

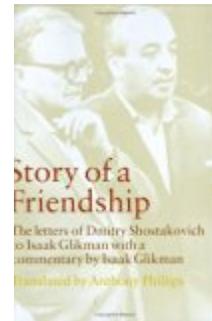
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dmitrii Shostakovich. *Story of a Friendship: The Letters of Dmitry Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman, 1941-1975.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001. xliv + 340 pp. \$36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3979-7.

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The Best of Friends

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This interesting and valuable book presents one half of the extensive correspondence between one of the most important musical figures of the twentieth century, composer Dmitrii Shostakovich, and his dear friend, Isaak Glikman. The letters span more than three decades, from the beginning of World War II until the composer's death in 1975. In addition to translations of Shostakovich's letters, the volume contains a rich and extended preface and copious annotations, both by Glikman.

Shostakovich's letters range from the banal to the profound. Ironically, this is perhaps the most important service provided by the publication of these letters. Too often, Shostakovich is presented as some kind of saint or martyr of Russian culture, an approach that reduces his complex creative personality to a caricature. Instead, in these letters we see both Shostakovich the man, sending birthday and holiday greetings, coping with the stresses of domestic life, battling both illness and hypochondria, and enjoying the company and emotional closeness of good friends, and Shostakovich the composer, at various points elated by success, afraid that his creativity has run out, and frustrated by the limits of Soviet cultural orthodoxy. Throughout the letters, the constant thread is the importance of his personal relationship to Glikman as friend, confidante, and colleague.

Although Glikman's letters to Shostakovich are lost, the preface provides a necessary introduction to the two

friends' relationship. Glikman, with good humor and insight, reveals his early hero worship of the composer. That Glikman devotedly preserved Shostakovich's letters to him reveals something of the intensity with which Glikman pursued this relationship. Nevertheless, as their friendship deepened, and as time passed, Glikman was able to see beyond the "great composer" to the human being. His reverence for the composer and his work, as well as his friendship for the man, does tend to skew Glikman's presentation of the letters and the tone of the preface. This is not an analytical work, for all its value to the scholarly community. Rather, it is a monument to Shostakovich by a bereaved and deeply loving friend.

In addition to the preface, Glikman's voice emerges strongly in the notes and two short appendices. His copious annotations to Shostakovich's letters (representing nearly a third of the volume) sometimes border on the ridiculous, as he feels compelled to comment on every conceivable question and nuance of Soviet life for the reader. Many of the annotations, however, do provide substantial insight into Shostakovich's personal life and the Soviet cultural milieu. It is worth the effort to read the more banal comments in order to avoid missing those that are more profound. By revealing Glikman's own personality more completely, the notes prove invaluable in interpreting the relationship between the two friends. The appendices include four short satirical songs (with text in Russian and English) and an essay, "On the Article 'Muddle Instead of Music,' and Other Matters," all

by Glikman. The translation is unobtrusive and often elegant. Great care has been taken to preserve, as much as possible, the “feel” of personal correspondence, even where this necessitates literal translation of Russian salutations and closings that have no English equivalents.

As a whole, the book is a valuable contribution to the literature on Russian and Soviet musical culture. For specialists on Russian music, the volume provides access to an important set of correspondence by the composer, as well as new insights into his personality and relationships. The volume’s greatest value, perhaps, is in its accessibility to a wide range of nonspecialists. Russian scholars and graduate students in a variety of disciplines would benefit from this intimate presentation of Soviet cultural life, as would general readers. Musicians

and musicologists interested in Russian music but lacking Russian language skills will find the book especially valuable in providing relatively direct access to the composer’s thoughts and ideas on his own work and life. Although the book is not appropriate for classroom use in its entirety, it could be excerpted fruitfully as primary source material on Soviet cultural politics for history or political science classes at the university level.

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