



SONATA FOR BROKEN FINGERS

Joe Cutler *composer*

Max Hoehn *libretto*

Booth | Cleverton | Schauer

Lemmings | Richardson

Birmingham Contemporary
Music Group

Sian Edwards *conductor*

Xenia Pestova Bennett

piano fragments

opera21

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Sonata for Broken Fingers

A Chamber Opera by Joe Cutler

Libretto: Max Hoehn

Inspired by the radio play *The Stalin Sonata* by David Zane Mairowitz and other Soviet historical sources

- | | |
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Complete Running Time: 68 minutes

CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Stalin: Stephen Richardson *bass*
Maria Maximova, the Pianist:
Claire Booth *soprano*
Gleb, Programmer of Radio Moscow:
Christopher Lemmings *tenor*
Dr Denisova / Public Prosecutor: Lucy
Schauffer *mezzo-soprano*
Leonid, the Minister: James Cleverton
baritone

Birmingham Contemporary Music Group
Flute Helen Benson
Bass Clarinet Oli Janes
Trombone Tony Howe
Cello Arthur Boutillier
Piano Joe Howson
Percussion Julian Warburton

Sian Edwards *conductor*

Xenia Pestova Bennett *pre-recorded*
piano fragments

World Premiere in Concert on 14th July 2024
at CBSO Centre, Birmingham
Recorded in the Recital Hall of Royal
Birmingham Conservatoire 9th-13th July 2024

Simon Hall, Joe Cutler
and Max Hoehn *Producers*
Simon Hall *Engineering and Postproduction*
Joe Ockford *Additional Engineering and*
Sound Design
James Abel *Assistant Engineering*
Peter Davies *Musical assistance*

The opera was commissioned by Opera21
and co-produced with Birmingham
Contemporary Music Group and Birmingham
Record Company in partnership with Royal
Birmingham Conservatoire

Stephan Meier *Artistic Director of BCMG*,
George Lee *Executive Director of BCMG*
Andy Ingamells *Label Manager of*
Birmingham Record Company
Charles Kondras *Booklet Design*
Andrew Fox *Photos*
Amber Cooper-Davies *Front Cover Image*

“
**Music's a good thing.
It calms the beast
in a man.**”

- Stalin

Stalin casts a shadow over several important operas, but the dictator has yet to make a memorable appearance in one. The reasons are not for lack of promising source material. The complex and savage interplay between the totalitarian society he shaped and the lives of artists under his regime have produced a series of fascinating urban myths and anecdotes that continue to grip our imaginations.

One of these tells the story of a surprise phone call the Soviet leader allegedly made late one evening to Radio Moscow demanding the urgent delivery of a record: a Mozart piano concerto played by Maria Yudina (1899-1970). This legendary pianist, little-known in the West, was renowned for her outspoken views, her public acts of piety

and the self-imposed poverty in which she lived. Radio Moscow either failed to preserve a copy of the live broadcast Stalin claimed to have heard or the recording simply did not exist. But rather than say “No” to Stalin, Radio Moscow gathered together Yudina and their orchestra in the middle of the night and made the recording from scratch, ready to be delivered to the Kremlin the following morning. In the version of the myth related by Shostakovich, it was this recording that was found on Stalin's gramophone player when the dictator had his fatal stroke.

Yudina somehow survived Stalinism and continued to play an important part in Russian intellectual and musical life until her death. In recent years her name has become more familiar to English-speaking audiences thanks to the publication of *Playing with Fire*, her first full biography by Elizabeth Wilson, and her cameo appearance at the beginning of Armando Iannucci's black comedy *The Death of Stalin*.

Sonata for Broken Fingers is not a dramatisation of Yudina's life, but a work of fiction inspired by her biography and her formidable, deeply personal style of playing as preserved through her many recordings.

