



The Noise of Time

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A compact masterpiece dedicated to the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich: Julian Barnes's first novel since his best-selling, Man Booker Prize-winning *The Sense of an Ending*.

In 1936, Shostakovich, just thirty, fears for his livelihood and his life. Stalin, hitherto a distant figure, has taken a sudden interest in his work and denounced his latest opera. Now, certain he will be exiled to Siberia (or, more likely, executed on the spot), Shostakovich reflects on his predicament, his personal history, his parents, various women and wives, his children—and all who are still alive themselves hang in the balance of his fate. And though a stroke of luck prevents him from becoming yet another casualty of the Great Terror, for decades to come he will be held fast under the thumb of despotism: made to represent Soviet values at a cultural conference in New York City, forced into joining the Party and compelled, constantly, to weigh appeasing those in power against the integrity of his music.

Barnes elegantly guides us through the trajectory of Shostakovich's career, at the same time illuminating the tumultuous evolution of the Soviet Union. The result is both a stunning portrait of a relentlessly fascinating man and a brilliant exploration of the meaning of art and its place in society.

The Noise of Time Details

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From Reader Review The Noise of Time for online ebook

Paula Kalin says

“He had also learned about the distruction of the human soul. Well, life is not a walk across the field as the saying goes. A soul could be destroyed in one of three ways: by what others did to you; by what others made you do to yourself; and by voluntarily what you chose to do to yourself.”

Julian Barnes is a master in his field. The Sense of an Ending and Levels of Life are brilliant literary novels. The Noise of Time, however, takes off on a different path. Written about the life of Russian composer, Dmitri Shostakovich, during the eras of Lenin and Stalin.

Barnes prose is excellent. No matter what subject matter he grabs a hold of you and doesn't let go. His words sing in my ears. When I finished the book I sat there in awe. Was the subject matter to my liking? No. But did it matter? No. I just love reading anything he writes.

As a takeaway I do plan on listening to Shostakovich's music. I need to understand why Barnes chose to write about this composer.

4 out of my usual 5 stars for Barnes

Violet wells says

A bit unfair but there were times when I couldn't help wishing Milan Kundera in his prime had written this and not Julian Barnes. Just for that extra bit of zest and wit and daring of which Kundera is renowned and the rather dry and self-conscious Barnes isn't.

Not that this isn't a good novel. It's very elegantly structured, intelligent and it makes you think a lot about its pervasive themes - courage and conscience and compromise. And it shows not only the enforced humiliations and blanketing terror of Stalin's Russia but the mind-boggling preposterousness of many of its premises, especially the artistic ones. At times, in its depiction of Stalin's Russia, it was as uncomfortable as watching an intelligent misunderstood man being shouted and spat at by a baying mob. What can a man in such a position do? Shostakovich, in Barnes' portrayal, kind of grins and bears it. He doesn't have the courage to commit suicide so he compromises, falls back on irony as his defence council. When a man reads out a speech praising a vile regime penned by him for that regime in a deadpan voice we realise it's a pretty lame form of protest no matter how much irony he might manage to inject into his voice. In fact, it's the kind of act that would destroy the self-respect of most people. Probably it destroyed the self-respect of Shostakovich.

I enjoyed the first half of this novel a lot more than the second half. The narrative drive slackened for me as Barnes gradually shifted the focus from an intimate lens to a wide angle one. It ends with a meditation on the artist's final stocktaking of his achievements when you feel you're eavesdropping on Barnes' doubts about his own body of work rather than getting any insight into what Shostakovich felt about his achievements and failings. To be honest I doubt if many artists feel smug about their achievements on their death bed as most creative inspiration is born in large part from the dissatisfaction felt for previous attempts. No dissatisfaction, no new work. It's highly probable Shakespeare died feeling he could have done better. The more interesting

question the novel poses is what ethical compromises an artist has to make in order to produce his work – it's been said, rather harshly, that Ted Hughes and TS Eliot killed their wives to further their artistic careers; Shostakovich had to slowly kill himself. Sometimes, perhaps, it's better to die young.

•Karen• says

I don't believe Julian Barnes has ever written a better book, and he has written some very fine ones.

Stunning.

There's no way I can review this without it turning into a quotation fest, great swathes of Mr Barnes rather than anything I can trot out. So we'll go for a quintessential selection.

So, he had lived long enough to be dismayed by himself. This was often the way with artists: either they succumbed to vanity, thinking themselves greater than they were, or else to disappointment. Nowadays, he was often inclined to think of himself as a dull, mediocre composer. The self-doubt of the young is nothing compared to the self-doubt of the old. And this, perhaps, was their final triumph over him. Instead of killing him, they had allowed him to live, and by allowing him to live, they had killed him. This was the final, unanswerable irony to his life: that by allowing him to live, they had killed him.

Magnificent.

Margitte says

On the Landing

It had all begun, very precisely, he told his mind, on the morning of the 28th of January 1936, at Arkhangelsk railway station. No, his mind responded, nothing begins just like that, on a certain date at a certain place. It all began in many places, and at many times, some even before you were born, in foreign countries, and in the minds of others.

And afterwards, whatever might happen next, it would all continue in the same way, in other places, and in the mind of others.

In my humble opinion, this is the most important paragraph/message/introduction in the book. After reading my tedious, probably boring, long-winded breakdown of elements which underscores this novel, you might want to refer back to this paragraph above and understand what the author meant by it, and how profoundly true it rings for all of us as well.

The life and music of Dimitri Soshtakovich was much more than just a combination of

1) a person who was socially insecure, highly intelligent, with a lack of confidence, who navigated his art through personal, political and philosophical challenges

and

2) a collection of musical scores by a composer.

To understand the approach by the author in *The Noise of Time* it is perhaps necessary to first dwell upon the ideas of postmodernism, and while you're at it, you can listen to the music of the composer.

First then: **OPINIONS ON SOSTAKOVICH'S MUSIC**

It is certainly one of the composers whose work inspired controversy all over the world.

(view spoiler)

Secondly: **OPINIONS/ CRITICISM ON POSTMODERNISM - a short summary**

(view spoiler)

At the 1998 summer seminar of the Institute for Objectivist Studies, Dr. Stephen Hicks offered a systematic analysis and dissection of the Postmodernist movement and outlined the core objectivists tenets to rejuvenate the spirit of the Enlightenment.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhK6X...>

"Postmodern themes are anti western: Columbus was bad; America is a deeply racist an sexist nation, western ideology is narrow, exclusive, intolerant, imperialistic, imposing its capitalism, technology and sciences on other non-western cultures, and increasingly upon a fragile ecosystem in an insane drive to capture nature. Non-western systems lives in harmony with nature and are therefore superior.

