CINEFORUM
ISSN : 0009-7039
Vol. 65. No. 2, 2025

Irony in Sound: Shostakovich's Satires, Op.109 and the Art of Musical Subversion

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Abstract

This piece looks at how musical irony is used in Dmitri Shostakovich's vocal cycle Satires, Op.109, which was written in 1960 during a time of political unrest in the Soviet Union. The study looks at how Shostakovich uses musical form, intertextual quotation, and performative nuance to express multiple meanings through Sasha Chorny's satirical poems. It does this by combining music analysis, literary interpretation, and performance studies. Even though the songs in the cycle seem funny or not political at first, they all have deep criticisms of Soviet culture norms, intellectual pretences, and existential contradictions. The paper uses Esti Sheinberg's theory of musical comedy to show how Shostakovich changes traditional forms like the waltz and march by purposely clashing styles, making tones unstable, and using extreme dynamics. The study also looks at how fragments from Beethoven, Rachmaninoff, and Tchaikovsky add to the irony by setting up emotional dissonance and historical dialogues. At the end of the day, Satires, Op.109 is both an act of creative resistance and a lesson in how to subvert a composition. The results are meant to show that Shostakovich's voice work was an important part of his creative legacy and that irony was a powerful way for people to hide their discontent, express their feelings, and create new art while living under strict dictatorships.

Key words: Musical Subversion, Satires, Poems, Op.109

1. Introduction

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975) is still thought to be one of the most important, mysterious, and difficult musicians of the 20th century [1]. He created a very unique musical language full of irony, parody, and coded defiance while living through some of the most oppressive decades in Soviet history [2]. Shostakovich learnt to use stylistic incongruities, tonal ambiguities, and intertextual allusions as subtle criticisms of power, ideology, and conformity. He did this

because he was constantly watched by the Stalinist government and later by Soviet cultural authorities [3].

His symphonies and string quartets have been known for a long time to be great examples of modernism and political commentary [4]. However, his vocal pieces are just as interesting because they show how he thought about art [5]. One of these is the 1960 song cycle Satires (Pictures of the Past), Op.109, which is a great example of instrumental irony. The cycle, which is based on five songs by satirical writer Sasha Chorny, seems silly or unrelated to politics at first glance [6]. It has a funny tone, but it's really a serious attack on intellectual arrogance, gender roles, and the silly things that happen in society [7].

This study talks about how Satires fits into the history of Russian art songs called romanans and looks at their formal structure, literary interplay, and historical setting. It also looks at how Shostakovich's techniques give performers a lot of room for dramatic involvement and expressive nuance through in-depth musical analysis and interpretive commentary.

2. Historical and stylistic Background

Romantics, which are a type of Russian art song, have changed over time in many ways that represent larger changes in Russian culture, including art, politics, and philosophy [8]. Mikhail Glinka, who is often called the "father of Russian classical music," was the first person to shape the style [9]. He wrote music that mixed European Romanticism with lyrical and rhythmic ideas that were uniquely Russian [10]. After him, musicians such as Dargomyzhsky, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and Borodin joined the nationalistic movement. They emphasised realism, folk idioms, and the expressive use of language in song [11]. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Sergei Rachmaninoff wrote deeply emotional and harmonically complex songs that marked the end of this path. Their work elevated the art song to a higher status in Russian performance tradition [12].

The 20th century brought about big changes. As the Russian Revolution and Soviet philosophy took hold, political ideas began to seep into art more and more. Early Soviet musicians like Prokofiev and Stravinsky played with modernist and experimental styles, but they often had to do so while being watched by the government or while living outside of Russia [13, 14]. Shostakovich, on the other hand, stayed in the USSR and dealt with these problems from within. Because of this, his approach to the art song was both new and smart: he kept the intimacy of the style while using it for subtle social criticism and emotional depth [3].

The unique thing about Shostakovich's art songs is that they combine precise structure with grotesque satire, absurdist humour, and dramatic irony [15]. Unlike the composers who came before him, who often set Romantic or philosophy texts to music, Shostakovich liked texts that could be used to criticise social norms in a biting way, especially ones that were full of irony and double meaning [16]. Shostakovich's second stage of composition, from 1948 to 1966, was shaped by his excommunication under the Zhdanov Doctrine and his later reluctant acceptance into the Communist Party. During this time, he wrote more vocal works to show his personal discontent and philosophical reflection [17].