Testimonies of Soviet cultural life and Stalin's bizarre nocturnal habits have provided further source material for the opera. The absurdity and horror of that time is explored through the medium of music. The piano itself plays an important role in the piece through a series of scratchy, pre-recorded fragments that glue the scenes together. The opera exposes the fragility of music-making in a terrifying world, highlighting its vulnerability in the face of propaganda and censorship, yet also affirming its power as a source of spiritual strength and courage.

(Right) Claire Booth as Maximova
(Photo: Andrew Fox)

SONATA FOR BROKEN FINGERS



LIBRETTO

1.BEWARE OF MUSIC

Stalin is alone at work, reviewing documents while listening to music on the radio.

STALIN

"Beware of music" Lenin said. "Beware of music...Especially Beethoven!"

We hear the voice of the pianist Maria Maximova, who begins the opera as a narrator before becoming a participant in her own drama.

MAXIMOVA (remembering)

The Kremlin. The night of the 1st March 1953. Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin is alone in his study, reviewing reports, drafting memoranda. The radio keeps him company. A bust of Lenin stares at him from across his desk.

STALIN

"Great music makes you want to stroke people's heads, say sweet, silly things... But to achieve the revolution heads must be

smashed, heads must be lopped off. So don't listen to music too often, my Georgian friend."

...Thanks for the advice, Vladimir Ilyich. But I've never had any problems.

...Even with German music.

Stalin returns to reading papers lying on his desk, signs a few and then picks up the phone on his desk.

STALIN (into the phone)

Get me Radio Moscow.

2. MIDNIGHT CALL

A bedroom. Gleb Nikitin, the Head of Radio Moscow, is sleeping.

MAXIMOVA

A bedroom. Pitch black.

The phone on Gleb's bedside table rings,

GLEB (half-asleep)

Whaaaaa?

STALIN

Stalin speaking.

GLEB

Huuuuuh?

STALIN

Is this the Director of Programming for Radio Moscow?

GLEB (wide-awake and terrified)

Se- Se- Sssexo- Sex- Excretory Stalin! What an honour!

STALIN

I would like a recording of Beethoven Sonata ** on my desk by tomorrow lunchtime.

GLEB

Yes, of course, your Eminence- (correcting himself) Secretary! Eminent Secretary!

STALIN

Send me Maximova's recording.

GLEB

Maximova's recording...Maximova's recording?

(greatly agitated) You definitely mean Maximova's recording, Comrade Cemetery? You see there are several splendid versions I could recommend -

Stalin hangs up.

Secretary Stalin?

Gleb puts the phone down.

GLEB

Maximova's recording. He wants Maximova's recording.

Oh, fuck...

Gleb dresses hurriedly.

GLEB

Maximova's recording does not exist. Why? It was destroyed two years ago. Like all her recordings. Her name, her image, her sound erased from history.

She was declared an enemy of the people. I know. I broadcast her trial.

3. THE TRIAL

MAXIMOVA (*remembering*)

Five years earlier.

A flashback to Maria Maximova's show trial. She is being questioned by the Public Prosecutor.

PROSECUTOR

Maria Veniaminovna Maximova, you dare to defend formalist composers.

You dare to play their works in public. You reject simple, natural, human music.

MAXIMOVA

I disagree Comrade Chairman -

PROSECUTOR

-What kind of public do you hope to reach with this music?

MAXIMOVA

I believe I can reach all citizens whatever their background.

PROSECUTOR

You are mistaken. The only public you can reach is a petty-bourgeois elite, a perverted public with a taste for fidgety, neurotic music.

I repeat: you dare to defend formalism -

MAXIMOVA

-I am a musician. All I do is play -

PROSECUTOR

-You play music that quacks, grunts and growls. Music that is coarse, vulgar, inaccessible.

...Let us turn to your public displays of piety. You cross yourself before you play, do you not?

MAXIMOVA

I ask God to protect me from making mistakes.

PROSECUTOR

Do you believe Bach is a religious composer or a people's composer?

MAXIMOVA

I cannot play Bach and deny God.

