

*Ключевые слова*

*Шостакович, Акимов, Шекспир, «Гамлет», творческая интерпретация, «шексперимент», пародия, гротеск, 1932.*

*Мишель Ассай*

**«Гамлет» Акимова и Шостаковича:  
«Шексперимент»**

*Key Words*

*Shostakovich, Akimov, Shakespeare, Hamlet, creative interpretation, 'shakesperiment', parody, grotesque, 1932.*

*Michelle Assay*

# Akimov and Shostakovich's Hamlet: a 'Shakesperiment'

*Abstract*

Shostakovich's incidental music to Nikolay Akimov's notorious Hamlet staged at the Vakhtangov Theatre, Moscow, in 1932, is analyzed in detail with due attention to its often contradictory relations with the director's ideas which, judging from archival documents, for different reasons could not be realized to the full extent. Obviously, Akimov had no intention of turning Hamlet into a comedy or farce, though his staging was perceived (and is still described in special literature) as a parody of Shakespeare's tragedy rather than as 'a creative interpretation of Hamlet using methods and devices of our theatre, taking into consideration the concrete situation of Shakespeare's era', as Akimov himself put it. Shostakovich's music, on the contrary, was largely perceived as the most 'Shakespearean' aspect of the whole enterprise. By composing a self-contained score for Hamlet, Shostakovich stuck to his earlier manifesto (published 1931) of not submitting to the instructions of theatre directors. Could we perhaps go further and say that in avoiding compromises and following his inner light, Shostakovich composed music that was simply too good for the production, and hence inadvertently exposed its shortcomings? The only way to test this hypothesis would be a reconstruction of the entire production – a project which faces almost insuperable difficulties.

*Аннотация*

Музыка Шостаковича к нашумевшему в свое время спектаклю «Гамлет», поставленному Николаем Акимовым в московском Театре имени Вахтангова (1932), детально анализируется в своих часто противоречивых связях с режиссерскими идеями, которые, судя по архивным документам, по разным причинам не удалось реализовать в полной мере. Очевидно, Акимов не стремился превратить «Гамлета» в комедию или фарс; между тем его работа была воспринята (и все еще характеризуется в специальной литературе) скорее как пародия на шекспировскую трагедию, чем как «творческая интерпретация "Гамлета" приемами нашего театра, с учетом конкретной обстановки эпохи Шекспира» (именно так ее рекомендовал сам режиссер). Что касается музыки Шостаковича, то она как раз была воспринята как наиболее «шекспировский» аспект всей постановки. Создав к постановке «Гамлета» партитуру, наделенную самостоятельной ценностью, Шостакович выполнил важнейший пункт собственной «Декларации обязанностей композитора» (опубл. 1931): не подчиняться требованиям режиссеров. Имеем ли мы основания утверждать, что Шостакович, следуя внутренним творческим побуждениям и избегая компромиссов, сочинил музыку, слишком хорошую для данного спектакля и поэтому невольно высветившую его недостатки? Чтобы проверить данную гипотезу, следовало бы полностью восстановить постановку, что в настоящее время практически невозможно.

Nikolay Akimov's production of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* with incidental music composed by Dmitriy Shostakovich, opened on 19 May 1932 at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow. Akimov later claimed that 'The goal of my mise-en-scène was to read and show *Hamlet* anew, ridding it from all that has been added to it through the three hundred and more years that separate us from the time of its writing.'<sup>1</sup> These words are paradoxical in the sense that they suggest a return to the original: a claim, which hardly anyone in that audience would have believed was part of his intentions.

Akimov's *Hamlet* has justly been described as one of the most notorious milestones in the history of Shakespeare theatre productions.<sup>2</sup> It was not just his controversial scenic solutions but also Shostakovich's extrovert music that contributed to this production being designated as a 'Shakesperiment', with the music eventually garnering more praise than the production itself and enjoying a notably more successful after-life.<sup>3</sup>

The production was commissioned to celebrate the jubilee year of the Theatre, ten years on from the death of its founder Evgeniy Vakhtangov (1883–1922) and the premiere of his most famous production, *Princess Turandot*.<sup>4</sup> Despite being loyal to Stanislavski's psychological approach, Vakhtangov was greatly influenced by Vsevolod Meyerhold's theatricality and anti-realism. Impressed by Roman Rolland's *Théâtre du peuple*,

<sup>1</sup> Nikolay Akimov, 'O postanovke "Gamleta" v Teatre im. Vakhtangova' [On the production of *Hamlet* at the Vakhtangov Theatre], *Teatral'noe nasledie* [Theatre heritage], Leningrad, 1978, Vol. 2, 119.  
<sup>2</sup> Almost every study or mention of this production describes it as a scandal or at least as a controversial production.  
<sup>3</sup> Timofey Rokotov, "'Sheksperiment' realisticheskogo teatra' [The Shakesperiment of a realist theatre], *Vechernyaya Moskva*, 19 April 1936. The term was applied by Rokotov retrospectively, in the course of a review of a new production of *Othello*.  
<sup>4</sup> For more on the history of the Theatre, see Nick Worrall, *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage: Tairov-Vakhtangov-Okhlopkov*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 102.

Vakhtangov set himself the task of giving art a sharper outline without falsifying its truthfulness to life.<sup>5</sup>

The premiere marked the beginning of Akimov's theatre directing career – he had previously worked as a stage designer and artist – and at the same time the end of his collaboration with the Muscovite theatre.<sup>6</sup> Following the more Meyerholdian side of Vakhtangov, Akimov decided to distance himself as much as possible from the most notable recent production of *Hamlet* featuring Mikhail Chekhov, which had premiered at MKhAT II (the Second Moscow Academic Art Theatre) in 1924.<sup>7</sup> In Akimov's conception, Hamlet was no philosopher. Played by Anatoly Goryunov, an actor mostly known as a comedian, he was a chubby, short, witty bon-vivant, a young man fighting for his right to be the King of Denmark. Thus the plot was emptied of its traditional enigmas and instead focused on one main intrigue: the struggle for the Danish throne. Horatio's role was considerably strengthened to represent at once an image of the 'eternal student', the failing intellectual and a caricature of Erasmus, whose words Akimov incorporated at some length. Acting as Hamlet's double, Horatio joined him in the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, turning it into a dialogue, in the course of which Hamlet tried on a papier-mâché crown left over from the actors' rehearsal. The iconic Ghost scene was completely reinterpreted. Inspired by Erasmus's *Colloquies*, Akimov evoked a masquerade, where Hamlet pretends to be the ghost and Horatio helps him by making spooky noises with the help of a clay pot, by which means the two men try to attract more supporters for their cause. The dialogue between Hamlet and his father's ghost was hence turned into a monologue for Hamlet, in what is effectively a mirror image of Akimov's treatment of 'To be or not to be'.<sup>8</sup>

The character of Ophelia also underwent considerable transformation, eventually bearing little resemblance to the traditional pale figure as depicted in Pre-Raphaelite paintings or in the poems of Afanasiy Fet or Aleksandr Blok. Akimov's Ophelia, played by Valentina Vagrina, was

<sup>5</sup> Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Traditions and the Avant-garde*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1988, 52–53.  
<sup>6</sup> See Nikolay Akimov, 'Otrivki nenapisannoy biografii' [Excerpts from an unwritten biography], in N. Akimov *Ne tol'ko o teatre* [Not only on theatre], Leningrad, Iskustvo, 1966, 346.  
<sup>7</sup> For more on Chekhov's *Hamlet*, see Vladislav Ivanov, 'MKhAT vtoroy rabotaet nad "Gamletom". Gamlet – Mikhail Chekhov' [The MKhAT II is working on *Hamlet* – Mikhail Chekhov as Hamlet], A. Anikst (ed.), *Shekspirovskie chtenia*, 1985, Moscow, Nauka, 1987, 216–43; E.A. Kesler (ed.), *Gamlet na stsene MKhAT vstorogo: novye materialy* [Hamlet on the stage of MKhAT II: new materials], Moscow, Moskovskiy Khudozhestvennyy Teatr, 2017.  
<sup>8</sup> Aspects of the scenario detailed in this paragraph and below are widely attested. See also the production book in RGALI [Russian State Archives of Literature and Arts], fund 2737, inventory 2, storage unit 1.

a femme fatale who knew how to enjoy life. According to the director there was no real love between her and Hamlet, and her main dramatic function was to spy on Hamlet and to report back to Polonius. Considering her madness and that of Hamlet unacceptable for the modern audience, Akimov tried to explain each of these phenomena in a more 'rational' way. Hence Ophelia gets drunk at the court ball and drowns accidentally. For his part, Hamlet is only pretending to be mad, and he does so, for example, by wearing a saucepan on his head, holding carrots in his hand, and chasing boys and piglets in his nightshirt (Act II scene 4).

Even today, some of Akimov's decisions raise eyebrows.<sup>9</sup> His *Hamlet* is often quoted in the context of formalism and Soviet censorship, which is just one aspect appearing mainly in *later* criticisms and studies of the production.<sup>10</sup> Months before the premiere of the production, critics, Shakespeare scholars and Akimov himself had been debating whether there was any need at all for yet another production of *Hamlet*. Articles questioned the rationale behind returning to classics of theatre repertoire and recommended solutions to make them more appropriate for the proletarian audience.<sup>11</sup> Akimov pre-announced intentions that were in most cases in line with the critical consensus.<sup>12</sup> Thus there were high expectations of this production, which was widely considered to be an organised effort to bring Shakespeare back to Soviet Reality. However, for several reasons, aspects of Akimov's concepts got lost in the process

<sup>9</sup> Theatre historian Konstantin Rudnitsky rather unguardedly suggests that 'Akimov's production more than anything else resembled a parody of *Hamlet*'; and musicologist Gerard McBurney, in a survey of Shostakovich's theatre music, agrees with Rudnitsky's hypothesis regarding the failure of this production: 'it was simply too late for its own time'. McBurney even suggests that 'Akimov's clunkily obvious intention was to turn *Hamlet* on its head.' Both studies compare Akimov's *Hamlet* to Meyerhold's theatre productions in the 1920s, ignoring this latter's negative reaction to Akimov's *Hamlet*. See Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1988, 270; and Gerard McBurney, 'Shostakovich and the Theatre', in Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 166.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Martin Banham, 'Nikolay Akimov', *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Al. K-ov, "'Bit' ili ne bit'" postanovke "Gamleta" v teatre imeni Vakhtangova? [To be or not to be? A production of *Hamlet* at the Vakhtangov Theatre], *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 13 May 1932; A. Kut, 'Nuzhno li stavit' "Gamleta"? Mozhno li perekinut' most ot "Gamleta" do sovremennosti? [Should we stage *Hamlet*? Is it possible to build a bridge from *Hamlet* to the present day?], *Vechernyaya Moskva*, 12 May 1932.

