

A Review of *The Noise of Time*
by Julian Barnes (London:
Jonathan Cape, 2016), 192 pages.

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Roland Barthes's 1967 proclamation that the author had died aimed to stem a twentieth-century tide of art criticism obsessed with biographical readings of artworks—although it also promised to free the artist from their personal history.¹ Despite this, Dmitri Shostakovich, the focus of Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time*, suffers a doubly Barthesian misfortune: not only is his music interpreted in a biographical manner, but he can never escape the nightmare of Soviet history to freely pursue his art. Fittingly, then, *The Noise of Time*'s central focus is on the precarious space between cultural production and state power, or, to put the issue in moral terms, the responsibility of the artist to society.

Shostakovich's faith in the apolitical and redemptive power of music never quite gels with the demands of Soviet bureaucracy. Similar to Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a man who comes "unstuck in time," Shostakovich feels out of step with history, as if "he was always on the wrong metronome setting" (12). Shostakovich is an

anachronistic figure, a gifted musician who combines a romanticised belief in *l'art pour l'art* with a distinctively twentieth-century sense of historical chaos and alienation. Of course, the problem faced by the artist who attempts to segregate themselves from the daily life of society is that their attitude renders art inconsequential, breeding all manner of reprimands directed at the “ivory tower” with its highfalutin pretensions of art. Conversely, the drawback of art willingly or unwillingly co-opted for political purposes is that it soon becomes diluted, compromising the artist’s sacred independence.

Thankfully, Barnes’s contribution to this debate does not suffer from either/or reductiveness. The widespread popularity of Shostakovich’s music in Soviet Russia assuages any possible critiques of its opacity and avant-garde elitism that may arise. And there is an intriguing suggestion in *The Noise of Time* to explain Shostakovich’s popularity: it is paradoxically the oppressive Soviet diktaks that bear down on Shostakovich that make his music so experimental and exciting. A decree from above becomes an opportunity for artistic innovation. Of course, the composer is keenly aware that if his music strays too quickly into formalism he will be “swiftly corrected,” and he recalls “a face in a photograph that went missing the next time that photograph was printed” (47)—an allusion to the famous excision of secret police official Nikolai Yezhov from an image with Stalin. Forget the artist, however: Shostakovich himself is mainly concerned with the question of whether his music will survive. It is one of *The Noise of Time*’s greatest achievements that personal obliteration at the hands of power may ironically liberate Shostakovich from his music, sating his belief in art for art’s sake while simultaneously rendering him a victim of Soviet history, a history he so ardently, if at times half-heartedly, tries to escape.

If this yearning for liberation seems familiar to readers of Barnes, it is because the author has juggled such themes—the relationships between art and the artist, history and the individual—since at least his 1984 masterpiece, *Flaubert’s Parrot*. Barnes’s earlier novel’s invocation of Flaubert, however, and of the French author’s insistence that “the artist must manage to make posterity believe that he never

existed,” takes on a slightly darker meaning in *The Noise of Time*.² And yet things for Shostakovich are not always as dire as they seem—at least not when rendered in Barnes’s by turns comic and exquisite prose. The best moments in *The Noise of Time* are those that use black humour to expose Shostakovich’s folly; he is more the bumbling bourgeois figure than the faithful Soviet comrade. The scene in which Shostakovich realises he has driven his car home with the handbrake on (hence the profusion of smoke coming from the vehicle) is particularly enjoyable. It recalls the travails of Nabokov’s comic character Pnin, and suggests that Barnes may have been inspired by Pnin when developing his own novel’s protagonist. A Russian émigré, Pnin struggles with the cultural particularities of the West, while Shostakovich is an exile in his own country. It seems reasonable to claim that Barnes is concerned with deconstructing the figure of the artist, contrasting what often amounts to a societal deification of the “genius” with the often absurd and paltry reality of the genius’s life. At one point, on a whim, the composer comes close to marrying a sex worker called Rozochka, except that he had “left his identity documents back at the hotel” (35). Quite skilfully, *The Noise of Time* presents Shostakovich as a Nabokovian character in an Orwellian world.

Yet the threat of Big Brother never quite dissipates to the extent that the novel devolves to a comedy of errors starring the eccentric Shostakovich. Although the totalitarian antics of Stalin and Khrushchev appear often on the brink of absurdity, power demands Shostakovich act in so docile a way that not even black humour can reduce the severity of his capitulations. Signing a statement against the novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is a particularly galling low point for the composer. Shostakovich’s coping mechanism for his egregious pragmatism is to take refuge in irony. He may sign a piece of paper here and there, and may read a speech about the virtues of Soviet communism written by someone else, but he never actually *means* any of it. Shostakovich’s retreat into personal justifications, however, only magnifies the limitations of his ironic attitude, which become clear as his acts begin to ramify, producing material, real-world consequences. It is all well and good to rationalise one’s own sins in the abstract,

but when the upshot is a fellow artist's exile, or their imprisonment in a gulag, then the rhetorical device starts to wear thin. Shostakovich masks his unpleasant actions and concessions to power within a highly convenient, determinist view of history. Indeed, a careful reader will note that the composer, or at least the narrator, invokes the word "destiny" no fewer than seven times throughout the novel. But perhaps we should be wary of casting a verdict on Shostakovich too quickly, since one of the effects of *The Noise of Time* is to bring into focus the abruptness of our own ethical judgments. At a textual level, the novel highlights what might be called the ethics of narration: *The Noise of Time's* narrator is Flaubertian, detached, and reserves his judgement—"objective" is the rather problematic word that comes to mind. But this narratorial stance seems particularly apt when we remember that the facts of the novel constitute a source of continuing historical debate. For instance, was Shostakovich's interrogator in 1936 called Zanchevsky, Zakrevsky, or Zakovsky?³ From Barnes's perspective, the historian's frustrations are the novelist's blessings. The pitfalls of historical slippage can be met by fiction's capacity to colour the lacunae of Shostakovich's life. Mischievously, though, Barnes's reanimation of Shostakovich serves as a reminder of the fictions we tell one another and, more importantly, the fictions we tell ourselves. In this way the novel is quite a feat, especially when we remember that Shostakovich simply wants "to be left alone with music and his family and his friends" (89), and would become a man whom death would liberate from history, art, and that ongoing static—the noise of time.

Notes

1. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Aspen: The Magazine in a Box 5 and 6* (1967), available at <http://www.ubu.com/aspens/aspens5and6/index.html>; reproduced in Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–148.

2. See Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 86.

3. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Zanchevsky, Zakrevsky or Zakovsky?" Review of *The Noise of Time* by Julian Barnes, *London Review of Books* 38 no. 4, 18 February 2016.