

The Sixth Symphony by Shostakovich (1939) by Dmitrii Bavilsky

Translated from Russian by Jenya Krein

A classic example (typical of Shostakovich) portraying a state of mind, a feeling, an interrelationship; a fixation of intent, a floating bridge that binds not just a person with his environment (social setting, milieu), but the object with the subject, the path of emotion to its logical course, its continuation; the complaints and their pressure of global proportion about the vanity (the individual is always less than his circumstances in such a situation). This underground ideologist of his own selfhood sits there and swells from the power of his own conception, completely wiggled out, all puffed up. But it's not his fault that he is like that; he just does not have any one to support him: his pride and gloom, born from a loneliness that could be sometimes illuminating, enlightening, but more often leaden, empty.

This Hamlet-like confusion, the outcome of which is always known in advance: not to be. Nevertheless, Hamlet keeps on thinking because the ergo (sounding here like sound itself) is tantamount for him to solving the enigma of the world. He is alive only and when he is in the process, inside the intention — a slim ray that probes the darkness. Everywhere around him this charmed world, which is under a spell of death, trembles, spins and foams: Shostakovich, the atheist, not even an agnostic — it's just so obvious. The season when the last asters are dying, the season of the first snow, a slight cold that turns into full-blown anemia, a lack of energy, a facile balancing act on the brink of non-existence. It seems Jaspers called this the *borderline state*.

The Sixth is about mechanisms of invoking and forming this kind of state. It does not mean, however, that Shostakovich is describing some grave illness — for him such existential anxiety (fading at the finale of the first part), such depression is simply the normal body temperature of a body that is supposed to perceive. Nothing personal: we're all destined for the night. This balance is maintained by the quantitative predominance of the innumerable violins that fall like snow, ennobling melancholy with white snow caps. It is not even scary to die in winter: for in doing so, you are following the general course of events; but what is scary is to lie in the earth, under the ground — and do nothing. The balance is strengthened by graceful curtseys toward the classically Viennese, Mahler-like passages.

In part two we peek into a nursery where kids — who suspect nothing — are trying to live their lives. Well, well. For Shostakovich, the first part of any symphony is always the most important statement; the following ones simply follow shading and supplementing the power and cerebral abyss of the first. Only a few are able to achieve the same amplitude and oscillation that always happens in the first part. The second and third are more mono-logical, monochromatic, *logical* (that's the right word); as a rule, they are like a jewelry box with a secret, a thing in itself. And only in the first part does Shostakovich allow himself to voice direct and unaffected statements.

Aha, I am starting to understand: what is important in Shostakovich is the drive to let oneself go, expressed through the swaying of this emotional swing. Here is the third part of the Sixth — how could you get more kaleidoscopic than all these waltzes and polkas swelling past the brass; and like that — the same old thing: historicism (anthropomorphous, really) renders innocuous their dense emptiness of the senses.

Bolsheviks must have liked it. Despite the flagrant dejection of the final movement that brings us back to the tragic purity of the beginning. But Rakhmaninov's sweeping *Russianness* masks under the anxiety about the fate of the Motherland a wounded existentialism suffering from heartburn. Like: what will happen with our homeland and with us? What will happen is that nothing will happen: we are all destined for the same night, death is our Motherland, and Russia is inevitable.

From *Fifteen Instances of Spring* by Dmitrii Bavilsky (Poet, novelist, essayist; editor of "Topos" magazine)

