

“A DANGEROUS PARODY”

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Luke 19:28-40

When I was in the graduate music school in Buffalo NY, Nicolas Nabokov, cousin of the author, Vladimir Nabokov, was the visiting composer. He entertained our seminar with stories about religious folk customs in the sparsely populated rural areas of Russia. But his expertise was, of course, in music, and he decoded Shostakovich's 5th Symphony for us.

Now, this was toward the end of Nabokov's life, just about 7 years before he died, and the Soviet Union was still intact as a totalitarian state. So, between his advancing years and his presence in the United States, Nabokov perhaps felt a loosening of the tongue - He said more about Shostakovich than he could have gotten away with in Russia.

The music of Shostakovich was fairly new to the average American audience at that time and growing in popularity. His 5th Symphony was by far the best known, and still is today. Parts of the symphony were very militaristic, and had not only passed scrutiny of the Russian government censors, but had greatly pleased them. They felt that Shostakovich had come back from the edge, where his use of satire had nearly made him *persona non grata* to the authorities. And at the time he wrote it, in the late 1930's, a *persona non grata* could end up shot or in the Gulag. (Lest we forget — in addition to the half million people who were shot, conservative estimates place the Gulag population at between nine and 15 million at the height of the Stalinist terror. And a number of Shostakovich's patrons were among them.)

And yet, Shostakovich utilized his mastery of musical form, and his understanding of his fellow countrymen, to trick those who insisted on socialist realism. Underneath the march-like surface, there was a melody that slipped through undetected – sort of like some obscure risqué reference made by a late-night TV host, that slips by an unwitting censor. The melody that was disguised was Shostakovich's own setting of the poem “Rebirth” by Alexander Pushkin.

An artist-barbarian with his lazy brush
Blackens the painting of a genius
And senselessly he covers it with
His own illegitimate drawing.

But with the passing years, the alien colours
Fall off like threadbare scales;
The creation of the genius emerges
before us in its former beauty

Thus vanish the illusions
From my tormented soul
And in it appear visions
Of original and innocent times.

Bearing in mind this text, the 5th Symphony was a very subversive piece of music! The authorities were clueless, while the average Russian citizen, living under the thumb of the repressive government, could revel in the forbidden pleasure of feeling anti-authoritarian solidarity while listening to music that was ignored or praised by the government.

“During the first performance of the symphony, people were reported to have wept during the slow movement. The music, steeped in an atmosphere of mourning, contained echoes of the Russian Orthodox requiem. . . . For an audience that had lost friends and family on a massive scale, these references were apt to evoke intense emotions. This was why the Fifth Symphony was received and cherished by the Soviet public . . . as an expression of the immeasurable grief they endured during Stalin's regime.”¹

In fact, regarding this “ecstatic reaction of the audience . . . , Tolstoy claimed it showed Shostakovich's *perestroyka* (or "restructuring") to be sincere. ‘Our audience is organically incapable of accepting decadent, gloomy, pessimistic art,’ declared Tolstoy. ‘Our audience responds enthusiastically to all that is bright, clear, joyous, optimistic, [and] life-affirming.’ ”²

But we have Shostakovich’s own words which give the lie to that comment, and offer a clue to the actual nature of the piece:

The rejoicing is forced, created under threat . . . It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, “Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,” and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, “Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.”

And so we have a paradox, two perspectives on the same artwork: “Is it a Stalinist victory hymn or is it a parody of one?”³

And to bring us back to our Palm Sunday readings, the same is true here. Palm Sunday, for all the hoopla, is an ambivalent holiday for Christians. And the recognition of this is embedded in the Gospel story. The scene is Jerusalem at Passover. Jerusalem is ruled by the Romans, who leave it to their puppets — those Jewish leaders who collaborated with Rome. They know that if the locals get out of hand, it’s their necks on the chopping block.

And into this forced but fragile Pax Romana (or Roman peace), we find Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey, with (as someone has observed this past week) his feet dragging on the ground. He is flanked not by soldiers but by children and peasants. The fanfares are shouts of “Hosanna!”, which means “Save us!” The red carpet, as it were, consists of cloaks thrown before him on the path. And, although they’re not mentioned in Luke, palm branches are being waved in lieu of official state banners.

Who is this man? Who is it, who comes in the name of the Lord God, Yahweh, rather than in the name of the Lord Caesar? The temple authorities were frightened: “What if he stirs up a riot? Then our détente with the Romans will be undone!” And so they plotted to arrest him and drag him before Pilate. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Now, if you’re not familiar with that “his”-story, maybe it’s time to pull out your old CD of “Jesus Christ Superstar” and listen to the High Priests sing “This Jesus Must Die.” Or, you might consider coming to worship this Thursday or Friday to hear more about Jesus’ fate at the hands of the Romans. But today, we’re sticking with singing “Hosanna”!

And there’s an interesting thing in Luke, besides the lack of actual palms and Hosannas. Luke is the one who, at Jesus birth, has the angels singing “Peace on Earth” to the shepherds below. Now in chapter 19, Luke has the people shouting, “Peace in Heaven”. There’s a paradox here — an earthly procession that appears to be powerless, versus the Roman procession of military power. And Luke highlights it with those 2 bookend shouts of “Peace!” Human power versus godly power; human peace, enforced by violence, versus heavenly peace brought about through love.

There’s a subversive side to the Palm Sunday procession, just as there was a subversive side to the 5th Symphony of Shostakovich. Caesar and his minions did not recognize the man on the donkey as reigning over them, but the people “got it”. They were present for the miracles and healings. They heard the message of liberation. They experienced the agape love of Jesus for the poor, the hungry, the mourners, the outcast. They, like we, were fully into this celebration . . . they may not have seen what was down the road, they might still be hoping this man would be the Messiah to crush Rome. But despite all that, they felt his power and his teaching “as one with authority.”

The procession on that first Palm Sunday was a dangerous parody of the power of Rome. And even today, our Palm Sunday celebration is a dangerous parody to all the earthly powers that seek to devour the poor. We Christians are inherently subversive. And our ultimate counter-cultural weapon is the love of Christ.

Amen. May it be so.

Let us rise and sing hymn #76, “My Song Is Love Unknown”.

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ENDNOTES

1. “Shostakovich 5th Symphony”, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_\(Shostakovich\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._5_(Shostakovich))
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*