these self-characteristics either.

Shostakovich's most detailed statement on the problem of content was made during the discussion on programmaticity that took place on the pages of the *Soviet Music* in 1951. Despite its obvious official tone, it deserves our attention:

[11] Glikman, I. D. (1993), p. 282.

> In the printed debates on program music, two different points of view emerged: some comrades consider only music with an author-supplied verbal text or concrete plot-based title to be programmatic. Others interpret the concept of programmaticity more broadly—as a work's internal idea, its content expressed through corresponding musical imagery.
>
> Personally, I identify programmaticity with meaningfulness. <…>
>
> For me, such works as Bach's fugues, Haydn's, Mozart's, Beethoven's symphonies, Chopin's etudes and mazurkas, Glinka's *Kamarinskaya*, Tchaikovsky's, Borodin's, Glazunov's symphonies, some of Myaskovsky's symphonies and mach else are deeply meaningful, and therefore programmatic.[12]

He then gave examples from Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Clavier* and Chopin's works, as well as Borodin's First Symphony, which, as he "admitted loving no less than the 2nd."[13]

While the phrasing of general theses in this article undoubtedly bears traces of editorial intervention—or at least self-censorship—the selection of examples likely reflects, to some degree, the composer's personal preferences. This may also hold true for the concluding argument:

> The author of a symphony, quartet or sonata may not announce their program, but is obliged to have one as the ideological basis of his work. It seems to me deeply false when a composer write music first, then 'discovers' its content with the help of critics and interpreters of his work. For me personally, as for many other authors of instrumental works, the programmatic concept always precedes the composition of the music.[14]

Another important statement:

> …Some participants in the discussion asserted that program music necessarily demands radical formal innovation. It seems to me that program music can be fully embodied in the forms and schemes bequeathed to us by the classics.

[12] Shostakovich D. (1951). O podlinnoj i mnimoj programmnosti [On Genuine and Imaginary Program Music]. *Sovetskaya muzyka*, (5), p. 76.
[13] Shostakovich D. (1951), p. 76.
[14] Shostakovich D. (1951), p. 76.

> <…> Works with a specific verbally formulated plot, inspired by living images of our modernity, are possible and necessary; but there can and should be symphonies, quartets, sonatas, instrumental concerts, the program of which is of a more general, philosophical nature, but which also reflect contemporary Soviet life.[15]

This verbal balancing act, in which the "generalized, philosophical character" must seamlessly coexist with the concrete requirement to "reflection of contemporary Soviet life," cannot eliminate the impression that behind these theses lies an attempt to protect pure instrumental music from the pervasive ideological blackmail of "Soviet themes." And, of course, Shostakovich's public declaration that not only is any author, in his opinion, "obliged to have a program," but that he himself always has one "prior to composing music," attracts special attention.

To what extent can we trust this claim? We posses only one absolutely uncommitted (since it was not intended for publication and assumed "purely scholarly" purposes) statement by Shostakovich about his creative process: his answers to the above-mentioned Roman Gruber's 1927 questionnaire. The young composer names reading Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* as immediate causes of the "impulse to creativity," as well as episodes of the World War I and revolutionary events, which he witnessed: "…in general, I composed a lot under the influence of external events."[16] Yet even beyond childhood, he sometimes admits that he continues to compose under the influence of external impulses. This is, for example, his message about the origin of the piano cycle *Aphorisms*: "I thought a lot about one law of nature at that time, and this gave me an impetus to compose *Aphorisms*, all unified by one idea. What that idea is, I do not want to say now."[17] Both the first and the second parts of this passage are symptomatic: there is a programmatic nature, but it is concealed by the author, although the name of the cycle indicates its possibility.

Undoubtedly, the composer's internal relationship with programmaticity could change over time and varied across works. It is interesting to compare the extreme periods of the composer's biography from this point of view: the example of the Suite

[15] Shostakovich D. (1951), pp. 77–78.
[16] Shostakovich o sebe i o svoikh sochineniyakh, p. 476.
[17] Shostakovich o sebe i o svoikh sochineniyakh, p. 477.

for Two Pianos—one of his first opuses from the early 1920s, in which programmaticity is demonstrated so clearly—with the non-programmatic composition of the late 1960s, marking his final creative period.

Quartet No. 12 in D-flat Major, Op. 133 (1968)

By the time of the Twelfth Quartet's composition, many events had taken place in the composer's creative laboratory that could not but indirectly influence Shostakovich's principles of work. Having gone through two ideological "purgatories" (Levon Hakobian) in the form of party purges, he was forced to draw the appropriate conclusions. These experiences fundamentally transformed his style over five decades. Mark G. Aranovsky summarized their main direction as follows:

> In short, his music possesses an exceptionally strong semiotic layer <...> Here we encounter a defining feature of Shostakovich's poetics—the strategic use of masks, symbols, and, consequently, encryption and decryption methods in the system of his artistic means. All these cases are connected with what was called indirect expression above, with the action of intermediary structures. The composer did not have much hope that the "pure" music, to which he almost entirely turned after the defeat of *Lady Macbeth*, would be protected from the punishing hand of political censorship. He had to find a way of self-expression that would allow, on the one hand, to fully realize his ideas, and on the other, to minimize the reasons for new persecutions [14, p. 238].