Underlying all these themes within postmodernism is a more abstract set of themes:

subjectivism, relativism, egalitarianism in both epistemological and ethical formulations. There is no truth - all cultures are equal. No one group's values have a special standing. The West's emphasis on individualism, capitalism and science is not something special.

On the other hand there are also the deep themes of cynicism sometimes in the same paragraph. Everything is political in the sense of nasty power politics. Ad hominem tactics are totally legitimate. Crude political corrections is perfectly justifiable.

These themes explain what is going on in the related professions in humanities, for instance, literary criticism: the notion that literary text could be interpreted objectively is rejected and replaced by the view that one's group membership most deeply shapes one's views and feelings. Therefore, authors, no matter what their professed intentions are in novels, are expressing their class, race or sex interests. Therefore, the task of the critic is recast. The text need to be deconstructed to reveal those deeper underlying interests. Those authors who the least embody the politically correct attitudes will be subjected to the deepest amount of deconstruction.

"As the replacement of the modernist movement(the philosophy of the Era of Enlightenment), postmodernism become the antidote to the modernist's principles of objective reality, reason and individualism. It has substituted its own precepts of relative feeling, social construction, and groupism.

This substitution has spread to major cultural institutions such as education, journalism and the law, where it manifests itself as race and gender politics, advocacy journalism, political correctness, multiculturalism, and the rejection of science and technology."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhK6X...>

**** Another anti-postmodernism criticism.

"Postmodernism is a kind of bastard off- shoot of Modernism. It is an illegitimate child that is constantly trying to kill its parents.

In one sense it still partakes in the same problem, namely the elevation of the individual under a subgroup to the point where it is impossible to listen to God." ~ D.A.Carson, professor of New Testament studies at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL.

In Postmodernism, religion is laughed out of philosophy, and so is truth borne out of reason. In the halls of postmodernism, truth does not exist anymore, which throws a blanket of doubt and skepticism over all truths, presented as facts, in all sciences. (hide spoiler)]

Through Julian Barne's postmodernism lens, Shostakovich exemplifies the clash between art and power and what it did to Russia's greatest, as well as one of the world's major composers of the 20th century.

"It's easy to be a Communist, when you don't live in a Communist country."

Testament, an alleged autobiography of Shostakovich, published in October 31, 1979, by the Russian musicologist Solomon Volkov (editor), was widely critized. Volkov was accused of offering his own perception and ideas to the world by putting words in Shostakovich's mouth.

The Noise Of Time by Julian Barnes is a fictional biography, which allowed the author to interpret the events, driven by ideologies in the composer's life; a quiet painting of the philosophical landscape in which Shostakovich survived and wrote his music. A dignified effort to capture the composer's thoughts and mind.

"Being a hero is easier than being a coward"

The composer had three different drawers for his work:

The top drawer contained the music which guaranteed the safety of himself and his family - the Soviet optimism, the music for the people as prescribed and demanded by Stalin. (Soviet optimism);

the second drawer reveals the in-between daring compositions, which exposed another side of Dimitry's inner soul, but not enough to endanger his message to the world;

the third drawer (Russian pessimism) contained his most private renditions reflecting his true inner self. If discovered during his lifetime, it could have gotten himself and everyone he ever came in contact with, killed, including his friends, colleagues, wife and children. His anger, despair, loneliness, true self, were there to observe. It could have been the reason(if they knew about it) of the Pravda eitorial in 1936 in which he was accused of being a formalist (which was dangerous) and too western inspired.

So he read how his music 'quacks and grunts and growls'; how its 'nervous, convulsive and spasmodic' nature derived from jazz; how it replaced singing with 'shrieking'. The opera had clearly been scribbled down in order to please the 'effete', who had lost all 'wholesome taste' for music, preferring 'a confused stream of sound. Course, primitive vulgar.

But even the stone deaf couldn't fail to hear what 'Muddle Instead of Music' was saying, and guess its likely consequences. There were three phrases which aimed not just at his theoretical misguidedness but at his very person. 'The composer apparently never considered the problem of what the Soviet audience looks for and expects in music.' That was enough to take away his membership of the Union of Composers. 'The danger of this trend to Soviet music is clear.' That was enough to take away his ability to compose and perform. And finally: 'It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly.' That was enough to take away his life.

The moral complexity with which Shostakovich struggled in his life is divided into three periods in the book. The composer was seriously superstitious of leap years.

Three leap years influenced the way he approached life and his music, which gives this book its three-part structure.

1936: "Muddle Instead of Music" - the headline of a Pravda article, published on the evening of 28 January. Shostakovich's second opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was condemned after Stalin and his henchman attended a performance and walked out. It was already running for two years and highly popular. Two days after the event, Dimitry was on a concert tour in the north of Russia and was standing on the platform of a railway station, when he saw the article with the closing sentence '*It is a game of clever ingenuity*'. Shostakovich knew he was in grave danger.

1948 On the personal instructions of Stalin, Dimitri was prepared as a member of a delegation that must represent Russia at the Cultural and Scientific Congress for World Peace in New York City(1949), where he had to endure an artistic humiliation in front of an American audience. He was forced to read a prepared speech in which he had to denounce Stravinsky, whom he privately regarded as the greatest composer of the

20th century. It was the worst day of Shostakovich's life.

It was also the year in which Shostakovich, along with many other composers, was again denounced for formalism in the Zhdanov decree. This was part of an ongoing anti-formalism campaign intended to root out all Western compositional influence as well as any perceived "non-Russian" output. Shostakovich was dismissed from the conservatoire as well. Destroying formalism according to Power, was necessary to build the most politically advanced society, a fusing of Utopia, the Garden of Eden and the Promised Land.

1960. After a lifetime of enormous political pressure, he finally joined the Communist Party, the one thing he said he would never do. He did not want to be part of a political movement that kills.

But Stalin was dead (1953) and a new era dawned for artistic expression. This event was marked by Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony.

Since it is a novel, the novelist uses artistic freedom to reconstruct the thoughts and historical background of the composer. There is little movement in the story line, an absence of drama and action, and little evidence of the composer's family. There is no dialogue. He loved cigarettes.

But this is not a tale for the masses. It is rather a quiet and dignified tribute to a remarkable man. The inner persona of Dimitry Shostakovich is explored within a philosophical framework.

The author pinpoints the character down at the doors of an elevator, waiting for the arresters. The protagonist did not want his family to witness his arrest. In flashbacks, a tragic life story unfolds.