During this time, he turned to vocal miniatures as a way to make deeper criticisms [18]. Cycles like From Jewish Folk Poetry, Op.79, Satires, Op.109, and Five Romances on Texts from Krokodil, Op.121, show this. Satires, in particular, show how Shostakovich combined the style of Russian Romances with the satirical spirit of literature to make songs that sound easy but are actually very complex and politically charged. His choice of texts, taste for ironic gestures, and mixing of styles show that he has a deep understanding of both Russian musical tradition and the limitations of the Soviet era. [19, 20]

3. Irony in Shostakovich's Language: Theoretical Framework

Irony is a subtle and multifaceted way to express yourself through music, especially in authoritarian governments where open criticism was not allowed [16, 21]. The important 2017 study by Esti Sheinberg [15], Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich, gives us a basic way to look at how the composer used irony in his work. Sheinberg says that musical irony comes from purposely making form and content, expectation and result, or surface and subtext, not match up [15]. In Shostakovich's work, irony is not only an artistic tool, but also a way to fight against culture and say what's really going on by being vague [22].

Shostakovich uses a variety of methods to create comedy in his music, which together create a two-layered listening experience. At first glance, his works may seem to fit with Soviet aesthetics which are simple, melodic, and even fun, but a closer look shows that they are actually full of hidden criticism and subversive depth [23]. These are some of his most useful tools:

- **Intertextual Quotation:** Shostakovich often uses quotes from famous musicians like Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninoff in his own work [24]. Most of the time,

these borrowings aren't meant to be happy; instead, they are taken out of their original context and reframed in ways that change or make fun of the original meaning [12]. When Rachmaninoff's "Spring Waters" quote in a scathing satire about society falling apart, it create a shocking contrast between Romantic longing and modern disappointment [25].

- **Genre Subversion:** He often changes the order of musical forms that are usually linked with high emotions or patriotism, like the waltz, lullaby, and military march, and pairs them with grotesque, absurd, or pointless poetry. This creates a tension between what is expected and what is said, which makes the viewer uncomfortable and hints at an ideological critique [26].
- **Expressive Disjunction:** Shostakovich breaks up the flow of ideas by quickly changing the speed, tone, and dynamics. A dissonant chord could quickly cut through a soft melody, and a lullaby could turn into a battle cry. These breaks in the music are like unstable mental or social states that keep the listener from falling into a steady emotional path [27].
- **Stylistic Collage:** He mixes different styles of music into one piece, like neoclassicism and modernism, and childlike themes and complex melody. The different layers, which show ideological inconsistencies and internal conflict, give the piece a sense of fragmentation and irony [28].

These kinds of tricks do more than just make people laugh; they also encourage a type of hermeneutic comedy that asks the reader to read between the lines. Often, the ironic layer doesn't come from a single action, but from a series of musical choices that go against what the text or setting suggests should happen [29]. Because of this, Satires, Op.109 can be interpreted in different ways: as a fun piece for casual listeners, or as a biting critique of Soviet life for those who know what they're talking about [30].

In a political atmosphere where direct criticism could lead to job loss or worse, Shostakovich used irony to keep his artistic integrity [31, 32]. His irony is never just funny; it's sad, a way for him to stay alive and speak out. In this way, it fits with Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, in which chaos and humour are used as ways to fight back. In this way of thinking, irony is not a fancy part of writing; it's a building block of composition [33].

Table 1 shows the wide range of vocal works that Shostakovich composed. This shows how deeply he was interested in poetic text, national identity, and political subtlety. These works

include translations from British, Japanese, Jewish, and Spanish sources, as well as verses by famous Russian writers like Pushkin, Blok, and Tsvetayeva. They show Shostakovich's interest in literature from around the world and his skill at finding irony in different historical and cultural settings. One of the most interesting pieces in this collection is Satires (Op.109), which doesn't seem like a one-off experiment but rather a continuation of his work to set subversive or satirical texts to music. When looked at with cycles like From Jewish Folk Poetry (Op.79) and Five Romances on Texts from Krokodil (Op.121), Satires shows the ironic voice that is present in all of his work from the middle of the 20th century, characterised by genre switching, style dissonance, and subtly expressed disagreement.

Table 1. Selected vocal works and song cycles by Dmitri Shostakovich, categorized by opus number, poet, vocal/instrumental arrangement, and date of composition [34].