This perspective was shared by Tamara N. Levaya, who argued that "the composer likely came to recognize subtextual's techniques as a kind of creative program during the 'Thaw' era" [19, p. 152].[18]

But what exactly is meant here by "subtext"? Apparently, the "doublethink" that was diagnosed in Shostakovich back in 1979 with the publication in the West of Solomon Volkov's scandalous *Testimony*, or "a certain two-facedness," as Marina D. Sabinina would describe the same quality two decades later [21]. Today, this verdict, but now with the incriminating definition of "duplicity," is delivered by Leonid Maksimenkov's book *Shostakovich. Marshal of Soviet Music* [22]. And we cannot dismiss these judgments as baseless. Questions of this kind are inevitable for an author who writes a dedication to "victims of fascism and war" on the title page of his String Quartet № 8, and in a private conversation says that it's "dedicated

[18] This collision is discussed in detail in my work [20].

to my own memory."[19] As well as questions of an ethical nature: even if there was only bitter irony behind this confession, and not the incriminating pathos attributed to it by a friend-memoirist Glikman, the severity of the author's trials and tribulations and the aforementioned "victims of fascism and war" are clearly incomparable.

There is no lie detector that could be used to examine Shostakovich's verbal self-representations of different times and on different occasions, but music in many cases has its properties. Of course, if we take as a basis the understanding of music as thinking, and utterances with sounds as speech. And this in turn is also a rich source of discussion.

Therefore, along with the desire to read out hidden meanings, there are other research strategies that allow one to bracket out individual works by the composer, seeing in them precisely the development of the self-sufficient idea of pure music as a kind of other way to hide from the punishing hand of political censorship. Thus, Levon O. Hakobian, speaking about the time period between the post-Thaw *Thirteenth Symphony* and "pessimistic Fourteenth," singles out three opuses in which the twelve-tone structure becomes an important and "far from episodic structural idea": the vocal cycle *Seven Poems by Alexander Blok* (early 1967), the *Twelfth Quartet* (January–March 1968), and the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (August–September 1968) [23, p. 579]. The researcher focuses his attention precisely on the principles of use and the significance of the twelve-tone technique in these works as a new original feature of Shostakovich's style that emerged during these years and testifies to his formal searches. He writes, in particular:

> The most original aspect in Blok's cycle is the theme opening *Secret Signs*. <…> Its beginning is none other than a complete twelve-tone row <…>. The association of the twelve-tone paradigm with the terrifying "secret signs" referenced in Blok's poem naturally suggests an evolution of the idea first expressed in the *Fears* movement of the Thirteenth Symphony, where the nearly twelve-tone theme represented, in general, the same semantic field [23, p. 580].

Thus, according to the researcher's remark, the twelve-tone nature in Shostakovich's vocal cycle "indicates something alien and dreadful, forcing," in Blok's words, "to close one's eyes in fear" to the "black dream" that "weighs in the chest," and suggests thoughts of the proximity of the "predestined end"

[19] See Glikman, I. D. (1993), p. 159.

[23, p. 582]. As Hakobian concludes, "this tendency toward semanticizing the twelve-tone technique will receive further development in the Fourteenth Symphony" [23, p. 582]. In other words, the twelve-tone method becomes imbued with connotations of fate and death.

However, the next work—the *Twelfth Quartet*—does not, in Hakobyan's interpretation, follow this trend. Here, twelve-tone technique serves a purely formal purpose—"creating and resolving tensions between the twelve-tone and tonal paradigms" [23, p. 582]. In other words, for Shostakovich in this case, it is not what but how that matters. Hakobyan expands on an approach first proposed by Western scholar Judy Kuhn, who views the *Twelfth Quartet* as uniquely devoid of Shostakovich's usual extramusical connotations: "...this monumental experimental quartet <...> more than any other of Shostakovich's quartets, can be understood as a composition about composition itself—about the methods and means of musical construction. In this sense, it stands as the composer's contribution to the ongoing Soviet debate on new music" (as cited in [24, p. 150]).

