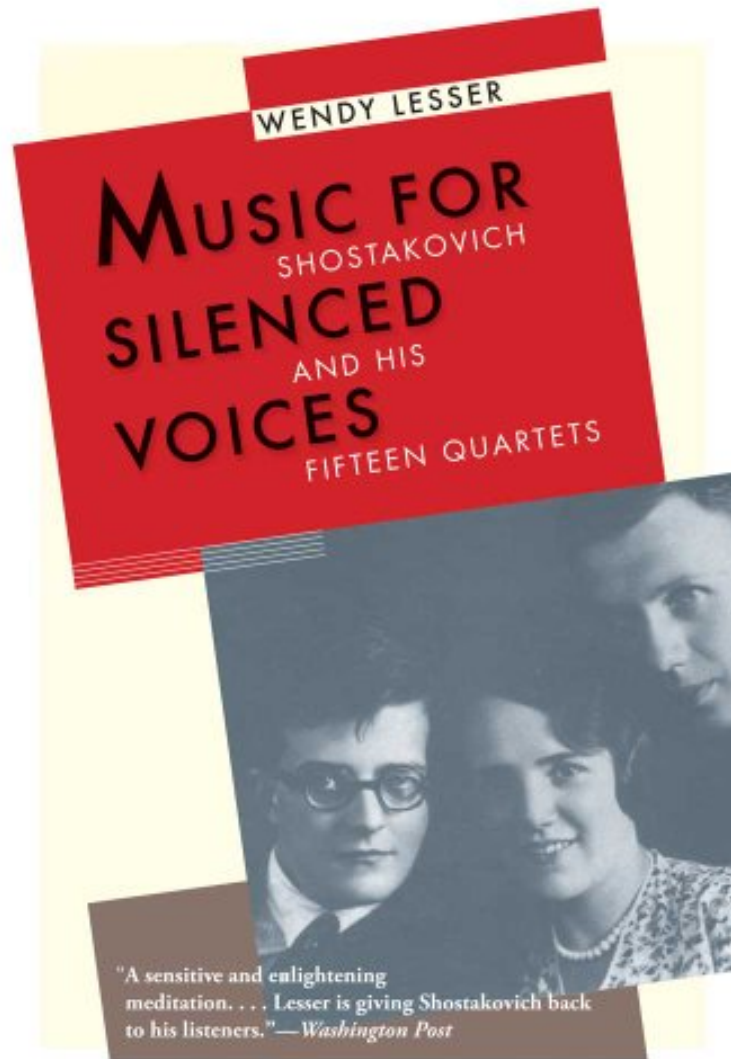


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## Music for Silenced Voices: Shostakovich and His Fifteen Quartets

Wendy Lesser

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**Wendy Lesser : Music for Silenced Voices: Shostakovich and His Fifteen Quartets** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Music for Silenced Voices: Shostakovich and His Fifteen Quartets:

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Adagio: An act of remembrance By Bahij Bawarshi The chapters of Wendy Lesser's book on the string quartets of Shostakovich carry the same titles, and are arranged in the same order, as those of the six consecutive Adagio movements of the Fifteenth Quartet: Elegy - Serenade - Intermezzo - Nocturne - Funeral March - Epilogue. As I glanced at the Contents when I first opened the book, I wondered why and