OPUS NO.	TITLE	POET / AUTHOR	VOICE TYPE / INSTRUMENTATION	YEARS
OP.4	*Two Fables by Krylov*	Ivan Krylov	Mezzo-soprano / orchestra with harp and celesta	1922
OP.21	*Six Romances on Japanese Poems*	Various (Japanese, Tagore)	Tenor / full orchestra (with two harps)	1928–1932
OP.46	*Four Romances on Poems by Pushkin*	Aleksandr Pushkin	Bass / piano	1936–1937
OP.62	*Six Romances on Verses by British Poets*	Various (British)	Low male voice / piano	1942
OP.M	*Eight British and American Folksongs*	Various (British / American)	Low voice / small orchestra (with harp)	1943
OP.79	*From Jewish Folk Poetry*	Translated by Spendiarova, Globa	Soprano, Contralto, Tenor / piano	1948

OP.84	*Two Romances on Verses by Lermontov*	Mikhail Lermontov	Male voice / piano	1950
OP.86	*Four Songs to Words by Dolmatovsky*	Yevgeni Dolmatovsky	Voice / piano	1950–1951
OP.91	*Four Monologues on Verses by Pushkin*	Aleksandr Pushkin	Bass voice / piano	1952
OP.98	*Five Romances on Verses of Yevgeni Dolmatovsky*	Yevgeni Dolmatovsky	Bass voice / piano	1954
OP.100	*Spanish Songs*	Spanish folk, translated by Bolotin	Mezzo-soprano / piano	1956
OP.109	*Satires (Pictures of the Past)*	Sasha Chorny	Soprano / piano	1960
OP.121	*Five Romances on Texts from Krokodil*	Texts from satirical magazine *Krokodil*	Bass voice / piano	1965
OP.127	*Seven Romances on Poems of Aleksandr Blok*	Aleksandr Blok	Soprano / violin, cello, piano	1967
OP.143	*Six Songs on Poems of Marina Tsvetayeva*	Marina Tsvetayeva	Contralto / piano	1973
OP.145	*Suite on Verses of Michelangelo*	Michelangelo Buonarroti	Bass / piano	1974
OP.146	*Four Verses of Captain Lebyadkin*	Fyodor Dostoyevsky	Bass / piano	1974

4. Analytical Overview of *Satires, Op.109*

4.1 "To the Critic"

The first song in the cycle, "To the Critic," presents Shostakovich's ironic language through simple but sharp music [35]. The piece is in F major, but the stability of that key is constantly weakened by eighth-note figures that repeat and a droning, clock-like accompaniment that shows how the reviewers being sneered at are too quick to judge [35]. A "prelude-postlude" style is used, which is similar to the poem's circular argument and ironic twist. This irony is heightened by Shostakovich's sudden changes in dynamics, from quiet sections to rapid bursts of fortissimo, and by using dissonant intervals, especially the minor second, which throw off an otherwise stable tonal framework [36, 37].

This song requires more than just technical skill from the players; it also calls for dramatic subtlety and over-the-top theatricality [35]. The performance must give the vocal line a sarcastic twist by using a clipped, biting tone that matches the harsh criticism of self-important commentators in the text [36]. It's important to use facial expressions and body language to convey a tone of contempt, especially in lines that reveal the ironic irony that the "great critic" is actually just a normal, bearded guy. The sudden cadential ending of the postlude works like a musical sneer, giving the piece a sarcastic ending [37].

4.2 "Spring's Awakening"

"Spring's Awakening," Shostakovich's second song, cleverly borrows from Rachmaninoff's early piano piece Spring Waters (Op. 14, No. 11), but it does so in a critical and ironic way. The accompaniment purposely sounds like Rachmaninoff's signature left-hand triplet figure, but it is "distorted to convey parody rather than reverence" [38]. Shostakovich's melody is "evocative of chaos rather than renewal" [39], but it doesn't sound like Romantic optimism. Instead, it's full of chromatic dissonances and sudden tonal changes.

Scholars have also thought that the use of a beat that sounds like a march was a satirical attack on Soviet ideology. Fay [40] says that this kind of musical rhetoric "turns forced positivity into an expression of mechanical drive, bringing out the emptiness that lies beneath". So, the staccato articulation and harmonic ambiguity of the song are like sound images of mental fragmentation and philosophical confusion [39, 40].