Of the semantic moments in the theoretical interpretation of the *Twelfth Quartet*, Hakobian emphasized only a significant stroke at the beginning of the 1st movement, which was noted by the addressee of the dedication of the quartet and the then first violin of the Beethoven Quartet, Dmitry Tsyganov[20]: the silence of the second violin throughout the main theme is endowed with symbolic meaning in light of the fact that the Beethoven Quartet recently lost its second violinist Vasily Shirinsky, and Shostakovich's previous quartet was dedicated to his memory [24, p. 149]. Another observation of a semantic plan in relation to the Twelfth Quartet belongs to the same D. Tsyganov and provides an outlet to the problem of semanticization of twelve-tone: he characterizes the violin cadenza, built on reminiscences of the epigraph of the 1st movement, as ominous music, likening its long pizzicato to the steps of death.[21]

Are there any grounds to see in these performer's comments a reason to search for the programmatic basis of the entire composition? Who is right —

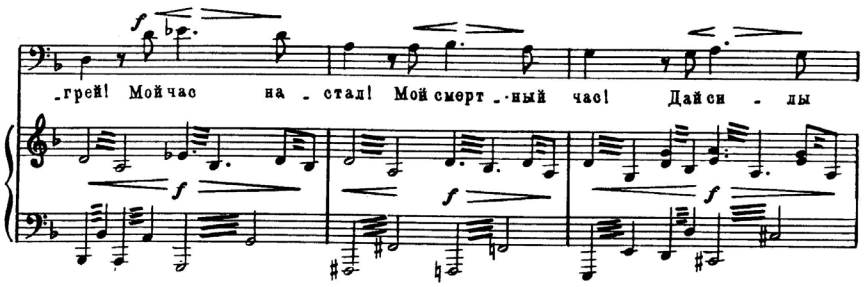
[20] See commentary by D. Tsyganov in the book: Khentova, S. M. (1996). *V mire Shostakovicha* [*In the World of Shostakovich*]. Kompozitor, p. 211.

[21] Khentova, S. M. (1996), p. 211.

the performer, who appeals to the hidden meanings of the composition, or the theorist, who reduces its dramaturgy to the realization of a purely formal compositional idea?

On Quotations and Allusions in Quartet No. 12

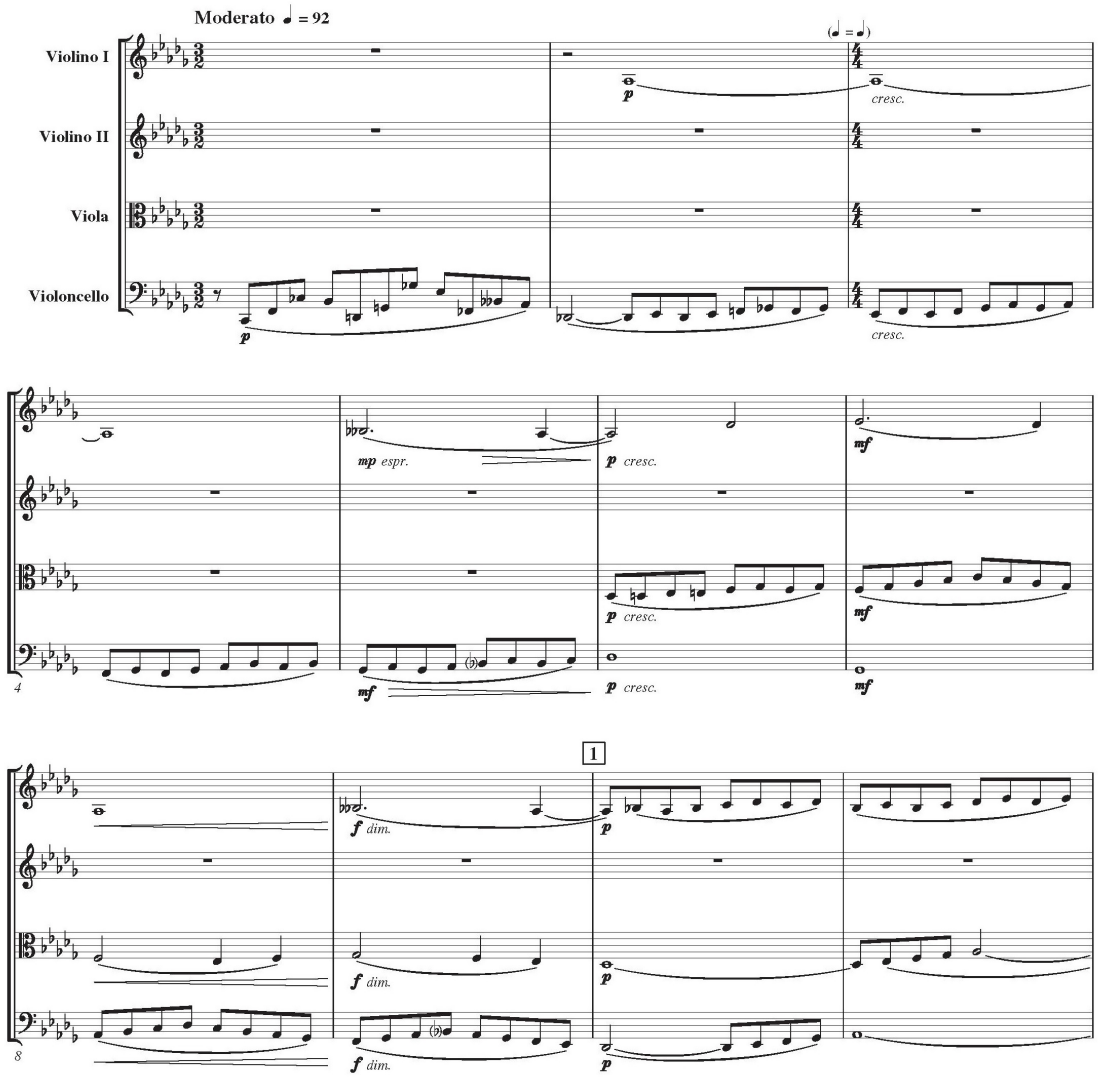
The answer is found in the cryptography of this text, the presence of which is most clearly evidenced by the citation of "other people's voice." In the scanty literature on the Twelfth Quartet, only an allusion to Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* was once marked, declared from the very first notes: it opens the quartet and is an important thematic element of its further development, forming a contrapuntal line of the leitmotif running through the entire work. This is a completely recognizable quotation from the instrumental accompaniment of Pimen's Tale from Act IV of opera [25, p. 98]. It determines the mood and imagery of the entire first movement of the quartet, and it also appears in key moments of the second. But another allusion, which acquires the concreteness of a quotation, has not yet been noted in the literature—the actual melodic line of the leitmotif. If in the first performance (mm. 6–8) there is only a hint at the melodic prototype (the intonation is slightly paraphrased and given in a major key), then the second performance (from m. 24) reveals a very specific reference, and not just to a certain theme, but also to "a word hidden in music"[22] (B. Katz): the tragic culmination of Susanin's aria in Act IV is quoted: *My hour has come! My mortal hour!* (*Oh, bitter hour! Oh, terrible hour!*) (*Example 6, 7*).[23]



