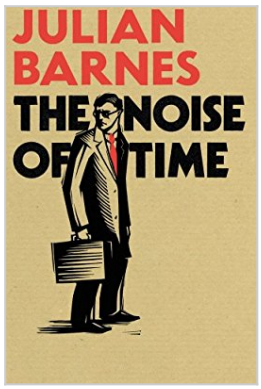

The Noise of Time

By Julian Barnes

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A compact masterpiece dedicated to the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich: Julian Barnes's first novel since his best-selling, Man Booker Prize–winning *The Sense of an Ending*.

In 1936, Shostakovich, just thirty, fears for his livelihood and his life. Stalin, hitherto a distant figure, has taken a sudden interest in his work and denounced his latest opera. Now, certain he will be exiled to Siberia (or, more likely, executed on the spot), Shostakovich reflects on his predicament, his personal history, his parents, various women and wives, his children—and all who are still alive themselves hang in the balance of his fate. And though a stroke of luck prevents him from becoming yet another casualty of the Great Terror, for decades to come he will be held fast under the thumb of despotism: made to represent Soviet values at a cultural conference in New York City, forced into joining the Party and compelled, constantly, to weigh appeasing those in power against the integrity of his music. Barnes elegantly guides us through the trajectory of Shostakovich's career, at the same time illuminating the tumultuous evolution of the Soviet Union. The result is both a stunning portrait of a relentlessly fascinating man and a brilliant exploration of the meaning of art and its place in society.

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The Noise of Time By Julian Barnes Bibliography

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- Binding: Hardcover

Editorial Review

Review
“Exquisite.” —*O Magazine*

“Stands in an honored literary tradition that includes such predecessors as Barnard Malamud’s *The Fixer*, Adam Johnson’s *The Orphan Master’s Son* or this year’s Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Sympathizer*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen [and] another even more audacious tradition, one that includes J.M. Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg*, Colm Tóibín’s *The Master*, and *Kafka’s Leopards* by Moacyr Scliar. . . . What can be more ambitious than a writer who seeks to capture the inner life of another great artist?” —Chauncy Mabe, *The Miami Herald*

“A tense and elegant study of terror, shame and cowardice, of a celebrated artist capitulating to power, yet on his own terms. . . . Barnes interweaves the painful and the sublime to achieve an epic orchestral effect.” —Tom Zelman, *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“A great short novel . . . thoughtful, humane and compassionate. . . . But its true beauty is in the impression it leaves of Shostakovich's distress and humanity. . . . The book is a meditation on the idea of character and integrity.” —Andre Alexis, *The Globe and Mail*

“Elegiac and ultimately affecting. . . . With cerebral precision, Barnes depicts a life encased by history and defined, from the outset, by music.” —Anna Mundow, *The Barnes & Noble Review*

“As elegantly constructed as a concerto . . . another brilliant thought-provoker which explores the cost of compromise and how much confrontation and concession a man and his conscience can endure.” —Heller McAlpin, *National Public Radio*

“Barnes’s storytelling is phenomenal; Shostakovich, as tragic and anxious as he is, is utterly fascinating.” —Leslie Rieder, *The Christian Science Monitor*

“This story is truly amazing . . . an arc of human degradation without violence (the threat of violence, of course, everywhere). . . . The whole Kafka madhouse brought to life.”—Jeremy Denk, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Timely and arresting . . . deeply engaging . . . [it] leads us to places only a handful of novelists have the skill and the courage to go. . . . I can’t recall any other recent book which offers such a prismatic perspective on the tension between revolutionary discipline and artistic freedom.” —Askold Melnyczuk, *The Boston Globe*

“[An] ambitious Orwellian allegory about the plight of artists in totalitarian societies—and a Kafkaesque parable about a fearful man’s efforts to wrestle with a surreal reality, even as he questions his complicity with the system. . . . Barnes’s book internalizes these debates, turning them into conversations within Shostakovich’s own head. On one hand, defending his need to survive and protect his family; on the other, cursing himself as a cowardly worm.” —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