He remembered an open-air concert at a park in Kharkov. His First Symphony had set all the neighborhood dogs barking. The crowd laughed, the orchestra played louder, the dogs yapped all the more, the audience laughed all the more. Now, his music had set bigger dogs barking. History was repeating itself: the first time as farce, the second time as tragedy. He did not want to make himself into a dramatic character. But sometimes, as his mind skittered in the small hours, he thought: so this is what history has come to. All that striving and idealism and hope and progress and science and art and conscience, and it all ends like this, with a man standing by a lift, at his feet a small case containing cigarettes, underwear and tooth powder; standing there and waiting to be taken away.

Read within the philosophical framework of history, this book is two hundred pages of insight, compassion and acknowledgement of a genius. The author proves that Shostakovich's life story or his music for that matter, was not written by him alone. Hence the importance of the paragraph in the beginning of the review that I have invited you to reread.

I listened to the composer's music while reading the book. Dimitro Shostakovich did not talk in words. He could not trust anyone. He burnt all letters. He made sure nobody could be connected to him should he be arrested. His life story plays itself out in his music instead. What he wrote down as music notes, was interpreted in words by the rest of the world through the gateways of different philosophies. For this reason the story can never be the same for everyone, because there is no universal truth anymore.

The Noise Of Time by Julian Barnes allows the reader to explore the emotional journey of Dimitry Shostakovich.

There is an irony in Shostakovich story as told by Barnes. The composer lived out, what intellectuals formulated in the dark rooms of intellect and forced upon societies. The freedom, and excitement created, by

postmodernism, was already proven by the murderous, tyranny of Stalin when the concept was known as Communism, and Stalin's reign of terror the example of the extreme application thereof. Yet, the excitement of a new intellectual Broadway for mankind, filtered through to the lecture halls of modern society, even faster after the so-called crash of Communism. It is also sold as the absolute antithesis to the horrors of the past. Under new definitions and new terms, an old -ism, inspired by the very same philosophers of Communism, received a new life in postmodernism. Now *that* is the biggest irony of all!

However, somewhere among all the philosophies defining society since earliest times, a great composer tried to protect the people he loved, tried to survive, and try to live long enough for him to write music from the heart. The author provided the historical background noise to the music of Dimitri Shostakovich.

The Noise Of Time, as the title of this book, was the perfect choice. How utterly noisy this global village has become.

PS. A a final treat to yourself, listen to Shostakovich's Second Waltz - by André Rieu
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vauo4...>

Agnieszka says

Unfortunately not as good as I had counted for. I hasten to add there's nothing really to blame the novel for yet somehow it didn't entirely work for me. The writing is very good, it's Julian Barnes after all, the idea is more than interesting, the protagonist, to say the least, very complex and ambiguous, the setting and times oppressive and ruining personality, yet something was missing.

It's a quick reading and I read it, well, four months ago, and to tell the truth, apart from some powerful and haunting scenes, barely remember it today. Maybe it says more about my memory than the novel but I dare say that's not the point. I very much liked the first part, *The noise of time* is divided into three sections, and the image of the man expecting to be arrested and waiting every night on the corridor near the lift with only small suitcase with himself was very disturbing even if entirely of daily occurrence in Soviet Russia. People would disappear without a trace at every hour then, sometimes to not return any more. But our protagonist is not some ordinary Russian citizen but acknowledged composer Dimitri Shostakovich who had that misfortune to draw Stalin's attention to himself. I thought this part was very convincing and I could imagine his dismay, I could almost taste his fear and the sense of claustrophobia and danger was truly overwhelming the reader.

Two other parts unfortunately didn't feel so successful to me. They were decent with some memorable passages but much more scathing and thoroughful thing on the subject, and that's artistic freedom in totalitarian regime and artist right to express oneself through art, had written Czesław Miłosz in his *The Captive Mind*. Perhaps Julian Barnes hadn't intend to his novel be any treatise on moral choices or morality play on the role of an artist in oppressive time but Miłosz perfectly captured the mechanisms and how authority with all available measures would seduce artists, how bended them, how forced them to more and more artistic and life compromises.

The noise of Time is not a biography of the composer, it's only loosely based on some pivotal events from his life but it rather have failed to explain fully case of Shostakovich and choices he finally undertook. Nor it

delivered wider, deepened picture of the system crushing and corrupting individuals. It definitely felt more powerful on personal level but when Barnes expanded his view and changed the perspective, when he focused on more universal things it did feel less convincing and to me the novel lost some of its initial impact. Dryness of the writing and discernible detachment of the author didn't help either.

Paromjit says

Julian Barnes gives us three riveting episodes in the life and times of Dmitri Shostakovitch. He explores the relationship between the composer and the State. It begins in the 1930s amidst the infamous purges with Shostakovitch waiting and expecting to be taken by agents of the state. His work has been denounced and you can practically smell the fear and paranoia. He is afraid for his family and friends, and his child. He finds himself in a position where he would rather be alive and safe rather than sticking to his principles. In the second episode he finds himself shamed and humiliated as he is forced to go to the US in the 1940s. There is dark humour as all the obstacles placed by Shostakovitch are pushed aside by Stalin and that the composer is coerced into delivering a speech prepared by the state. The third episode in the 1960s under Khrushchev, has Shostakovitch joining the party. Until then, he had managed to avoid this particular ignominy. He had acted as an instrument of the State in composing particular music, signing letters denouncing prominent dissidents etc.. Now, he is finally a part of the State.

Barnes has delivered a powerful, if partial, picture of a composer compromised by the State into doing its work. However, his sympathies for the composer are unmistakable. There are compelling reasons as to why this is so. Whilst many have condemned Shostakovitch, they have not walked in his shoes. Stalinist Russia was not a place where you can challenge the state and live. It is a murky and dangerous place to survive as an artist who criticises the state. Surely it is better that Shostakovitch was compromised and continued to compose? We know what happened to dissidents. Maintaining artistic integrity in this milieu would have been folly. Additionally, I am certain anyone who finds themselves having to compromise their personal integrity in such circumstances pays an exceedingly heavy price in so many ways.

The way the narrative itself is presented in a musical form underlines the skills of an expert writer. I absolutely loved this atmospheric book and Julian Barnes has drawn attention to the circumstances under which many artists have operated. As ever, a masterful writer. Many thanks to Jonathan Cape, the publishers for a copy of the book via netgalley.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

The Noise of Opinion

Two other novels came to mind as I read this 184 page work:

* William T Vollmann's *"Europe Central"*; and

* John Banville's *"The Untouchable"*.