Example 6. Glinka M. Susanin's Aria from the opera *A Life for the Tsar*, Act IV

[22] Katz, B. A. (1995). Slovo, spryatannoe v muzyke [The Word Hidden in Music]. *Music Academy*, (4–5), 49–56.

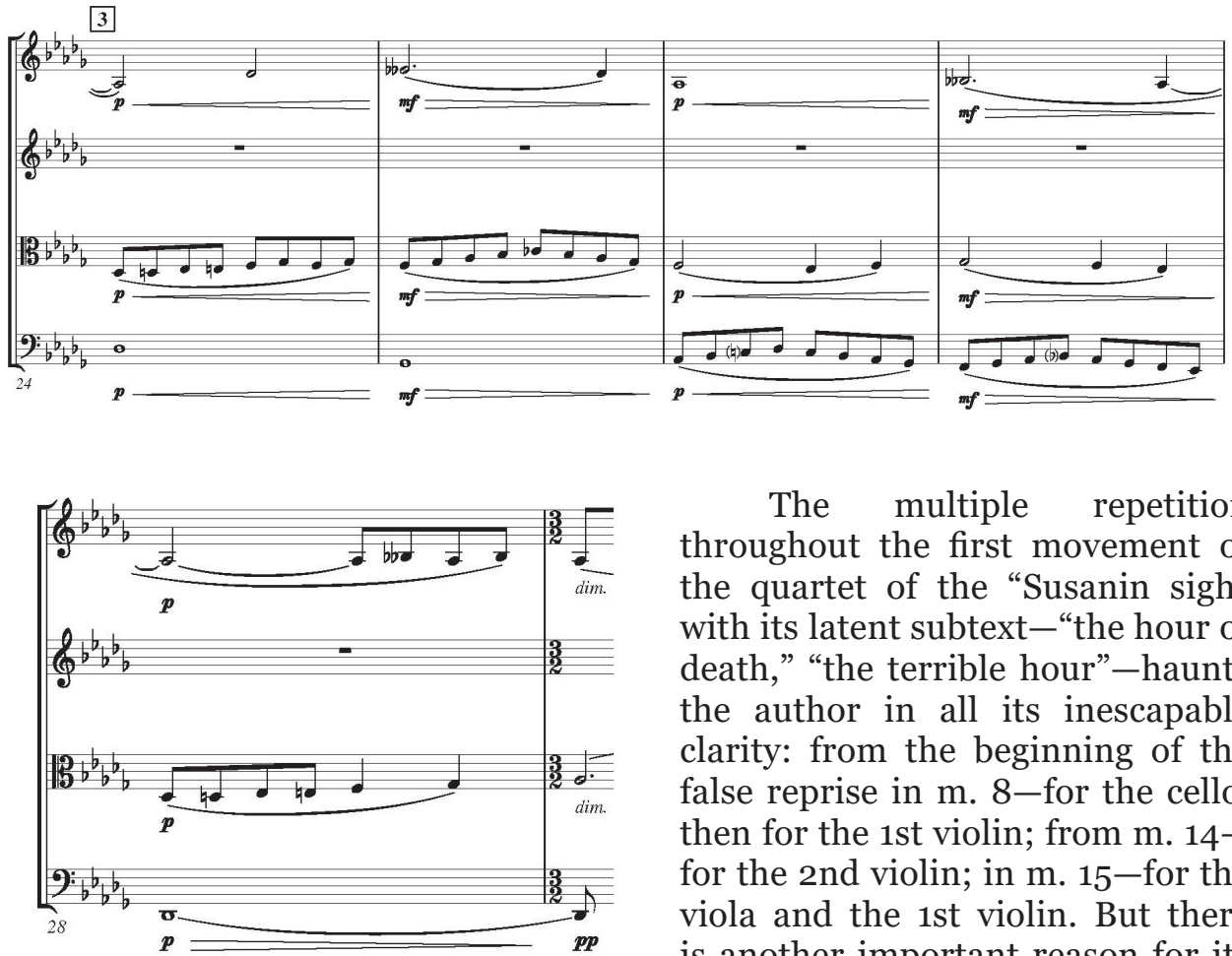
[23] Two versions of the text are given here: the first by S. M. Gorodetsky, the second by Baron von Rosen. Both were undoubtedly known to the composer, but it's difficult to say which one was most memorable for him by this time.