PROSECUTOR

In other words you spread religious propaganda. I declare the accused to be a deranged sermoniser, a proponent of musical dissonance, an elitist intellectual, a rootless cosmopolitan and to be suffering from rampant psychological instability!

4. THE BLACK LIMOUSINE

Five years later. The same night.

MAXIMOVA

Not long after Comrade Stalin's phone call, the Director of Radio Moscow emerges from his home and steps into a black limousine waiting outside.

GLEB (*sitting next to Leonid in the ministerial car*)

Forgive me, Comrade Minister. I didn't know who else to call.

LEONID

Are you sure there's nothing in the archive?

GLEB

We destroyed everything. Every single copy.

LEONID

Perhaps it was a prank?

GLEB

No, no. The voice, the accent...

LEONID

And what if you tell the truth?

GLEB

The truth? Might as well blow my brains out. (*imagining how the conversation would go*) "Apologies, Comrade Stalin, but Maximova was arrested years ago on your orders and

has probably kicked the bucket - God knows where? Must have slipped your mind!"

LEONID

Have you considered using another recording and replacing the name of the artist?

GLEB

Of course. He might not notice the difference. But then again he ...

LEONID

...Yes, he just might. She was a one-off. Her sound was massive, majestic. Her tempi - always extreme.

GLEB

It's too risky. You have to help me, Comrade Minister. I cannot lose my job. I have my mother to support.

LEONID

Why should I help you?

GLEB

Well, after all, Maria Veniaminovna was your sister.

LEONID

My ex-sister. I denounced her.

GLEB

Precisely. This affair threatens us both.

Pause

LEONID

Very well. (*calling to the driver*) Misha, change of plan. Drive into town.

GLEB

Where are we going?

LEONID

To find her.

GLEB

You mean...she's alive?

LEONID

Her talent won her special privileges. She's in Moscow. The Serbsky Psychiatric Institute. That is our destination.

5. THE SERBSKY PSYCHIATRIC INSTITUTE

MAXIMOVA

My room on the third floor...

I open my eyes and see my brother standing in front of me.

LEONID

Do you recognise me, Masha?

MAXIMOVA (*half-whispered advice to herself*)

Don't say a word.

LEONID

Cigarette?

MAXIMOVA (*to herself*)

Stay quiet.

LEONID

Well, I understand I'm the last person you want to talk to.

But believe me, Masha, I deserve your gratitude not your hatred.

You'd be long dead if it wasn't for me.

Try and gain a little perspective.

I'm here on an urgent mission, Masha. Your country needs you.

We need your musicality. Your artistry.

We need you to make a recording.

Beethoven Sonata 33. A recording of great importance to the state.

I can offer you freedom for 24 hours. I repeat I can offer you freedom for 24 hours.

Freedom to be an artist again. Freedom to see Moscow at night.

To breathe fresh air. To eat whatever you like.

If the recording is good then, who knows, the authorities might arrange your rehabilitation...

6. MOSCOW NIGHTS

MAXIMOVA

I am smuggled out of the Institute and into a car.

Maximova is squashed between Leonid and Gleb in the back of the ministerial car. They drive through Moscow.

LEONID *(calling to his driver)*

Lower the windows, Misha.

MAXIMOVA *(breathing in the nighttime buzz of the city)*

Moscow... Moscow...

7. CAKE

MAXIMOVA

The car stops at an elite Party members' club. In the restaurant I eat my way through several dishes.

Gleb arrives with dessert.

GLEB

Here you go. Honey cake for you. Drunken cherry cake for me.

Gleb tucks in. Maximova stares at the cake.

LEONID

What are you waiting for? We need to fatten you up for your recording.

With trembling fingers, Maximova samples a morsel of honey cake.

She smiles...

...and then throws up over Gleb's lap.

8. TARZAN

LEONID, GLEB & DENISOVA

Deep in the bowels of the Kremlin, Comrade Stalin likes to combine work with pleasure in his own private cinema.

