Dissonant Truths
Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony as a Witness to Trauma and Memory

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Abstract

This paper examines Dmitri Shostakovich's *Thirteenth Symphony* as a profound act of musical witnessing during the Khrushchev Thaw. Drawing on Yevgeny Yevtushenko's controversial poem, Shostakovich's symphony confronts Soviet antisemitism and the state's selective historical memory, particularly regarding the Holocaust. Through irony, dissonance, and innovative choral techniques, the composition both honors marginalized victims and critiques ideological censorship. This study contextualizes the symphony within trauma studies, exploring how music functions as a vehicle for resistance and remembrance. By analyzing its structural components, thematic content, and reception, the paper argues that Babi Yar embodies the tension between artistic expression and political repression, exemplifying the enduring power of music to bear witness to historical trauma. Ultimately, Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony serves as both an elegy and an act of defiance, illuminating the complex interplay between culture, politics, and memory in the Soviet Union.

Keywords:

Dmitri Shostakovich, Babi Yar, Soviet Union, Trauma Studies, Artistic Resistanc

Referring to the period from the mid-1950s until the 1960s, the Khrushchev Thaw identifies a time of relative intellectual liberalization and political change in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin. It was characterized by a tentative loosening of censorship, and a newfound intellectual vibrancy—the conditions conducive to artists and scholars actively engaging with questions of trauma and historical memory previously suppressed for the most part under Stalin. One of the most crucial figures of the period was Dmitri Shostakovich, whose works demonstrated a relationship between free self-expression and state control. Written after Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem of the same name, his *Thirteenth Symphony "Babi Yar"* was a powerful exploration into the nature of collective memory and the omissions of certain histories.

This study posits that the *Thirteenth Symphony* represents a musical endeavor of witnessing, addressing the horrors of the Holocaust and the antisemitism prevalent in the Soviet Union, while also contending with the ideological limitations imposed by the Khrushchev administration. Shostakovich employs irony, dissonance, and inventive choral techniques, endowing the composition with a dual purpose: it functions simultaneously as a tribute to individuals excluded from Soviet historical accounts and as a critique of the government's selective recollection. Through an analysis of the historical backdrop of the Thaw, the structural components of the symphony and its reception, this research

positions the *Thirteenth Symphony* within the expansive domain of trauma studies, contending that it serves as a testament to the enduring power of art as a conduit for truth and collective memory.

The death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 ushered in a period in Soviet history known as the Khrushchev Thaw. This was a period of cautious but quite important change, both in the cultural and political spheres, under Nikita Khrushchev's leadership, while the state tried to come to terms with the legacy of Stalinist repression and responded to the demands of modernization and ideological renewal. At the heart of this change was Khrushchev's exposure of Stalin's atrocities at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, known popularly as the "Secret Speech."[1] Although the speech was about Stalin's crimes, it failed to critique the basic tenets of the regime and characterized the atrocities of Stalinism as deviations from Leninist ideals. This account laid groundwork for a bifurcated reality: the partial acknowledgment of historical trauma continued to coexist with the reproduction of Soviet authoritarianism.[2]

During the Thaw, the Soviet government undertook limited measures of rehabilitation for victims of Stalinist purges and gulags.[3] While this was far from a thorough process, it marked a dramatic shift away from the complete denial and erasure of past atrocities under Stalin. Political prisoners were released, and

[1] Khrushchev, "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences."
[2] Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953-70*, 144-46.
[3] Taubman, *Khrushchev : The Man and His Era,* 275-77.

a few of the intellectuals silenced under Stalin began to find cautious opportunities for expression. Still, the state would insistently set the strict limits within which historical trauma could be engaged with—according to socialist realist ideology—without being allowed to undermine the regime's authority. It functioned to some extent as a mechanism of justice, but at the same time reaffirmed control inasmuch as it underlined the authority of the state in determining the parameters of historical memory.[4]

This controlled liberalization permeated into the cultural sphere, whereby artists, writers, and composers worked out a complex give-and-take between the newly won freedoms and the remaining restrictions. While the Khrushchev regime encouraged works celebrating Soviet successes and adhering to the official state narrative, the loosening of censorship enabled exploration in more nuanced ways of themes previously considered off-limits.[5] Because it could express abstract meanings and referentiality, music became one of the most powerful historical trauma processing vehicles. Certain composers, like Dmitri Shostakovich, exposed directly to the Stalinist repressions and censorship, knew best how to navigate these unpredictable currents. Shostakovich's position in this conflicted environment was emblematic of broader struggles surrounding the Thaw. During Stalin's regime, Shostakovich was the target of intense criticism, starting in 1936