Example 7. Shostakovich D. *Quartet No. 12*, 1st movement

"The word hidden in the music" creates the semantic subtext of the composition, and the quotation, thanks to repeated performances, acquires the status of a leitmotif of the entire quartet. If at its first appearance in m. 2 in the first violin part it sounds in a deceptive major variant, then on the wave of development of "Pimen leitmotif" it acquires an even greater, and now undeniable similarity with the "Susanin motive": in the first violin part in m. 24 it is reproduced almost verbatim—in a minor and practically

at the same pitch as in Glinka, but with the flat deepening of the tonality characteristic of Shostakovich. The size coincides, the rhythmic relationship of the steps is preserved, but weighted due to the doubling of the durations[24] (*Example 8*).



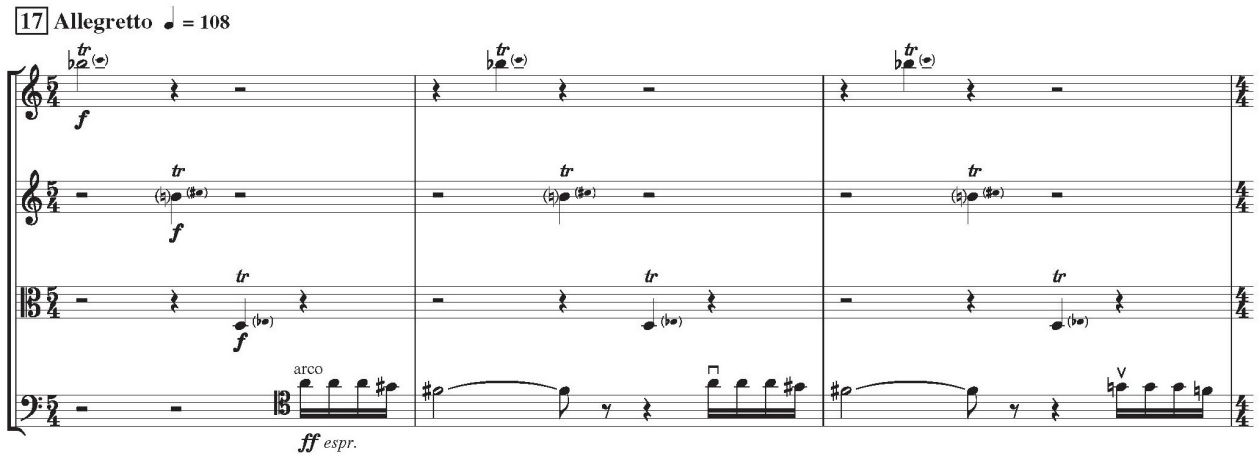
Example 8. Shostakovich D. *Quartet No. 12*, 1st movement, mm. 24–28

The multiple repetition throughout the first movement of the quartet of the "Susanin sigh" with its latent subtext—"the hour of death," "the terrible hour"—haunts the author in all its inescapable clarity: from the beginning of the false reprise in m. 8—for the cello, then for the 1st violin; from m. 14—for the 2nd violin; in m. 15—for the viola and the 1st violin. But there is another important reason for its appearance—it begins with *D–Es* as a reminder of Shostakovich's monogram.

[24] It is interesting that, having not noticed this quote, Olesya A. Osipenko nevertheless classified the motif itself as a category of themes with a "clearly expressed national flavor," noting its "song-like length" and "plaintive-heart-rending tone" [25, pp. 92, 98].