Stalin is watching one of his favourite films "Tarzan the Ape Man" (1932) for the umpteenth time in his private cinema.

STALIN *(into the phone)*

Yura, where's the laboratory report on the Chinese ambassador?

...

(impatient) What do you mean "he hasn't had a shit yet"?

...

Well, when he finally opens his bowels send his turd for analysis and report back to me.

Stalin slams down the phone and turns his attention back to the film.

LEONID, GLEB & DENISOVA

Tonight the Supreme Leader is screening an old favourite of his: Tarzan the Ape Man.

STALIN *(joining in)*

Jane. Tarzan. Jane. Tarzan.

STALIN *(contentedly)*

In jungle strong man always wins...

9. FINGERS

MAXIMOVA *(wary)*

Radio Moscow. Studio Three. They've called in a doctor to examine me.

LEONID

Well, doctor?

DR. DENISOVA

Who is this woman?

LEONID

That is classified information.

DR. DENISOVA

She is suffering from hypoglycaemic shock as a result of insulin injections.

There are bruises all over her body. And I suspect she has a urinary infection.

LEONID

I need her in working order for the next six hours.

DR. DENISOVA

With respect, Comrade Minister, she needs complete rest and medical attention.

LEONID

Later. First she needs to record a piano sonata.

DR. DENISOVA

A piano sonata? Impossible.

LEONID

Twenty-five minutes of music.
Fill her up with cortisone. Anything.

Gleb enters with Maximova.

DR. DENISOVA

I'm sorry. Cortisone is strictly rationed.

LEONID (*putting more pressure on her*)

Can't you see this is an exceptional case?

DR. DENISOVA

I think you better find another doctor.

GLEB

We have a problem, Comrade Minister. Look.

He shows him Maximova's left hand.

DR. DENISOVA

Two fingers have been broken.

Leonid walks over to Maximova and picks up her hands delicately.

MAXIMOVA

They examine the fingers on my left hand, bending them one by one.

LEONID

Does this hurt?

Maximova winces.

LEONID

The Doctor is right. We are wasting our time.

Leonid walks away. Dr. Denisova starts to pack her bag.

MAXIMOVA (*to herself in a half-whisper, fighting the pain*)

I drag myself to the piano and attack the keys.

In a sudden, shocking outburst of energy Maximova plays through about a minute of difficult finger-work in a strange and desperate display of willpower.

Leonid and Gleb exchange looks.

LEONID

Prepare for the first take.

GLEB

At once.

DR. DENISOVA

This is absurd. Inhuman.

LEONID

You forget, Doctor, great artists are superhuman. Lipatti plays with leukemia. Lemeshev sings with one lung.

GLEB

The show must go on!

LEONID

Put her fingers in a splint and give her your finest pain killer.

DR. DENISOVA

Comrade Minister.

LEONID

Doctor Denisova, we've had a look at your file. You worked under Ehrenburg, correct?

DR. DENISOVA (*scared*)

Correct.

LEONID

The same Doctor Ehrenburg convicted of spying for international Jewish bourgeois-nationalist organisations?

GLEB

The same Doctor Ehrenburg who intentionally concealed a myocardial infarction from a member of the Politburo-

LEONID

-and attempted to cure the Minister of Industry's insomnia with cocaine?

Fade out on Leonid, Gleb and Dr. Glikman. Focus changes to Maximova.

10. MAXIMOVA

MAXIMOVA (*sharing her daily routine at the Institute*)

Monday. Sunrise. Two injections of Haloperidol.

Convulsions. Lie in bed. Eyes closed. Body stiff. Brain dead.

Afternoon. Escape to the bathroom. Desperate.

Nurse limits toilet visits to three a day.

Evening. Start humming and singing.

Punishment. Rolled tightly in a wet canvas.

Trapped. Breathless. Canvas dries.

Shiver and sleep. Shiver and sleep.

11. SOVIET JOKES

LEONID

While the great Maximova warms up her fingers in preparation for her much-anticipated comeback, here are two jokes to pass away the time.

