Who Wrote Shostakovich’s Memoirs?

In 1979 a book called Testimony, purporting to contain the memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, was published in the United States. The materials in the book were compiled by Solomon Volkov—an editor of Sovetskaya muzyka, the leading Soviet musical journal, who had emigrated to America in 1976—from notes he claimed to have made from conversations with Shostakovich toward the end of the composer’s life.

Before the book appeared, Shostakovich had invariably presented himself—both at home and on his many trips abroad—as a loyal citizen of Soviet Russia, fully in compliance with its official ideology concerning the arts, and always striving to make his music conform to those ideals. Testimony presented an entirely opposite picture. Here Shostakovich presents himself as an embittered dissident with no sympathy for Soviet ideology, a composer who communicated his disdain for the Soviet regime through subtle and ironic hints in his music. His complicity with the Soviets, he says, was only a pretense, “a survival tactic that permits you to maintain a minimal decency.” For example, the bombastic conclusion of the Fifth Symphony—Shostakovich had always explained it as “joyful, optimistic”—was actually something forced, “created under threat,” and understood as such by everyone in Russia except for the obtuse authorities.

As expected, Testimony was immediately dismissed by the Soviets as a hoax. Even Shostakovich’s son, the émigré conductor Maxim Shostakovich, said that the book was unauthentic. Their doubts were reinforced by the American musicologist Laurel Fay, who discovered that several passages of the book were taken literally from articles by Shostakovich published during his lifetime, not based on notes from conversations with the composer.

The battle over Testimony still rages. It seems likely that the cynicism and frustration that the composer expresses in Testimony are at least partly accurate. But the extent to which details are his own genuine thoughts, or those of Volkov, still remains to be determined.