

What opportunities  
does the music of



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Within this Essay, I aim to discuss the opportunities that Shostakovich and his music offer for a discussion on tradition and dissent. Tradition and dissent are common words banded about but it is interesting in this context to define what they are.

Tradition refers to a custom or style formed by one person and then followed by other generations and dissent is an expression or holding of opinion against a commonly held view. Music is quite commonly talked about in relation to tradition, much of the music around today could be said to be based on tradition. Music such as hymns, Christmas carols, folks songs are all musical traditions passed on through time and place. Even more conventionally, pop music can be seen as affected by tradition but at the same time been reinvented to make it current.

Tradition has affected music in so many ways but it's always evolving and changing. Looking back at some of the famous composers, the music of Shostakovich seemed to be an area that was a high discussion point about tradition and dissent. Shostakovich began his music career in a time where the tradition of music was mainly Chamber Music – music which was written for small groups to play, rather than a full orchestra and particularly String Quartets. String Quartets were a type of chamber music and again traditionally written to be played in small and private settings and were subsequently not really scrutinised heavily. String Quartets were also very traditional in their makeup, they had 4 movements, and each movement had a different type – Allegro, Slow, A minuet trio or Scherzo and end with a flourish, faster than 1st movement.

Also, around at this time musically were larger scale music functions – Symphonies and Operas which were much larger more public events. Shostakovich's first major work was his Symphony No 1, followed a year later by Symphony No 2 which was commissioned to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Russian Revolution. These symphonies's were typically traditional and based on the music traditions that had already been set in this era and within the Soviet society. At a time in Soviet Russia, where Stalin had began to recognise the power and potential of music as a propaganda, Shostakovich began to experiment with traditional musical conventions by moving away from the expected traditions by working on some stage music, the first particular prominent writing of Shostakovich was the Opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsenk District. This was perhaps the first evidence that Shostakovich was using his music to dissent rather than following tradition. It created outcry as it was seen as not following the expected rousing music tradition.

From the very first moment of the opera, the listener is flabbergasted by the deliberately dissonant, muddled stream of sounds”( Quoted in Shostakovich, 1979 in Richards, Fiona – Tradition and Dissent in Music: Dmitri Shostakovich, P204) Due to the Stalin regime and the society that Shostakovich struggled in, he seemed to return to the more traditional structured symphonies with his Symphony No 5. Although this would seem to be quite simply being pressured to return to tradition, however some critics thought that Shostakovich was engaging in the time honoured Russian tradition of saying one thing and meaning another. Through the 1940s Shostakovich continued to compose a number of Symphonies reacting to

events of his time, eg: World War 2, the death of his wife. A number of his symphonies were again seen as dissenting from the regime and musical traditions of the time – 8th, 9th and 10th Symphonies particularly seemed to dissent from Stalin's ideals and musical tradition. Traditionally, one would expect an uplifting spectacular ending to the Symphony but in Symphony 9 and many of his other works they have a more sombre ending and not the grand ending expected by Stalin. Shostakovich then began to be seen developing the traditional music in his string quartets.

If we look at his String Quartet 2 we can see already that he uses some of the traditional Sonata form but also breaks away from it towards the end. A sonata consists of 3 sections, the Exposition- where the two main melodic ideas are presented, the Development- the melodies are developed with different keys and rhythms and the Recapitulation- where the original melodic ideas are restated with a build to the end. Shostakovich Quartet 2 doesn't follow this norm and he breaks away in the recapitulation where the melodies are mixed up in a different order. Within his String Quartet 3, again he can be seen breaking away from tradition by using the instruments differently within the composition. Traditionally within a string quartet, each instrument has their own clear individual part the 1st violin plays the main melody, the cello plays the bass line and the others fill out the song. However, in the 3rd movement of quartet 3, Shostakovich has the instruments played more equally.

He also dissents from the usual Scherzo which normally makes up the 3rd movement. This is typically a lighter, frothier movement and written in 3 time. However, in this quartet, Shostakovich has used 2 Scherzi for the 2nd

and 3rd movement and only the 2nd movement is in 3 time with the 3rd in 2 time and much more vibrant than traditionally expected in a Scherzo.

Another evident dissent from tradition and Stalin's regime was how Shostakovich created a musical protest against Stalin political ideas by linking some of his compositions with strong Jewish Elements. This can be seen particularly in his Piano Trio 3 where you can hear the common themes of Jewish music like Klezmar within this Piano Trio. This not only showed his support for Jewish culture and tradition but was seen as a musical representation of his opposition to Stalin's Anti-Semitic powers.

In Shostakovich's 13th Symphony he used A Jewish poem as the Libretto at a time when ant-Semitism was unofficial state policy. In conclusion, Shostakovich music has created and continues to create a lot of discussion about both tradition and dissent. His music shows many ways in which tradition was used to develop music. Shostakovich seemed very careful about when to follow tradition both in musical form and genre and when to dissent from it to express his views about his and his society's situation. Sometimes Shostakovich had to use tradition to placate Stalin's as dissent could endanger his life.

Debate continues as to whether Shostakovich was actually ever following tradition due to the pressures of Stalin's Regime and this is evident in a number of books published since his death. Claims in " The Testimony" say " All of his music was composed with a dissident agenda. What appears to be Soviet Kitsch is actually sarcasm. It allows both the censors and dissidents to find exactly what they want within" (Volkov, Solomon, Testimony) Others saw Shostakovich as a real traditionalist " Although Shostakovich saw

himself as a realist, his style was an extension of late 19th century romantic tradition; Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky and Mahler were his free most influence”  
Edwards, Robert. www. FindaGrave.

co. uk) Shostakovich not only used and developed tradition but also dissented where he felt necessary, he himself has become tradition.