

An Extraordinary Relationship and Acrimonious Split – Galina Ustvol'skaya and Dmitri Shostakovich

by Rachel Jeremiah-Foulds

Galina Ustvol'skaya constantly – and very publicly – denied any cultural influence upon her work, not least by her former composition teacher Dmitri Shostakovich. Much has been written about the relationship between these two composers: against Ustvol'skaya's wishes, it is perhaps their infamous falling-out that has brought about most of her international notoriety. That both composers once had a close relationship remains undisputed, commencing during her studentship in his composition class between 1937 and 1947 (the extraordinary length of her undergraduate studies resulted from the interruption of the Second World War, when she contributed to the war effort in a military hospital in Tikhvin).¹ In 1948 Ustvol'skaya joined the Composers' Union and soon outgrew her conventional position as Shostakovich's student, gradually assuming a place as his musical conscience.² By 1953, Shostakovich had begun to inquire after Ustvol'skaya's personal welfare in his private letters³ and to send her scores of his unpublished works prior to their completion in order to receive sound criticism and judgment. Among these works were *The Gamblers* (he significantly asked for its return in 1974)⁴ and *Preludes and Fugues (1950–51)*.⁵ Shortly after the sudden death of his first wife Nina in 1954, Shostakovich first proposed marriage to Ustvol'skaya.⁶ Shortly after Ustvol'skaya's rejection, Shostakovich met Margarita Kainova and embarked upon his brief and somewhat disastrous marriage, only to divorce her in 1959.⁷ In the meantime Ustvol'skaya had met and struck up a companionship with Yuri Balkashin, who died unexpectedly in 1960.⁸ Both single, it is entirely plausible that Shostakovich once again proposed marriage to a declining Ustvol'skaya.

Ustvol'skaya's position, however, changed dramatically after these events: the early 1990s saw her sending special statements to her publisher Hans Sikorski, denying any influence Shostakovich may have had upon her and deprecating both his professional and personal integrity. Ustvol'skaya's vehement rejection of the figure whom she once held in such high regard has not endeared her greatly to the remainder of the music world. But perhaps it is quite justifiable that she was determined to distance herself

Example 1: Galina Ustvolskaya, Trio (1949), rehearsal no. 31.

Example 2: Dmitri Shostakovich, String Quartet No. 5 (1952), rehearsal no. 29.

from the man who was beginning, somewhat unfairly, to define all interest in her music. In a sense, perhaps Ustvolskaya's rejection of Shostakovich was a complex (and rather personal) attempt to "cut the umbilical cord."⁹ Further, Suslin implies that Ustvolskaya believed Shostakovich did not defend her music strongly enough when she graduated from the conservatory,¹⁰ and a further conjecture behind her hostility was her objection to Shostakovich's acquiescence in official requirements.¹¹

Example 3: Dmitri Shostakovich, “Noch,” from *Suite on Verses by Michelangelo Buonarroti* (1974), mm. 10–14.

Example 4: Dmitri Shostakovich, No. 4: “Nyedarazumyeniye,” from *Satires on the Words of Sasha Chorny* (1961), opening (mm. 9–12).

In terms of the musical connection between the two composers, Shostakovich most notoriously borrowed musical material from Ustvol'skaya's Trio (1949) for use in his Fifth String Quartet (1952) and *Michelangelo Suite* (1974), depicting the theme in contrasting settings (*Examples 1–3*).¹² This theme is also used in the opening vocal line of the fourth song, *Nyedarazumyeniye* (“Misunderstandings”), of *Satires on the Words of Sasha Chorny* (1961),¹³ showing itself to be adaptable to yet another musical context (*Example 4*).¹⁴ Despite its having been widely accepted that this theme originated in Ustvol'skaya's Trio, David Fanning has recently found an appearance of this musical material in the newly discovered, abandoned symphonic sketch of Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony, dating back to 1945.¹⁵ Therefore, contrary to popular assumptions, it would now seem that Ustvol'skaya borrowed the original material from Shostakovich (see Table below).¹⁶ As a result, we end up with a private exchange of citations between the two composers, spanning several decades. But, aside from this musical interchange, there are further stylistic influences that Ustvol'skaya was to have on Shostakovich. In his Thirteenth String Quartet (1970) Shostakovich was to take full advantage of the versatility of the violin in