<sup>12</sup> Nikolay Akimov, 'Shekspir, prochitanniy zanovo. O "Gamlete" v teatre im. Vakhtangova' [Reading Shakespeare anew: on *Hamlet* at the Vakhtangov Theatre], *Vechernyaya Moskva*, 11 May 1932.

of realisation, contributing to the production's short stage life.<sup>13</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the premiere, the general feeling among critics was one of disappointment. This *Hamlet* had proved to be merely a 'Sheksperiment', which, as it were, blew up in the laboratory.<sup>14</sup> In the broader historical perspective, the seriousness of Akimov's intentions became lost, or at least seriously under-estimated.

Prior to the premiere of his *Hamlet*, Akimov outlined his plans and the details of his approach in a series of articles in the national press. These were mainly based on the 79-page *doklad* he presented in March 1931 when proposing his project to the then still relatively young Vakhtangov Theatre.<sup>15</sup> Here he argued that since the appearance of *Hamlet*'s text, each era had interpreted this work in its own way, consciously or unconsciously using the play as a mirror to reflect the ideology of its time. And he announced that 'the goal of any production of *Hamlet* in our days is to liberate it from such prisons.'<sup>16</sup> The most dangerous of these prisons was, according to Akimov, the problem of 'Hamletism', which he believed to have been superimposed on Shakespeare's play by the Romantics of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and by Goethe in particular. Akimov noted that the birth and development of 'Hamletism' ran parallel to the development of bourgeois ideology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His goal was accordingly to better

<sup>13</sup> Akimov's *Hamlet* only survived one season in Moscow. In personal exchanges with Marina Zabolotnaya in April 2013, she mentioned Yuriy Elagin's memoirs regarding the production's tour to Leningrad in 1933. However, neither she nor the archivist of the Vakhtangov Theatre could at that point provide any reference or evidence for the tour. In May 2015, I came across a few numbers from the journal *Rabochiy i teatr* (1933/1 and 11 back covers) with announcements of forthcoming tours of the Vakhtangov Theatre to Leningrad and a repertoire that included *Hamlet*. Furthermore, *Rabochiy i teatr* (1933/11) contains a one-page review (21) of the tour with a mention of this production.

<sup>14</sup> For one of the clearest statements of a perceived gap between conception and realisation, and a reminder of Akimov's promises and their outcomes, see Luda Grossman-Roshchin, 'Strashnaya mest' [A terrible revenge], *Sovetskiy teatr* (1932/6), 7–11.

<sup>15</sup> 'Doklad N. P. Akimova o tragedii V. Sheskpira "Gamlet"', Vakhtangov Theatre Archive, archival No. 526, file No. 22, inventory 1, March 1931. Several versions of this article survive in the Theatre archive and at RGALI, fund 2737, inventory 2. As V. Mironova observes ("Gamlet" po-akimovski', in David Zolotnitsky [ed.], *V sporakh o teatre*, Leningrad, Rossiyskiy Institut Istorii Isskustva, 1992, 11), the main points of the 'doklad' were published in Akimov's '0 postanovke "Gamleta" v Teatre im. Vakhtangova v 1932 g.', in Aleksandr Gvozdev [ed.], *Nasha rabota nad klassikami*, Leningrad, Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1936, 125–168, and republished in Akimov, *Teatral'noe nasledie*, Vol. 2, Leningrad, Iskuststvo, 1978, 119–154. Compared to the 'doklad' documents and their sociological, class-war slogans, the two later publications put a greater accent on Akimov's search for the true, authentic Shakespeare as a justification for his interpretative choices.

<sup>16</sup> 'Doklad N. P. Akimova', 1–3; Nikolay Akimov, 'O "Gamlete"', *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 3 March 1932, 3 [a summary of the 'doklad'].

understand and interpret the Shakespeare of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and not the Shakespeare of the 19<sup>th</sup>.

At the same time, he predicted that Hamletism and its attendant mysticism and other 'falsifications', were by then so deeply rooted in the audience's sub-conscious that *his* more authentic *Hamlet* would paradoxically appear 'false'. For Akimov Hamlet was 'a highly developed, healthy, optimistic young man whose jokes sparkle throughout the five acts of the play [and who] dies while trying in vain to combine his advanced theories with feudalism in practice' in the society of his time. Akimov summarised his task as 'a creative interpretation of *Hamlet* using methods and devices of our theatre, taking into consideration the concrete situation of Shakespeare's era.'<sup>17</sup>

## Text, translation and adaptation

Akimov's claims for, in effect, a fusion of authenticity and contemporary relevance went further. Regarding the problem of translating Shakespeare's play into Russian, he maintained that previous translators, too, had served the ideology of their time, and that by adapting rather than translating accurately they had often taken part in the process of falsification. He illustrated this point through examples from 'Belinsky's Apocrypha',<sup>18</sup> claiming that the new translation by Mikhail Lozinsky<sup>19</sup> used for his own *mise-en-scène* was the first exact Russian translation that 'depicts the character of Shakespeare's language without the usual artificial varnish.'<sup>20</sup>

As for the interpolation of lines by Erasmus of Rotterdam,<sup>21</sup> this can be explained by Akimov's intention of consciously freeing the play from Hamletism in favour of Humanism, the worldview centred on human agency rather than on the supernatural, dogma and, in more Marxist

<sup>17</sup> Akimov, 'Kak teatr im. Vakhtangova stavit "Gamleta"', *Izvestiya*, 26 March 1932.

<sup>18</sup> Akimov was alluding to Vissarion Belinsky's 1838 essay embracing Nikolay Polevov's translation and Pavel Mochalov's rendering, which became a milestone in Russian perception of the play.

<sup>19</sup> Lozinsky's translation was published for the first time a year after the premiere of Akimov's production. For more on particularities of this translation and other Russian translations of *Hamlet*, see Aleksey Semenenko, *Hamlet the Sign: Russian Translations of Hamlet and Literary Canon Formation*, Stockholm University Press, 2007. For details of Lozinsky's system, see Eridano Bazzarelli, 'O perevode *Bozhestvennoy komedii* Lozinskim. Sistema ekvivalentov' [On the translation of *The Divine Comedy* using Lozinsky's equivalent system], in *Sravnitel'noe izuchenie literatur: Sbornik statey k 80-letiyu M. P. Alekseeva* [Comparative literature studies: collection of articles marking the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of M.P. Alekseev], Leningrad, Nauka, 1976, 315–23.

<sup>20</sup> Akimov, "O 'Gamlete'".

<sup>21</sup> Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1466–1536), often known as Erasmus of Rotterdam, or simply Erasmus: Dutch Renaissance humanist, priest, social critic, teacher, and theologian.

terms, social rankings. It was for the purposes of defending this conception, among other things, that Akimov turned to what he considered the essence of Elizabethan tragedies and their topicality, describing Hamlet as a 'humanist of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, well ahead of his time, an individualist dying within his feudal surroundings'.<sup>22</sup> In general, he explained, on behalf of the Theatre, that they aimed to re-evaluate the play in relationship to the philosophy of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: that is, 'humanism' with references to Erasmus's 'Colloquies'.<sup>23</sup>

## Internal debates

Many of Akimov's concepts, however, got lost in the process of realisation. What the critics and public saw on the opening night was Akimov's production after it had been extensively discussed, altered and abbreviated by the Theatre, subsequent to many rehearsals and particularly the discussions following the dress rehearsal on 19 April 1932. Taking place over two days, these discussions were attended by members of the crew and cast, and by Akimov himself. The accounts of these sessions reveal invaluable information on details of the *mise-en-scène* and its practicalities, on major concerns of the production team about certain aspects of the show, and on Akimov's justification of his choices.<sup>24</sup> Reading between the lines, we can glean from the debates something of how Akimov's production was meant to be. It transpires that it was not Akimov's eccentric interpretation of *Hamlet* that caused the main concerns for the production team – apart from, perhaps, his interpretation of Ophelia, which was flatly deemed non-Shakespearean.<sup>25</sup> What worried those present at the debates was: Akimov's manipulation of Shakespeare's text; the interpretation of Ophelia; the logical continuity of certain elements such as the clay pot used to evoke the voice of the ghost; and the overall length of the production (over five hours) and related logistics. Shostakovich's music was mentioned only sparingly. However, one such reference, by the executive director, Boris Zakhava, provides an important clue to the place and role of one musical number, 'Requiem':

Here Shostakovich has composed a magnificent Requiem, which is to be accompanied by male chorus hiding in the orchestra or in the box seats and hence invisible to the audience. This chorus grows into a powerful *forte* and finally the first panel curtain (*paddinga*) rises, and there Laertes

<sup>22</sup> Akimov, 'Shekspir, pročitanniy zanovo'.