kept wondering as I read through the book to the end. I find a clue in something Dr. Sigrid Neef has written concerning the Fifteenth Quartet in her excellent liner notes for the complete set of Shostakovich's quartets by Borodin Quartet (BMG-Melodiya): "In the wake of Tchaikovsky, Adagio was not simply a tempo marking in Russian music but a mode of musical thinking implying an act of remembrance." Ms. Lesser includes herself among those who have felt that Shostakovich may have known that the end was near, and in the Fifteenth Quartet, his last, had written an elegy to himself (p. 261). Doesn't a true elegiac work imply looking back and commemoration as well? In borrowing the titles, then, has she intended a book that is itself a literary 'Adagio', an act of remembrance honoring the life and works of Shostakovich? For her it had to be "the life first then the music." She goes on, "Only after learning something of the biography have I been able to hear what was there all along in the quartets." She says it after having accepted that "for the most part the life is a smoke screen that gets between you and the art." Of correct interpretation, "[E]ven the artist is not the ultimate authority in this regard, for he may well have given rise to something that is larger than his own intentions." To interpret Shostakovich, it is "especially important to keep the known facts in mind, precisely because falsehood, dishonesty, and misrepresentation were such devastating issues in his life." The Acknowledgments give an idea of how far she went to gather facts, memories and impressions of Shostakovich and his music to aid her in writing a selective biography of the composer, with the string quartets at its heart. One thing becomes obvious as you go through the pages, and that is Lesser's love for the quartets, an impression that only intensifies the further you read. To her, Shostakovich's own voice is most clearly heard in them, something that is shared by many (including myself). Reflecting the dark experiences of this "tortured and self-torturing man", as she calls him, the music sounds personal and introspective with anxiety defining many of the quartets' movements, even some of the more placid ones. Biographical details, memoirs and anecdotes preface each of the 15 quartets that she discusses. The discussions mirror the viewpoint of an experienced, devoted listener who understands music and musical terms, but not that of a musician or musicologist, for she is not one. Yet I would have liked to read, for example, something on how Shostakovich used musical forms to convey his message, if there was one. Take one quartet, the Sixth. Lesser writes of the third movement's "strongest melancholy tone, the deepest sense of an underlying sorrow"; but she doesn't mention that it was written in passacaglia form, the significance of which is brought out by Dr. Sigrid Neef, describing the same quartet: "The third movement remembers the dead. Ever since the Eighth Symphony of 1943, Shostakovich had chosen the form of the passacaglia - a set of variations on an unvarying ground - as a symbol of grief and remembrance." Lesser often refers to klezmer music in the quartets, and cites the opinion of conductor Kurt Sanderling that Shostakovich used Jewish melodies to express tragic experiences. Diverging from the prevalent interpretation, she accepts Shostakovich's dedication of the Eighth Quartet "in memory of the victims of fascism and war", when most commentators think the quartet was really autobiographical. She explains the klezmer elements in the quartet by pointing out that Jews were the victims of fascism - which is true; and adds, as were the Germans of Dresden the victims of war - also true. Yet somehow she does not mention the many millions of Russian victims of that same war (the exact number is disputed), as if Shostakovich would not have remembered his own people. A curious omission. The Epilogue discusses people's interaction with these quartets, how their emotional power comes out when performed before an audience, and includes sections on truth and irony in Shostakovich's music; his use of allusions; his sense of shame; of humor; recurrent melancholy; and the silences in the music, which Lesser likens to white areas on a painting's canvass. At times she adopts a philosophical tone; at all times her direct, clear style is pleasurable to read. *Music for Silenced Voices* is a fine, thoughtful book, not without its minor flaws, worth reading and re-reading by anyone interested in Shostakovich, his life and music.

24 of 28 people found the following review helpful. VERY disappointed  
By KenOCI was very disappointed with this book and, in fact, read only the first half before giving up. The author tries to explore Shostakovich's string quartets through the events and circumstances of his life when he wrote each one. This is after an initial warning that knowledge of a composer's life is as likely to come between us and the music as it is to "explain" the music. Well, fair warning indeed, which perhaps she should have heeded herself. Be that as it may, the parallel biography and musicology halves never seem to connect. Worse, the music part consists almost entirely of "the third movement makes me feel like..." stuff with almost no analysis of form, no attempt to trace the development of the idiom over time, no connections with other works, and so forth. Of course, not a single musical example is given in the entire book. This is thin stuff indeed! There is at least one site on the Internet with detailed and helpful analyses of all the quartets. Although it's free, it's worth ten times this book. I would recommend looking at that site and skipping this book, which seems to me to have little value.