the quartet by directing the viola (Fig. 22) to rhythmically strike the body of the instrument with the bow. Fanning suggests that Shostakovich's compositional experiments were wholly indebted to the instrumentation called for in Ustvol'skaya's Violin and Piano Sonata (1952), where the violinist is directed to strike the belly of the instrument with the tip of the bow¹⁷ (an effect that was taken to new heights by the early 1970s, when Ustvol'skaya scored a part for a wooden box in her *Composition No. 2*). Indeed, the dark tragedy that saturates many of Shostakovich's later works (paralleling the composer's preoccupation with his own death) is gloomily reminiscent of Ustvol'skaya's apocalyptic life-view.

D.S. 1945 Unused symphonic fragment	G.U. 1949 Trio	D.S. 1952 Fifth String Quartet	D.S. 1961 <i>Satires</i>	D.S. 1974 <i>Michelangelo Suite</i>
Student / teacher	Colleagues / lovers?	Height of personal relationship / 1 st proposal	Possible rekindling of relationship / 2 nd proposal? / beginnings of falling-out?	Broken relationship
Original theme: triumphant, energetic	Lyrical, energetic: occupies entire final movement	Youthful, impassioned: developed at length	Melancholy, set to the word "misunder- standings": brief appearance	Principal theme: mournful, pathetic

Table of citation exchanges of the *Trio* theme

It is a comparison of Ustvol'skaya's Piano Concerto (1946) with Shostakovich's Piano Concerto for Strings, Trumpet, and Percussion, op. 35 (1933) that provides the most tangible stylistic overlap. Aside from the obvious parallels regarding the instrumentation of both pieces, several further reverberations can be noted, not least the similarity of the opening motivic writing.¹⁸ Both works commence with a dramatic rise and fall of homophonic dotted rhythms articulated by strings and firmly rooted in C minor. The twisting chromatic sixteenth-note runs of Ustvol'skaya's second subject, and the prevalence of the flatted sixth in the A-minor scalar figures, have their roots in Shostakovich's eccentric circus-style gestures. But despite these melodic similarities, Ustvol'skaya's Piano Concerto does not capture quite the same buffoonery, as the opening motive is presented increasingly brutally, supported by dissonant clusters scored for piano. Although the substance of the two Concertos is very similar, it is the composers' respective treatment of these foundational motives that provides the distinguishing hallmarks of their work.

By the 1970s, when Ustvol'skaya had developed her mature style, she had managed to literally truncate Shostakovich's voice entirely from each of her new works. But this does not negate the influence that Shostakovich had over his former pupil: this state of solitude, or self-purgation, could not exist without her precursor. As Bokman aptly summarizes, "By denying Shostakovich, Ustvol'skaya continues his tradition in her own way, as her denial is largely based on his work."¹⁹ It is easy to view Ustvol'skaya and Shostakovich as products of exactly the same cultural backdrop, lending themselves to easy comparison. Yet, as with all such things, the truth is far more convoluted. The thirteen years that separate their births had a huge impact on both composers' life and work and, consequently, drove a vast wedge between their respective contexts. Shostakovich's career began as part of the aftermath of the revolution, during a time of optimism, enthusiasm, and general elation.²⁰ Ten years later – at the same point in her career – Ustvol'skaya was struggling with the horrors of the Second World War. Politically, the goalposts had been drastically moved for musicians by the early 1940s, and Ustvol'skaya was forced to carve out the beginnings of a career amidst intense repression and aesthetic control. Of course, the dangers of the 1940s legendarily faced Shostakovich too, but it was at a different point in his life and career. The fundamental step of breaking away from his pedagogical influence enabled Ustvol'skaya to more accurately convey the personal, social, political, and spiritual context of her own unique experience and time.