<sup>23</sup> Akimov, 'Kak teatr im. Vakhtangova stavit "Gamleta"'.  
<sup>24</sup> Stenographic report of discussions, 19 and 21 April 1932, Archive of the Vakhtangov Theatre, Moscow, fund 22, inventory 1, storage unit 530.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

and the King are standing to the background of the second *padduga*, in poses as if in a church. The Requiem is heard to the end. While the monologue about the return of Hamlet is going on, the bath tub scene can be prepared (behind the second curtain).<sup>26</sup>

Such debates resulted in a production that was definitely shorter, but the cuts meant that it had lost many brilliant scenes and important themes, such as various chase scenes that had given it a special flavour. It was understandable that certain critics complained that in general the architecture of the composition of the play was destroyed.<sup>27</sup> But the blame for that should not have been laid at Akimov's door alone.

## Aftermath

So far as the Soviet press of the time goes, one reaction was common: no critic seemed to agree with Akimov's claims of liberating *Hamlet* and reviving Shakespeare's concept. The general tone of the critical reception may be judged from such observations as: 'Everything is allowed and is legal. Machiavellianism – political theories of Italian Renaissance plotters.'<sup>28</sup> 'Akimov has preferred a Hamlet who is unthinking and unreflecting. <...> Akimov's directorial idea derived from topsy-turveydom. It was from the start an idiosyncratic academic "reduction ad absurdum". Shakespeare is reduced to absurdity.'<sup>29</sup>

What everyone seems to have forgotten, or simply ignored, was the conditions set by the Theatre repertoire committee (Repertkom) in 1931, when discussing and commissioning the production of *Hamlet* for the anniversary season of the Theatre. As Akimov himself later explained, at the time when his *Hamlet* was in progress the agenda had been very different from the time of the premiere: no rich person or royalty could possibly be a positive hero, and depicting the ghost as a metaphysical creature would also cause concerns. According to Akimov, his changes and interpretative choices made it possible to stage a tragedy of Shakespeare at a time when it was not at the top of the authorities' list of priorities.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, what Akimov did was largely working towards the objectives set for him at the time. Of course within a year much had changed in the

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>27</sup> 'Perviy disput o "Gamlete" v teatre Vakhtangova' [The first discussion of *Hamlet* at the Vakhtangov Theatre], *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 1932/25 [5 June].

<sup>28</sup> Il'ya Berezark, 'Avanturist i gumanist' [Adventurer and humanist], *Rabis*, 1932/16, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Pavel Markov, "'Gamlet" v postanovke Akimova' [*Hamlet* staged by Akimov], *Sovetskij teatr*, 1932/7–8, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Marina Zabolotnyaya, 'Obsuzhdenie akimovskogo "Gamleta"', VTO, Kabinet Shekspira, 29 sent. 1943 g., in Vladislav Ivanov (ed.), *Mnemozina. Dokumenty i fakti iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka*, Moscow, VTO, 2004, 415.

cultural and political climate of the country. April 1932 saw the Central Committee's decree 'On restructuring literary and artistic organisations', which led to the dissolution of RAPP, the organisation of creative Unions and the doctrine of Socialist Realism. The reception of Akimov's *Hamlet* was not merely reactive to the problematic mixture of the director's conception and his realisation of it, but it was also to a degree prescribed. Had the production been staged at the time of its conception in 1931, it would most likely have had very different resonances for critics and public alike.

## Music and reception

If Akimov's *Hamlet* as a whole had a mixed reception, critics were unanimous in one respect: that Shostakovich's incidental music was excellent. Even the satirical journal *Krokodil* could not help but praise it: 'The composer Shostakovich leaves me in a very stupid situation as a critic. You see, when one writes for a satirical journal, one is supposed mainly to tell people off. But Shostakovich has composed such music that there is simply not a single fault with it. Amazing music!'<sup>31</sup>

Other critics were not much different in preferring Shostakovich's 'magnificent' music to Akimov's staging. The harshest words directed at Akimov were probably those of Pavel Markov,<sup>32</sup> who complained that 'At times it seems that the production is preventing us from hearing Shostakovich's music, let alone Shakespeare.'<sup>33</sup> In this article Markov admitted to having detected brief echoes of Vakhtangov's theatrical credo, not through Akimov's production but thanks to Shostakovich's music: 'Only a few times, during the long duration of the show, could Vakhtangov's principles be felt in it, and almost always this perception was caused not by the director's interpretation nor by the actors' skills, but by the music that Shostakovich composed in the teeth of Akimov.'<sup>34</sup> By pointing to contradictions between Shostakovich's music and Akimov's production, the critics were no doubt responding to the problematic relationship between the incidental music and the actual play. This is best illustrated by the fact that in one issue of *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* (1932/24, 27 May) two separate articles were published: one discussing the production as a whole and the other Shostakovich's music. In the latter article, E. Gal'skiy praised Shostakovich's music by suggesting that Shostakovich used music not only as an illustrative device but also that in several moments he managed to

<sup>31</sup> Armans Zoilova, 'V plane i v razreze', *Krokodil*, 1932/17.

<sup>32</sup> Pavel Markov (1897–1980) was a theatre critic and head of literary section of Moscow Art Theatre.

<sup>33</sup> Pavel Markov, *O teatre*, Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1977, Vol. 4, 67, orig. pub. "'Gamlet" v postanovke N. Akimova', *Sovetskij teatr*, 1932/7–8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

give it the important, profound and clear significance of an independent composition. Thus, 'it is not rare that the music goes against the director's interpretative decision for a given scene.'<sup>35</sup>

Do these contradictions mean that Shostakovich's music simply overpowered Akimov's production and thus did not comply with the traditional subordinate function of incidental theatre music? Or were they perhaps a result of lack of communication and close collaboration between the two artists? To this day, no document has emerged to prove that Shostakovich composed his music with any detailed knowledge of Akimov's interpretative solutions. The two short letters that do survive from the correspondence between these two men only reveal that Shostakovich started on the composition rather late in the day, due to his being overloaded by other projects, as he put it.<sup>36</sup>

Akimov and Shostakovich may well have elaborated their approaches at least to some extent independently, contributing to the apparent divergence between their readings. Even so, the little we do know about the background to Shostakovich's score helps us to better understand its specific qualities and its relationship to the actual production, whether or not it was worked out through telephone conversations, meetings, or even letters that are now lost.

In the absence of such documentation, it may prove beneficial to refer back to the composer's previous incidental music and particularly to his first experience in this field, which was thrust upon him by none other than Meyerhold himself. When Prokofiev declined the offer to compose the incidental music to Meyerhold's 1929 production of Mayakovsky's *The Bedbug*, the director turned to his young protégé and friend, Shostakovich, who was at this time the pianist in residence at the Meyerhold Theatre in Moscow. Meyerhold's specific ideas regarding the musicality of theatre meant that he took great care to outline his requirements regarding the soundtrack and took the liberty of interfering in the process of composition and application of the musical material; this is best revealed in his detailed letters to the composers involved in his productions explaining his demands<sup>37</sup> and in his significant role in Shostakovich's music to *The Bedbug*, as detectable from the manuscripts and the final performance score where much pre-composed material was simply left out.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> E. Gal'skiy, 'Muzika k "Gamletu"', *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 1932/24 (27 May).

<sup>36</sup> Letters from Shostakovich to Akimov dated 22 October 1931 and 18 February 1932, RGALI, fund 2737, inventory 2, storage unit 214.

<sup>37</sup> Béatrice Picon-Vallin, 'Vers un théâtre musical. Les propositions de Vsevolod Meyerhold', in *Musique et Dramaturgie, esthétique de la représentation au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Laurent Feneyrou (ed.), Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003, 45–65.

<sup>38</sup> See Gerard McBurney, 'Shostakovich and the Theatre', 152–55.

A study of the *Hamlet* score and Shostakovich's subsequent incidental music in conjunction with his other contemporary opuses reveals several instances of his re-use of his own material. The recycling of musical material between different productions and between his theatre music and other genres suggests that many of his ideas were in fact generic, rather than specifically intended for a particular character or scene. This may have been a result of onerous working conditions and strict deadlines dictated by the theatres, to which Shostakovich reacted in his famous 'Declaration' article in 1931 (see below); but it also illuminates the composer's 'cool-headed grasp of the way the same music could bear different meanings in different contexts.'<sup>39</sup> At any rate, for Shostakovich in his twenties, composing incidental music offered an opportunity to try his hand at diverse styles and aesthetic orientations, as well as to test out musical ideas for more ambitious ongoing projects, including, most notably, his second opera, *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* (1930–32).

This was Shostakovich's first working encounter with Shakespeare, but it would definitely not be the last. It is curious that in 1929, replying to a questionnaire, the young Shostakovich had admitted to a dislike for Shakespeare's work;<sup>40</sup> however, this was before he had worked with any of the Bard's works as a composer. The 1932 *Hamlet* seems to have left its mark, since from this point on he would return to Shakespeare at regular intervals during his career: in 1941 for Grigori Kozintsev's production of *King Lear* at the Leningrad Gorky Theatre (Bolshoy Dramaticheskii Teatr im. Gor'kogo), in 1942 when he included Sonnet 66 in his song cycle, *Six Romances on Verses by English Poets*, Op. 62, and in 1954 when he recycled parts of the *King Lear* music together with a few newly-composed numbers for Kozintsev's 1954 production of *Hamlet* at the Pushkin Theatre in Leningrad (now the Alexandrinsky Theatre). In 1963, Kozintsev asked Shostakovich to provide the music for his famous cinema version of *Hamlet*, which was to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. The collaboration continued in 1970 when Kozintsev created a film version of *King Lear*, for which Shostakovich produced yet another outstanding score.

The composer would have two further encounters of the Shakespearian kind through characters rather than text, when he turned late in his career to Hamlet and Ophelia, this time in Russian poetic renderings.

<sup>39</sup> McBurney, 'Shostakovich and the Theatre', 147.

<sup>40</sup> Roman Il'ich Gruber, 'Responses of Shostakovich to a Questionnaire on the Psychology of the Creative Process', in *Shostakovich and His World*, Laurel Fay (ed.), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004, 31.

'Ophelia's Song' opens his *Seven Verses of A. Blok*, Op. 127, depicting Ophelia's sorrow when bidding farewell to her beloved Hamlet. Finally 'Dialogue of Hamlet with his Conscience', which forms part of Shostakovich's *Six Verses of Marina Tsvetayeva*, Op. 143, describes Hamlet's inner turmoil as he blames himself for Ophelia's death.

