From David Johnson
(Lightly-edited extracts from a personal letter to the Editor of Tempo)

Two things I feel like commenting on in the ‘Soviet’ Tempo 173, since I’d thought about them already.

First: The popularity of Shostakovich with present-day Western audiences (p.2). What I think people are getting from the music is a lifting of a burden from the heart of the capitalist-aggressive individuality - a return to a (religious) sense of what is common to humanity of all periods and social classes. RVW said this about Bach’s music; I think this gives Shostakovich and Bach a lot in common. It doesn’t help the problem you outline because (a) Shostakovich couldn’t have written like this without great hardship in his life (the experience, at least on one level, of his own individuality being battered down to worthless nothingness); but on the other hand (b) insofar as Communism is valid at all as a philosophy, it must imply exactly this return. So is his music (a) a response to a God-awful personal life or (b) the perfect expression of everything Soviet Communism was (or should have been) on about? The ambiguity you mention moves right into the centre of this description...

Second point: Herschkowitz’s definitions of fest and locker. This is a pure guess, but I think I discovered something similar in 1985 (while completing my Recorder Pibroch and Piano Trio). Normal analysis doesn’t reach these concepts because, normally, analysis is to do with structure but not construction, ie what the thing is but not how the composer put it there, like what bits he wrote first. (Example - analysis normally gets it all wrong about fugues, through not considering that the most creative bit about a fugue is composing the subject!)

I think I could do a lovely fest/locker job on the first movement of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, but let me try a sample: exposition, bar 1 -

- the 1st violin has a completely new free solo section, as well as the new descant bits over the original theme, which is repeated as it stands.

I think the point Herschkowitz could have been getting at is that freedom and rigidity are not opposites here, they are not ‘balanced’ - the absolute firmness of the recapitulated material allows the improvised 1st fiddle part (it’s perfect, but it could have been anything. Beethoven probably jotted it off in 15 seconds and got it right first time) - at the same time as the improvisation affirms the rightness of the exact recapitulation.

Well, when H’s book is published I shall no doubt find out he was thinking of something else altogether! (PS: there’s an exactly parallel cadenza for solo oboe in the same place in B’s Fifth Symphony, but not as subtle as this one.)

1 Hill Square
Edinburgh

From Solomon Volkov

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