[4] Taubman, *Khrushchev : The Man and His Era,* 287-88.
[5] Taubman, *Khrushchev : The Man and His Era,* 307-08.

with the official condemnation of his opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, for its supposed ideological and artistic failings. One widely held story has this diatribe authored by Stalin personally. This initiated a long era of terror in which Shostakovich purportedly lived in perpetual fear of arrest, with a packed suitcase always sitting beside his door in preparation for when state authorities might come to fetch him.[6] Having suffered Stalinist repression, he was the very image of the human costs of state persecution, famously through his public censure in 1948 under the Zhdanov Decree, which attacked "formalist" tendencies in Soviet music,[7] a term Soviet critics used to denounce compositions that prioritized complex structures and abstract musical ideas over accessibility and ideological clarity.[8]

Even in the Thaw, Shostakovich never lost sight of the delicacy surrounding his professional and private autonomy. In 1960, he was compelled to join the Communist Party, which greatly distressed him. His son has subsequently stated that this event reduced him to tears, and Shostakovich himself reportedly informed his wife that he had been blackmailed into it.[9] The works he composed in this period show both his engagement with the horrors of history and his observation of the regime's selective memory. For example, the *Tenth Symphony*,

[6] Reilly, "Persecution and the Art of Music.(Music for Silenced Voices: Shostakovich and His Fifteen Quartets)," 60-61.
[7] Blokker & Dearling, *The Music of Dmitri Shostakovich, the Symphonies*, 33-34; Wilson, *Shostakovich : A Life Remembered*, 206-07.
[8] *Sovetskaia muzyka (Soviet Music), No. 1 (1948)*, 3-8.
[9] Ho & Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 398.

written immediately following Stalin's death, was interpreted as a summing up of his legacy, as a requiem for his victims. While ostensibly toeing the socialist realism line, its emotional depth and ambiguous tonalities suggest something far more subversive.

Public reception of Shostakovich's works in the Thaw was deeply affected by the broader cultural context. Both audiences and critics, many of whom had shared experiences of persecution and sorrow, were attuned to the deeper messages found in his works. These cultural texts were often sites of contested memory during the Thaw, where official memory came into open conflict with personal and social remembrance of the recent past.[10]

This phenomenon is perhaps most prominent in Shostakovich's *Thirteenth Symphony*, which premiered in 1962 and directly confronted problems of historical trauma through its use of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar."[11] The poem was an act of bold remembrance, which paid tribute to the massacre of over 33,000 Jews by the Nazi troops carried out in 1941 at the Babi Yar ravine near Kyiv.[12] The poem was a brave tribute, remembering the massacre of over 33,000 Jews by Nazi troops in 1941 at the Babi Yar ravine near Kyiv. Despite its scale, the Soviet government deliberately erased the Jewish nature of the massacre, instead portraying the victims as anonymous Soviet citizens. This

[10] Jones, "Memories of Terror or Terrorizing Memories? Terror, Trauma and Survival in Soviet Culture of the Thaw", 348.
[11] MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*, 228-29.
[12] Yevtushenko, "Babi Yar."

erasure was part of a larger ideological campaign wherein the Soviet state aimed to erase national and religious differences in the interest of one Soviet identity. Acknowledging the Holocaust as a distinct event ran counter to this agenda, as it would have conflicted with the narrative of a unified Soviet people, devoid of ethnic or religious divisions.[13] To reinforce this policy, Soviet rhetoric consistently refused to identify the victims of Babi Yar as Jews but instead called them "peaceful Soviet citizens," a term that included the Jewish tragedy in the overall paradigm of the Soviet war experience.[14] This shift was also evident in the presentation of the events by the Soviet media; initially, after the liberation of Kyiv in November 1943, Soviet media did report on the massacre of Jews at Babi Yar. However, with time, official propaganda more and more diverted the atrocity to be a representation of overall Nazi brutality and not an incident of genocide against Jews specifically.[15] The prolonged refusal of the Soviet Union to construct a monument at Babi Yar can be understood as one aspect of a more extensive state-sponsored historical revisionism.[16] It rested on a wider ideological attempt to integrate Jewish tragedy into the generic narrative of Soviet victimhood and thereby reassert the government's adherence to an unified Soviet identity that downplayed ethnic distinctions. The authorities