I recall a comment by a member of the Vollmann fanclub pronouncing his book necessarily superior to

Barnes', because it was written by Vollmann and it was under-read by critics, while admitting that he hadn't read any Barnes at all, let alone this one.

"Europe Central" is a five star achievement, but in retrospect it displays some of the indulgences that would plague Vollmann's later work. A lot of the description of Shostakovich's life sounds like it was worked up from extensive notes from biographies, journals and letters. This serves primarily as background material for the prurient investigation of the women in Shostakovich's life, who at least according to Vollmann's account were far more interesting than the composer himself. At least, Vollmann seems to have spent a lot of time with Lizzy Kate Gray (no relation) listening to the music, which then gave him licence to review it in the body of the novel.

Just the Facts

Apart from the sex, Vollmann seemed to be more interested in the Sturm und Drang of the war. In contrast, Barnes squarely focuses on three pivotal politically compromising moments in Shostakovich's career. Barnes makes it clear that, even within these constraints, he gives us *"just the facts"*. He has done equivalent research, but doesn't purport to embellish it. I kept waiting for some lyricism to emerge, but, alas, it didn't. The events themselves must suffice to create the drama.

We see little of the composer's internal world. This might result from the choice to write the novel in the third person. As a result, it lacks much psychological insight into the character of Shostakovich, beyond the David and Goliath struggle between an individual artist and the state.

The Music of the Narrative

Contrast this with John Banville who brilliantly describes the inner life of a character based on the Fourth Man, Anthony Blunt, in his superlative novel.

I'm not a fan of orchestral, symphonic or operatic music. My taste runs to rock, blues, jazz and classical music for smaller ensembles (e.g., quartets). Hence, I've got no knowledge of Shostakovich's music that allows me to guess at his temperament.

Perhaps this is why I didn't detect or hear the music in this novel. To me, it sounded monotonal and almost undramatic, certainly not as Kafkaesque as I had expected.

Triad

Nevertheless, underlying the structure of the novel is a triad that was hinted at in the toast in the epigraph:

*"One to hear
One to remember
And one to drink."*

This was *"a sound that rang clear of the noise of time, and would outlive everyone and everything."*

The triad of moments consists of three *"historic meetings"* or *"Conversations with Power"* held in the years 1936, 1948 and 1960. Twelve years apart and each a leap year, an unlucky year for the superstitious.

Conversations with Power

On 26 January, 1936, Stalin attended a performance of *"Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk"*, about which he wrote an uncredited editorial in *"Pravda"* denouncing it as *"a muddle instead of music"*. Overnight, Shostakovich had become *"an enemy of the people"*. He fears being dragged out of his bed one night, taken away and shot in the back of the head. Each night, he packs a bag full of necessities and waits outside the lift on his floor. His fear is hardly conducive to creativity!

12 years later, he is denounced yet again. However, on 16 March, 1949, he received a personal phone call from Stalin, in which Stalin invited him to represent the Soviet Union at a Cultural and Scientific Congress for World Peace in New York. Stalin also undertook to overturn the blacklisting of his music.

By 1960, Stalin has died and been denounced by Khrushchev. Times have changed, apparently. Tyranny has been *"repudiated"*. Nobody is being shot anymore. But the apparatus of power and persuasion hasn't been disassembled yet.

This time, Shostakovich is asked to become the Chairman of the Russian Federation Union of Composers.

On the one hand, it's supposed to demonstrate that the Cult of Personality around Stalin is over. On the other hand, the state is just as reliant on propaganda as it ever was.

To be eligible, Shostakovich has to be a member of the Communist Party, which he has previously avoided. Finally, under less pressure than ever before, he gives in:

"1936; 1948; 1960. They had come for him every twelve years. And each of them, of course, a leap year."

"This was the final, unanswerable irony to his life: that by allowing him to live, they had killed him."

Against the Noise of Time

Music, on the other hand, didn't belong to the state or the people or the Party. It belonged only to music. It would survive his death, to be appreciated as music independently of the whisper of his own history. Regardless of what happened to Shostakovich, his music would transcend and be heard against *"the noise of time"*.

Darwin8u says

"A soul could be destroyed in one of three ways: by what others did to you; by what others made you do to yourself; and by what you voluntarily did to yourself. Any single method was sufficient; though if all three were present, the outcome was irresistible."

? Julian Barnes, *The Noise of Time*

The last Julian Barnes I read was *The Sense of an Ending* which seemed to float perfectly as a short novel. The prose was as delicate, smooth and perfect as rosette frosting. I'm not sure Nabokov would want to follow that novel, but eventually Barnes was bound to write his next novel, comparisons be damned.

'The Noise of Time' is a short 200 page novel about the life and times of Dmitri Shostakovich, one of the

great composers of the 20th century. This is not exactly new ground. 11 years ago William T. Vollmann also used the life of Shostakovich to explore the nature of evil, power, etc. Vollmann used Shostakovich as one of several voices to tell his stories. In some ways, *Europe Central* explores WWII as a symphony and the life of Shostakovich happens to just be one of the major instruments. In *'The Noise of Time'* Barnes explores art and music using Shostakovich as a single instrument.

Barnes uses the relationship between Shostakovich and Stalin (later the Soviet state) to delve into how power and fear can externally affect the artist. But he goes further and looks at how man can affect his own art in relationship to the outside world. He looks at how irony is used as a defense against external forces that would control and destroy.

One of my favorite lines from this novel is:

“Art belongs to everybody and nobody. Art belongs to all time and no time. Art belongs to those who create it and those who savour it. Art no more belongs to the People and the Party than it once belonged to the aristocracy and the patron. Art is the whisper of history, heard above the noise of time. Art does not exist for art’s sake: it exists for people’s sake.”

Anyway, this month I've been a bit obsessed with Shostakovich. After reading two fictionalized accounts his life, I've also been sucked down the Russian rabbit hole of his Symphonies (primarily the 5th, 7th, and 10th). These three symphonies play a significant role in both books, so I'm glad to have been reminded several times this year that I should listen to more post-romantics than just Gustav Mahler. Thank you Julian Barnes and William T. Vollmann to push me into the small, shaking hands of Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich.

Adina says

3.5 *

“What could be put up against the noise of time? Only the music which is inside ourselves –the music of our being –which is transformed by some into real music. Which, over the decades, if it is strong and true and pure enough to drown out the noise of time, is transformed into the whisper of history. This is what he held to”

The Noise of Time, Julian Barnes' latest novel transports us in Russia and into the mind of the composer Dmitri Shostakovich around three conversations with the Soviet Power that influenced his destiny. The format of the novel is of a stream of consciousness in 3rd person, where the composer remembers events and people from his past and what they meant for his mind, soul and his career.