Akimov's production had started Shostakovich off with quite a different Hamlet. Conceivably it may even have been an intimation of the director's untraditional and eccentric approach that tempted Shostakovich into this collaboration, despite his earlier ambivalence towards Shakespeare and theatre music in general, although in 1931 the two men would have known of each other from their joint participation in the music-hall revue, *Uslovno ubitiiy (Declared Dead/Hypothetically Murdered)*.<sup>41</sup>

In November 1931, Shostakovich had published an extraordinary manifesto in the journal *Rabochiy i teatr*, entitled 'Declaration of a composer's duties', attacking the state of music in the theatre world, and denouncing all his own theatrical and film music.<sup>42</sup> Although he promised to fulfil his contract to provide incidental music for *Hamlet*, he vowed to return the advances and cancel contracts for any other incidental music and to reject all future theatrical commissions for the next five years.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that Shostakovich went ahead with *Hamlet* is easy to trivialise. It has been speculated that he had already spent the advances paid by the theatre, or that it was difficult to escape Akimov's 'convincing charm'.<sup>44</sup> But one might equally propose that *Hamlet* appealed to him as an excellent opportunity to show how incidental music might actually resist total 'subordination to the theatrical institutions'. This point was particularly highlighted in Gal'skiy's glowing appraisal of Shostakovich's music to *Hamlet* in an article published on the same page as a harsh criticism of Akimov's production in *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*: 'Earlier this year [*sic*], Shostakovich wrote an article in which he passionately announced his dislike for the work of composers in theatre <...> and promised <...> to write "proper" music only. Shostakovich's music to *Hamlet* is the best reply to the composer himself, the best piece of evidence to prove how wrong his opinion of his own theatre work was.'<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, 363.

<sup>42</sup> Shostakovich, 'Deklaratsiya obyazannostey kompozitora' [Declaration of a composer's duties], *Rabochiy i teatr*, 1931/31 [20 November 1931], p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*, London, Fourth Estate, 1990, 81, rev. edn. 98–9.

<sup>45</sup> Gal'skiy, 'Muzika k Gamletu'.

Unlike composer Vladimir Kobekin, who explicitly called his 2008 operatic take on *Hamlet* a comedy,<sup>46</sup> Akimov did preserve the word 'tragedy' in the title of his production, for all his interventions in Shakespeare's text. Yet he chose to illustrate the poster with the Gravediggers' scene, which would presumably have been one of the satirical highlights, had it been preserved in the actual production. Such fusion of tragedy and satire points to Shostakovich's idea of a satirical rendering of Leskov's tragedy in *Lady Macbeth*, which could even have had its roots in the Vakhtangov production of *Hamlet* – existing documentations and evidence do not enable us to establish an exact chronology. That tragi-comedy was in the air at the time is suggested by, for instance, the successful production of the well-known play *An Optimistic Tragedy*, written by Vsevolod Vishnevsky, and staged in 1933 by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamerniy (Chamber) Teatr, Moscow, which dealt with the story of a female commissar who sacrificed her life in order to bring glory to the Baltic fleet during the Civil War.<sup>47</sup>

## Music and Drama

Shostakovich's music to *Hamlet* was and remains the finest example of his theatre music and in a way the highpoint of all his incidental music of the 1920s and 30s.<sup>48</sup> However, it is often assessed in isolation from the production itself, with most analysis being based on the musical material from the orchestral suite which the composer produced from his incidental music and which has entered the concert repertoire.

Due to the lack of dramaturgical study of the music and production even if it is considered in its theatrical context, Shostakovich's music has been described as closer to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* than anything else in Akimov's mise-en-scène. This highly debatable notion was possibly implanted by Yuriy Elagin, a member of the Vakhtangov Theatre orchestra who emigrated to the West after the War, having been interned in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp, and who published his memoirs in English in 1951: 'The music Shostakovich wrote for *Hamlet* was magnificent. Though it was very modern, it came closer to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* than anything else in Akimov's production.'<sup>49</sup> There is some truth in this observation. But the glaring mistakes that Elagin makes while describing the music

<sup>46</sup> Vladimir Kobekin, *Gamlet (datskiy) (rossiyskaya) komediya*, musical theatre piece premiered at the Stanislavsky–Nemirovich–Danchenko Academic Music Theatre in 2008.

<sup>47</sup> See also Laurence Senelick and Sergey Ostrovsky (eds.), *The Soviet Theatre: A Documentary History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014, 338–41.

<sup>48</sup> For a sympathetic survey of his other contributions in the field, see Gerard McBurney, 'Shostakovich and the Theatre', 145–78.

<sup>49</sup> Juri Jelagin, *The Taming of the Arts*, trans. Nicholas Wreden, New York, Dutton, 1951, 35.

and its respective scenes indicate that his memory was, to say the least, fallible.<sup>50</sup> In fact, Akimov's untraditional interpretation of the tragedy is directly reflected in Shostakovich's music in several respects, not least in Shostakovich's choice of cabaret genres for several numbers.

In support of Elagin's observation, the 60 or so musical numbers of the piano score kept at the Vakhtangov Theatre archive<sup>51</sup> are more or less divisible into the four categories Christopher R. Wilson lists as typical musical cues for incidental music to Shakespeare's works: namely stage music, magic music, character music and atmospheric music.<sup>52</sup> In this way, all the fanfares, processions and transition ('stinger') numbers belong to the category of stage music, while Ophelia's songs and the gravedigger's are character music. Wilson argues that "atmospheric music" is the most subtle of the four categories, because it is concerned with such intangibles as mood, tone and emotional feeling, and because it may involve changes from suspicion to trust, from vengeance to forgiveness or from hatred to love.<sup>53</sup> So it comes as no surprise that those numbers from Shostakovich's score which could be designated 'atmospheric' often belong to another category as well, and that it is by adding extra musical layers that the composer gives them subtle undertones, thereby musicalising the intangibles listed by Wilson. For example, as will be shown below, 'Hunt' is a 'stage music' (quasi-onomatopoeic), which at the same time underlines Ophelia's betrayal.

There follows an act-by-act description and analysis of each scene and its corresponding musical number where applicable.

**Act I Shakespeare's *Hamlet* opens with a key question that will echo throughout the play: 'Who's there?' Pronounced by Bernardo, a frightened common soldier on guard, who is also the first person to appear on the stage, the question might seem innocuous, but it introduces the key topic of spying and conspiracy. Notwithstanding the common view regarding the dominance of the theme of espionage in Akimov's production, he chose to**

<sup>50</sup> One of this mistakes, regarding the recorder scene, is pointed out, albeit not fully, by McBurney, see McBurney, 'Shostakovich and theatre', 167–68.

<sup>51</sup> At my first enquiries (2012–2014) the theatre's archivists claimed they no longer held this material. However, in 2014 they handed me a folder containing the scores. These are still uncatalogued and only carry the folder designation No. 26 and the stamp of the former Music Library of the Vakhtangov Theatre.

<sup>52</sup> Christopher R. Wilson *et al.*, 'Shakespeare, William', in Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (eds.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn., London, Macmillan, 2001, Vol. 23, 192–98; also available at [http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/public/page/shakespeare\\_william](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/public/page/shakespeare_william), accessed 21 July 2016.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

**begin with a short prologue derived from the very end of the tragedy, to be read in front of the closed curtains by Horatio.**

The sources do not indicate whether Shostakovich's 'Introduction' was played before or after Horatio's speech. However, its *fortissimo-marcato* character, and its harmonic open-endedness suggest that it would have been suitable for calling the audience's attention before the entrance of the actor. At any rate it establishes a tone of Tchaikovskian fatefulness which will be echoed at the end of the first act.

The curtain opens on the scene of the Night Patrol The background story explains this depiction of security measures at Elsinore: Old King Hamlet has killed Fortinbras's father, the King of Norway, and has taken away lands from Norway. Fortinbras's uncle is the new king of Norway (an echo of what is happening in Denmark). Yet Fortinbras himself, like Hamlet, is determined to avenge his father and claim back his lands. Akimov uses Shostakovich's haunting music for the 'Night Patrol' [*Nochnoy dozor*] to frame this scene, which starts as a mime. Its subdued yet naggingly insistent character suggests a mixture of vigilance and terror. Its static quality is fully in accord with Shakespeare's overall image. This episode is a recycling of the 'Infantry March' from Shostakovich's previous year's theatre score to Adrian Piotrovsky's *Rule, Britannia* (Op. 28) about communist agitation in the West.

Despite the similarity to Shakespeare's opening scene in terms of the overall atmosphere of fear, reinforced by the music, Akimov's decision to leave out the Ghost of King Hamlet as a separate character means that the source of the fear of these common soldiers (Bernardo and Marcellus) is not clear. The production book at RGALI notes that the Ghost appears and is mentioned in the soldiers' conversation, but it does not clarify the staging solution adopted by Akimov (namely the Ghost's impersonation by Hamlet and Horatio). However, a still from the production depicts a figure (most probably Hamlet) dressed as a ghost appearing to the soldiers and Horatio. In any case, the result may have been initially confusing to the audience, which had yet to discover Akimov's Ghost-free concept.

While in Shakespeare's play it is the rooster's crow that makes the Ghost disappear, there is no evidence of any musical rendering of this moment. Instead, Horatio's words 'I've heard this and believe it [i. e., that the rooster's crow is known to make ghosts disappear]' is followed by the 'Shepherd's pipe' [*Pastushiy rozhok*], played on the clarinet, which announces the breaking of dawn.

The second scene is visually the opposite of the previous one. It is daytime, and everyone is dressed in bright colours ready for the new King's wedding: everyone except, of course, Hamlet. Akimov assigns Hamlet a very dramatic entrance, thus singling him out not only visually



but also dramatically. Following Claudius's words justifying his marriage and the celebrations, Shostakovich's 'Funeral march' is played while Hamlet enters wearing a black veil that covers his face.