[13] Burakovskiy, "Holocaust remembrance in Ukraine: memorialization of the Jewish tragedy at Babi Yar," 371.
[14] Judt, *Postwar : A History of Europe since 1945*, 182.
[15] Yekelchyk, Serhy. "The Civic Duty to Hate: Stalinist Citizenship as Political Practice and Civic Emotion (Kiev, 1943-53)," 539.
[16] Weinberg, "The Politics of Remembering: The Treatment of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," 316.

systematically removed allusions to Jewish identity in commemorations of the massacre and instead portrayed the victims as abstract Soviet citizens.[17] This erasure prevented any kind of official memorial for decades, in line with the Soviet Union's general policy of suppressing historical narratives that failed to conform to its ideological framework. Furthermore, Holocaust research has concluded Babi Yar to be a significant case of the trends of Soviet historical revisionism, which actively minimized Jewish persecution in an attempt to uphold state-sanctioned narratives of the war. When a monument was eventually constructed, its inscription made no reference to Jewish victims, thereby perpetuating the course of this revisionist approach.[18]

Consequently, Yevtushenko's poem acted as a direct challenge to this state-sponsored erasure, re-introducing into public discussion the very identity that the Soviet government had attempted to erase. The poem broke this silence, indicting both Nazi atrocities and the complicity of the Soviet state in perpetuating historical erasure.[19] However, the poem's publication provoked immediate backlash: Nikita Khrushchev personally criticized Yevtushenko, for what he saw as "ignorance of the historical facts".[20] It was a period of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, during which Khrushchev aimed to reinterpret Soviet history in such a manner that would denounce Stalin's crimes

[17] Sacilotto, "The Soviet Memorialization of Babi Yar 1941-1976", 24.
[18] Gitelman, *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*, 18-19.
[19] Brandon & Lower, *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, 292.
[20] Korey, "Babi Yar Remembered," 34.

while at the same time retain rigorous ideological domination over collective memory. But regarding *Babi Yar*—a site strongly loaded with historical antisemitism—this guarded liberalization was abruptly reversed.[21] The denunciation of *Babi Yar* culminated in December 1962, when 400 writers and artists convened to denounce both Yevtushenko and Shostakovich, with sharp disapproval. Khrushchev publicly denounced Yevtushenko, calling his poem unjustified and distorting Soviet history.[22] While defending the poem, Yevtushenko maintained that antisemitism was a significant issue that warranted attention; but Khrushchev forcefully interjected, stating that there was no such problem in the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, Yevtushenko stood his ground, contending that the question of antisemitism could not so conveniently be dismissed or wished away.[23]

The publication of *Babi Yar* had significant political repercussions; specifically, the chief editor of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, the newspaper which initially disseminated the poem, was dismissed from his post following its publication.[24] Simultaneously, right-wing critics orchestrated a campaign against Yevtushenko that culminated in Khrushchev's public denunciation of the poem during high-level government meetings in 1962 and 1963. The Soviet leader denounced the poem's allegations as historically null and void, contending that the Soviet

[21] Yevtushenko, *Yevgeny Yevtushenko: TThe Collected Poems, 1952-1990*, xxi.
[22] Shvarts, *Evrei v sovetskom soyuze: s nachala vtoroi mirovoi voini 1939-1965*, 368.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Korey, "In History's 'Memory Hole:' the Soviet Treatment of the Holocaust," 154.