20 of 22 people found the following review helpful. Conversations over Shostakovich Quartets  
By Grady Harp Wendy Lesser has done her homework! This 'biography' is obviously a work of love as the author informs us of her introductions to the brilliant quartets of Dmitri Shostakovich and how the immediacy of his pure music, music written out of the limelight (the positive and negative focus) of his endurance of Soviet condemnation, is more sensitive to his reactions to his life and the people who surrounded his life. Her writing style approaches conversation and that is an aspect that makes this volume such a pleasure to read. Lesser does indeed understand music and has found a manner in which to evaluate in words her perceptions of the various aspects of the compositions she address in a way that even novices will find understandable. But the really superb part of this book is the technique Lesser uses to offer up the life of one of the greatest composers

of the 20th century, tracing his life from childhood to youth and his introduction to composition, through the period of Stalinism when he was condemned for his decadent Western music, his music from the 4th symphony and his operas were banned from performance, nearly losing his life at the Zhdanov Decree in 1948, how he had the courage to 'bow down' (very much with tongue in cheek) to the demands Stalin placed on him, falling from the stance of being the finest composer in Russia to being penniless until Stalin once again allowed his works to have performances in the USSR. With Stalin's death and with the eventual changes or softening of policy against the arts Shostakovich regained his status and has been influential in music since that time. The author's choice of examining the fifteen quartets as the inner map to revealing the true character and life of Dmitri Shostakovich is a wise one. In the course of the book Lesser explains this choice: 'If the full orchestra can be seen as a mass society in which the performers risk losing their individuality, while the solo recital represents an essentially narcissistic arrangement, then the string quartet might be viewed as an ideal society in which the musicians look to each other for guidance. By eliminating the massive and hierarchical orchestral structure, Shostakovich was attaining a measure of practical relief - from the need to rehearse in a large, public space, with intrusive questions flung at him by a conductor and with every move potentially watched by interfering officials... [he turned to the quartet].....well, so much the more reason for Shostakovich to seek it out in his private life and in his music. This book is graceful, intelligent, and gives a fresh view of the great composer Dmitri Shostakovich and from the vantage of over a half century since his condemnation by a Communist government to his present international acceptance of being one of the most performed composers in our halls Wendy Lesser gives a better picture of the man as well as the artist. Highly Recommended. Grady Harp, April 11

Most previous books about Dmitri Shostakovich have focused on either his symphonies and operas, or his relationship to the regime under which he lived, or both, since these large-scale works were the ones that attracted the interest and sometimes the condemnation of the Soviet authorities. *Music for Silenced Voices* looks at Shostakovich through the back door, as it were, of his fifteen quartets, the works which his widow characterized as a "diary, the story of his soul." The silences and the voices were of many kinds, including the political silencing of adventurous writers, artists, and musicians during the Stalin era; the lost voices of Shostakovich's operas (a form he abandoned just before turning to string quartets); and the death-silenced voices of his close friends, to whom he dedicated many of these chamber works. Wendy Lesser has constructed a fascinating narrative in which the fifteen quartets, considered one at a time in chronological order, lead the reader through the personal, political, and professional events that shaped Shostakovich's singular, emblematic twentieth-century life. Weaving together interviews with the composer's friends, family, and colleagues, as well as conversations with present-day musicians who have played the quartets, Lesser sheds new light on the man and the musician. One of the very few books about Shostakovich that is aimed at a general rather than an academic audience, *Music for Silenced Voices* is a pleasure to read; at the same time, it is rigorously faithful to the known facts in this notoriously complicated life. It will fill readers with the desire to hear the quartets, which are among the most compelling and emotionally powerful monuments of the past century's music.

*Music for Silenced Voices* is a sensitive and enlightening meditation. . . . Lesser, in other words, is giving Shostakovich back to his listeners. Paul Mitchinson, *Washington Post* (Paul Mitchinson *The Washington Post*) Riveting. Laurence Vittes, *The Huffington Post*