This was a moment widely praised for its intensity and powerful drama. Pavel Markov, for instance, claimed that this was the scene where he encountered and felt Shakespeare, but he insists that this was thanks to Shostakovich's music, rather than to Akimov's staging.<sup>54</sup> The use of orchestral tutti and octave doublings of the melodic line during significant portions of the opening 'Funeral march' points to a more universalised status of mourning, rather than individual suffering.<sup>55</sup> The B flat minor tonality, echoing that of Chopin's famous Funeral March Sonata, arguably reinforces the archetypal impression.

By conveying Hamlet's mournful state and the universality of the tragedy of the King's death, the 'Funeral March' goes beyond simple 'stage music' marking the protagonist's entrance. In the absence of the Ghost from Akimov's mise-en-scène, Shostakovich's music in effect fills in for this missing component in the 'exposition' of the tragedy, and by means of musico-dramatic irony brings to the audience's consciousness the murder of the King.

This scene ends with Claudius inviting everyone to a day of feasting, drinking and firing cannons. His exit, which is followed by that of the Queen and everyone else except Hamlet, is accompanied by Shostakovich's startlingly up-tempo galop music in the manner of Offenbach ('Exit of King and Queen'). Although Zinkevich finds this music to be ironic and hence an example of Shostakovich's use of '*muzika bita*' (everyday music) to convey decay and evil,<sup>56</sup> the preceding announcement of the feast and the overall joyous atmosphere of the wedding justify Shostakovich's choice of idiom in a non-ironic way, in accordance with both Shakespeare and Akimov.

In general, Akimov shuffles Shakespeare's text quite extensively from this point. For example, he transposes to this scene Hamlet's remark about Claudius's being a villain despite smiling, which in Shakespeare comes only after the departure of the Ghost and Hamlet's finding out about the destiny of his father (Act I/Scene 5/Lines 106–108).<sup>57</sup> It seems that by this means Akimov tried to reinforce his interpretation by insisting that Hamlet knew who his enemy was from the beginning of the play.

<sup>54</sup> Pavel Markov, "'Gamlet'" v postanovke N. Akimova', 67.

<sup>55</sup> Elena Zinkevich, 'Muzika k pervomu Gamletu' [Music to the first *Hamlet*], *Sovetskaya muzika*, 1971/5, 96.

<sup>56</sup> Zinkevich, 'Muzika k pervomu Gamletu', 98.

<sup>57</sup> See production book, RGALI fund 2737, inventory 2, storage unit 1, 11.

The following musical number, the 'Dining music', despite contributing further to the festive mood of the scene with its waltz-like lilt, is mainly a filler for the change of set before the next scene, which takes place at Ophelia's closet and contains no musical accompaniment.

Akimov delays the reunion of Hamlet and his old comrade Horatio until this scene, which he calls 'Arsenal'. This scene, which is also without music, shows Hamlet revealing to Horatio his strategy for regaining the throne of Denmark and asking for his friend's help. He is in fact planning to pretend to be his father's ghost in order to win more support for his fight with Claudius for the throne.

The scene entitled 'The Ruins' conflates scenes 4 and 5 of Shakespeare's first act. It begins with Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus awaiting midnight and the reappearance of the Ghost. Following Shakespeare's text, there are flourishes and cannon-fire, followed by 'Dancing music' emanating from Claudius's feast in the distance. The *sempre piano* performance instruction and the somewhat uncanny Mahlerian character of this musical number, evoked by the unexpected caesuras, are impossible to explain other than by the context of the play and with the help of the production book, which reveals its designated place. Notwithstanding the lack of precision in the musico-dramatic synopsis, this piece was almost certainly designed to be heard as though sounding from a distance. Hence the more usual *forte* of dancing music (which would cover up the noise of feet on the stage) is replaced by a *sempre piano*. The transparent orchestral texture and the caesuras simulate the distance that could well render the bass register acoustically inaudible.

The setting of the 'Ghost scene' – or more accurately for Akimov's production the 'non-ghost scene' – has been immortalised by photos that depict Hamlet kicking in the air as if to repel an invisible ghost, and a little further on by Horatio holding a clay pot in front of his mouth and making spooky ghost-like noises. The fact that this visually intriguing scene is without any music might seem strange. Following Shakespeare's text and musical tradition as outlined by Christopher Wilson, this scene would require incidental music of the 'magic' category; however, in the absence of supernatural phenomena – i. e. the Ghost – such accompaniment would be futile and even misleading. The absence of music could also have been a case of avoiding making the scene too laden with semantic layers for an audience encountering this extremely original approach for the first time.

Act I finishes with a short item of closing music ('Finale of the First Act') which recalls the Tchaikovskian character of the opening number but with a concluding C minor twist, perhaps as an indicator of 'something <...> rotten in the state of Denmark' (in Shakespeare Act I scene 4) or as a premonition of the bloodshed and tragedy to come.

If, as a whole, Shostakovich's music for Act I consists mainly of pastiche and lacks a personal stamp, the second act will offer more of his individual idiom, to the point of self-quotation, adding another semantic layer to the events and (apparent) personalities of the characters.

## Act II

Akimov's realisation of the second act is almost impossible to reconstruct without a parallel study of archival materials, mainly because several scenes and ideas did not survive the scrutiny of panels before the premiere. In this act Akimov's imagination takes wing, and he is not afraid of moving scenes around and even adding scenes not found in Shakespeare's text. Some of these were eventually cut out, and as a result much of Akimov's general concept became distorted. Since some of the excised passages had no words and were designed as interludes (*Intermedia*), it is often quite difficult to work out their exact relation to the plot or their place in the play. This is the case with the scene, 'Passage of the Beggars', which is included in the piano score published in the Soviet Complete Collection of Shostakovich's works but was not orchestrated, evidently because it was not included in the production itself.<sup>58</sup> The commentary to that volume states that the order of the pieces was established according to the manuscripts and copies kept at the Vakhtangov Theatre archives and at RGALI, as well as the conductor's list (musico-dramatic synopsis). However, this scene was among those left out in the production itself, which seems to be the only the reason for placing it at the very end. Gerard McBurney, by contrast, chooses to follow the logic of Shakespeare's text for the placing of his orchestration within the complete score as performed and recorded by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra,<sup>59</sup> logically assuming that the beggars would appear at the graveyard scene after Ophelia's death (Act V in Shakespeare's text and IV in Akimov's production). To establish the true place of this scene dramatically and according to the intentions of Akimov, we need to look at a lesser-known archival document, entitled 'Protokol', which is a stenographic report of Akimov's outline for his production in March 1931.<sup>60</sup> According to this document, the scene of the beggars was to be placed at the beginning of the second act, depicting those who are ready to sell

<sup>58</sup> Shostakovich, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, Vol. 28, Moscow, Muzika, 1986, 150–51.

<sup>59</sup> *Shostakovich: Hamlet & King Lear*, various soloists, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Mark Elder (Signum SIGCD052, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Akimov, 'Protokol' in 'Doklad N. P. Akimova o tragedii V. Shekspira "Gamlet" na khudozhestvennom soveshchani: protokol i stenogrammi khudozhestvennikh soveshchaniy teatra po obsuzhdeniyu doklada, 15, 16, 19 marta 1931', Vakhtangov Theatre Archive, archival No. 522, file 22, inventory 1, 20–21 (hereafter referred to as 'Protokol').

themselves and become the King's spies (principally to keep an eye on Hamlet). Akimov describes the scene in detail:

The second act starts with a musical and dancing procession. A few monks and behind them beggars. Beggars were like a plague in that time. Because of the competition they would think of all sorts of tricks to feign deformity. The procession takes place on the proscenium. The music is catholic-religious with beaters (*kolotushki*) and sleigh bells with hints of the Charleston as a response to contemporaneity. The last beggar is pseudo-legless, rolling his cart along the proscenium; he leaves it and comes to the window. He knocks and hands in a letter. Polonius instructs him on how to spy on Laertes. The instruction is interrupted several times; the beggar leaves and comes back again. A pig's squeal distracts Polonius. In the end, the beggar rides his cart along the proscenium and bumps into Ophelia.<sup>61</sup>

Akimov's specifications are barely detectable in Shostakovich's score, whose character is rather of a slowed-down grotesque hybrid of march and polka. Since it remained unorchestrated, we cannot know whether he would have approached Akimov's concept.

The scene of Hamlet's simulated madness is entitled 'Passage of Hamlet and boys', and is illustrated in one of Akimov's sketches for the production as well as in the 'Protokol' document: Hamlet is wearing a white nightgown with a saucepan on his head, holding a carrot and running after boys and piglets. Shostakovich's music for the scene of Hamlet and the boys shares elements with the seduction scene from his opera, *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, which was being composed parallel to his work on *Hamlet*. In fact both are reworkings and developments of the opening bars of 'The Wedding' scene from Shostakovich's 1929 incidental music to Meyerhold's production of *The Bedbug*. (The flattened second and fourth degrees in a modal D minor contribute to an apparent conflict between the grotesque staging and the somewhat haunting musical rendering. However, the unreal nature of Hamlet's madness and the ongoing lies and plots surrounding him during this apparently funny scene might also account for such incongruity.)

Finally it is Ophelia's turn to be appointed as yet another spy to watch Hamlet. This is illustrated musically in the 'Galop of Polonius and Ophelia', which is quite comical and – like the 'Exit of the King and Queen' in the first act – very much in the style of Offenbach. Akimov explained that Polonius is the most comic character of the tragedy,<sup>62</sup> which justifies the tone of this short extract, marked to be repeated until the actors have left

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. Admittedly the sources show that a repetition of the beggars' music might have been considered by Akimov for the gravediggers' scene.