Union had never had any involvement in carrying out antisemitic discrimination.[25] The demand for changes was not rhetorical; Yevtushenko was compelled by political pressure to change the poem, introducing lines that reshaped the narrative to highlight Soviet heroism at the expense of Jewish suffering. In doing this, the poem toned down the initial criticism of Soviet antisemitism and brought it more into line with the state-favored myth of collective Soviet victimhood, and its specifically Jewish character of the Holocaust.[26]

The Soviet media traditionally downplayed the quite Jewish character of the Holocaust as part of a general Nazi campaign against "peaceful Soviet citizens". All efforts to promote the blatantly antisemitic motive behind the massacre at *Babi Yar* were repeatedly toned down or excluded from public awareness.[27] In spite of these imposed revisions, *Babi Yar* stimulated a broad debate regarding historical memory and state censorship. Over time, the poem also represented the struggle between forgetting and remembering, both the need to recall past horrors and the state's ongoing amnesia regarding politically inconvenient histories. The outrage over Yevtushenko's poem exposed a deeper tension within Soviet society: the simultaneous urge to expose and bury painful historical truths. By challenging the historical erasure in a bold way, *Babi Yar* eventually forced

[25] Korey, "In History's 'Memory Hole:' the Soviet Treatment of the Holocaust," 154.
[26] Clowes, "Constructing the Memory of the Holocaust: The Ambiguous Treatment of Babii Yar in Soviet Literature," 153-155.
[27] Ibid.

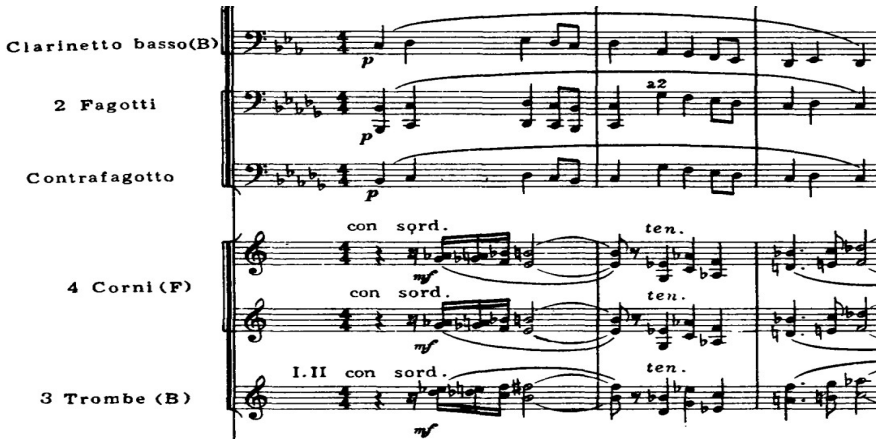
consideration of the Soviet state's selective memory and continued suppression of embarrassing historical facts.

The setting of this poem to music was an act which was intrinsically political in that it pitted Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony squarely against the regime's control over memory.[28] From a musical perspective, the *Thirteenth Symphony* exemplifies Shostakovich's skill in maneuvering through the limitations imposed by Soviet ideology, all the while producing compositions imbued with significant emotional and intellectual richness. The symphonic work consists of five movements, each derived from a poem by Yevtushenko, exploring motifs of historical suffering, injustice, and shared memory. Through a skillful integration of textual elements and musical composition, Shostakovich conducts a sophisticated critique of antisemitism, social oppression, and the erosion of moral values prevalent in Soviet society. His symphony transcends the specific political context in which it was written to explore universal themes of resistance and memory, thus reaffirming the eternal power of music as a medium of resistance and memorialization. This composition not only proves Shostakovich's ability to compose under ideological pressures but also his extraordinary ability in constructing a richly textured musical narrative. An examination of the compositional techniques, thematic components, and political connotations of this symphony shows that the *Thirteenth Symphony* is a

[28] Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 235.

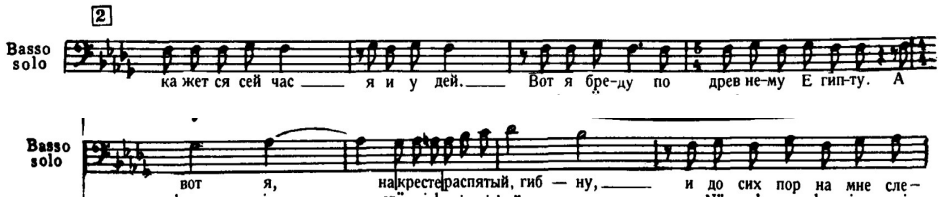
courageous act of artistic resistance and historical responsibility.