I felt distanced in the first part although it should had held the most tension, I got into the “rhythm” for the second one but the third part was torture.

I decided to read this novel although I did not have previous knowledge of Shostakovich and I do not really enjoy classical music. However, I was mesmerized by *The Sense of An Ending* and I am interested in reading more books about Russia. Would it have made a difference if I had already been familiar with the composer’s life and work? Probably, I am not sure. I did some research before starting the novel which helped me to better understand the events the author was alluding to but also took away the feeling of tension from the first chapter as I knew the outcome.

The book is full of beautiful quotes that taken alone have a great impact on the reader. However, the narrator voice felt lifeless, dry, especially in the third part. In my opinion, the author did not succeed to make the music come alive, actually there wasn't much written about music save some composition names and their fate during the oppressive regime. I was expecting the music to flow out of the pages, to transport me in the composer's soul, to feel his love for music, his fear that the Power will take it from him. Nevertheless, The author succeeded to transmit the composers internal struggle with fear of dying, his cowardice to confront the Soviet Power and his guilt for acting the way he did to preserve his life and career.

I do not normally discuss the cover in my reviews but this time I am going to make an exception. For me it is one of the most beautiful creations that I've hold in my hands. I loved the uneven texture, the contrast between the vintage cheap brown paper feel and the salmon pink of the title and the inside jacket. I surprised myself petting the book many times and I felt an exhilarating pleasure just to hold it. I know that you, voracious readers, can understand the lure of a beautiful cover. Here you can read an interview with Julian Barnes and his long-term designer Suzanne Dean on this cover and the other she created for the author.

I appreciated the quality of the writing, the message the author tried to convey but I did not enjoy reading about a third of the novel.

As I said, this novel is extremely quotable so I leave you with some thoughts that I selected.

"Art belongs to everybody and nobody. Art belongs to all time and no time. Art belongs to those who create it and those who savour it. Art no more belongs to the People and the Party than it once belonged to the aristocracy and the patron. Art is the whisper of history, heard above the noise of time. Art does not exist for art's sake: it exists for people's sake."

"Sarcasm was dangerous to its user, identifiable as the language of the wrecker and the saboteur. But irony – perhaps, sometimes, so he hoped – might enable you to preserve what you valued, even as the noise of time became loud enough to knock out window-panes." "If you turned your back on irony, it curdled into sarcasm. And what good was it then? Sarcasm was irony which had lost its soul."

"Being a hero was much easier than being a coward. To be a hero, you only had to be brave for a moment - when you took out the gun, threw the bomb, pressed the detonator, did away with the tyrant, and away with yourself as well. But to be a coward was to embark on a career that lasted a lifetime. You couldn't ever relax. You had to anticipate the next occasion when you would have to make excuses for yourself, dither, cringe, reacquaint yourself with the taste of rubber boots and the state of your own fallen, abject character. Being a coward required pertinacity, persistence, a refusal to change - which made it, in a way, a kind of courage."

Hugh says

A magnificent reimagining of three pivotal moments in the life of Dmitri Shostakovich, focusing on three occasions when the direction of his life was determined by conversations with the Soviet authorities, or as Barnes describes it, *Power*.

The first part covers the events of 1936, when the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was condemned after Stalin saw it and disapproved, resulting in the famous Pravda editorial "Muddle instead of Music". In this case the conversation is a first interview with the local secret police chief in the Leningrad Big House, after

which he is relieved because his accuser has himself been purged.

The second part moves on to 1948 and a trip to America as part of a Soviet delegation purporting to be peace envoys - this time the conversation is with Stalin himself.

The final part covers his declining years, and the conversation is the 1960 one which led to him joining the party and becoming head of the Composers' Union.

Barnes has obviously been influenced by Solomon Volkov's book *Testimony*, which claimed to be Shostakovich's own memoirs; while acknowledging in the postscript that its veracity has been questioned and explaining that the truth of anything that happened in Soviet Russia is rather slippery: *"All this is frustrating to any biographer, but most welcome to any novelist"*.

Barnes is very sparing in describing the music, possibly wisely focusing more on the compromises required for survival in Stalin's Russia, the very different pressures and compromises in the time of Khrushchev (*"Nikita the Corncob"*) and the nature of bravery and cowardice. The book is very wise on the dubious benefits of age and experience to a creative artist, and this must be at least partly about Barnes himself.

Whether or not you are interested in Shostakovich's music (I am very fond of his string quartets) this is a fascinating book and probably the best of Barnes's later novels.

I'll finish with a few quotes, as much of this book seems very quotable:

"The system of retribution had been greatly improved, and was so much more inclusive than it used to be"

"Who engineers the engineers?"

"Art is the whisper of history heard above the noise of time"

"It is our destiny to become in old age what in youth we would have most despised"

"Integrity is like virginity: once lost, never recoverable"

"Sarcasm was irony which had lost its soul"

"Well, few lives ended fortissimo and in the major"

I will be moderating a discussion on this book in the **21st Century Literature** group starting on Wednesday 1st March. You can access the discussion here:

<https://www.goodreads.com/topic/group...>

????? ????? says

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Susan says

This latest work by Julian Barnes looks at the life of the composer Shostakovich. Rather than give us a straightforward, fictional biography, the author takes three key points in his life. He begins in 1936, when the composer finds himself denounced in Stalinist Russia. As critics trip over themselves to find fault with his work, Shostakovich waits – dressed and with his small suitcase packed – for those in Power to take him to the Big House...

Shostakovich was living in a dangerous time and the author perfectly creates that period of intense fear, speculation and danger. When a visitor from the Party commentates that he likes the composer's study, but that it lacks a portrait of Stalin, you can almost feel the composer break out in a cold sweat. Throughout this novel, the composer constantly castigates himself for cowardice. However, when he does feel that he will disappear in the 1930's, his concern is not just for himself but his wife and baby daughter, as well as his friends and family. Will his beloved child, Galya, be trundled off to a State orphanage if her father is discredited? So begins an uneasy truce with Power.

We meet up with Shostakovich again; after a visit to the United States in 1948, where he is ordered to represent his country at the Cultural and Scientific Congress for World Peace and again, in 1960, when he is offered the Chairmanship of the Russian Federation Union of Composers. During this time, he feels humiliation and shame, as he endeavours to continue his work and keep his family safe in this period of political danger.

