

Music and drama mix in Great Lakes fest's boldest undertaking ever

David Lyman, Special to the Detroit Free Press

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The Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival is mounting an ambitious world premiere with "Shostakovich and The Black Monk." See a recent rehearsal.



(Photo: Xi Wangk)

It began, as so many projects do, with a passing conversation.

It was 2000, and Philip Setzer, a founding violinist of the renowned Emerson String Quartet, was speaking with Gerard McBurney, a British composer and music scholar. Knowing that Setzer had a deep interest in the music of Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich, McBurney said he understood that late in his life, Shostakovich had grown quite obsessed with a short story by Anton Chekhov.

“The story is called ‘The Black Monk,’” says Setzer. “I wasn’t familiar with it, but apparently, Shostakovich intended to turn the story into an opera. He wanted it to be his last major project, but his hands weren’t really working and” Setzer just stops.

Shostakovich died before he could do anything with the opera, and it’s clear that, for Setzer, the composer’s inability to realize that dream was something of a tragedy.

Setzer decided to explore the Chekhov tale himself. Written in 1893, the story tells of a scholar named Kovrin and his encounters with a black monk so mysterious that he verges on the mystical.

“It’s a haunting story,” says Setzer, who found himself nearly as captivated by it as Shostakovich had been. His fascination grew, though, when he began to see parallels between the Chekhov story and Shostakovich’s “String Quartet No. 14,” completed two years before the composer’s death in 1975.

He mentioned the connection to his longtime friend, stage director James Glossman, a voracious reader of 20th-Century history and a huge Chekhov fan. Like Setzer, Glossman was floored by the connections between the two works.

“When I went back and reread the story, the association between the two was obvious,” says Glossman. “I knew a lot about the struggles of Russian artists under the Soviet government, but I was stunned at how many of the same small details and the kind of government-inspired paranoia were in the Chekhov story. If you know anything about the lives of Soviet artists who lived between the 1920s and 1970s, you know that there was a sort of insanity that they were subjected to.”

'Unprecedented' effort

For years, Setzer and Glossman had talked about finding a project in which they could work together, a project in which they could weave together theater and music. This was it.

The work they have created, titled “Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy,” has its world premiere Saturday as the centerpiece of the 2017 Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival. It is being presented in association with Wayne State University.

By the standards of the Great Lakes fest, it’s a mammoth production. The Emerson String Quartet will perform, along with seven costumed actors who portray Shostakovich, Joseph Stalin and dozens of other characters. The cast includes Len Cariou (“Sweeney Todd,” CBS’s “Blue Bloods”) and Jay O. Sanders (“The Day After Tomorrow,” “Green Lantern”). In

addition, the production features projected images that help paint a vivid portrait of the worlds in which Chekhov and Shostakovich lived.

“This is the largest and most ambitious artistic undertaking in the festival’s history,” says executive director Maury Okun. “Obviously, we’ve presented projects of enormous significance in the past, but the scope and the breadth of this project is, for us, unprecedented.”



Dmitri Shostakovich was known throughout the music world by the time he was in his mid-20s, but soon found himself running afoul of the Soviet Union's communist hierarchy. (Photo: Deutsche Fotothek)

For Shostakovich, the fascination with “The Black Monk” wasn’t based on any particular connection with Chekhov, whom he never met. (Chekhov died in 1904, while Shostakovich was born in 1906.) Rather, it was the story itself.

After taking refuge in the country to restore his mental health, the tale's leading character, Kovrin, encounters a black monk who alternately haunts him and proclaims him a genius. Shostakovich had his own black monk-type character in the person of Stalin, the Soviet leader who at one time praised him and then attacked him.

Although Shostakovich had experienced monumental successes and was known throughout the music world by the time he was in his mid-20s, he soon found himself running afoul of the Soviet Union's communist hierarchy. Its members were traditionalists, and they disliked any works of art that dared to explore new directions or, in the case of music, new tonalities.

In 1936, when Shostakovich was 30, Moscow's Bolshoi Opera performed his "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District." It was a significant honor for a composer so young to have his work featured at such a prestigious musical institution.

But that opening-night performance was attended by Stalin and several members of his Politburo, the executive committee of the ruling Communist Party.

The composer wrote to a friend that he was dismayed by the disdain that Stalin openly showed for "Lady Macbeth," but that was just the beginning. Two days later, Pravda, the all-powerful party newspaper, published a front-page editorial about the production, carrying a headline that translated as "Muddle instead of music."

Soviet tightrope

For many artists, this sort of public vilification — widely rumored to be prompted by Stalin himself — would soon manifest itself as a lengthy prison term or an unexplained disappearance.

But Shostakovich found a way to walk an artistic tightrope, creating work that alluded to the horrors of official oppression, but never going so far that it would force the despot's hand.

He succeeded in staying out of jail, but the pressure on him was incessant. Buoyed by its share of victory in World War II, the Soviet Union began stepping up its attacks on artists in the late 1940s.



A scene from Dmitri Shostakovich's 1975 funeral in Moscow's Novodevichy Cemetery. Composer Aram Khachaturian is seen kissing the composer's hand. (Photo: Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival)

“There are many stories about how Shostakovich slept on his landing with a full suitcase,” says Glossman. “He was ready for people to take him away and be shot in the head.” He didn’t want his wife or children to witness him being dragged away to what he regarded as an almost certain death sentence.

Stalin died in 1953, but the Soviet Union continued to exert control over Shostakovich and other artists. He continued to compose, and, indeed, some of his masterpieces are from the post-Stalin years. But nearly all of the music reflected the unrelenting anxiety of the Atomic Age and of the life he had been subjected to for so long.

“It was an unimaginable way for people to live,” says Glossman. “You could be the toast of the town one moment, and the next, you’re put away in an institution. Or worse.”

There was something surreal about the lives Soviet artists had to lead in the period between the 1920s and 1970s. Suddenly, it’s not hard to imagine that the otherworldly qualities we assign to the writing of Kafka might just be a response to the severe repression that surrounded him.

“That Shostakovich was able to continue to produce the way he did was a triumph,” says Setzer. “I hope that after people see this production, they won’t just be able to see how unbearable these aspects of his life were, but the remarkable tenacity he had. And the determination. To be so tortured. And so brilliant.”

After the presentation at the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, “Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy” will be performed at the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts (July 19) and at Princeton University (Sept. 28).

'Shostakovich and the Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy'

8 p.m. Sat.

Detroit Film Theatre at the Detroit Institute of Arts

5200 Woodward, Detroit

248-559-2097

greatlakeschambermusic.org

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