Thus, the entire first movement of this cycle is accompanied by a lament about death, very personally colored and fused with the tragic motif from *Boris Godunov*. Its appearance here is also explained by the "hidden word": the operatic Pimen tells about the death of the young Dimitry.

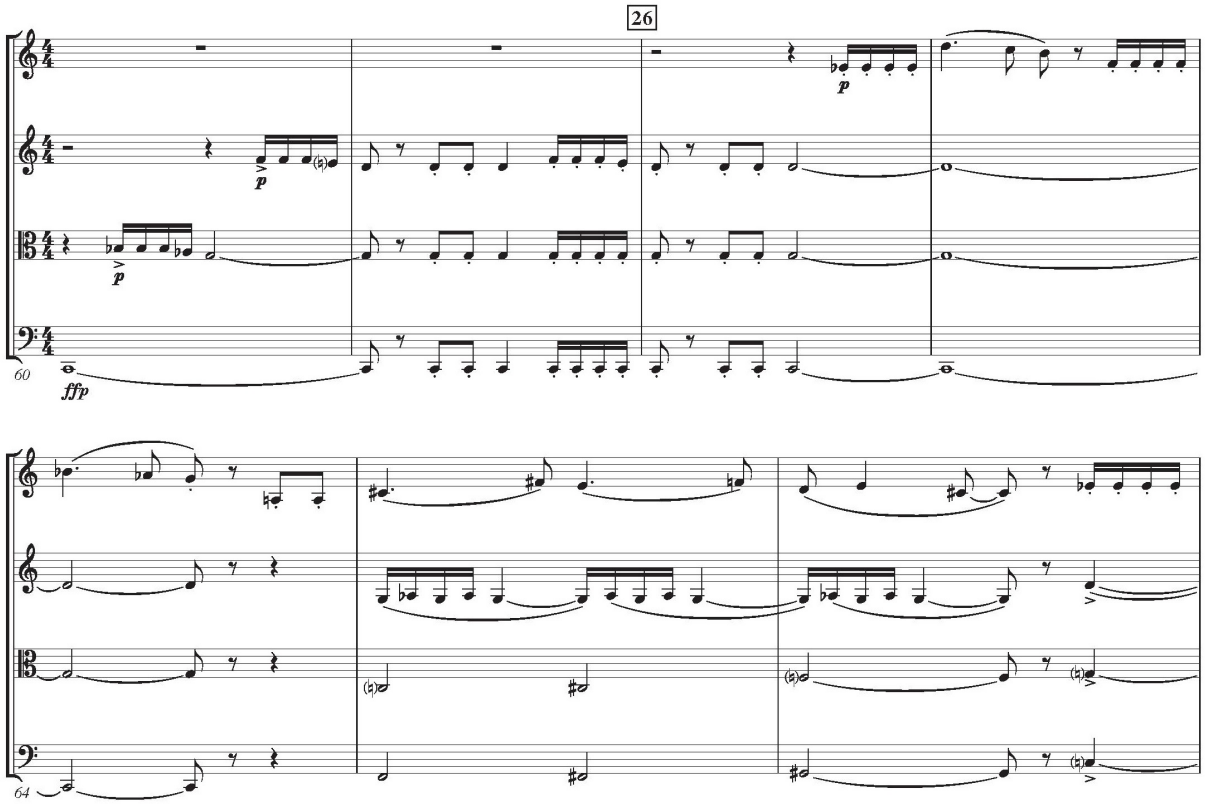
The dramatic milestones of the Twelfth Quartet, endowed with distinct semantic and a connection with the word, continue further, in the second movement, to build the listener's perception of the plot logic, whose semantic unity is reinforced by the compactness of the unconventional (including for Shostakovich himself) two-movement cycle. The second movement opens in an extremely expressive and unexpected way: "...a characteristic textural element—sharp, point-like 'flashes' of short trills, appearing in turn (in the first violin, then in the second, then in the viola—R. 17) and accompanying the development of the theme in the future" [25, p. 89] (*Example 9*).



Example 9. Shostakovich D. *Quartet No. 12*, 2nd movement

Olesya Osipenko rightly attributes the pointillistic motifs of the quartet to the sphere of "terrifying visions of the beyond" [25, p. 91] typic of Shostakovich's late works. It is characteristic that this introduction further leads to a fierce dispute between the instruments in the main theme of the second movement (from R. 19), which unfolds as a contrast between the trill motif and the motif of four sixteenth notes ending with a long note "in the space between the twelve-tone and tonal poles" [24, p. 150].

But there is also a semantic dimension here, since in the second movement the deeply personal pathos of the statement is confirmed and strengthened by the introduction of a variant of the Shostakovich monogram in R. 26: *Es-D-C-H*. The motif, which had long been established by this time in the composer's works, is combined with the rhythmic formula "Mi-ten'-ka," the significance of which was noted by Arkady I. Klimovitsky [26]. In this way they semantically strengthen and clarify each other (*Example 10*).



