

TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

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Shostakovich's career has followed a pattern not uncommon in this century, and perhaps common in history generally: that of the daring young man who is suddenly checked by doubts, and sobers up. Hindemith's development was a notable example, and the fact that Shostakovich's doubts, unlike Hindemith's, appear not to have arisen spontaneously but to have been forced on him by extra-musical criticism in the 1930s, is no longer of much significance (which is not to say that the general effect of such criticism has not been a very significant, and disastrous, influence on the generation of Soviet composers after Shostakovich, from which not a single figure of individuality has emerged).

Examining the Fourth and Fifth symphonies in an article in this issue, Tim Souster finds the work of 'repentance' more convincingly and profoundly original than the one whose 'excesses' it was meant to atone for. And now that we know *Katerina Ismailova* too, from the crucial period, it is possible to understand, if not to condone, the moral indignation and censure once aroused by the blatant heartlessness and sardonic 'objectivity' of the music, and to feel that a deeper emotional involvement was desirable—though it is also true that the Fourth Symphony almost bursts at the seams with feeling. But whatever evaluation is placed on the changes that Shostakovich's music has undergone, it has shown no greater variations in quality than the output of most other composers. Most listeners would readily acknowledge the deepening of feeling as a gain, but some would also consider it to some extent offset by a tendency to excessive length and overelaboration of material (as in the maddening insistence of the main motif of the Eighth Quartet) which seems to have come with it—a characteristic which, unlike the weakness for shallow, rowdy finales (these are heir to an older Russian tradition equally observable in Tchaikovsky) is perhaps partially attributable to the demand for music accessible to the masses. Such accessibility is not easily reconcilable with compression of thought, and this situation may have encouraged in Shostakovich what was already a natural inclination towards prolixity.

But at his best he has the power of holding the attention even when his argument is very long drawn out or over-insistent, as for instance in the Tenth Symphony (when well performed). And it might be ventured that since his harmonic invention is not remarkable and his textures are remarkable mainly for their elementariness, he does so largely by the sheer compelling power of his melody, which he can spin out in endless lines that rarely fail in interest or tension. The development of this gift too undoubtedly arose out of the response to Soviet pressure, and it is one of the gains that compensates for the inability to compress. A scrutiny of his melody would indeed be the most rewarding line of study for an assessment of Shostakovich's particular contribution to twentieth-century music, which is certainly comparable in individuality with those of, say, Messiaen, Copland and Britten, the other outstanding figures of his generation. Why none of the four has attained the stature of the greatest of their immediate predecessors is of course a question for another and larger study.