<sup>62</sup> Akimov, 'Protokol', 20 verso.



ries a double meaning: a literal hunt with real horses on the stage and with the participation of Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius and other courtiers; and at the same time a metaphorical hunt for the real reason behind Hamlet's 'madness'. This scene leads to and replaces 'the nunnery scene' from Shakespeare's tragedy (III/1), where Hamlet is confronted with Ophelia in a meeting with Polonius and Claudius watching them closely. Akimov adds a comic twist to this scene by placing these two inside a hollow tree trunk, from which Polonius would have trouble getting out.

The enigma of this scene as to why Hamlet's gentle tone with Ophelia suddenly becomes aggressive is often solved by suggesting that the prince actually notices Polonius and that he is being 'set up'. Akimov opts for the same strategy, and Shostakovich assists this by conveying Ophelia's betraying deed in the troubled pulsation of the hunting music, reinforced by bass drum and, in the second section of the number, by driving syncopations. This is a truly Shostakovichian, obsessive galop in the manner of *Lady Macbeth*. Here, as in several instances already witnessed in Act II, Shostakovich's music demonstrates the hallmark of his individual modal style, which serves as a distinct layer of semantic progression from the more generalised style of Act I and reinforces the gathering intensity of the drama, along the lines mapped out in contrasting ways by Shakespeare and Akimov.

Corresponding to Akimov's main theme of the struggle for the throne, this scene marks the beginning of an open confrontation of the two camps. Finishing the entire second act with a repeat of the breathless last eleven bars of this scene's musical accompaniment asserts its crucial role.

### Act III

Having transposed the 'nunnery' scene (here the 'Hunt') from the third act to the second, Akimov begins Act III with Hamlet's advice to the actors. Since for Akimov the speech and the following scene are supposed to be a rehearsal for the 'Mousetrap' performance, he sets them in a wine cellar, with Hamlet, Horatio, actors and musicians present. The rehearsal scene was to have started with a musical jeu d'esprit ('Instruments Tuning Up') from Shostakovich, illustrating the musicians tuning up their instruments (chromatic distorted open fifths, presumably on the strings), but this was presumably cut, since the music was never orchestrated.

In order to realise his unusual concept of presenting the play-within-the-play first complete as a rehearsal and then with the real performance off-stage, Akimov asked the translator to provide him with an ending for the rehearsal, since in Shakespeare's text the final scene of the show is interrupted by the King's storming out.

The accompanying music ['Introduction'] to the rehearsal of 'The Murder of Gonzago', contains the same allusions as in *Lady Macbeth* Act

IV to Musorgsky's 'Gnomus' – all drawn from a semantic pool of musical representations of the horrific by means of quasi-onomatopoeic shivers (Ex. 2). The same motif will reappear in Shostakovich's incidental music to Kozintsev's 1964 film version of *Hamlet*, where the composer depicts the flight of a seagull, symbolising Ophelia's death.<sup>68</sup>

Ex.2: a) Shostakovich, *Hamlet*, Act III 'Introduction [to the actors' rehearsal]';  
b) Shostakovich, *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, Act IV;  
c) Musorgsky, 'Gnomus' from *Pictures from an Exhibition*

The image displays three musical excerpts labeled a), b), and c).  
 a) Titled 'Adagio', it features a bass clef and common time (C). The upper staff has a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). Dynamics include *p* and *tr* (trills).  
 b) Titled 'Adagio', it features a treble clef and a 2/4 time signature. The key signature is two flats. Dynamics include *fff* and *tr*.  
 c) Titled 'poco a poco accelerando', it features a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. The key signature is two flats. Dynamics include *p*, *f*, and *dim.*. There are markings for a sixteenth-note pattern (6) and a sixteenth-note pattern (6).

This introduction and the following pastoral episodes ('Love scene (*kusok*) of King and Queen') which accompany the dialogue of the actor King and the actor Queen, are interrupted at various points by Hamlet's descriptive instructions and commentaries, cleverly incorporated here from Shakespeare's later scene. With 'The Entrance of the Poisoner' the music shifts towards echoes of Richard Strauss, followed by a non-tonal spiral-like descending episode ('Music of Poisoning') illustrating the entrance of poison inside the sleeping King's ear and his

<sup>68</sup> In the film around 1:47:55. See also 'Smert' Ofelii', fig. 3, *New Collected Works*, Vol. 140, DSCB Publishers, 2016, 154.

eventual death. Finally the music for 'The Exit of the Poisoner' resonates with Shostakovich's music for *Lady Macbeth* after Katerina Izmailova has poisoned her husband.

Similar to Katerina's crocodile tears, this poisoning scene is followed by the actor-Queen's passionate reaction as she finds out about her husband's death; the music here is in a syrupy mock-Richard Strauss style, suggesting the superficiality of the woman's behaviour.

What followed did not contain any music, but it deserves a mention, as it was the riskiest episode in Akimov's reading of *Hamlet*, tackling as it did the most famous episode not only of the play but probably of the entire Shakespearean canon. Having delayed the celebrated soliloquy 'To be or not to be' until this point,<sup>69</sup> Akimov presents the monologue as a dialogue between Hamlet and Horatio while Hamlet is trying on the papier-mâché crown left by the actors and wondering whether 'to be or not to be [i. e. King]' followed by a discussion of doubts between the two friends. Already during the rehearsals Akimov was harshly criticised for this unusual reading. But he never backed off from offering what was probably the first dialogued version of Shakespeare's soliloquy.

The 'To be or not to be' dialogue was to be followed by the musical number, 'Dialogue of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern', played *pianissimo* several times, underlining the secretive nature of their conversation. The arrival of the guests, who include the royals and court noblemen, is presented musically in a very Soviet-public-style movement, similar to the climactic episodes from Shostakovich's Symphonies 3, 4 and 5 and featuring his signature dactylic rhythm. Curiously, the composer did not employ here any of the more grotesque genres as he did for the confirmed opponents of Hamlet.

Since the complete version of the play-within-a play has already been shown as a rehearsal incorporating Hamlet's commentaries from a later scene, here Akimov makes the audience join Hamlet and Horatio in observing the guests, particularly Claudius, closely, whilst the performance is continuing off-stage. To this end, the actual performance is transferred off-stage, with a few bars of each musical episode preserved as a background to Hamlet's mocking of Ophelia and Claudius. The whole thing then is interrupted as Ophelia screams 'The King stands up'. What follows is visually the most iconic moment of the production, praised and quoted by critics – even those who despised the rest of the *mise-en-scène*. After shouting out 'Give me light' (in Russian translated as 'fire' [*ognya*]), the frightened and furious Claudius, played by an actor of small

<sup>69</sup> In the text of First Folio the soliloquy comes at the start of the nunnery scene (III/1/55–89).

stature, runs down the stairs, followed by twelve metres of red velvet train, suggesting a river of blood. This dramatic and somewhat Macbethian realisation alone proves that Akimov had no intention of turning *Hamlet* into a comedy or farce.

With its references to Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, the musical number that illustrates the 'Flute scene' has been widely referred to in the Shostakovich literature. This is probably thanks to its erroneous mention in Elagin's memoirs: 'Hamlet held the flute to the lower part of his torso, and the piccolo in the orchestra, accompanied by double-bass and a drum, piercingly and out of tune played the famous Soviet song "They wanted to beat us, to beat us" written by the composer Alexander Davidenko, the leader of the proletarian musicians.'<sup>70</sup> McBurney suggests that Elagin had made a mistake regarding the instruments assigned to play the parody of Davidenko's tune, since the second half of this number features a much more overtly satirical timbre – a tuba accompanied by a tambourine.<sup>71</sup> However, Elagin's mistake is much more fundamental, since the parody in question is actually heard not here but in Rosencrantz and Hamlet's scene in Act II (described earlier).

The next scene is a musical pantomime, with a score that features fairy-tale-like intonations in the manner of Prokofiev's comic opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*. This scene, entitled 'The King is unwell', depicts the ailing Claudius surrounded by court doctors; the composer uses glissandi to represent the King's sighs of pain, very similar to those of the hypochondriac prince in Act I of Prokofiev's opera.

Akimov's presentation as inscribed in the 'Protokol' document provides three different 'variations' for the following scene at the Queen's closet. These are all different solutions for Polonius's hiding place: the first under the carpet on the ground with his slippers left out, the second behind a tapestry with a portrait of Claudius on it, and finally behind a wardrobe.<sup>72</sup> The piano score offers two variants for this scene, the first an untitled pastoral music and the second a Prokofievian satirical fragment ('Hamlet Carries Body of Polonius'). It seems more plausible that the pastoral music would have accompanied Hamlet's farewell to his mother, whereas the satirical fragment could have been appropriate to Hamlet's carrying Polonius's dead body up the stairs.

Shakespeare's Act III finishes here. However, the five acts of Akimov's original conception were finally condensed into four, with Shakespeare's fourth act being distributed across Akimov's third and fourth. Hence the following scene in Akimov's Act III is the dialogue of

<sup>70</sup> Juri Jelagin, *The Taming of the Arts*, 35.

<sup>71</sup> McBurney, 'Shostakovich and Theatre', 168.

<sup>72</sup> Akimov, 'Protokol', 20 verso.

Gertrude and Claudius at the Queen's bedroom, where Gertrude tells Claudius of Hamlet's murder of Polonius. Shostakovich's cabaret-style foxtrot music ('The King Drags the Queen'/*Korol' tashchit korolevu*), which follows Claudius's mournful words: 'My soul is full of discord and dismay'/*Strakh i smyaten'e u menya v grudi* (IV/1/45), moves further from Shakespeare than any other component of Akimov's staging of this scene. Apart from which, this is in clear contrast with the intense funeral march that is designated for the King's following monologue ('Monologue of the King') as he sends Hamlet off to England. His dark plans to have Hamlet murdered upon the latter's arrival in England are suggested in the score (at fig. 2), which bears close resemblance to the music of poisoning from the 'Mousetrap'.