Example 10. Shostakovich D. *Quartet No. 12*, 2nd movement (R. 26)

In the process of development, the exact formula of the monogram is gradually acquired—the intonation plot seems to come to it.

The culmination, begun in R. 31, returns the main leitmotif of the "groan," distorted by suffering, and on the crest of the waves of rolling despair, its exclamations sound (R. 32–33). Further, the intonation plot naturally leads to

the tragic cello solo in R. 45. It is answered by the quietest mournful chorale, and then the mystical atmosphere of this liturgical responsory is broken by the cello lines of "lamentation with sobs" in the tense tessitura of the treble clef. This chorale in R. 46, in its lengthy development and tempo, corresponds to the image of a funeral procession. As Osipenko notes, in R. 48, both violins and viola have a crucifix motif in the chorale texture, while in the cello part the figure of passus duriusculus clearly emerges [25, p. 170]. The development comes to a powerfully semantically loaded formula, literally screaming about mortal agony.

The following cadenza of the 1st violin, to the infernal imagery of the pizzicato of which Tsyganov drew attention, really calls for the symbolism of the *danse macabre*—and in R. 56 a ghostly waltz-like *tutti* appears, which echoes the *quasi*-waltz secondary theme of the 1st movement, colored by twelve tones (R. 4–7). The use of dodecaphony, therefore, is fully corresponds to the "recipe" given by the composer in an interview in the spring of 1968 on the eve of the quartet's premier. Shostakovich said:

> If, say, a composer sets himself the task of necessarily writing dodecaphonic music, then he artificially limits his possibilities, his concept. The use of elements of these complex systems is entirely justified if it is dictated by the idea of the composition.[25]

The role of dodecaphony here turns out to be precisely semantic, being endowed with negative semantics, as was typical in general for the Soviet avant-garde of the 1960s. The ghostliness created by dodecaphony in the secondary theme becomes a stable image, one of the faces of death, appearing in both the 1st and 2nd movements.

The chorale, this time preceded by a violin monologue, will sound again in R. 59. After it, in R. 60, the leitmotif will return, like a reprise of the entire composition, which creates the effect of a one-part form with a certain semblance of monothematics. And yet, everything ends with a coda that is unexpected in its imagery and meaning: in R. 65, a convulsive, tense joy of the sixteenth-note motif arises, like the giggling of small demons. But their onslaught is pacified by the insistent, demanding, almost ecstatic assertion of the tonic

[25] Shostakovich D. (1968). Priglashenie k molodoi muzike [Invitation to Young Music]. *Yunost'*, (5), 87. (as cited in [24, p. 149]).

D-flat major, who weightily refutes the possibility of a nihilistic ending. A certain semantic similarity to this powerful image of overcoming such a tragic plot in the finale can be found in Pasternak's poem *On Passion Week* (from his novel *Doctor Zhivago*), written during the first post-war Easter of 1946:

> At midnight flesh and soul are dumb,
> As they hear some spring story,
> That in the holy gleaming sun
> Death will be absolutely won
> By Resurrexit glory.[26]

With a similar "gleaming sun's effort" the D-flat major in the finale of the Twelfth Quartet drives away the evil spirits of the night, forcing one to recall these verses, possibly unknown to Shostakovich.[27]

> On March 9 (in Repino) he said to me and my wife Vera Vasil'evna with a smile: "Maybe it's funny, but it always seems to me that I won't have time to finish my next opus. What if I die and the piece remains unfinished?" But, thank God, nothing happened and on March 16 Dmitry Dmitrievich played (in Repino) for me and Veniamin Basner the deeply dramatic Twelfth Quartet. He was in an elevated mood.[28]

Conclusion

Our analytical excursion in search of Shostakovich's thanatology in relation to one of his earliest and one of his latest works makes us think about at least two questions. The first is why such obvious quotations from such famous works by Russian classics were not noticed by researchers (and, apparently, by performers). What is the focus and pattern of this "deafness" of ours?

It seems that we trust the author's evidence too much. As we have already mentioned, one could read about the *Suite for Two Pianos*, Opus 6, a self-

[26] Pasternak, B. L. (2004). *Complete Works: in 11 volumes. Vol. 4. Doctor Zhivago, 1945–1955*. Slovo. P. 518.

[27] The poem, written on the first post-war Easter, was later included in the cycle *Poems of Yuri Zhivago*, but even before the publication of the novel, it appeared in the Russian-language émigré press in 1957.

[28] Glikman, I. D. (1993), p. 240.

commentary referring to Tchaikovsky and Glazunov. The author himself did not indicate Rachmaninoff, and analysts did not dare to go further than stating general stylistic similarities. Concerning the Twelfth Quartet, the self-commentary turned out to be even more cunning. Regarding the new opus, Shostakovich said about it to its future performer Dmitry M. Tsyganov: "Symphony, symphony…" (as cited in [27, p. 510]). In fact on the contrary, the musical text clearly refers to operatic allusions. And then the second question arises: is there any cunning here and was the composer being disingenuous, was he himself aware of the existence of these quotes.