The first movement, *Babi Yar*, sets up the main themes of the symphony by addressing the atrocities of the Holocaust and the continuing problem of anti-Semitism. Shostakovich begins the movement with an ominous, wavering string figure, which immediately brings feelings of mourning and terror. The figure becomes the building block of the movement, and it places the audience within the uneasy memory of the Babi Yar massacre. Using low-register strings, resonant bells, and somber brass instruments, Shostakovich evokes a vivid portrayal of desolation and grief.[29] (see M*usic Example I*) The entrance of the bass soloist further amplifies this ambience with a declamatory delivery as he gives voice to the pungent verses of Yevgeny Yevtushenko castigating historical apathy. (see *Music Example II*) The gravity of the male choir, singing in unison, reinforces the common import of the text by transforming personal sorrow into collective lamentation.



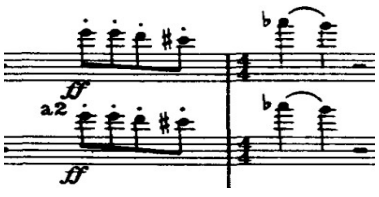
[29] Shostakovich, *Symphony No.13 "Babi Yar", Op.113*.

Music Example I [30]



Music Example II [30]

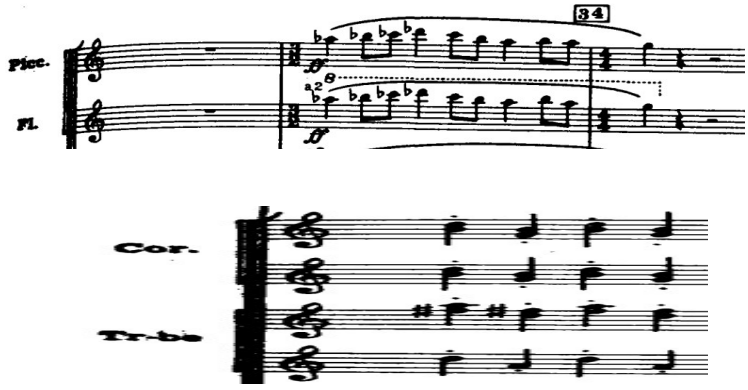
In this manner, the interaction of dissonance and chromaticism in the first movement mirrors the fractured nature of traumatic memory. Shostakovich does not avail himself of the conventional harmonic resolution but rather accumulates tonal instability to allude to the continuous suffering of history. The large dynamic range, from almost inaudible to powerful orchestral fortissimos, makes the nature of memory volatile, the urge to confront the past compelling. (see *Music Example III*) The selection of musical elements acts to heighten the emotive impact of Yevtushenko's poem while concomitantly highlighting the need to focus on previously ignored historical stories. Shostakovich binds the piece to a much broader Russian musical tradition, facilitating an interplay between history, grief, and resistance.



[30] Ibid.

Music Example III Descending Scale with Powerful Fotissimos[31]

As the symphony proceeds, Shostakovich widens his focus from historic anti-Semitism to embrace broader issues of repression and moral cowardice. The second movement, *Humor*, is in the use of irony and wit to show the follies of autocratic rule. Shostakovich pits the bright, lilting themes in the woodwinds against the abrupt, interrupting outbursts from the brass, representing the precarious balance between resilience and oppression. (see *Music Example IV*) Such satire calls back to the poem's declaration that humor can survive the most powerful tyrants, an idea underscored by the subversive orchestral scoring by Shostakovich. He reinterpret the movement, as it were, through an acute incorporation of angular design—one that would satirically suggest the rigidness of ideology in the Soviet Union—as he immortalizes the unyielding spirit of human aesthetic.



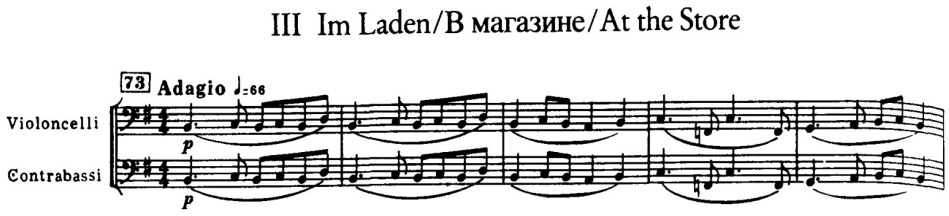
Music Example IV **Contrasting Motifs of Woodwinds and Brasses**[32]

[31] Shostakovich, *Symphony No.13 "Babi Yar", Op.113*.