When it comes to acting, "Spring's Awakening" needs very smart dramatic control. The piece is a masterclass in changing moods because it requires the singer to quickly move from silly

domestic scenes like the "cat marriage" to sharp social critiques like references to hunger and environmental damage [41]. The complicated rhythms and wide range of vocal registers require both technical precision and quick interpretation. As the tempo picks up near the end, the dramatic arc builds up to a cynical "punchline," which puts a lot of pressure on performers to give a sharply bitter ending with vocal flexibility and nuanced expression [42].

4.3 “Descendants”

There is a sad 3/4 metre in "Descendants" that fits with what G. Sly [43] "emotive rhythms expressing turmoil and anxiety" in Shostakovich's later song cycles [43]. Minor thirds are used to create a sense of tonal uncertainty as the harmonic structure moves back and forth between G minor and A-flat minor. This vague harmonic terrain is like a sound metaphor for mental breakdown, similar to "the collapse of functional tonality as an index of psychic crisis" [44]. The song's repetitive background motif is a metaphor for the heavy weight of generational pain. Shostakovich's use of broken melodies and dark tonal shading is also a reflection of this theme. J.A. Bermudez [45]connects this musical technique to Shostakovich's larger themes of "failure, death, and legacy" in his later works, focussing on how these things all contribute to existential dread [45]. When performed, the song calls for a controlled emotional response while also being dynamically powerful. The Shostakovich's vocal lines often need a "neurotic vibrato" and "prophetic sadness," which show how the narrator's mind is falling apart [46]. The descending postlude, a slow harmonic plunge, represents the end of life and awareness. It needs to be played with a stillness that sounds like a trance [47] [48].

4.4 “Misunderstanding”

By using irony to change the form of the music in "Misunderstanding," Shostakovich explores the conflict between society norms and personal feelings. The piece starts with a graceful waltz, a style that is usually linked with romance and elegance. However, the over-the-top phrasing and distorted harmonics quickly subvert expectations. This kind of rhythmic incongruity is a signature of Shostakovich's ironic style, in which everyday sayings are turned on their heads to make people think critically [15]. The waltz turns into a stereotype when it shows a middle-aged woman trying too hard to get a much younger guy to like her. This is a situation that is full of social satire. The metre quickly changes to 2/4 as the story turns to the male character's discomfort, and the harmony breaks down into fragmented, atonal textures. This interruption

shows how the character's mind is broken up, creating an uneasy and funny contrast between the idealised love and the awkward reality. These changes between lyrical and dissonant idioms are at the heart of Shostakovich's comments on the absurdities of society [49].

The theatrical structure of the song requires the artist to be very flexible. The singer must switch between three different roles: a sarcastic storyteller, a seductive woman, and a young man who isn't sure what to do. The fact that Shostakovich's works have multiple plots requires a Bakhtinian dialogism, which is a stacking of voices that must be clearly distinguished in performance [16]. The woman's voice should be full and overstated, and the young man's should be short and getting more tense. The narrator's voice should sound cold and emotionless. Shostakovich's vocal cycles often use satire as a form of music, calling for a singer who can "manage irony without lapsing into sentimentality" [35]. Quick changes in dynamics and expressive movement are important parts of making this piece's silliness and emotional distance come across. To get to the greater criticism hidden beneath the music, you need to be good at comedic timing and understand how people think and feel [50].

4.5 “Kreutzer Sonata”

"Kreutzer Sonata," the last song in the cycle, wraps up both the themes and the feelings. Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9 (often called the "Kreutzer Sonata") and Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin are woven into Shostakovich's work, both as a tribute and as humorous counterpoints to the story's emotional range. Shostakovich often used multiple quotes to create tension and irony in his dialogue [16]. The male character is presented with a sad, dance-like theme that shows how fragile his emotions are and how romantic he thinks love is. On the other hand, the female character's music has short, staccato beats in a driving 2/4 metre, which makes me think of Soviet labour songs. This ironic flipping of common musical phrases based on gender questions long-held beliefs. This method is part of Shostakovich's larger pattern of using musical oddities to question social and cultural norms [15].

As the musical parts build up to an operatic climax, the dramatic arc gets stronger. In The Kreutzer Sonata, Shostakovich's references to Beethoven and Tchaikovsky are filtered through Tolstoy's criticism of romantic idealism. This turns well-known themes into ways to explore how modern moral ambiguity has made men lose their masculinity [51]. This piece makes a lot of demands on the actors. It's important for the singer to be able to mix lyrical legato with sharp rhythmic articulation, showing both vulnerability and passionate fervour. The end of the

work, singers have to go through "emotional extremes through technical precision," especially in the final, cacophonous descent that shows how romantic illusions fall apart [35].

