



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 1: Slavic Sensibilities

Broadcast Intermission Panel

Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, 1981

Featuring: Calvin Simmons (conductor), Richard Rodzinski (artistic consultant), and Gerald Freedman (stage director); Scott Beach (interviewer/host)

(transcript read time ~ 12 minutes; audio run time ~ 16 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's centennial celebration.

SCOTT BEACH [SB]: Much has been written about Shostakovich's only full-length opera, a work that was denounced by Stalin and has come to be regarded today as one of the important operas in the international repertoire written since 1920. A few days before the opening of *Lady Macbeth*, the San Francisco Opera invited members of the Bay Area musical press to a panel discussion about the opera. Participating in the round table, which by the way took place over lunch, were Calvin Simmons, Gerald Freedman, who staged *Lady Macbeth*, and Richard Rodzinski, whose father, conductor Artur Rodzinski, was one of the key figures responsible for bringing the opera to this country. Early in the discussion, it was pointed out that *Lady Macbeth* is a piece representative of its period, just as Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* are. Calvin Simmons comments.

CALVIN SIMMONS [CS]: It's very interesting, the fact that it's your father's performances in both Cleveland and the Met was George Gershwin. It's interesting for me because I find a lot of Gershwin in the score. Admittedly, Gershwin must have been extremely involved with Shostakovich's musical language. Between those three pieces, I think there was a great deal of change in those parts of the world, in United States, in Russia, and in Europe as far as the direction of opera at that time.

RICHARD RODZINSKI [RR]: I think one thing one can also bring up in terms of its being a piece of its period, like *Porgy*, the interesting thing was that it was not quite a scandalous, revolutionary, modern piece at that time in the way that, for instance, that [inaudible] was several years before, many years before. What really struck the public and the press was the realism, the drama, the participation of the orchestra as a very important protagonist in the chromatic evolution of a very, very potent piece. So it's really more the potency, I think, that struck everybody, rather than a revolutionary, terrible, modernistic thing. In that sense, it's not something that should perhaps today be looked at as it was very scandalous and very exciting then, and maybe today, by having 40, 50 years more distance, it's not quite as intense. That's not really the case because the piece is essentially tonal. That, I think, should be very much kept in mind.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have anything to add to that?

GERALD FREEDMAN [GF]: As theater pieces, the ones we've been talking about, there's amazing similarity or concurrence about them, as if they're related historically. I mean to ourselves. They're not so far removed in period that you can't recognize yourself, and they deal with the very lowest elements of our society. I'm talking about *Wozzeck* and *Porgy* and *Lady Macbeth*, not to overdo their similarity, but they're about murderers, drunks, dope fiends, gamblers, degenerates, and yet the heroes or heroines are sympathetic. There was, I think, a different infusion of a theatrical look of a common person, a common denominator, that an audience could empathize with. That seems to be very exciting. They were interested more in theater than the morality of it and that the theatricality carries the evening rather than any strict moral sense. I mean, if we talked about any of these operas and what these people do, they're reprehensible actions. Yet in all of them, we come to empathize with leading characters.

RR: Which incidentally, in the material that was handed out to you, there are several excerpts of Shostakovich's statements to this effect. He did, of course, use the Leskov novel, but was very, very conscious of making one change, at least in his opinion. In the Leskov novel, Katerina Izmailova is not really a sympathetic person. She is somebody who goes after her own ends, regardless of what means are involved, murder being the chief one, I suppose. She, however in Shostakovich's opinion, is somebody who can be understood within the social context of that time and of that situation. Therefore, musically he does quite a number of things to try to make you empathize with this woman who is driven to these acts in a rather understandable way. In fact, in the Volkov book, *Testimony*, he speaks rather extensively about, one, her genius for love, which is comparable to the talent of a carpenter or a bricklayer, whatever. Her talent is love and needs to be expressed, but the other thing that he points out, quite importantly, is something to the effect of that no act in itself can really be damned. For instance, murder is not necessarily evil in and of itself, unless you understand the motive behind it and tries to give her, through the music and through his adaptation of the libretto, a real justification for doing what she did.

GF: Richard, when we were first talking, you said something about why *Lady Macbeth*, and although Shostakovich took the title from Leskov's story, I saw an analogy with the treatment that Shakespeare gave *Lady Macbeth* and that both of them commit murder for their lover, but they're both given sympathetic treatment. In Shakespeare, we get to be sympathetic, I think, for *Lady Macbeth* by giving her the sleepwalking scene and then after the fact by *Macbeth* stealing for her in "Tomorrow, Tomorrow, Tomorrow." In *Lady Macbeth*, Shostakovich gives her, at the almost penultimate moment, a fabulous aria, which I call the black lake aria, in which her desperation is lyricized to the point that just musically, if you don't understand the words, the music is so beautiful.

CS: It's very Johnny One Note, but very beautiful at the same time.

GF: Yeah, that you can't help but, I think, empathize with this woman's plight, in spite of what she has done. I think in the theater, you don't count up how many times she's murdered. What you are assessing is the passion with which Shostakovich creates her condition. In truth, I went back to read a translation of the Leskov story, and I found her very sympathetic for just that reason because she is very clear-minded, active, and with just her vitality, her need to make a life for herself, she goes against all societal ideas. Now, this is in the Leskov, is what I'm saying, and I think that is an attractive picture to us today, regardless, again, of what she does. I think that Shostakovich benefits from that, too. Here's a woman who, from her inner need and against a totally autocratic male society, becomes somehow a figure of dignity, simply because she fights against it.

