

[Print this page](#)

Dissident too limiting a term for artists, says Solzhenitsyn's son

Conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn has strong opinions on how music and politics mix, writes **Matthew Westwood**

21mar06

NO discussion of the relationship between artists and a repressive state would be complete without consideration of the composer Dmitri Shostakovich and the author Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Both were active during the dark years of the Soviet Union and both responded to the regime through their art. Some of Shostakovich's music, it's said, depicts the violence and relentless horror of Soviet brutality, and the composer famously fell out of favour with Stalin over his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned and later expelled from the Soviet Union for his writing, especially his account of the labour camps, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Composer and author are sometimes described as dissidents, but Solzhenitsyn's son, the pianist and conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn, does not regard Shostakovich as being in the same class.

"Of course not in the way my father was," he says. "But very few people were."

The composer, born 100 years ago, died in 1975 and met Solzhenitsyn senior only a few times.

"One of the reasons they did not meet more often, and did not hit it off, was because they were at very different points of their lives," Solzhenitsyn says. "My father was engaged in a fight to the death with the same regime that Shostakovich, at that point in his life, had reached a certain accommodation with, had reached a certain truce with. [Shostakovich] was sick, he was physically not well, and he was tired, and he was not interested in fighting any more. I think that's a fair assessment."

Solzhenitsyn, 36, is in Melbourne to give concerts and masterclasses at the Australian National Academy of Music. He has a busy career as a concert pianist and conductor, and recently has joined the faculty of the famed Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, which, together with the Juilliard School in New York, is regarded as the top conservatory in the US. Places are offered on scholarship only and competition is fierce; the pianist Leon Fleisher and violinist Pamela Frank are among its teaching staff.

Solzhenitsyn was born in Moscow but raised in the US after his father's exile: he speaks with an American accent. He studied piano at the Curtis with Gary Graffman. He also took lessons in London, on the recommendation of family friend Mstislav Rostropovich, with Maria Curcio, a student of Artur Schnabel.

"We thought about who the teachers were out there, and she seemed like No. 1," he says. "It was the best decision I ever made."

A strong sense of Solzhenitsyn's lineage comes through in conversation with him. It's not only his biological inheritance -- although proud of his father, he says the famous surname can be a burden -- but his musical one. There is a line of artistry that runs from Schnabel through Curcio to Solzhenitsyn. He describes every lesson with Curcio, who is retired and lives in London, as an event, "so inspired, so elemental".

"It was an event in the very basic sense of what it means to be human," he says. "The sense that man does not live by bread alone, that we are here for something else."

"And each lesson, without exception, with Maria, there was a sense of a sacrament. There was a sense of something unbelievably important taking place. And that's what every lesson should be."

One aspect of Curcio's method was the teaching of piano technique around the music of Mozart and Chopin; not, as one might expect, Beethoven. Solzhenitsyn explains that while Beethoven piano technique was specific to the music Beethoven was writing, the keyboard skill associated with Chopin would have greater consequence for the music of later romantic composers such as Rachmaninov.

"And everything else is sort of an extrapolation of that," says Solzhenitsyn, who teaches his own students at Curtis with the same priorities. "I want to emphasise that we're speaking technically, in terms of how to play the piano. It's not really a judgment at all of the importance of those composers. I personally don't play a lot of Chopin, but I think it's essential as a foundation, as a base, for the piano repertoire. Everything else -- Liszt, Rachmaninov, that big romantic technique -- is built on the principles that Chopin very cannily put forward and solidified."

During his Melbourne visit, Solzhenitsyn will give a talk on Shostakovich. His concert repertoire includes Shostakovich's Piano Concerto, chamber music and other works. He says the composer's work has achieved "a kind of immortality", and that it succeeds first as music, rather than for any anti-Soviet position.

"Is there an element of dissent? Naturally. But the best way to think of his music is as a reflection of the horrible, horrible Russian century that he lived through." The term dissident, he adds, is too limiting for creators of the greatest works of art.

"My father has never really appreciated it, if only because it's a somewhat squarely political term, and he's always felt that politics was a fairly crass kind of endeavour ... shorn of the great subtleties inherent in art," he says.

"If an artist is not more than a dissident, that's not good enough from the point of view of art."

Ignat Solzhenitsyn conducts Mozart and Schumann at the Australian National Academy of Music orchestra, South Melbourne Town Hall, on Saturday.

[privacy](#) [terms](#) © The Australian