What comes between these two musical representations of Claudius is a visual masterstroke, as may be seen from Akimov's sketches. The confrontation of Claudius and Hamlet reaches a highpoint when two groups carry the protagonist and the antagonist on separate chairs, holding them face to face, which prophesies the final duel of the play. Shostakovich here ('Carrying of the King'/*Vinos korolia*) again draws on the style of *Lady Macbeth*, particularly the whipping and seduction scenes with their obsessive, indeed excessive, drive.

The final scene of the Act, which again was apparently mostly cut in the actual performance, takes place at the harbour front, where martial music accompanies the arrival of Fortinbras's forces ('Signals of Fortinbras'). A similar music of military character would represent Fortinbras at the end of the tragedy.

#### Act IV

The fourth act of Akimov's production starts with a royal banquet and an accompanying vocal waltz, entitled 'Romance for the feast', which seems to have been left out of the final version, since it only features in the piano score and is clearly crossed out from the musico-dramatic synopsis at a late stage. The title of the following musical number, which was to begin just as the applause for the previous one quietened down, seems to have been changed more than once – from Feast (*Pir*) to Cancan and back, with a preference for the latter title. As McBurney notes, this Offenbachian parody number is in fact a transcription of the 'blistering' cancan that ends the music-hall scene in the *Golden Age* ballet of 1929–30.<sup>73</sup> The composer seems to have felt an affinity between the two scenes and their depiction of Western decadence.

This entire scene and the pantomime seemingly performed parallel to it on a separate part of stage, entitled 'Pirates', are quite difficult to reconstruct, as the musical and dramatic sources are contradictory and mis-matched. According to the 'Protokol', at this moment the arrival of the raging Laertes should have been marked by the noise of breaking plates, and this was to be followed by Ophelia's entry, who in Akimov's interpretation is drunk rather than mad.

Of all the characters of Shakespeare's tragedy, Ophelia is the only one who shows an obvious evolution: from innocent obedient daughter, to passionate lover, to mad victim of a tragic fate. Akimov's interpretation disregards this evolution to a certain extent by depicting her primarily as a spy among other spies, whose principal function is to observe Hamlet and report to her father. Ophelia's *musical* depiction, on the other hand, is a perfect example of Shostakovich following Akimov's interpretation while at the same time staying loyal to a more Shakespearean image of the heroine. Ophelia as a member of the list of Elsinore's spies and baddies is best revealed in numbers such as the trivial 'Galop of Ophelia and Polonius' in Act I. On the other hand, the more delicate Ophelia – as portrayed by Russian poets such as Blok and Fet – is represented most remarkably in the 'Lullaby' (later in Act IV), which in turn points ahead to Shostakovich's music for her in Kozintsev's 1964 film. The passionate Ophelia, who relates more to Katerina, the heroine of *Lady Macbeth*, is shown through her cabaret-style song during her mad scene, where the composer incorporates a motif also sung by Katerina in the last act of the opera.<sup>74</sup> Finally the tragedy of her fate is expressed in the Requiem accompanying her funeral (see below).

The scene of the Royal Feast is interrupted by one showing parallel events related to Hamlet's voyage to England. This scene features Horatio at the library repairing a skeleton while wearing a nightgown and holding a candle, thus implying that it is still night time. Hamlet's letter is delivered, and Horatio learns about the Prince's confrontation with pirates and his imminent return to Elsinore. According to Zabolotnyaya, the whole adventure was acted out on the proscenium,<sup>75</sup> which could imply that the musical number 'Actors' pantomime' could have belonged here and not to the 'Mousetrap' scene, as in the CBSO recording. Horatio is now due to pass another letter to Claudius. We are back to the royal banquet, and we follow on where we left off: Claudius is trying to convince Laertes that he must avenge his father by killing Hamlet. Whether it is the news

<sup>73</sup> McBurney, 'Shostakovich and the Theatre', 168.

<sup>74</sup> See *Ibid.*, 173.  
<sup>75</sup> Zabolotnyaya, "'Gamlet" v postanovke N. P. Akimova', 109.

of Ophelia's death or Claudius's powerful words that sway him, Laertes agrees to the King's apparently foolproof plan.

Although it is not clear where it fits with the rest of the dramatic plan, musically Shostakovich's 'Lullaby' is definitely one of the most intriguing numbers of this scene. As noted above, most probably it depicts the gentler and more fragile side of Ophelia's character. It is composed as a string quartet in C major, also the tonality of Shostakovich's first String Quartet proper, composed six years later. The identical tonalities and related character of musical ideas raise the question whether this episode could even be considered as a kind of first draft for his future opus. According to Shakespeare's text, and taking into account the musico-dramatic synopsis, it is possible that this music was either to accompany Laertes grieving over Ophelia's death, or, as in Kozintsev's film, to constitute a solemn moment depicting the young woman's untimely death.

With the curtain rising to a pastoral musical episode similar to the 'Shepherd's pipe' of the first act and depicting birds singing, the graveyard scene was to be presented under the glowing sun and covered in flowers.<sup>76</sup> Akimov commissioned Nikolay Erdman and Vladimir Mass to rewrite the dialogue of the clowns at the start of the scene.<sup>77</sup> This decision went down badly during the rehearsals, and Akimov was severely criticised for his choice of text and for mixing Shakespeare's words with the 'unfunny' writings of Mass. Thus, as the production book reveals, almost the entire scene had to be left out of the final version, including Shostakovich's 'Gravedigger's song' and a possible repetition of the grotesque polka entitled 'The Passage of Beggars' (see above). Akimov proposed for the rest of the scene that the lights should dim, thereby suggesting the clouds that were gathering as the body of Ophelia is carried to the stage, followed by Laertes, Claudius and Gertrude. The funeral is accompanied by Shostakovich's powerful 'Requiem', sung by off-stage male chorus (not solo, as on the CBSO CD recording); this is another scene where Shostakovich's music was praised by critics for its affinity with Shakespeare's tragedy.<sup>78</sup> The other interest of this scene is in Shostakovich's preserving the Latin text of the 'Dies irae' in his music, at a time when composing a full-scale Requiem to a Latin text would have

<sup>76</sup> See 'Protokol', 20 verso.

<sup>77</sup> This text may be found in Nikolay Erdman and Vladimir Mass, *A Meeting about Laughter: Sketches, Interludes and Theatrical Parodies*, Luxembourg, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995, 139–54.

<sup>78</sup> Pavel Markov, "'Gamlet v postanovke N. Akimova'" [*Hamlet in N. Akimov's staging*], *Sovetskiy teatr*, 1932, No. 7–8, 12.

been politically out of the question.<sup>79</sup> Remaining consistent, he ends the Requiem with a mock antique cadence.

The heavy, dark atmosphere is balanced by the following scene, added by Akimov, which takes place at the bathroom, where Hamlet is shaving and telling Horatio what has happened to him. This is where Osric comes in to invite Hamlet to a fencing match with Laertes. There is no music for this scene; however, Goryunov's acting was said to have acquired more softness and lyricism at this point, suggesting Hamlet's tiredness and eventual acceptance of his destiny.<sup>80</sup>

The final duel scene starts with Shostakovich's score ('Joust'/'Turnir'), couched in the style of Soviet public celebrations and pointing forward to his 1941 music for Lear's Fool, which makes explicit the resemblance to the American Christmas song 'Jingle Bells'. The entire scene was staged similarly to medieval knights' tournaments, with many extras consisting of both actors and papier-mâché dummies, and with the main participants wearing masks. There are two main musical numbers for the duration of the duel: a fast and a slow one, both rooted in G minor and again reminiscent of Shostakovich's obsessive score to *Lady Macbeth*. There are also two key moments that Shostakovich marks individually, the first being as the Queen drinks from the poisoned cup that kills her, which is preceded by a flourish, and the second at the end of the fight, which follows Goryunov's 'the blade is poisoned too' and foreshadows the composer's music for the Ghost in Kozintsev's 1964 film.

Finally, when everyone except Horatio is dead, Fortinbras arrives on his white horse, together with his soldiers. Here three character marches are played, not all that different from one another in their character. The first two follow Hamlet asking Horatio to tell the truth about his story and Horatio's final words (respectively), and the third leads to the trumpets' signalling the final scene following Fortinbras's ordering of a military salute in the honour of the dead Prince. The entire music of 'Fortinbras's march' is in fact a variant of the 'Camouflage' march from Shostakovich's music to the music hall production, *Hypothetically Murdered*.<sup>81</sup> The scenic solution of Akimov was described during the discussions of the rehearsal: Hamlet's presence is felt through the only

<sup>79</sup> Although it does not mention Shostakovich's Requiem for *Hamlet*, for a detailed account of Western sacred genres in the Soviet Union, see Pauline Fairclough, "'Don't Sing It on a Feast Day": The Reception and Performance of Western Sacred Music in Soviet Russia, 1917–1953', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 65/1 (Spring 2012), 67–111.

<sup>80</sup> Shchukin, 'Stenogramma obsuzhdeniya spektaklya v Teatre im. Vakhtangova', 14 February 1932, Vakhtangov Theatre Archive, archival No. 529, file 22, inventory 1, 5.

<sup>81</sup> See McBurney, 'Shostakovich and the Theatre', 168.

remaining object belonging to him – the mask he was wearing during the duel.

The reconstruction of the very ending of the production presents yet another difficult case, due to divergent reports and the missing last page of the production book. In any case, as the musico-dramatic synopsis suggests, the above-mentioned 'Fortinbras March' followed Horatio's last line, closing the production on a triumphant note. As to what Horatio's last words were supposed to be, at least two different versions have been reported; of course it is possible that there was a combination of the two versions or that different words were used on different nights. The production book at this point contains several pages (different paper and different ink) with Erasmus's words on Science, the last few sentences reading: 'He knew how to enjoy the sound of mosquitos, but enjoying a normal life, *that* he did not know.' The latter phrase is quoted in the musico-dramatic synopsis as a cue to Fortinbras's march. On the other hand, Eleanor Rowe, quoting Nikolay Chushkin, suggests that the production ended by Horatio citing Ulrich von Hutten's words: 'Oh Century, oh Sciences, What a joy it is to be alive'.<sup>82</sup> Incidentally these exact words were used by Goebbels a year later at the time of the Nazis' book-burning.<sup>83</sup> Regardless of this, 'Hutten's words of 1518 were interpreted, in the early modern period, as the clarion call of an altered epochal awareness.' Moreover, 'what was celebrated was the euphoric feeling of standing at the threshold of a new age.'<sup>84</sup> Given that Hamlet was holding a book of von Hutten in the library scene and that Akimov had insisted on a 'dialectical materialist' reading of *Hamlet* as the tragedy of a man caught between two eras, the use of Hutten's words seems to be in complete accordance with the rest of the *mise-en-scène*.