- AUDIENCE (MALE): Do you think today audiences are going to find Katarina just a very pragmatic lady, a change from, let's say, 30 years ago, as far as societal view of women? I mean, this lady would get an A-plus in (inaudible).
- GF: I agree. Absolutely. In spite of the fact -- (laughter) no, thinking not unlike Gene Harris, that in spite of the fact that she murdered this man for her lover, there was a tremendous amount of sympathy generated because she was obviously a woman of intelligence and integrity who had fought for the man she loved, for her need, love, and that generated a lot of sympathy. I think that's true of this woman. I find her very admirable, also in the person of Anja Silja, who embodies all that kind of energy and vitality and intelligence. You can't help admire this figure.
- CS: You see, I was thinking about that very much in the past couple of weeks, working with Anja, she makes you feel sympathetic. I feel very sympathetic with her because of the way she carries herself. We've even started calling her Katia around the rehearsals.
- GF: Also, Shostakovich gives the character, in the middle of the opera, a very sharp text in terms of what we would call women's rights. Women are good for something more than being laid in bed. Women are loyal. Women die for their country. I mean, she's lecturing the mill hands in their business about who and what women are, and the next minute, she's on the floor, wrestling with this man she feels an immediate sexual attraction for. I mean, that's, to me, not a bad idea. I mean, it's really exciting. (laughter)
- RR: Interestingly, of course, Shostakovich was, at that time at least, very, very concerned with women as the embodiment of the new movement, wanting to write, again, something that's wrong in many reference books, not a trilogy but a tetralogy. He was going to do four operas based on women, symbolizing, I suppose, the emancipation of the Russian people through women.
- GF: I can't obviously attest for the voracity of this, but in the Volkov book, he says that at the time he was writing *Lady Macbeth*, he was passionately courting his wife-to-be, and there was a very tempestuous love affair. Just taking that at face value, in truth, it certainly shows up in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. There's a rocking back and forth in emotional, sexual confrontations, it seems to me, all the time, which I find, again, a lot of fun and very thrilling. But it is like a man who is wracked with passions, and he gets it all out in the orchestration.
- RR: Which was probably the most scandalous aspect when it was premiered because there really hadn't been anything quite that graphically sexual ever written.
- AUDIENCE (MALE): What was there about the musical treatment that makes us sympathize with this anti-heroine?
- CS: He tries very hard to convey that in the music. I don't think he's all that successful at doing it, really. He's only successful basically in that scene at the end.
- GF: But Calvin, again, I speak from a less perhaps valid musical position, but it struck me when I was at the orchestra rehearsals, and we hadn't thought of *Porgy and Bess* yet, or I thought of *Porgy and Bess* by looking at the scene design. It got my mind going. But the first thing you hear in the opera, there's no overture. There is a clarinet. That's the first main instrument as the curtain goes up, and she's lonely. I think you

know right away, by the use of the clarinet, she's lonely. Again, my mind immediately went to "Rhapsody in Blue." The first thing you hear is that wail of the clarinet. It's like clarinet says, to the Western mind anyway, today lonely. I'm lonely. (laughter) There it was. I mean, it really hit me very hard. About 10 bars later, he starts using some violins in a very pathetic lyric melody underscoring her condition, and I think right away I felt sympathetic just by the instrumentation. There's loneliness, and then there's this kind of weeping violin figure, and my heart went out to her right away.

AUDIENCE (MALE): It's a social condition as well as a personal one. I think that's why it's so difficult to establish a beginning. I think that's where your task comes in. The music establishes, I think, a personal loneliness, but it's a societal loneliness the whole opera, I think, (crosstalk)

GF: But that also depends on him because what he does, which may alienate all kinds of folks, is all the time –

CS: Are you talking about me?

GF: No, no. Shostakovich.

CS: Oh. (laughter)

GF: You don't alienate anybody. No, Shostakovich pulls back from an emotional situation. I mean, he will suddenly get very satiric. He will suddenly get very humorous in the orchestration. (laughter) I think he doesn't allow you to get too mopey about her condition. I think he's always saying, "Look at the bigger picture." It's really wild, and I think it's very modern in that sense. One of the most graphic is the father-in-law is murdered by her. She feeds him rat poison, and he has a horrible death in front of us.

CS: Over mushrooms.

GF: Rat poison over mushrooms. (crosstalk) I mean, the truth is Boris is a horrible man. I mean, he's a tyrant. He's a bully. He's a monster. Nevertheless, when somebody is dying like a rat in front of your eyes, you feel some sympathy for him. Then Shostakovich has a priest come in and give him last rites and then go into like a dance tune.

CS: Circus music. It's wonderful, Shostakovich's circus music. It's, to me, one of the most gripping moments in the opera, that, and when the body of her husband is found, he again uses circus music. But in this first case with Boris dying and the priest comes out, and Shostakovich has absolutely no respect whatsoever for the church. It's incredible the way he does it. And we have this silly little scene. He gives him the last rites, and while you're still sitting there giggling, the passacaglia begins, which is the most frightening moment in the opera.

GF: That's right. He just pulls the rug from under your feet again.

CS: That, I think, is a masterpiece right there, those three pages.

GF: As a response to your question, it's all in music. The music is telling you all those things.

RR: You could mention also the police scene because he's constantly musically making social comments.

CS: Most of the police scene is a waltz. I think that's a rather fitting dance form for the police. (laughter)
In fact, it's a very clumsy waltz, in fact.

SB: You've been listening to a panel discussion on *Lady Macbeth* with Calvin Simmons, Gerald Freedman, and Richard Rodzinski, held in the opera house conference room for members of the Bay Area press.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to *Streaming the First Century*, San Francisco Opera's centennial celebration, told through historic recordings. This recording is a copyrighted production of San Francisco Opera, all rights reserved.

[END AUDIO]