DENISOVA

A frightened man visits the KGB.

GLEB

Comrade, my talking parrot has disappeared!

DENISOVA

That's not the kind of case we handle. Go to the criminal police.

GLEB

Yes, of course, I know that.

I simply wish to declare to the authorities that I completely disagree with my parrot and have never shared his Trotskyite sympathies!

VOICE

Joke two. Stalin reads his report to the Party Congress.

STALIN

Comrades, permit me to express my appreciation to all fraternal parties and groups whose representatives have honoured us with their presence.

Someone sneezes very loudly.

Who sneezed?

Silence. The audience is too terrified to answer.

First row. On your feet.

The first row stands.

Shoot them.

The first row is shot.

Who sneezed, comrades?

No answer.

Second row. On your feet.

The second row jumps to their feet.

Shoot them.

The second row is also shot.

STALIN

Well, who sneezed?

Pause

GLEB (*sobbing*)

It was me...

Pause

STALIN

Bless you, Comrade.

... Now where was I? Ah, yes. Permit me to express my appreciation to all fraternal parties and groups for honouring us with their presence...

Snap back to the recording studio.

DR. DENISOVA

The cortisone is kicking in.

LEONID

At last. Put her to work.

12. YET ANOTHER TAKE

Back in the recording studio. Leonid, Gleb and Dr. Denisova listen to Maximova stumbling through the first movement next door.

GLEB

She's terrible.

DR. DENISOVA

Poor woman.

LEONID *(into the microphone)*

Stop! Stop!

Maximova continues

I said stop!

The music stops.

LEONID

(into the microphone) We will take a break.
(turning to Denisova) Doctor, the success of this recording is in your interests as well as ours. Please examine the patient carefully.

DR. DENISOVA

She's not a machine. I can't perform miracles.

She sees the stony looks of Leonid and Gleb.

But I'll see what I can do.

Leonid paces around as Gleb replays the recording, rewinding several times.

LEONID

Five minutes are salvageable.

GLEB

It's a quarter past four.

LEONID

The clock is ticking on our careers.

Nextdoor, Denisova tends to Maximova.

13. SLUGGISH SCHIZOPHRENIA

DR. DENISOVA

Rest now. Lie down and rest. Sssshhh. That's it.

She carefully withdraws her fingers from the keys and guides her gently to the floor. Maximova crawls underneath the piano to sleep.

Sssshhh. Go to sleep.

There's only one place that injects a patient with an antipsychotic drug, but without a corrective. Symptoms: Paranoia, delusions, inflexibility of convictions, hypochondria, sexual or moral deviance. Diagnosis: Sluggish schizophrenia. Treatment: Isolation, electric shocks, tranquilisers, ideological reeducation, behavioural correction.

LEONID *(over the microphone)*

Doctor, we continue in fifteen minutes.

Maximova wakes momentarily, but Dr. Denisova helps her fall asleep again.

DR. DENISOVA

Sssshhh. Sleep. Sleep...

MAXIMOVA *(drugged, tranquil)*

A dream...

Maximova is walking through an empty, bombed-out, looted cathedral. Voices recite a recent Stalinist slogan "Life has become more joyful" and excerpts from the text of the Zdravitsa cantata.

VOICES

Life has become better.

Life has become more joyful.

Maximova prays at the altar.

MAXIMOVA

O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath, nor chasten me in thy hot displeasure,

for thine arrows stick fast in me and thy hand presseth me sore.

VOICES

Life has become better.

Life has become more joyful.

MAXIMOVA

My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it is also gone from me.

VOICES

My life is blooming like the spring cherry blossom.

Oh, the sun glows and dances in the bright dewdrops.

MAXIMOVA

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean.
Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

VOICES

Our sons shall grow like the stalks of wheat among the cornflowers and their cheeks shall turn pink like rose apples.

MAXIMOVA

O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more.

VOICES

Behind you, we joyously march.

