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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Overture	9
<i>Vladimir Ashkenazy</i>	
Introduction	13
Acknowledgements	24
The Editors	26
The Contributors	27

Theme

Shostakovich's <i>Testimony</i>: Reply to an Unjust Criticism	33
<i>Allan B. Ho and Dmitry Feofanov</i>	
I. Opening Statement	33
II. Cross-Examination	46
A. 'Friends and Family': The Official Response	46
1. Death and Rehabilitation	46
2. The KGB Connection	48
3. 'Les Six Soviétiques'	60
4. Tishinka and Tishchenko	67
5. Yakubov and Sabinina	72
6. Irina and Galina	76
7. Maxim Shostakovich: Then	84
a. Motive and Opportunity	88
b. Prokofiev and Pogrebov	91
c. Mravinsky and Toscanini	106
8. Maxim Shostakovich: Now	110

B. Fools: Holy and Regular, or An Essay on the Dangers of Casting Stones in Glass Houses	115
1. Handed on a Soviet Platter	118
2. Inscriptions and Photographs	119
3. <i>Rothschild's Violin</i>	128
4. Biography or Memoirs?	133
5. Factual Discrepancies	143
6. The Seventh Symphony	150
7. The Eighth Quartet; Fifth, Tenth and Eleventh Symphonies; and Other Notes in a Bottle	159
a. The Eighth Quartet	160
b. The Fifth Symphony	164
c. The Tenth and Eleventh Symphonies	167
d. Other Works	170
8. 'Soviet Russia's Most Loyal Musical Son'?	171
a. A Primer for Musicologists	173
b. Internal Dissidence	176
9. Other Contradictions	177
10. Omissions	182
11. Plagiarism or Self-Quotation?	188
12. 'Chital [Read]. D. Shostakovich'	209
13. The Original Russian Text	216
14. Bravery in the Artist	219
15. Testimony of Guilt	233
16. Summary	236
III. The Case for the Defence:	
Corroborating Testimony	238
A. Selective Scholarship	242
B. The Ring of Truth	256
C. Rayok	271
IV. Closing Argument: A Rush to Judgment	287
Appendix	299

Variations on a Theme

Variation I	315
A Man Has Burned-Up Here	315
<i>Solomon Volkov interviewed</i> <i>by Galina Drubachevskaya</i>	
Tradition Returns: Rostropovich's Symbolism	359
<i>Mstislav Rostropovich interviewed</i> <i>by Solomon Volkov</i>	
Shostakovich Symposium	373
<i>Maxim Shostakovich, Solomon Volkov,</i> <i>Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Kenneth Kiesler,</i> <i>moderated and edited by Harlow Robinson</i>	
Six Lectures on the Shostakovich Symphonies	400
<i>Maxim Shostakovich, transcribed and edited</i> <i>by John-Michael Albert</i>	
Variation II	419
Shostakovich	419
<i>Daniil Zhitomirsky</i>	
Code, Quotation and Collage: Some Musical Allusions in the Works of Dmitry Shostakovich	472
<i>Lev Lebedinsky</i>	
An Inner Rebellion: Thoughts on the Current Debate about Shostakovich	483
<i>Leo Mazel'</i>	
Shostakovich's Idioms	495
<i>Vladimir Zak</i>	
Talking About Shostakovich: Three Documents	507
<i>Kirill Kondrashin</i>	
The Gulag and Shostakovich's Memorial	521
<i>Andrey Bitov</i>	
Variation III	
His Misty Youth: The Glivenko Letters and Life in the '20s	530
<i>Ian MacDonald</i>	

Universal Because Specific: Arguments for a Contextual Approach <i>Ian MacDonald</i>	555
Writing About Shostakovich: The Post-Communist Perspective <i>Ian MacDonald</i>	566
Variation IV	
The Legend of the Eighth Quartet <i>Ian MacDonald</i>	587
The Seventh Symphony: Truth and Legend <i>Semyon Bychkov interviewed by Henrietta Cowling</i>	589
Dmitry Shostakovich: The Composer as Jew <i>Timothy L. Jackson</i>	597
Coda	
Naïve Anti-Revisionism: The Academic Misrepresentation of Shostakovich <i>Ian MacDonald</i>	643
Bibliography	725
Index	757



Overture

Vladimir Ashkenazy

I shall never forget the time when my piano teacher told me how she first met Dmitry Shostakovich outside the apartment building in Moscow where both of them lived. He asked if her water supply had been cut off. She answered: 'No, but why do you ask?' He said that his supply had been cut off, but then added that he was sure he knew why. This was soon after the Zhdanov committee's pronouncement on 'formalism', 'modernism' and other sins attributed to a few Soviet composers, Shostakovich among them – and my teacher told me that he looked like a hunted animal, fearing the worst.

This episode was only one of the countless snippets of information that reached us students and teachers of the Conservatory and the musical community in general – information relating to Shostakovich's state of mind and his reaction to what was happening in the country. One must not forget that such things were not – and, indeed, could not ever be – discussed in public, and we knew without a shadow of a doubt that Shostakovich deeply detested the system in which he lived, we knew how much he suffered from it and how helpless he felt about being unable to do anything except express himself through his music.

I and my fellow students had the privilege of attending several first Moscow performances of Shostakovich works (first performances usually being in Leningrad) – and one would have to be deaf not to have heard what he wanted to say. We were literally afraid for him at the premiere of the Tenth Symphony: surely, we thought, even the Party hacks could hear the gloomy helplessness and desperation in it, save for the finale, which we did not understand at the time, thinking that the composer had to put in 'a happy ending' to please the apparatchiks (only later we understood that it wasn't 'a happy ending' at all but a reflection of the ubiquitous trivia that surrounded him, which he was unable to