¹ Ustvol'skaya's handwritten autobiographical note preserved in the St. Petersburg Composers' Union, dated November 16, 1983.

² Iosif Pustyl'nik recalled a young Ustvol'skaya who, during a train journey in the 1930s between Moscow and Leningrad, persuaded him to exchange tickets with her so that she could be consigned, overnight, to the same train carriage as Shostakovich. Related to Alexander Ivashkin by Sergei Slonimsky in St. Petersburg, June 2007, and recalled to the author soon thereafter.

³ Letter to Glikman, August 28, 1953; Cf. Dmitri Shostakovich, *Story of a Friendship: The Letters of Dmitri Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman 1941–1975*, trans. Anthony Phillips (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 49.

⁴ Cf. Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 283.

⁵ Related to the author by Olga Digonskaya, Moscow, April 3, 2008.

⁶ The official date of this proposal remains unknown, although Galina Shostakovich recalls her father addressing the prospect of marriage to Ustvol'skaya with her and her brother around this time (Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich*, see note 4, p. 297).

⁷ Cf. Michael Mishra, *A Shostakovich Companion* (Westport, CT, and London: Praeger, 2008), p. 210.

⁸ Letter to Glikman, November 3, 1960; cf. Dmitri Shostakovich, *Story of a Friendship* (see note 3), p. 274.

⁹ Olga Gladkova, *Galina Ustvol'skaya: Features of a Portrait "People and the Gods,"* CD recording played to the author by Konstantin Makhukin in St. Petersburg, March 2008.

¹⁰ Thea Derks, "Very Nearly an Interview," *Tempo*, new ser., no. 193 (1995), German Issue, p. 32.

¹¹ Bokman remembers how Ustvolskaya told him that she tore Shostakovich's portrait into pieces and flushed it down the toilet upon learning that he had joined the party (Simon Bokman, *Variations on the Theme Galina Ustvolskaya*, Berlin: Verlag Ernst Kuhn, 2008, p. 42). Lest it be forgotten, a large portion of Ustvolskaya's relatively slender artistic output was official, commissioned music. A further factor that may have magnified their already strained relations was Shostakovich's stipulation of the return of his gift manuscript of *The Gamblers* in 1974, during his third marriage (Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich*, see note 4, p. 172).

¹² For a comprehensive account of the treatment of the theme in Shostakovich see Louis Blois, "Shostakovich and the Ustvolskaya Connection: A Textual Investigation," *The Music Review*, 52 (1991), no. 3, pp. 218–24.

¹³ The manuscript includes the inscription "To dear Galya Ustvolskaya, from a loving Shostakovich."

¹⁴ Perhaps it is a little too fanciful to imagine the biographical reverberations of the "Misunderstanding" itself.

¹⁵ This was discovered in December 2003 and recorded and conducted by Mark Fitz-Gerald for release in 2009. It is entirely possible that Shostakovich had played this unpublished fragment to Ustvolskaya, as other musicians remember him playing them the beginning of this version in 1945 (Olga Digonskaya and David Fanning, "Symphonic Movement," liner notes to the CD recording *Girl Friends / Rule, Britannia / Salute to Spain*, Polish Radio Symphony, cond. Fitz-Gerald, Naxos, 8.572138, 2009).

¹⁶ A repeated note motif and a descending third pervade this entire fragment.

¹⁷ David Fanning, "Shostakovich and his Pupils," *Shostakovich and his World*, ed. Laurel Fay (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 297.

¹⁸ The opening dramatic scotch-snap rhythms also sound remarkably similar to Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* (1934).

¹⁹ Simon Bokman, *Variations* (see note 11), p. 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.