If we try to explain everything by the work of the subconscious, then most likely the catalyst for the operatic associations in the Twelfth Quartet was the draft used for its sketches with a fragment of the work on the editing of *Khovanshchina* (1958)[29]. And his editing of *Boris Godunov* in 1940, pushed into the shadows by many other works and events, could have served with its long-standing nature as the same game of the subconscious. Also pushed into the past were meetings with Glinka's first opera score: in 1944, he included a quote from *A Life for the Tsar* (then already—*Ivan Susanin*) in the finale of the music for the film *Zoya*, and in 1957—10 years before working on the quartet, he took part in writing the collective *Variations on a Theme* of Glinka (for the 100th anniversary of the death of the classic), which were based on Vanya's Song.

Susanin's motif with its preserved albeit clouded by the flat-sphere, pitch, when placed in a new context, could be detached from specific words in the author's memory, but retain its tragic semantics. Although the author did not leave us any evidence of his deliberate use of the aforementioned quotes, the harmony of the concept of the whole, the consistency of the connection of allusions to *Boris Godunov*, *Ivan Susanin*, the author's monogram with the figurative dramaturgy of the Twelfth Quartet demonstrates the impeccable work of his artistic intuition.

The principles of this work, which created the richest content resource of the composition, did not arise overnight, not under the pressure of external ideological circumstances, as is commonly believed, but were initially inherent in his talent, as demonstrated by his first major independent composition, Suite for Two Pianos, opus 6. From it to the last creative stage, a direct continuity can be traced—

[29] Dmitry Shostakovich's Archive. Rec.gr. 1. Section 1. F. 136. Sheet 1 rev. See [28, p. 217].

in the attitude to music as an art of communication, in the commitment to specific methods of creating this communication. That is, musical speech.

It is also certain that both of these opuses—one with a published dedication-*memoria*, the other without any hint of the intended programmatic nature—are part of Shostakovich's thanatology, the idea of which, as we see, occupied Shostakovich from childhood to his last days. From this point of view the theme of death seems central to Shostakovich's work. And, of course, this existential problem precedes any social responses in its appearance. But the horror of Thanatos was tirelessly fueled by historical trials—from childhood rumors about the First World War and impressions of revolutionary everyday life to the feeling of doom during the years of Stalin's rule and the global catastrophism of the Second World War, and later—the wise pessimism of the last decades of his biography, darkened by the most severe physical ailments.

The hypnosis of the image of death did not weaken, although the interpretation and embodiment of the theme could change repeatedly. And here again, one should not completely trust the auto-comments. For example, Shostakovich's confession of unbelief, disarming in its sincerity and tragedy, his nihilistic characterization of the end of human life as an unconditional and unappealable end, publicly made at the dress rehearsal of the Fourteenth Symphony—an opus entirely devoted to the theme of death. Written a year later than the Twelfth Quartet, the symphony, as it becomes clear, was another stage in his reflection on this theme, which led to the disclosure of the composer's life *credo* both in the program of the new opus itself and in the commentary to it. What sounded then from his own lips offers a tempting possibility of projection onto other opuses connected with the same theme:

> I am partly trying to argue with the great classics who touched on the theme of death in their work, and, as it seems to me… let's remember the death of Boris Godunov, when Boris Godunov, that is, died, then some kind of enlightenment comes. Let's remember Verdi's *Othello*, when the whole tragedy ends and Desdemona and Othello die, then a beautiful calm also sounds. Let's remember *Aida*. When the tragic death of the heroes occurs, it is softened by light music. I think that the no less outstanding English composer Benjamin Britten—I would also reproach him. <…> So, it seems to me that in part, perhaps, I am following,

> imitating, following in the footsteps of the great Russian composer Mussorgsky. His cycle *Songs and Dances of Death*. Maybe not all [songs], but *The Commander* is a great protest [against] death and a reminder that one must live one's life honestly, nobly, decently, and never commit bad deeds. Because, alas, our scientists will not think of immortality so soon. This awaits us all, so to speak. I don't see anything good in such an end to life…[30]

However, it is evident that this statement cannot be extrapolated to the Twelfth Quartet with its finale-overcoming. The "Agony in the Garden" (revealed by the crucifix motif)[31] ends this time with amnesty. And the similarity of the intonational plot of this score with the poetic plot of Pasternak's Easter poem is strengthened by the perhaps strange and accidental coincidence that the quartet was completed in the spring of 1968 at the beginning of Lent.

Music, therefore, including the quoted "other people's voice," is always capable of saying more about the doubts, hopes, and depths of its author's worldview than he himself will tell us, and than he himself is perhaps capable of realizing.

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