Your vision is our vision, O leader of the people!

Your thoughts are our thoughts, indivisible!

You are the banner flying from our mighty fortress!

You are the flame that warms our spirit and our blood,

O Stalin, Stalin!

Maximova is terrified by the sudden appearance of Stalin at the altar.

MAXIMOVA

Stalin! Stalin!

14. DREAM

Dawn is breaking. Maximova comes to the end of the first movement, playing more or less fluently.

15. BEETHOVEN FOR BREAKFAST

LEONID

And cut.

GLEB

First movement in the bag.

Doctor, a top-up please.

DR. DENISOVA (*rushing into the recording studio*)

Let me examine her pulse.

GLEB (*to Leonid*)

Well, that was...tolerable.

LEONID

Barely.

DR. DENISOVA (*via the microphone in the other room*)

She is agitated. I request permission to administer a dose of barbiturate.

LEONID (*responds through the microphone, forgetting to turn it off*)

Denied. Artists thrive on anxiety.

GLEB

I feel sick. We have barely three hours...I could do with a dose of bloody barbiturate.

LEONID

Calm yourself. Secretary Stalin will soon have Beethoven for breakfast.

The sound of a disturbance from next-door in the studio.

LEONID

What is it now?

DR. DENISOVA (*from the next room*)

Something's happened. She's suddenly full of energy.

GLEB (*to Valery*)

The microphone. You left the microphone on.

A Stormy Interlude: Blackout. The piano takes over. The shock of this revelation is expressed in a short, violent outburst of solo playing.

Leonid and Gleb enter the recording studio. Maximova is racing around the room, wreaking havoc.

16. SHOWDOWN

LEONID

Stop her!

The sound of a fight as Gleb tries to block the exit. Maximova attacks him.

GLEB

Ow!

LEONID *(shouting)*

Get out. Both of you. Leave us alone.

Gleb limps out and Dr. Denisova follows.

LEONID

What are you playing at?

Do you expect me to believe this is an act of artistic principle? Or religious conviction?

He forces Maximova's hands onto the piano keys.

This is who you are. Why deny it?

She starts to play a march of the Young Pioneers.

LEONID

What are you doing?

MAXIMOVA *(internal)*

Remember when we were children?

LEONID

Trying to jog my memory, are you?

MAXIMOVA *(internal)*

You were the model pioneer. Devoted to the Party. So devoted you snitched on Papa.

LEONID

You want to avenge the family, do you?

Maximova switches to playing a melody from a Russian ballet.

MAXIMOVA *(internal)*

Twenty years later it was my turn.

LEONID

You want to hurt me?

MAXIMOVA *(internal)*

The night before you denounced me you took me to the ballet.

LEONID

Stop it, Masha.

MAXIMOVA *(internal)*

We sat in your box. Mama, you and me. One happy family.

LEONID

Stop it, Masha. Stop it!

MAXIMOVA *(internal)*

You knew what was coming.

LEONID

Stop it or I will break your fingers all over again.

Maximova stops for a moment and then starts

playing the melody of a Hungarian waltz.

LEONID

You want to travel again? Hungary?

Maximova switches to Josephine Baker's "J'ai deux amours".

LEONID

Paris? Don't be ridiculous.

...The provinces, perhaps. In time.

I promise to do everything in my power, Masha. But you must be patient. I am only the Minister of Culture.

That's my final offer. I advise you to accept. Now...

Leonid carefully places the Beethoven score, which had fallen onto the floor, back onto the stand.

LEONID

Second Movement. Take One.

MAXIMOVA *(to herself)*

Second Movement...The roar of silence.
Wait. Touch the keys. Breathe and -

She begins playing. Fade out.

17. THE END IS NIGH

MAXIMOVA

Two hours later...

Back in the editing suite. Maximova is nearing the end of the final movement. Gleb is drinking vodka. Dr. Denisova is sitting silently, waiting for it all to be over. Leonid is on the telephone.