A few so-called illogical outcomes of the show that were severely criticised could arguably have been avoided had the score been different in its characterisation. As we have seen, the scene of Ophelia's funeral, for example, struck the critics for its overwhelming tragedy, which one would assume as normal for a traditional production, but which is quite irrational if Akimov's depiction of Ophelia and her loveless relationship with Hamlet is followed to its logical conclusion. However, most critics, while praising the magnificent 'Requiem' composed by Shostakovich for

<sup>82</sup> Eleanor Rowe, *Hamlet: a Window on Russia*, New York, New York University Press, 1976, 130.

<sup>83</sup> As reported in *Völkischer Beobachter*, 12 May 1933.

<sup>84</sup> Ortrude Gutjahr, 'Literary Modernism and the Tradition of Breaking Tradition', in Christian Emden and David Midgley (eds.), *Cultural Memory and Historical Consciousness in the German-Speaking World since 1500: Papers from the Conference 'The Fragile Tradition'*, Cambridge 2002, Oxford and New York, Peter Lang, 2004, 76.

this scene, failed to see – or at least to comment on – how this and the Funeral March at the beginning of the play resulted in a much darker perception of the scene than Akimov seems to have intended.

Irrespective of the effect of Shostakovich's music working at times contrapuntally to Akimov's scenic solutions, the convergences and divergences between the setting and its music reveal each artist's creative obsession at the time: securing a career as an independent and self-sufficient theatre director in the case of Akimov, and ongoing work on the opera, *Lady Macbeth* in the case of Shostakovich.

Hence, and probably because he was simultaneously trying out musical ideas for his opera, Shostakovich's most compelling disobedience of Akimov's conception lay in his choice of style. Unlike many productions of *Hamlet* at the time, where the events of the play take place in the Middle Ages, Akimov had decided that it was more logical to place the tragedy in the time of Shakespeare himself. Shostakovich, however, did not follow suit, but instead incorporated cabaret genres such as cancan, tango and galop in an uproarious updated-Offenbach style. As Richard Taruskin observes, it was especially the latter genre that was used extensively in *Lady Macbeth* to dehumanise the characters surrounding the heroine in an attempt by the composer to justify her evil deeds.<sup>85</sup>

Again in accordance with his sympathetic reading of the otherwise monstrous heroine of Nikolay Leskov's novella, Shostakovich seems to have identified common traits between her and Ophelia. These are revealed musically through similar motifs sung by the two women in similar situations, and through the universalised state of tragedy depicted in the 'Requiem' accompanying Ophelia's funeral. Here too Shostakovich apparently follows Shakespeare more closely than does Akimov, since in the director's interpretation Ophelia's death was by accidental drowning, following her drunkenness during a court ball. Shostakovich's music, composed as a free interpretation in the style of early music, develops from mourning to a depiction of the inevitability of tragic fate. However, it was Akimov's interpretation of Ophelia as a passionate, sensual and lustful woman that permitted Shostakovich's assimilation of her to the heroine of his opera in the first place; a more traditional reading of Ophelia as the symbol of purity and innocence would have not allowed such a representation. In the case of the opera, by contrast, Shostakovich was his own master, which meant that there was no question of disharmony in the conception, other than between his view and that of Leskov's original.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Taruskin, 'The Opera and the Dictator: the peculiar martyrdom of Dmitri Shostakovich', *The New Republic*, 20 March 1989, 38–39.



The parallels between Akimov's *Hamlet* and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth* extend beyond purely musical affinities and are manifested in ideological aspects and especially in their reception. Shostakovich's programme note for the premiere of his opera in 1934, in which he outlines his task as correctly interpreting what Nikolay Leskov could not fully grasp from his contemporary time,<sup>86</sup> conspicuously echoes Akimov's statements about his *Hamlet* in the above-mentioned articles published prior to the opening of his production. Akimov, too, argued that Shakespeare was too close to his era to be able to understand and interpret the ongoing events he reports in his *Hamlet*.<sup>87</sup> Indeed class struggle was at the centre of both works: if Shostakovich's opera dehumanised the crowd and the heroine's social environment, Akimov, with the help of the composer, drew a ghastly portrait of the beggars by representing them as parasites, who would do anything for money.

In general, apart from drawing on his extensive experience with music for the theatre, Shostakovich's incidental music provided him with a kind of laboratory to try out many aspects of his still evolving musical language. Being a young composer, and despite the fame that had already to some extent been thrust upon him, his musical language at this time was not yet fixed and secure. Contact with big personalities in related artistic fields, such as Kozintsev, Akimov and not least Vsevolod Meyerhold, was crucial in defining his musical persona (or his multiple personae, one might say). At this point in his career it could be argued that his concerns were not so much social criticism as how to place himself as modern, individual and at the cutting-edge of artistic developments. The development of his experiments from the 1932 *Hamlet* on is not only reflected in his later Shakespearean works, and especially Kozintsev's film, but also in his symphonies and, more immediately, as we have repeatedly seen, in his second opera, *Lady Macbeth*. By composing a self-contained score for *Hamlet*, which, as one of the critics of the time somewhat over-optimistically put it, would 'definitely find its way into the symphonic repertoire',<sup>88</sup> Shostakovich stuck to his manifesto of not submitting to the instructions of theatre directors. Could we perhaps go further and say that in avoiding compromises and following his inner light, Shostakovich composed music that was simply too good for the production, and hence inadvertently exposed its shortcomings? Perhaps the only way to test this hypothesis

<sup>86</sup> See Richard Taruskin, 'The Opera and the Dictator', 36.

<sup>87</sup> See for example 'Doklad N. P. Akimova', 19. This view was echoed by the executive producer (*otvetstvenniy rezhissёр*), Boris Zakhava, during the discussions of the dress rehearsal – see 'Stenogrammi khudozhestvennikh soveshchaniy', 19 April 1932, 32.

<sup>88</sup> E. Gal'skiy, 'Muzyka k Gamletu'.

would be a reconstruction of the entire production – a project which, as we have seen, faces almost insuperable difficulties.

The order of musical numbers and scenes is here reproduced employing several previously unresearched archival materials, and special care is taken to arrive as close as possible to Akimov's original concept (for all the difficulties associated with that term). This order therefore differs from that suggested by Gerard McBurney for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra's CD recording of the incidental music (Signum SIGCD052, 1994), which in cases of doubt follows Shakespeare's text rather than Akimov's manipulations of it. Any future attempt at reconstructing the production should at least take the newly established order into account. On the other hand, contradictory reports, especially those by Yuriy Elagin, suggest that some last-minute changes might have been made in the choice of scenes and music. The famous 'Flute Scene', which according to Elagin was accompanied by the parody of Davidenko's march, might well have been a case in point, given that the 'Hamlet and Rosencrantz' scene with this parody music was excised before the opening night.

Since its reported disappearance from Russian stages between 1762 and 1809 because of the parallels between the tragedy's plot and the murder of Peter III leading to the reign of Catherine the Great, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been considered, especially in Eastern Europe and Russia, as a politically charged tragedy.<sup>89</sup> In this vein, and especially in the Soviet era, productions of this play have often been read and understood as political commentaries. Akimov's production has raised many such speculations, especially among Western scholars. These theories vary from Simon Morrison's reading of it as a direct allusion to the power-struggle of the 1920s leading to Stalin's accession,<sup>90</sup> to Akimov's supposed efforts to comply with the nascent socialist realist doctrine, as suggested by Boika Sokolova.<sup>91</sup> However, certainly by comparison with such productions and adaptations of *Hamlet* as Yuriy Lyubimov's (1970s) and Sergey Slonimsky's opera (1991), that of Akimov made a relatively passive and generalised political statement on historical and political events, rather than a direct or contemporary one. If anything – again to echo Taruskin's controversial reading of *Lady Macbeth* – by concentrating on the positive impact of a hero in something akin to the class struggle, Akimov's *Hamlet* could be read as affirming the general concept of epochal

<sup>89</sup> Rowe, *Hamlet: a Window on Russia*, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Simon Morrison, *The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years*, Oxford etc., Oxford University Press, 2009, 82.

<sup>91</sup> Boika Sokolova, 'Between Ideology and Religion: Some Russian Hamlets of the Twentieth Century', in Peter Holland (ed.), *Shakespeare Survey Vol. 54: Shakespeare and Religion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 147.

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change as outlined by Marxist dialectics. In a more aesthetic vein, the visual and musical treatment of the subject by Akimov and Shostakovich proved that on the eve of Soviet 'Cultural Revolution'<sup>92</sup> it was still possible to look at Shakespeare through contemporary eyes yet at the same time to stay loyal to the Bard – or at least to believe in that possibility.

**MP3** Shostakovich. Suite from Hamlet, op. 32a (excerpts)

Introduction and Night Patrol;  
<http://bit.ly/2CRoBPi>

Funeral March;  
<http://bit.ly/2zb3PYI>

Flourish and Dancing Music;  
<http://bit.ly/2kxCOKM>

The Hunt;  
<http://bit.ly/2DmYDnQ>

Ophelia's Song;  
<http://bit.ly/2BSqcrv>

Lullaby;  
<http://bit.ly/2BNceEH>

Requiem.  
<http://bit.ly/2kR7IwS>

Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Andris Nelsons (DGG, 2016)

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<sup>92</sup> See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978.

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