I expect that many will read this novel and find it fairly slow and quiet; perhaps too slow. However, this is certainly a novel which has stayed with me and I found it profoundly disquieting and extremely atmospheric. It has made me wish to discover more about the central character and I feel that Barnes painted a very realistic portrait of Stalinist Russia. Lastly, I received a copy of this book from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.

Dem says

Having read and loved *Symphony for the City of the Dead: Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad* I was up to date on the life and work of Dmitri Shostakovich but still had an interest in reading Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time* as a friend recommended it to me purely for its beautiful prose and sentences.

This book is presented as a short fictional account of the life of the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. This for me was a book where nothing much happens and yet everything happens inside the head of Shostakovich and while the writing and prose are beautiful I can't help wondering if I would have rated this 3 stars if I had picked this up having read nothing previously about Dmitri Shostakovich or would I have found this wanting in the absence of *Symphony for the City of the Dead: Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad* which I did rate 5 stars.

The story begins in 1936, the year of the great purge, with Shostakovich, suitcase in hand on the landing of his apartment awaiting the arrival of the secret police. His Opera lady Macbeth of Mtsensk and opened to poor reviews and is out of favour with the press and the most important reviewer of all " Stalin" and so Shostakovich waits and contemplates of his past and future and what at exactly has brought his to this moment.

I get that Barnes book didn't set out to write the history of Shostakovich and yet he does manage to convey a sense of the terror and uncertainty of Russia in the reign of Stalin. This book is an interesting read for lovers of Barnes's style novels and his eloquent prose but for lovers of history and facts I think may serve your needs better.

Elyse says

Having recently read "Do Not Say We Have Nothing", by Madeleine Thien where music came alive for me during heartbreaking times.....I naturally grabbed "The Noise of Time" to read next, (which I've been wanting to read for some time anyway),.....thinking I'd like to experience more music and art appreciation during turbulent times....and learn about a composer I knew next to nothing.

plus

I enjoyed Julian Barnes "The Sense of Ending".

Demitri Shostakovich- the great Russian Composer of the 20th century:

I've taken away that he was brilliant- complex --conflicted morally.... and was compromising his artistic principles in order to maintain a comfortable life.

Is a man a coward when he needs to compromise for the purpose safety? With intentions to protect his family?

The oppressive rule of Stalin that we see in Barnes book -is same the oppression we see in Thien's book. Shostakovich threatened to commit suicide several times---where as Sparrow (a fiction character - great musician in Thien's book), 'did' commit suicide.

This quiet-understated small novel is wonderful with lovely prose on every page. It really had me thinking about the personal conflicts under Soviet rule.

I thought about the personal conflicts under our government today. Perhaps not music -- but other rights that are at risk right now.

But.... back to music - and art.... here is a quote (rather long - but powerful) --that I sat thinking about for a long time:

"Why, he wondered, had power now turned its attention to music, and to him? Power had always been more interested in the word than the note: writers, not composers, had been proclaimed the engineers of human souls. Writers were condemned on page one of 'PRAVDA', composers on page three. Two pages apart. And yet it was not nothing: it could make the difference between death and life".

"The engineers of human souls: a chilly, mechanistic phrase. And yet... what was the artist's business with, if not a human soul? Unless an artist wanted to be merely decorative, or merely a lapdog of rich and powerful.

He himself had always been anti-

aristocratic, in feeling, politics, artistic principal. And that optimistic time -- really so very few years ago -- when the future of the whole country, if not if humanity itself, was being remade, it had seemed as if all the

arts might finally come together in one glorious joint project. Music and literature and theater and film and architecture and ballet and photography would form a dynamic partnership, not just reflecting society or criticizing it, but 'making' it. Artist's, of their own free will, and without any political direction, would help their fellow human souls develop and flourish."

"Why not? It was the artist's oldest dream. Or, as he now thought, the artist's oldest fantasy".

Graceful fluid prose.... an examination of a man.... regardless of his handicap, he was a great composer!!!

Brina says

I am inherently drawn to Russian literature or even books set in Russia written by non Russian authors. Perhaps, it is because the majority of my ancestors come from Russia, but, regardless of the reason, I devour most Russo-centric books that I read. As I have read through my goodreads friends year end reviews, I came across *The Noise of Time* by Julian Barnes, a novella based on the life of famed composer Dmitri Shostakovich. Having read *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* by Madeleine Thien earlier this year, which featured Shostakovich's music, I had my interest piqued to read this modern novel. And as has been the case with the other books I have read set in Russia or the Soviet Union this year, I was not disappointed.

Julian Barnes is a respected post-modern novelist from London. His books have been nominated for the Man Booker award three times, and *The Noise of Time* should follow in suit. Barnes sets out to piece together Shostakovich's life in three parts or eras: pre Stalin, the Stalin purge era, and the post Stalin Khrushchev era. Each part of the book takes place in vignettes of Shostakovich's memory set in twelve year periods. The composer points out from the book's beginning that during each leap year- 1936, 1948, 1960...- he was destined for bad luck. This could be in the form of close relatives dying, critics denouncing his music as subversive, or the government targeting the composer as an enemy of the state. Shostakovich despite being revered lived his life in constant fear until Stalin's death as he believed that the government wanted to dispose of him, as it had of many artists who had spoken out against the state. As a result despite composing nine symphonies, Shostakovich did not have an easy life.

Today, Shostakovich is regarded in both the west and the Soviet Union yet during Stalin's reign of terror, the composer was targeted as both subversive. He would have been the regime's biggest catch if he joined the party and head of the union of composers, but Shostakovich viewed this as a fate worse than death. Yet, Stalin himself appreciated the composer's symphonies and for the most part left him alone even if his henchmen did not. Shostakovich was never deported or forced to do labor in a gulag as did many famed Russian composers and authors. He was considered untouchable, yet Barnes can not pinpoint exactly why Stalin and his cronies left him alone. Perhaps, because his music was regarded in China, the Soviets' ally, or because after Stravinsky defected to the west, that Shostakovich was the top Soviet composer left and the state would be devoid of its top musician should the communists deport or denounce him.

From reading Barnes' work, it is clear that he is a gifted writer. It is also clear that he has studied Russian literature in depth as he has cited Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn, and Pushkin in this slim volume. That Barnes is from the west and has studied previous biographies written on Shostakovich it is clear that he has a deep appreciation for the musician's work and his history within the communist historical context. In each of the three parts of this book, a recurring theme is the survival of the noise of time-- who will outlive the government of the day, who will submit to politicians' wishes, who will be their own person, who will continue to create masterpieces despite the threat of censure of socialists and communists alike. Today Putin has lauded Shostakovich's work as being central to the history of Russian music, whereas during the

composer's life, he lived in fear of Stalin, Khrushchev, and all the government officials of his day. It is clear that Shostakovich has survived the noise of time.