GLEB

Congratulations Doctor. A remarkable achievement. *(toasting)* Here's to you and your syringes.

LEONID *(speaking on the phone)*

Hello? Yes, that's what I said: Order the temporary closure of the Third Ring Road. I'm sending a driver with an item of immense importance to Secretary Stalin....I am the Minister of Culture and will take full responsibility.

Maximova finishes the sonata.

GLEB *(over the microphone)*

And cut.

LEONID *(still on the phone)*

This is for Secretary Stalin. There's no need to wait for further confirmation, you imbecile!

GLEB

In the nick of time.

LEONID *(shouting down the phone)*

Execute the order or suffer the consequences.

GLEB *(to Leonid)*

The ambulance is ready outside.

LEONID

Send her back to the institute.

GLEB

At once, Comrade Minister. Goodnight.

LEONID

Good morning.

MAXIMOVA *(internal)*

Goodbye.

18. THE DEATH OF STALIN

MAXIMOVA *(half-dazed)*

The black limousine, carrying my record, speeds towards the Kremlin. An ambulance takes me in the opposite direction to the Psychiatric Institute.

Comrade Stalin wakes.

The stage is split into three:

(centre) Stalin is at his desk in his pyjama-bottoms and undershirt. (left) Gleb is in the back of a chauffeur-driven car, clutching the record in a white sleeve. (right) Maximova is in the back of an ambulance.

Stalin picks up the phone. His movements are slow and tremulous.

STALIN *(into the phone)*

Yura, memo for tomorrow.

GLEB *(to his driver)*

Drive faster, you fat lump!

STALIN *(into the phone)*

Hang Bryukhanov by the balls.

MAXIMOVA *(obsessively going through music in her head)*

Ta-ta-ta-tee. Ta-ta-ta-tee...

STALIN *(into the phone)*

If the balls hold out, consider him acquitted. If not, drown him in the river.

He slams the phone down and rises unsteadily.

GLEB *(again to the driver)*

Take the next left.

MAXIMOVA *(forcefully)*

Ta-tee-ta-tee-ta-tee...

GLEB

I said LEFT!!

STALIN

I need some music.

MAXIMOVA (*wildly*)

Ta-tum-ta-tum-ta-ta!

GLEB

I'll report you, you dunderhead!

STALIN

Music.

GLEB

You'll be eating horseshit in Kazakhstan.

STALIN (*hit by a massive pain in his chest*)

Ah.....shit!

GLEB

Horseshit!

MAXIMOVA

Stalin! Stalin!

Stalin falls to the ground.

STALIN (*in great pain*)

Ddzzzh...Ddzzh...

MAXIMOVA

I pray for your end, Iosif Vissarionovich.

May the Lord forgive you.

Amen.

She crosses herself.

19. IN MOURNING

DR. DENISOVA

We all sat by our radios, waiting.

And waiting.

Early in the morning the music ceased.

Followed by a long silence.

Just an eerie buzzing sound, full of foreboding.

And then the bells tolled.

The announcement began.

A cerebral catastrophe.

The end of an era.

Stalin, our father, was dead.

... And the record? Our sonata for broken fingers?

GLEB (*scared*)

What are you talking about? What record?

20. ANOTHER MIDNIGHT CALL

Leonid's home. The telephone rings.

LEONID

Yes? Comrade Chairman, how good of you to call... No, no, I'm wide awake.

... Yes indeed, a great loss... The choice of music for the funeral? Why, yes, I'd be honoured. Do you have any musicians in mind?... The Bolshoi, yes. May I suggest The Borodin Quartet?... Thank you. Anyone else?... Oh, really?... Surprised? No, it's a really... excellent choice.

21. STATE FUNERAL

MAXIMOVA

I am sitting in a car filled with flowers.

Nothing but heaps of flowers.

Baskets of roses. White lilies. Enormous wreaths.

We drive past endless lines of people shuffling forwards.

I peer at their faces. Some anxious. Some sad. Some a blank.

