

The Nose

PROGRAM NOTE
BY RICHARD DYER

SHOSTAKOVICH WROTE his First Symphony when he was still a teenager; it was a graduation exercise for the Leningrad Conservatory. The premiere in 1926 created a sensation, and within a couple of years the symphony had entered the repertory of famous conductors and orchestras in the West, and it has remained securely there ever since.

The composer was not so fortunate in his first opera to reach the stage, *The Nose*. The premiere in Leningrad in four years after the symphony was controversial. The nature of the controversy was not artistic but political; there were only 14 performances.

The opera had to wait 30 years before it was revived, first in Germany, and later in America (Santa Fe) and England. It was not performed again in Russia until 1974, when the ailing composer supervised a production in Moscow the year before he died. *The Nose* has since become a repertory standard in Russia and ambitious companies in Europe and America have taken it up – the opera requires ambition because it is not easy.

Shostakovich found his subject in classic short story Nikolai Gogol published in 1836; it was a story the composer loved so much that he could recite all 24 pages of it by heart. Three librettists worked on the text, and so did the composer himself; much of it comes verbatim from the original story, supplemented with lines and incidents from various other works by Gogol, and

a song from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Gogol's story famous resists interpretation; that is part of its fascination. Kovalyov, a collegiate assessor (a minor bureaucrat), loses his nose, which takes on its own independent life as a much more important bureaucrat. Ultimately Kovalyov is reunited with his nose and resumes his own self-important life.

Gogol describes these fantastic events in a level, journalistic, realistic style, so there is no way to know whether this is dream or reality (in Russian, "nose" spelled backwards is "dream"). "Such things do happen in this world," the story closes, "rarely, but they do happen."

What is certain is that the absurd events are very much rooted in the actual social and political circumstances of St. Petersburg in Gogol's time, and, more to the point, in the universal characteristics of human nature.

Shostakovich's musical response to this comes from many sources in high art and in popular culture – he had been profoundly affected by the Russian premiere of Alban Berg's 12-tone opera *Wozzeck*, and his own opera is tightly organized in musical forms – there are two big fugues, for example. The speed and cheekiness of the music recall Italian comic opera; the noseless bureaucrat Kovalyov sings a parody bel canto aria, and some of the score sounds like wrong-note Rossini, or Rossini filtered

through Prokofiev's *commedia dell'arte* opera *The Love of Three Oranges*.

Although it is an opera that deliberately mocks operatic traditions, but is also very much rooted in those traditions. One episode with an Old Countess recalls Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*; the noseless Kovalyov gazes into the mirror like the Marchallin in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*.

At the same time, the opera is full of allusions to, and examples, of popular music and dances, old ones like the galop, the polka, the march and the waltz, and newer ones like the foxtrot. The score is a kaleidoscope of brilliant effects, a collage of found objects gathered, arranged, interconnected, and woven into counterpoint with profound artistic individuality.

Despite its 19th century setting, *The Nose* is a very self-consciously contemporary piece. It must be the first opera to contain a reference to hemorrhoids; the singers sniff, yawn, sneeze and belch, and there is a jolly, hocketing chorus of classified ads sung in a newspaper office. At the same time there was no question that the pompous St. Petersburg bureaucrats of Gogol's time were just like the Stalinist bureaucrats of Shostakovich's time – and they aren't much different from anyone you might meet at the Registry of Motor Vehicles or on a customer-service call to Comcast today.

Another major contemporary influence on the opera was the emerging art of the movies. As a kid, Shostakovich had played the piano for "silent" movies, and his music is full of cinematic effects – there is story telling in the music, but through means suggested not just by traditional musical procedures, but also through new ones like montage, tracking shots, close-ups, and jump cuts. The music is almost bewildering in its daredevil plunges from one kind of music into another; it is the

aural counterpart to a Keystone Cops short.

In a way Shostakovich's score also *anticipates* what was going to happen in the movies within a few years. *The Nose* is a cartoon, and for it Shostakovich wrote cartoon music, although cartoons with soundtracks didn't yet exist. He permitted a concert performance of *The Nose* as a kind of preview, but he was very against the idea. "*The Nose* loses all sense to me if it is viewed only from the musical standpoint. . . for its musical component is derived exclusively from the action."

That action, like that in a cartoon, is fast and off-kilter. Its affect and effects are obvious, but only apparently so. Shostakovich's satirical tilt leaves the listener with no firm footing. To put it another way, the composer has pulled the lever and the audience is hurtling over the hills and around the curves of a roller coaster.

The overall impression the opera leaves is one of exaggeration and extravagance. There are more than 70 solo parts, and the characters often sing at the outer extremes of their range, both high and low. Kovalyov is a baritone who sings more high Gs than Verdi's *Rigoletto*, but his nose is a tenor, and in one scene *The Nose* sings 11 high Cs, beating Tonio in *The Daughter of the Regiment* at his own game.

The orchestra also plays with the utmost brilliance. The vocal lines for the singers take their unusual contours from the rhythms and inflections of the Russian language; the orchestra, not the singers, maintains the continuity of the musical discourse. Like Berg in *Wozzeck*, or Debussy in *Pelleas et Melisande*, Shostakovich marks the frequent changes of scene by extended orchestral interludes. One of these is for percussion alone (another is for chorus alone). The principal

instruments almost become principal characters because their solos are so frequent, so brilliant, and so exposed. Unusual orchestral instruments like the flexatone and the balalaika contribute flecks of color, and there important parts for the piccolo and for the lowest instruments like the bass clarinet. The string basses sometimes play in high harmonics. Even familiar instruments sound strange when played at the extremes of their range.

All this extravagance, however, is a function of Shostakovich's precision of ear; it is accomplished with astonishing economy of means. This brilliant orchestra, for example, is basically a chamber ensemble supplemented by extra percussion (Shostakovich calls for 10 percussionists).

At the time of the premiere, discussion centered on whether this was an opera suitable for factory workers and peasants; the educated critics didn't think so, but audience surveys showed that the factory workers and peasants who saw a special performance loved what they heard (although they may have enjoyed the break from their labors). The opera was denounced by ideologues as representing "the infantile sickness of leftism" and somewhat ambiguously as "an anarchist's hand grenade."

Shostakovich may have viewed that remark as a compliment. We do know that he knew the opera's value. "I am convinced that *The Nose* is one of my most successful works," he wrote, defensively. "The path taken by *The Nose* is the correct path."

The Nose may lack depth – cartoons do. And the glare of its

brilliance may be exhausting for performers and public; the satire could not be more dazzling, but one misses the human warmth of the great operatic comedies by Mozart, Donizetti, Verdi and Wagner, and indeed the warmth we can find in Gogol, or in other works by Shostakovich.

But it is hard to think of any other composer of 22 who ever produced a more striking first opera than *The Nose*; even Mozart was 24 when he wrote his first indisputable operatic masterpiece *Idomeneo*, and that was his 11th opera.

Three years after *The Nose* Shostakovich followed his path even further with his second opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. That opera was even more furiously denounced than *The Nose* had been, and Stalin himself was offended by it. And that was effectively the end of Shostakovich's career as an opera composer – he just couldn't risk it.

He went on to compose his great symphonies, his songs, his chamber music, and he kept an intimate diary in a masterly series of string quartets. In light of what Shostakovich was able to achieve despite lifelong poor health and the constraints of a repressive government, it is ungrateful to wish for more. But there can be no question that in another time and in another place Shostakovich would have left as large a mark on opera as he did on the symphony and the string quartet. But in another time and place, Shostakovich might not have become Shostakovich.

- Richard Dyer