The third movement, *In the Store*, diverts attention to the everyday hardships of ordinary Soviet citizens, using those very programmatic elements as a way to depict their boredom and hardships of survival under systemic oppression.[33] Shostakovich gets the work under way with a deliberately awkward and laborious bass line, which reflects the monotony of queuing—a theme that recurs frequently in the piece. (see *Music Example V*) A further denseness in the aural tapestry is brought about by the castanets and woodblocks, which clatter away like pots and pans, as in the poem. In this context, Shostakovich's music speaks to the strength of ordinary people, their unspoken resilience in the face of adversity. The fourth movement, *Fears*, is an examination of the psychological consequences that follow from relentless watching and uses all of its spare and disjunct textures to create a sense of generalized unease. Shostakovich begins the movement with a lengthy tuba solo, whose low and lugubrious tones establish the overall mood of desolation and terror. (see *Music Example VI*) The subdued beginning of the choir, singing about anxieties "vanishing in Russia", does not convey a sense of reassurance but rather deep skepticism, as if questioning the truth of the statement. In the symphony's final movement, *A Career,*

[32] Shostakovich, *Symphony No.13 "Babi Yar", Op.113*.
[33] Wilson, *Shostakovich : A Life Remembered*, 357.

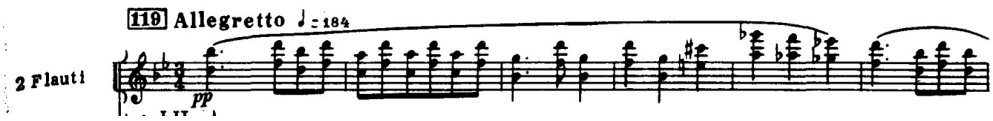
Shostakovich criticizes the moral compromises demanded of citizens by totalitarian regimes that pit individual ambition against personal decency. The first waltz, played by the flutes and strings, seems cheerful on first hearing, but is marked by a deeper criticism: that of conformity and betrayals. (see *Music Example VII*) It is with this refined melody that Shostakovich sets in opposition the sudden, harsh, discordant interruptions, ruptures interrupting its development, to represent the individual and moral compromises necessary for success in a repressive regime. The climax of the movement features a triumphant, sarcastic return of the earlier themes, suggesting true heroism lies not in compliance but in unyielding opposition. By ending the symphony with a muted, unresolved cadence, Shostakovich refuses to grant resolution, forcing the listener to confront the enduring implications of his message.



Music Example V [34]

[34] Shostakovich, *Symphony No.13 "Babi Yar", Op.113*.

Music Example VI [35]



Music Example VII [36]

The political reception of the *Thirteenth Symphony* only goes on to further cement its importance as a piece emblematic of artistic bravery. Audiences at the 1962 premiere of this composition gave it considerable praise for its bold exploration of stories from the margins. Nevertheless, the Soviet authorities quickly moved to suppress the composition, accusing Shostakovich of promoting controversial narratives.[37] This response highlights the unease of the regime with artistic works that challenged its ideological hegemony, putting into sharp focus the precarious position of the artist in authoritarian societies. Despite this opposition, the symphony has remained a landmark work in Soviet music, celebrated for its bold confrontation of trauma and its insistence on the role of art in bearing witness to truth. Therefore, the symphony outgrows its particular historical context in order to grapple with larger themes such as suffering, resilience, and moral accountability. With its ingenious orchestration, multithematic development, and profound emotional strain, the composition

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Hausmann, "Shostakovich, Yevtushenko, and Criticism in the Thirteenth Symphony", 9-11.

reaffirms music''s capacity to serve as a medium of remembering and an instrument of resistance. In writing his music to Yevtushenko's *Babi Yar*, Shostakovich kept memory of the victims of the atrocity and faced the silence surrounding systemic injustice. His symphony is the lasting emblem of the transformative power of art, an assertion that the act of remembering is at once a moral obligation and an act of defiance.

The Thirteenth Symphony has a special place in the study of trauma and its artistic representations, as a work exemplifying how music can capture the disjointed and unsettling qualities characteristic of traumatic memory. Using theoretical positions from trauma studies, Shostakovich's work here can be seen as an exemplar of the unique power of music to give voice to the unsayable aspects of both historical and collective suffering. The ambiguous characteristics of the symphonic narrative are reflective of a more extensive debate concerning ethical implications of representing trauma. Artistic works that on the surface formally mimic features of traumatic memory give way to prove the flexibility of representation along with creative capabilities.