5. Discussion

Dmitri Shostakovich's vocal works, especially his song cycles from the middle of the 20th century, are richly complex works that mix music, politics, and comedy. His symphonic and chamber works have long been seen as subtle attacks on Soviet authoritarianism. But his art songs show a more personal and text-based way of subverting things. These vocal pieces, which were written during times of shifting ideologies, turn irony from a decorative or rhetorical flourish into a structural principle of composition. Shostakovich creates meanings that are complex and swing between compliance and critique by combining musical phrases that seem harmless or playful with texts that are satirical or absurdist. In this way, his vocal music goes beyond typical lyrics and instead serves as a covert space for political and aesthetic confusion. Putting together the musical form with its political and social setting is one of the most interesting things about Satires, Op.109. A close study of all five songs in the cycle supports the idea that they use ironic devices like intertextual quotation, genre subversion, exaggerated dynamic changes, and stylistic collage. For example, in To the Critic, the repetitive eighth notes and harmonically still texture are meant to be a joke about how professional review isn't very reliable [15, 52]. In the same way, Spring's Awakening breaks down romantic connections with the changing of the seasons by using Rachmaninoff's Spring Waters in a way that is distorted and emotionally empty. This turns nostalgia into farce and shows how unrealistic Soviet positivity was.

In this cycle, one of Shostakovich's main ideas is to play with people's expectations, especially by making musical standards and textual meanings seem to not go together. One striking example is Kreutzer Sonata, which flips the usual gender roles in music: weak waltz patterns represent the sad male intellectual, while labor-song rhythms, which are usually associated with ideological strength, support the female figure. This ironic re-gendering criticises not only character stereotypes but also larger Soviet ideas of what it means to be a man and what cultural power means [19]. Using Sheinberg's theory framework also shows that irony is more than just funny; it can be used as an existential question, an aesthetic comment, or an ideological resistance, all at the same time. This creates a complex communication landscape.

The talk of performance practice is interesting, but it would be better with a more rigorous application of performance theory. Some ways to understand the music are suggested, like using different vocal tones, body language, and characters. However, these ideas could be improved by working with scholars like Goehr or Abbate, who have written a lot about performative agency and musical embodiment. A lot of research has not been done on the use of irony in live performance, especially on how it works with different types of audiences and emotional levels. Also, using references to other works [35, 47, 53, 54] assumes that the listener knows a lot about music. A more in-depth look at how irony works when these kinds of quotations aren't known would make the work more useful and show a more open model of how listeners interpret things.

The part of censorship and reception is another area that needs more attention. It is recognised that the piece was written in 1960, which was a big year for Shostakovich personally and politically because he had just been forced to join the Communist Party. However, the reception history and climate of Soviet musical control are only briefly talked about. More research into Volkov's controversial memoir Testimony (1990) [55] and Martynov's critical views (2015) [56]could help us understand how vocal music was used as a way for people to express themselves in public and private, letting composers voice their disagreements while pretending to follow the rules. Understanding satires not only in terms of how they are written, but also in terms of how they have been distributed and how they have affected readers would help you understand how dangerous they can be.

By putting Satires, Op.109 at the centre of the study, the work ultimately shows how important vocal miniatures are to Shostakovich's artistic and political legacy. Instead of being ignored or thought to be funny, these songs stand out as concentrated works of ironic genius—pieces where precise structure, literary reference, and expressive dissonance come together. This way of looking at things fits with larger trends in musicology that see composers as part of complicated social and political processes, not just as artists who work alone [29, 57, 58]. The analysis balances academic rigour with interpretive accessibility by showing how musical devices can be used as tools of veiled rebellion. It is useful for both scholars and performers.

6. Conclusion

Shostakovich was a master of musical comedy, and Satires, Op.109 is a great example of this. He mixes literary criticism and new ways of putting words together by subverting genres, using

quotations, and making tones sound different. Shostakovich takes the Russian art song to a higher level of philosophical involvement by adding his DSCH motif and making formal unity across different styles. The cycle is still an important part of 20th-century music as a piece of artistic resistance and psychological reality. In the future, scholars should learn more about his vocal work and put it in context with his symphonic and operatic heritage.

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