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# Shostakovich Reconsidered



## **Synopsis**

Dmitry Shostakovich's memoirs, *Testimony*, 'related to and edited by Solomon Volkov', have been the subject of fierce debate since their publication in 1979. Was *Testimony* a forgery, made up by an impudent impostor, or was it the deathbed confession of a bent, but unbroken, man? Even now, years after the fall of the communist regime, a coterie of well-placed Western musicologists have regularly raised objections to *Testimony*, hoping with each attack to undermine the picture of Shostakovich presented in his memoirs that of a man of enormous moral stature, bitterly disillusioned with the Soviet system. Here, Allan Ho and Dmitry Feofanov systematically address all of the accusations levelled at *Testimony* and Solomon Volkov, Shostakovich's amanuensis, amassing an enormous amount of material about Shostakovich and his position in Soviet society and burying forever the picture of Shostakovich as a willing participant in the communist charade.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Essential reading for anyone interested in Shostakovich --The Washington Post

ALLAN B. HO is a musicologist, DMITRY FEOFANOV a lawyer and pianist.

Please read the excellent reviews of St John, ultrarunner, Prosser and A Customer, written before this review. Because of these previous writers, I can take a different path. First of all, this book offers little analysis of the music of Shostakovich. No surprise: Shostakovich believed there was no need

to explain the meaning of his music -- "Those who have ears will understand," he said on many occasions. He did write explanations for officials, who apparently did not "have ears", and those explanations have apparently misled Fay, Taruskin and others. To the many, Russians and others, who did then and do now understand, it seems incredible that anyone could mistake Shostakovich's intent. It's possible that authoritarians, as defined by the post WWII studies, can see only black or white and must have simple explanations; they do not tolerate complexity -- and most great works of art are complex, with many levels of meaning. Secondly, the first part of this 728 page work is a laborious -- and yes, ultimately tedious -- absolutely convincing refutation of Fay and total vindication of Testimony. Combined with listening to all the symphonies, quartets, concertos and chamber music, there can be no mistaking Shostakovich's basic intent. Thirdly, the rest of the book turns out to be a dissection of the man Shostakovich. Outside of an interview with Kondrashin and one or two other short articles, the rest of *Shostakovich Revisited* reminded me of Rembrandt's painting "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp". (You don't need to know the painting to get the allusion: the cadaver is stretched out for all to see, students crowded about hanging on the words of the lecturer.) After a while I became uncomfortable with this intimacy. The dead Shostakovich has been dug up and his life dissected mercilessly. Yes, much of this analysis does shed some light on Shostakovich's beliefs that impacted on his music. Possibly much of it is valuable -- although still highly speculative. For example, how can we tell from a seven-teen-year-old's letters to his girlfriend just how integral his stated literary preferences are to his mature beliefs? I'm not sure how much is necessary to those of us "with ears". Before I knew very much about the USSR from the 1920s to the 1970s, Shostakovich's music spoke directly to me, a middle-class, female suburbanite living a very comfortable life in the U.S. Reading Wilson and Volkov, plus program notes by many writers, will set the various works in historical and biographical context and analyze them technically. That may be enough for fuller understanding. I've given this book five stars -- it's impossible not to. I'm certainly not sorry I've read it, but it offered less to me than I had hoped and much more than I needed.

I bought this book a while back, and kept it for almost a year before I read it. I wanted to give the book my highest level of attention. Well, it was worth the wait. *Shostakovich Reconsidered* has a wealth of information for any serious (and not-so-serious) Shostakovich scholar. My only criticism of the book is that Ian MacDonald's (*The New Shostakovich*) name should be more associated with this book than it is. He has written a sizeable array of articles in this book, and each one has proven to be as interesting as *The New Shostakovich*. I found the "courtroom" approach to supporting or

refuting the memoirs of Shostakovich (Testimony) a little tedious after awhile, but I enjoyed the information nevertheless. I also found that Laurel Fay's book (Shostakovich: A Life) suffers from "selective scholarship" in the eyes of the authors. This should be interesting, as I dive into that book next. . .

The authors of the book Allan Ho a Musicologist and Dmitry Feofanov a lawyer and pianist, show that Solomon Volkov did indeed write the book Testimony, which Shostakovich dictated to him. The authors address all the accusations against Volkov and show that the composer was no willing participant in the Communist charade. They show that the problem was they did not understand Soviet society. The main criticism comes from 3-4 American Musicologists, Fay, Brown et al. They revive the official version of Shostakovich that he was no brighter than the average utterly bamboozled Soviet citizen. The fact is he did hide himself and his feelings. In fact as his friends testify, he was a brilliant mimic and had a razor sharp mind, and had a faultless memory when it came to literature and music. He could speed read prose and scores and not forget them. He had huge moral stature and fought back against the regime through his music. For example, the 5th Symphony, the slow movement, is a requiem for the dead killed by Stalin's order, and the last movement, about the fact that one must be happy, as you are beaten with a stick. The Leningrad symphony is about Stalin as well as Hitler. The composer had begun the symphony before the siege. Other contributors are the composer's son, Maxim, the cellist and conductor, Rostropovich etc. Also, the authors explain what is really behind the symphonies, not that it is pure music as the three academics suggest, that is rubbish. As one who grew up in a fascist state, South Africa, I can tell you, you do hide your views and go along outwardly as Shostakovich did. Eventually, in 1972 for viewing my opinions, I was told by the security police that it was within my interest to leave. I had two warnings and did leave. It was worse in the Soviet Union, so the three Academics have no idea what they are writing and talking about. This book should be on every Shostakovich's lover bookcase.

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Not sure the case for Volkov is made.

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