Trauma is sometimes thought of as a "disease of time", a term suggested by anthropologist Allan Young, who notes that it does not follow a linear trajectory and constantly intrudes on the present, forcing people to relive past memories.[38] The theory of trauma indicates that suffering breaks up memory and narrative

[38] Young, *The Harmony of Illusions : Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, 7.

coherence, leaving in its wake fragmented, unchanged, and recurring physical sensations and images that are not integrated into language.[39] The concept of fragmentation is a powerful metaphor through which one can interpret Shostakovich's structural and thematic choices. Musical compositions can figuratively represent fragmentation, rupture, silences, continuities, mourning, or longing—each a different aspect related to trauma and recovery that helps to form larger cultural and social projects of working to understand trauma. In the *Thirteenth Symphony*, Shostakovich employs dissonance and jarring shifts to portray the mental breaks typical of trauma. The chromatic features and unpredictable variations in dynamics evident in the opening movement embody the fundamental resistance of trauma to conform to structured, linear time. In this way, the composer manages to situate this disruption within the historical atrocity interweaving past and present into an auditory landscape where memory persists without resolution. The sudden changes in dynamics and emotional tone throughout the symphony unsettle the listener's expectations and echo the disorientation characteristic of trauma. By doing this, the composer puts this interruption into context within the historical tragedy enacted by the Babi Yar massacre and weaves past and present into an acoustic space in which memory, without closure, endures. The sudden contrasts of dynamics and emotional line in the course of the symphony shake up expectations and mirror the disorientation

[39] Van der Kolk, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," 127.

characteristic of trauma.

The movement away from the first movement's anguished chromaticism into the second movement *Humor* with its ironical mood marks a pattern of disruption and continuity that underlines the complex nature of memory.[40] Moreover, trauma theory emphasizes fragmentation of form as a hallmark of creative expression. Works often explicate the bewildering effects of suffering, attesting to their constructed nature rather than taking such ruptures at face value as direct portrayals of trauma.[41] In Shostakovich's symphony, this is evident in the relation of the traditional musical forms to moments of rupture. The solemn unison of the male choir, contrasted with the ironic inflections of the subsequent movements, gives musical expression to the tension between mourning and resistance. Similarly, abrupt shifts from harmony to dissonance thwart expectations by the listener, demonstrating the ability of trauma to interfere with perception.

As a composer living under the restrictions of Soviet censorship, Shostakovich developed the art of expressing dissident ideas in works that were ostensibly conformist. His works often shift between public and private spheres, giving their interpretations multiple layers that resonate differently with government officials and audiences. In the *Thirteenth Symphony*, one can note this in his

[40] Shostakovich, *Symphony No.13 "Babi Yar", Op.113*.
[41] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 186.

setting to music of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem *Babi Yar*. Even though the very words of this poem openly curse antisemitism and obliteration of memory, Shostakovich's musical arrangement deepens its emotions in subtle but powerful ways. For example, the male chorus's funereal passages sung in unison bring out a common grief that transcends the specific historical event and therefore opens wider interpretations of systemic oppression and resistance. The fragmentation of linear historical time, as expressed by postmodern theorists, bears a striking resemblance to discourses on trauma and memory. This fragmentation is effectively heightened in Shostakovich's musical reflections on historical annihilation and antisemitism.

Though Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem *Babi Yar* provides a clear textual denunciation, the complex harmonies and dissonances in the symphony offer an affective complexity that interrogates the officially endorsed narrative. Shostakovich uses irony as a dual-purpose instrument—to provide cathartic relief to his audiences and to avoid direct political criticism. Rather than searching in writing for trauma through some literal retelling of historical events, we might construe these creative responses to suffering as ways in which individuals and societies articulate, process, interact with, and make sense of trauma, thereby allowing the expression of historical wrongs while coming to terms with traumatic events and their continuing effects. The dual role of

witnessing in overcoming enforced silence forms the cultural significance of the symphony. The very core of the *Thirteenth Symphony* is a battle between individual and collective memory. By witnessing, there is always an involvement with the historical event—yet one that knows in advance the inherent incompleteness within such acts. In the symphony, the bass soloist acts as a narrative witness, expressing personal grief, while the male choir brings in a collective element, thus transforming the piece into a communal expression of lamentation.

