

**A Shostakovich Casebook.** Edited by Malcolm Hamrick Brown. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 408 pages, facsimiles. \$39.95 US (cloth). ISBN 0-253-34364-X

For the last quarter-century, Shostakovich scholars have been embroiled in a dispute over the authenticity of *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* by Solomon Volkov (New York : Limelight Editions, 1992, c1979). When it was first published, Volkov claimed he had met with Shostakovich repeatedly in order to capture glimpses into Shostakovich's life, works, and opinions. The book's authority was no less than "as related to and edited by" Volkov (italics added). In the climate of the Cold War, it received instant notoriety, with many in the West invoking it to underscore the depravity of the Soviet regime. In response, cries of fraud and falsehood came from the Soviets, who condemned the book as the vituperation of an angry, self-exiled dissident. What followed over the next two decades was a flurry of scholarly activity, aimed both at championing and at vilifying Volkov's work, in what has become known as the "Shostakovich wars." The resulting scholarship has, indeed, shed much new and positive light on Shostakovich's work, and provoked fresh and critical listening to his oeuvre.

This present volume has a clear and pointed agenda, which it proclaims in its opening sentence, almost as if throwing down the gauntlet: "It matters that *Testimony* is not exactly what Solomon Volkov has claimed it to be." From there it proceeds tirelessly, relentlessly, to achieve that goal—to disprove and discredit these supposed "memoirs" of Shostakovich. In order to do so, Brown has compiled twenty-five essays from

leading Shostakovich scholars, performers, and acquaintances of the composer. The essays are grouped into four thematically-linked parts, each of which serves the objective of undermining *Testimony*. Each essay is dated immediately following the title, demonstrating the currency of the scholarship. The introduction sets out not only the direction, but also how the book is structured and what purpose each essay serves; the clarity of this section is immensely helpful in guiding the reader through the rest of the book, and it cannot be omitted.

Part 1 is the cornerstone, presenting two essays by Laurel Fay that lay the foundation for all of the subsequent material. Being separated by twenty-two years (1980 and 2002), there is noticeable evolution in her argument. The first essay, "Shostakovich vs. Volkov: Whose *Testimony*" (presumably the first declaration of the war in the English language), begins to dissect the problems in Volkov's work, but ends rather abruptly. The second, however, "Volkov's *Testimony* Reconsidered," leaves no stone unturned as it outlines the multiplicity of problems and addresses them with such precision that any dispassionate reader will be persuaded that Volkov's work is unquestionably suspect. The synoptic conclusion is that this is a book *about* rather than *by* Shostakovich. For example, her analysis of the chronology of events of research and publication clearly puts Volkov's own recollection of their order into dispute; progressively she attacks countless similar details until

Volkov is left with no credibility at all. Fay's work is an excellent example of seasoned, cutting-edge scholarship. The writing style is fluid in both essays. It should be noted that Fay also provided many of the translations used in the book, and these are equally idiomatic.

Because Fay's work is so thorough, each of the remaining parts exists as corollary proof to the arguments she makes. Part 2 is a series of eleven sources translated from Russian. First, several text comparisons demonstrate the high probability that Volkov "borrowed" widely from pre-existent sources, undermining his claims that all of the materials in *Testimony* had been discussed directly between himself and Shostakovich. Subsequent items include writings such as official denunciations of *Testimony* by the composer's colleagues and fellow composers, an explanation by Shostakovich's widow of his signature on various of Volkov's manuscript pages, and a retrospectus by Rostropovich which debunks Shostakovich's alleged criticism of other composers in the memoirs. Despite an occasional interesting anecdote, each item in this part devotes itself to proving one or another of Fay's claims, or to disproving the surface arguments proffered by Volkov's supporters.

Part 3 consists of four additional Russian sources, intended to address more tangentially the vitriol of Volkov and to demonstrate that Shostakovich was not the personality that one encounters in Volkov's pages. Two of the key articles, "A Link in the Chain: Reflections on Shostakovich and His Times" (1976) and "A Perspective on Soviet Musical Culture during the Lifetime of Shostakovich" (1998), again

present viewpoints separated by substantial time. Partly because of the subject matter, and partly due to the writing style, these are heavier reading, not unlike much of Shostakovich's music itself. While offering some good insights into the difficult political and spiritual climate of Soviet musicians, neither lives up to its title in any exhaustive way, and one will need to look to other sources for greater depth of information. In keeping with the goal of the book, one essay is devoted to refuting the positions of Volkov's chief protagonists, Ho and Feofanov, in their counter-volume, *Shostakovich Reconsidered* (London: Toccata Press, 1998).

In part 4, eight English-speaking authors write on various topics, from reviews of books about Shostakovich to additional opinion pieces, including three by the general editor, Brown. One article in particular, "The Shostakovich Variations" by Mitchinson, provides a complete synopsis and is effectively the digest version of the controversy; this might have been a better piece to begin the book. Overall, the opinions in this part are reasonably informed, but do little to advance any argument. The writing is of variable and occasionally awkward quality (there are surely better terms than "emblemize" or "foregrounding"), and there is some logical fallacy in spending time defending authors who appear elsewhere in the book, all of whom survive better on their own merits. The book concludes with an extensive though not exhaustive bibliography, terse biographies of each of the authors, and an index.

Let it be said that this book achieves what it sets out to do; it discredits Volkov and his defenders with a

precision seldom seen in scholarly print. However, in the end it must be asked what this book has done to clarify matters in the war. As a work of scholarship, it is consistently first-rate, despite some redundancy in the “proving.” But it appears to fall into some of the very traps that it identifies with the enemy. For instance, Ho and Feofanov are chided because “a range of contrary perspectives is not represented.” Yet any dissenting opinion raised in *Casebook* is there only to be soundly refuted—this is hardly representation of contrary perspectives. It would also appear that despite the attempts to discredit Volkov’s assertions about hidden meanings in Shostakovich’s music, *Casebook* discusses that particular aspect enough to leave the question still open. Furthermore, various authors concede that Volkov *accurately* represented many aspects of the oppression of Soviet composers, including Shostakovich. Yet the thoroughness with which Volkov is undermined renders it virtually impossible for anyone to utilize *Testimony* as a source of reliable information. Would it not have been a better tactic to specify which parts of

Volkov’s work ring true, thereby leaving us with at least a few glimpses into the composer’s work and character? Having read *Testimony* almost twenty years ago, I can still remember the poignancy of the anecdote that Shostakovich kept a packed suitcase near his bed, not knowing if he might be arrested and taken away during the middle of the night. That single anecdote spoke volumes about the pain, oppression, and uncertainty that Shostakovich endured under the Soviet regime. Or did it?

To paraphrase Shostakovich’s (or is it Volkov’s?) “we go on our way rejoicing” comment, at the conclusion of this book the authors can rightly assert that “we go on our way vindicated.” Unfortunately, there has been both a constructive *and* a damaging result to scholarship about Shostakovich, and the book may have fallen into the trap of self-service for which Volkov is maligned. In the end, like *Testimony*, this is another book *not* about Shostakovich, but about Volkov.

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