I found this slim autobiographical novel to be full of excellent, post modern prose as well as realistic information about Shostakovich's life. It has been well researched, and Barnes' words flow on the pages like Shostakovich's symphonies. For me, it is always a treat to read Russo-centric novels, and I Barnes' short gem is probably the last one I read this year, so it was a wonderful find for me here on goodreads. I am inclined to listen to Shostakovich's third symphony that was spoke of many times in the other musical book I read this year, as finishing this novella, I desire more of the composer's work. I will definitely be reading more of Barnes' work a well in the future as his books I can tell are a treat for literary aficionados.

5 stars

Maciek says

Move over, Martin Amis! It's time for another episode of *English author does Russia* - after a fictional love affair in the Gulag as described in *House of Meetings*, this time it is Julian Barnes who steps in and employs a real historical figure as his protagonist: one of the most famous contemporary Russian composers, Dmitri Shostakovich.

The Noise of Time is divided into three parts, each focusing on defining moments from Shostakovich's life during Stalin's reign and after his death. The first of these happens in 1936, following an adapted historical event - his new opera, *"Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk"*, was not well received by the supremo who left the performance early. Stalin condemned the opera and denounced Shostakovich as an enemy of the people, banning his work for almost thirty years. A vicious article in *Pravda* - said to be authored by Stalin himself - denounced the opera as "muddle instead of music". The novel opens with a haunting image of Shostakovich standing outside his apartment deep in the night, in street clothes and with a small suitcase, facing an empty elevator. He is waiting to be taken away by the NKVD, hoping that the secret police will come just for him and not his family. But they never do - instead of being confined to the claustrophobia of a small prison cell, the composer has to endure something much worse: the suffocating claustrophobia of an entire society of constant fear, where anyone can disappear at a whim of the Power that be.

How can an artist follow his personal vision in a totalitarian society? This is a question at the center of *The Noise of Time*, which has Shostakovich think, think and think about it, and then think some more. Although the novel uses real events from Shostakovich's life, it is not historical fiction, as there is not much of a plot and not much real fiction to be spoken of either: rather, it's a historical essay on the nature of artistry and freedom of thought in the Soviet Union, with Shostakovich as a prime example of a great talent personally targeted and molded by the system. Where the book succeeds is as giving the reader an intimate insight into how a creative mind can work in this condition - can we stay true to ourselves in an environment which aims to change the mind itself? At the same time, this very approach to narration is the book's biggest drawback - since at all times we are aware that it is not Shostakovich who is speaking or thinking, but Julian Barnes who is putting what he thought his thoughts would be into his head.

The book is short, lean and well written; it contains plenty of observations which are true of Soviet life both during and after Stalin, paying close attention to stay faithful to real historical events and characters. But it is also the largest problem that I had with it - because the author focused on a real historical figure as his narrator, I could not stop seeing him behind that figure at all times; instead of Shostakovich's own thoughts

and sentences I saw his research and careful writing. This is my own problem which I sometimes have with novels featuring historical figures; I just have read enough of history to not be particularly surprised by any of the insights presented within.

For anyone who thinks that the subject of the book sounds even remotely interesting, I would also dearly recommend Czesław Miłosz's *The Captive Mind* - which is his famous non-fiction work devoted to explaining how artists exist and work in totalitarian societies and why, based on his own experience and that of fellow writers in post-war Poland. While Barnes's book has the benefit of being well researched and accurate, Miłosz has the great advantage of being *true*.

Marita says

“Art belongs to everybody and nobody. Art belongs to all time and no time. Art belongs to those who create it and those who savour it. Art no more belongs to the People and the Party than it once belonged to the aristocracy and the patron. Art is the whisper of history, heard above the noise of time. Art does not exist for art’s sake: it exists for people’s sake.”

In a novel which is sharp, witty, ironic, funny, sad, menacing and perceptive, Julian Barnes fleshes out the life of Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) from 1936 when Shostakovich was denounced as an Enemy of the People after a performance of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.

Thus far the opera had been a success, but this particular performance was attended by Stalin, and to be noticed by Stalin was dangerous. His opera was labelled a "MUDDLE INSTEAD OF MUSIC". **“The composer had written not an opera but an anti-opera, with music deliberately turned inside out.” “He noted how critics who had consistently praised Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk over the past two years suddenly found no merit at all in it.”**

And so, during Stalin's Great Terror, begins a time in which Shostakovich, like so many others, has to dodge the bullets. He has to protect his family, he has to acquiesce to doing things that cause him shame and regret, such as having to read out a letter (written on his behalf!) which condemns fellow composer Igor Stravinsky. This is particularly mortifying to Shostakovich as he is a great admirer of Stravinsky. He is eventually also "invited" to join the Party, but this is an invitation no man can refuse even if it happens to be the last thing on earth that one might want to do.

Shostakovich soon learns to appear to be doing what is required, to say what he is expected to say. His music, however, speaks for itself. Music cannot lie, and those with ears can hear. He keeps a postcard with Titian's 'The Tribute Money' by his bedside: **“One man, sly and swarthy, with a dangling ruby earring, grips a coin between thumb and forefinger. He shows it to a second, paler man, who does not touch it, but instead looks the first man straight in the eye.”** This is a constant reminder of his situation. He learns to live by irony: **“All his life he had relied on irony. He imagined that the trait had been born in the usual place: in the gap between how we imagine, or suppose, or hope life will turn out, and the way it actually does. So irony becomes a defence of the self and the soul; it lets you breathe on a day-to-day basis.”** At the end of his life he realises that: **“This was the final, unanswerable irony to his life: that by allowing him to live, they had killed him.”**

Mr Barnes, you have yet another fan!

Kalliope says

Here I am listening to Shostakovich First Piano Concerto and wondering about Julian Barnes latest novel (?) biography (?). Throughout my reading I was asking myself why had he written this book. I know his interest in classical music. In his *The Lemon Table*, *Vigilance* in my favorite short story. It takes place during a concert in which Shostakovich's music is played. Barnes has also dealt with 'real people' in *Arthur & George* in a highly successful fictional recreation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but this was entering a literary area which so far I had not associated with him.

