

*The Noise of Time* by Julian Barnes is a biographical novel that is centred on the life of the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. This is not clear at the start of the book which describes a scene on a railway station during World War II. A beggar – a soldier who had lost both legs during the war – was propelling himself on a trolley along the platform, singing a variety of obscene songs, while a train was waiting to continue its journey from Moscow to Leningrad. Two men alighted and went up to him offering vodka, which made a group of three people, the traditional vodka-drinking number.

This preface is an introduction to the novel itself, which is divided into three sections and begins with a description of someone waiting on a landing. It is several pages later when that someone is revealed as being Shostakovich and the reason for him being there is that he expects to be taken away by the NKVD and interrogated. It was the height of the Stalinist Terror in Russia during the mid-late 1930's when anyone of any consequence could find themselves being arrested and either executed or sent to the Gulags. Shostakovich was on the landing in order to protect his family from having police officers go into their flat. The reason for him being out of favour with authority was a performance of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* attended by Stalin himself. The performance was probably over-enthusiastic and Stalin didn't like it so, despite having earlier given the opera favourable reviews, *Pravda* came out with a damning article that finished with the words ... *that may end very badly*, that Shostakovich took to mean likely arrest.

This first section of the book also deals with Shostakovich looking back on his life from when he was brought up in Tsarist Russia, his support of The Revolution and how he embraced the ideas of Free Love, to the development of authoritarianism followed by tyranny under Stalin. Indeed, much of the book focusses on the effects of such tyranny, which was inconsistent and paranoid, creating a climate of fear. Shostakovich just wanted to have a quiet family life where he could write music and have it performed, but came to realise that he had to write music 'for the people' – a phrase that was defined by the Party.

Shostakovich was able to redeem himself, although it is also likely that even Stalin understood that nothing would be gained by executing or even banishing him. Soon after the War, Shostakovich headed a cultural tour to the United States, but the visit was cut short due to deepening antagonism with the Soviet Union. He never really considered defecting and, although he worshiped Stravinsky and his music, he deplored his selling out the principles of the Revolution for the benefits of Capitalism. Shostakovich also despised apologists for Stalin, such as Paul Robeson and George Bernard Shaw, who were fêted on their visits to Russia and never shown the realities of Soviet life. Even those with a more questioning attitude were unable to appreciate the level of fear that people like Shostakovich experienced.

The oppressive atmosphere eased after Stalin's death, but Shostakovich found himself facing a different difficulty. He had managed to avoid joining the Communist Party throughout the Stalinist era, but the more liberal government under Khrushchev made membership a precondition for having his music performed. This went against his convictions, but he eventually agreed after persistent persuasion – which caused him real despondency.

The book ends with a return to the scene on the railway station. The disabled soldier, Shostakovich and his companion clink their vodka glasses. '*A triad*' murmurs Shostakovich. It was a *sound that rang clear of the noise of time*.

Some of the group found the way in which some characters were identified rather confusing, since it was sometimes by their Christian name and sometimes by a patronymic or family name. Nonetheless, most people enjoyed the book and appreciated how it conveyed the atmosphere of living in a tyrannical state and the compromises that are sometimes necessary for survival, as well as describing the life and possible emotions of a famous contemporary composer.