

## Shoshtakovich and The Black Monk: *A Russian Fantasy* Review

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Music and drama have always served essential purposes throughout nearly all cultures in the world. They serve as mediums for new understandings, storytelling, entertainment, and a slew of other things. Most critically however, is their ability to transcend specific human experiences, and shed light on the humanity of others. It is my belief that one of the best virtues one can have is that of compassion and empathy, and it is for that reason that I was so intrigued by the melding of the Black Monk and the music of Shoshtakovich. This project aims to tell the tale of a man working desperately to share a story of the struggles between genius and insanity. It depicts his effort to produce art freely, independent of, and defiantly against an oppressive state. However at times, it was a bit of a strain to fully understand and appreciate the connections that the artists onstage were making, as at times it felt that the two tales (1. Of Shoshtakovich attempting to defy Stalin and the Soviet Union by producing the Black Monk, and (2. The story of the Black Monk itself, did not have enough room within the performance to share their perspectives of individuals attempting to find fulfillment through their means as humans and artists.

In explaining my opinion, I feel that this production was meant to be more of a focus on the music of Shoshtakovich. If you are a lover of his music, I would certainly recommend that you see this performance. However, I should preface that I am first and foremost a lover of, and a collaborator in theatre. The lens through which I saw this performance was certainly that of theatre and storytelling. It is doubtless that the Emerson string quartet is phenomenal at what they do, however, in this case, I saw their music as a backdrop to the event; it allowed for this story to be told, and provided a sort of wonderment and melancholy to the whole event. My greatest concern with this piece was the altering of Chekhov's short story, *The Black Monk*. It

was most likely cut down to make more room for the story that these artists aimed to tell about the life and work of Shostakovich. While they aimed to depict his relationship to the Soviet State (through actors playing Shostakovich and Stalin, who played the relationship very well), this unfortunately weakened the emotional heft of the performance, as the original story that inspired it all was stripped to the bone, leaving the relationships between the characters at the surface, as merely objects on the stage that were simply meant to justify the performance. Without flushing out the dimensions and relationships between the characters of the original story, it was ultimately robbed of its humanity, and was no longer the same tale that Chekhov had such a strong urge to bring to music. The story that this was supposed to make room for was entertaining at times, but was unfortunately muddled and disjointed due to so many things happening at once. The production veered between telling two stories, to the point where if someone viewed this piece without prior reading or viewing of *The Black Monk*, that its lessons and perspectives would unfortunately fall on deaf ears. While the music of Shostakovich surged with emotion, the story fell flat, as it lacked the cohesion and context to fully grab the audience by the heart.