Moreover, Shostakovich, in particular, has been in the recent literary limelight. I have heard that Vollman's *Europe Central*, which I have not read, deals with a very fictional approach with the composer. There is also Salomon Volkov's *Testimony: The Memoirs*, which I own but have not yet read. This last work occasioned a bitter controversy in *The New York Review of Books*. I sort of perused through the confrontation between Orlando Figes and the Volkov when it took place (gosh, now two decades ago), but cannot review it now since I am no longer subscribed (GR takes up all my bookish explorations). But as Orlando Figes does not have a reputation of unbreakable honesty, I simply could not take sides. This confrontation got onto such a high register that a book has been published about it, *The Shostakovich Wars* (view spoiler). Additionally to all this printed material, there is also the excellent documentary on the composer *The War Symphonies*.

So, Julian Barnes, why this? Because my perplexity augmented when I read the Epigraph where Barnes addresses this very issue with the many alternative accounts of Shostakovich. So, again, why? For this is not a full biography. Barnes selects just four episodes. The first, the way Stalin reacted to the Opera **Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District**, was the most familiar to me. The account in the documentary above is very striking because it includes a shot of Stalin sitting in the shadow of his Opera box. I was then more interested in reading about his visit to the US and the way he was confronted by Nabokov Vladimir. But the most engaging part of Barnes' account was once Stalin has disappeared and the "Cult of Personality" eradicated. Under Khrushchev things were more ambiguous even if Shostakovich was nonetheless "ambushed" into joining formally the Communist Party. In this last section I think the reader gets a clearer idea of what was Barnes exploration and the reasoning behind the title: the nature of art, and its relationship to time. The following quote, in an earlier part of the book, receives a brighter light towards the end.

Art belongs to everybody and nobody. Art belongs to all time and no time. Art belongs to those who create it and those who savour it.... Art is the whisper of history, heard above the noise of time. Art does not exist for art's sake; it exists for people's sake.

So, it is in the last section that Barnes motives and thinking come to the fore. For the 'fictional' tone of the account has until then not acquired the very fine weaving of the human psyche that, for example, a writer of the calibre of John Banville achieved in his *Doctor Copernicus*. Barnes' is not really an exploration of Shostakovich's very enigmatic personality at its very core. Nor is it about a study of his music. Barnes barely

discusses the pieces and stays away from the jargon of the musicologist. Even Vikram Seth in his *An Equal Music* could fool musicians into making they think that he was also one of them.

Instead, this looks like Barnes exploring the aims and conditions and repercussion of his own creativity. In the last section, the reader can ponder more closely on the relationship of art to its times, and especially to Time in the singular.

For us now, even if we examine how Shostakovich stood and withstood the difficult times in which he lived, we can forget about any interfering noise and listen to his very moving and powerful music. As innocently as **chimes** played by the wind on a quiet afternoon.

And continue reading Julian Barnes too.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

The noise of time, Julian Barnes

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Michael says

A quiet book of the tough moral choices of a famous composer who has to survive in the controlling atmosphere of the Soviet system over the decades. This channeling of the life of Shostakovich takes a minimalist route of presenting little of his family life, childhood, and emotional life. I was a little disappointed not to get any real window on his creative process or even much detail on his musical interests and development. But through Barnes' focus on his state of mind at a few seminal turning points in his life, I felt something powerful about the humanity of a creative soul seeping out between the cracks in the walls that would constrain him. Certain brilliant touches in Barnes' literary forms rendered a similar feeling about this author's talent, which also blooms amid the arid atmosphere of the stage-like settings of his narrative.

In 1929 Stalin had a negative reaction to a Shostakovich' opera at the Bolshoi, a version of *Lady Macbeth* set in Russia. Critics follow the dictator's lead, resulting in a newspaper headline the composer reads which turns his world upside down: "Muddle Instead of Music." Despite its popularity around the world, in his

country his opera “was to be put down like a yapping dog which had suddenly displeased its master”. The work is tagged as having “tickled the perverted taste of the bourgeois with its fidgety, neurotic music.”

It took a long time to climb out of that hole toward renewed success, gained at the cost of certain compromises. Under the precept from Lenin that “art belongs to the people”, the apparatchiks with power try to enforce the notion that “all music must be instantly comprehensible and pleasing to the masses.” Yet at the same time, Soviet leaders from Stalin on down expect a new Beethoven to emerge from their glorious system.

In his youth the Revolution had indeed inspired Shostakovich with the vision that all the arts “would form a dynamic partnership, not just reflecting society or criticizing or satirising it, but making it.” Soon he recognized this as fantasy. He could understand how it came to be that writers were tapped by the powers that be as “the engineers of human souls”. Yet for him music was apolitical: *Those that have ears will hear.*

Despite the former allure of Lenin’s words, he holds this aesthetic in his heart:

Art belongs to everybody and nobody. Art belongs to all time and no time. Art no more belongs to the People and the Party than it once belonged to the aristocracy and the patron. Art is the whisper of history heard above the noise of time.

To gain the freedom to continue creating music, he eventually succumbs to the pressure to join the Communist Party and accrue glory to the Soviet Union in trips to Europe. At one point, he is forced to denounce the exiled Stravinsky in a scripted speech, a man whose work he long admired.

He only cares about his music and his wife and family. As he goes through the motions to allow these things he loves to continue, he finds his mind dwelling in irony as a foil to the dangers and the absurdities of the society around him:

To be Russian was to be pessimistic; to be Soviet was to be optimistic.

Barnes conveys well the anguish and near madness of Shostakovich at the beginning of the story. The scene is of a man waiting to be interrogated, one who waits night after night with a suitcase in the hall to spare his family. All the while his mind flits from memory to memory like musical counterpoint, some dark, some light. Like his emotional careening between hope and despair when he first met his future wife:

It was if he was always on the wrong metronome setting.

Late in his career, when the terrors of the successive totalitarian regimes begin to lighten, some people consider him courageous in his ability to survive. He knows better:

Perhaps courage was like beauty. A beautiful woman grows old: she sees only what has gone; others see only what remains. Some congratulate him on his endurance, his refusal to submit. The solid core beneath the hysterical surface. He saw only what was gone.

I have no way of predicting if any of my Goodreads friends might enjoy this book given its limited plot elements and conventional drama with emotional hooks. Maybe my satisfaction with it has to do with my identification with this version of the composer based on my own slippery slide with integrity out of accommodation to outside forces during my more mundane life. Also, I appreciated how the subtle surprises in the prose and restrained mode of presentation of disturbing situations left me with the kind of emotional impact you get from a great piece of music that builds on its themes.