We stop. I recognise the Hall of Columns.

I am escorted up the marble staircase.

The mourners look at me. They wonder:

Who is this scruffy woman skipping the queue?

... And then I see him.

Stalin is lying in a coffin surrounded by enormous bouquets of flowers. Next to him is a piano. Among the mourners are Leonid, Gleb and Dr Denisova.

Maximova approaches the piano.

GLEB

And now

LEONID

Honoured Artist of the USSR

DR. DENISOVA
Professor Emeritus

GLEB
Distinguished pianist and pedagogue

LEONID
Maria Veniaminovna Maximova

DR. DENISOVA
Takes to the stage

LEONID
Her face

GLEB
Dripping with tears

DR. DENISOVA
For a performance in memory of

GLEB
Iosif

LEONID
Vissarionovich

DR. DENISOVA
Stalin

MAXIMOVA
The roar of silence.
Wait. Touch the keys.
Breathe and -

Blackout.

THE END

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Stephen Richardson as Stalin
(Photo by Andrew Fox)

Joe Cutler (Composer)

Joe Cutler has been described as 'writing music of quirky dancing energy and humour mingled with mystery' (Ivan Hewett, Daily Telegraph). For over three decades, he has been a distinctive figure on the contemporary music scene, often exploring the spaces between genres.

His music has been performed in over 40 countries and on six continents including performances at festivals and venues such as Bang-on-a-Can Music Marathon (New York), Gaudeamus Music Week (Amsterdam and Utrecht), Opera City (Tokyo), ISCM World Music Days (New Zealand), Musik Monat (Basle), Concertgebouw (Amsterdam), Beijing Modern Music Festival, London Jazz Festival and the BBC Proms.

He has previously released four full-length albums: in 2008 *Bartlebooth* was released on NMC and was one of Gramophone Magazine's Top 20 Releases of the Year. This was followed in 2014 by *Boogie Nights* released on Birmingham Record Company. *Elsewhereness*, came out on NMC in November 2018, reaching no.10 in the Specialist Classical Charts, whilst *Hawaii Hawaii* was released on BRC in October 2020.

He is a recipient of two British Composer Awards and in 2023 was shortlisted for a Royal Philharmonic Award in the Large Scale Works category.

Since 2005 he has been Head of Composition at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

His music is published by Composers Edition and Chester Music.

Max Hoehn (Librettist)

Born in London to Swiss-Hungarian parents. He began working in opera as an assistant-director to Graham Vick and David Pountney among others. In 2015 he won the Independent Opera Directing Fellowship and staged the UK Premiere of Šimon Voseček's Biedermann and the Arsonists at Sadler's Wells, which led to his nomination at the 2016 International Opera Awards. His recent productions include *The Flying Dutchman* (Teatro Nacional de São Carlos, Lisbon) and his future plans include his directing debut for the Wexford Festival. He has written several English-language versions of operas including Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* for Birmingham Opera Company. *Sonata for Broken Fingers* is his first complete libretto.

Thank you to the trusts and foundations who have generously supported the commissioning of this opera:

The Maria Björnson Memorial Fund

The Oleg Prokofiev Trust

The Radcliffe Trust

The Marchus Trust

The Hinrichsen Foundation

The Vaughan Williams Foundation

The Swiss Cultural Fund UK

The Francis Routh Charitable Trust

The Golsoncott Foundation

With support from the ADM Faculty Research Investment Scheme, Birmingham City University.

Thank you to the following donors:

William G. Bollinger

Toni Staub

Special thanks to Andy Ingamells, Edmund Digby-Jones, Kirsten Foster, Rujenne Green, Tarik Badwan, Elena Langer and to the team at Stone Nest and CBSO Centre.

Birmingham Contemporary Music Group is supported using funding from Arts Council England



Supported using public funding by
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THE MARCHUS TRUST



I pray for your end,
Iosif Vissarionovich.
May the Lord forgive you...

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