This active play testifies to the very flexibility of representation and creativeness of artists who were able to produce works where the audience could resonate, reflect, and perform parts of their experience. Through the integration of folk-like melodies with more traditional choral symphonic structures, Shostakovich sets up a dialogic tension between the historical and the contemporary. His amalgamation of modernist dissonance with themes from the past links historical memory with today's reflection, capturing the timelessness of trauma. The reception of the symphony demonstrates the fundamental problems of representing trauma in an authoritarian society. While government officials accused Shostakovich of promoting controversial narratives, listeners conceded the emotional impact of the piece and its implicit condemnation of Soviet policies. This duality underlines the precarious situation of art, being at one and

the same time an instrument of resistance and a target for repression. Music provides an avenue in which people can provide events with meaning—a vehicle of feeling that responds to social historical consciousness.

The ambiguous characteristics of the symphonic narrative are reflective of a more extensive debate concerning ethical implications of representing trauma. Artistic works that on the surface formally mimic features of traumatic memory give way to prove the flexibility of representation along with creative capabilities.

One of the greatest criticisms of Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony has to do with its reportedly small impact, particularly as regards its initial reception and its ability to serve well as a tool for public remembrance. Critics maintain that the few performances of the symphony after its premiere and the complex and demanding musical syntax reduced its potential appeal to a wider audience in the Soviet Union. Such criticism, however, underestimates the subversive power of ambiguity and the lasting cultural importance of Shostakovich's work. A closer look shows these supposed limitations to actually be strengths that only magnify the impact of the symphony over time, inside the Soviet Union and out. Critics who have implied that Shostakovich's musical ambiguity reflects collaboration rather than resistance underestimate the sophistication by which he negotiated Soviet ideological constrictions. Rather than a weakness, ambiguity was

Shostakovich's greatest asset in creating subversive works that on the surface adhered to the principles of socialist realism. He used irony, tonal dissonance, and complex juxtaposition to speak to very different audiences simultaneously: he could challenge official truths and simultaneously help his compositions survive the repressive regime.

In the *Thirteenth Symphony*, Shostakovich places in opposition themes of revolution—funereal motifs—that invite more than one interpretation and perhaps impose none at all. The first movement is for a grave bass solo and choruses that sound out, as it were, grieved over the victims of the Babi Yar massacre under Soviet ears—and harmonically and rhythmically discordant and aberrant challenges to the suppression of the events in the Soviet commonwealth's memory. It's this duality that allows the music to function both as an elegy and a protest, creating a deep resonance with those attuned to its message. Ambiguity—what some critics rail against—is exactly that which allows the symphony to speak not only to the oppressed in the Soviet Union but to speak universally to those who could read its hidden rebellion. More specifically, the inherent ambiguity of the symphony protected it from explicit suppression, leaving Shostakovich free to express dissent without inviting direct repercussions. This is borne out by the work's reception: while state authorities did exercise censorship over later performances, the symphony itself was never

actually banned. Therefore, this allowed dissidents and intellectuals to interpret and disseminate its messages, ensuring that its critique of Soviet antisemitism and historical erasure continued to survive even under censorship. Shostakovich's compositions were heard as both conformist and subversive, depending on the listener—a duality that afforded them a special kind of longevity. Audiences were able to actively imagine alternatives or, at the very least, momentarily escape seduced by the new aural landscapes they were presented with. Hence, music formed the "third space" that Nancy Condee argues that Khrushchev encouraged, an "inner freedom" which was "implicitly a different truth than party truth."[42]

In conclusion, Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony is a representation of the conflict between artistic creativity and authoritarian governance during the Khrushchev Thaw. Setting to music the shocking poem of Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Shostakovich deals with the erasure of history, anti-Semitism, and moral cowardice through the alchemy of private sorrow into collective memory. Ironic, dissonant, and imaginatively orchestrated, this symphony transcends its own political moment to achieve a universality of trauma and resistance. *Babi Yar* has become a metaphor, but not in spite of early silencing; the symbol of music's possibility of contesting authoritarian narratives and keeping the ethical task of commemoration, and giving exemplary insight into art's double role of an

[42] Taubman, Khrushchev & Gleason, *Nikita Khrushchev*, 168.

observer and as a mode of resistance.

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