“Elegiac and ultimately affecting. . . . With cerebral precision, Barnes depicts a life encased by history and defined, from the outset, by music.” —Anna Mundow, *The Barnes & Noble Review*

“Magnificent . . . Novels about artistic achievement rarely do justice to their subjects. *The Noise of Time* is that rarity. It is a novel of tremendous grace and power, giving voice to the complex and troubled man whose music outlasted the state that sought to silence him.” —Anthony Marra, *Publishers Weekly*

“A great novel, Barnes's masterpiece—the particular and intimate details of the life under consideration beget questions of universal significance; the operation of power upon art, the limits of courage and endurance, the sometimes intolerable demands of personal integrity and conscience. This novel, like [*The Sense of an Ending*], gives us the breath of a whole life within the pages of a slim book.” —Alex Preston, *The Guardian*

“Undoubtedly one of Barnes’s best novels.” —Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Sunday Times*

“*The Noise of Time* tells the story of Dmitri Shostakovich, the Russian composer both feted and condemned by the Soviet state during his lifetime; but it does so not in aridly “truthful” fashion, but in full, delighted knowledge of how little use facts are in determining the essence of human experience, let alone its intersection with history and politics … A complex meditation on the power, limitations and likely endurance of art.” —Alex Clark, *Observer*

“Barnes brilliantly captures the composer’s conflicted state of mind, which culminates in the chilling realization that ‘death was preferable to endless terror.’ … Packs an extraordinary emotional punch.” —Sebastian Shakespeare, *Tatler*

“[Barnes is] a master of the narrative sidestep… Not just a novel about music, but something more like a musical novel… The story itself is structured in three parts that come together like a broken chord. It is a simple but brilliant device, and one that goes right to the heart of this novel.”—Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *The Times*

“A novel of deceptive slenderness… Barnes has reinvented himself once again.” —Duncan White, *Daily Telegraph*

About the Author

JULIAN BARNES is the author of twenty previous books including, most recently, *Keeping an Eye Open: Essays on Art*. He has received the Man Booker Prize, the Somerset Maugham Award, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, the David Cohen Prize for Literature, and the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; in France, the Prix Médicis and the Prix Femina; in Austria, the State Prize for European Literature. In 2004 he was named Commandeur de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Ministry of Culture. His work has been translated into more than forty languages. He lives in London.

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And so, it had all begun, very precisely, on the morning of the 28th of January 1936, in Arkhangelsk. He had been invited to perform his first piano concerto with the local orchestra under Viktor Kubatsky; the two of them had also played his new cello sonata. It had gone well. The next morning he went to the railway station to buy a copy of *Pravda*. He had looked at the front page briefly, then turned to the next two. It was, as he would later put it, the most memorable day of his life. And a date he chose to mark each year until his death.

Except that—as his mind obstinately argued back—nothing ever begins as precisely as that. It began in different places, and in different minds. The true starting point might have been his own fame. Or his opera. Or it might have been Stalin, who, being infallible, was therefore responsible for everything. Or it could have

been caused by something as simple as the layout of an orchestra. Indeed, that might finally be the best way of looking at it: a composer first denounced and humiliated, later arrested and shot, all because of the layout of an orchestra.

If it all began elsewhere, and in the minds of others, then perhaps he could blame Shakespeare, for having written *Macbeth.* Or Leskov for Russifying it into *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk.* No, none of that. It was, self-evidently, his own fault for having written the piece that offended. It was his opera's fault for being such a success—at home and abroad—it had aroused the curiosity of the Kremlin. It was Stalin's fault because he would have inspired and approved the *Pravda* editorial—perhaps even written it himself: there were enough grammatical errors to suggest the pen of one whose mistakes could never be corrected. It was also Stalin's fault for imagining himself a patron and connoisseur of the arts in the first place. He was known never to miss a performance of *Boris Godunov* at the Bolshoi. He was almost as keen on *Prince Igor* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko.* Why should Stalin not want to hear this acclaimed new opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*?

And so, the composer was instructed to attend a performance of his own work on the 26th of January 1936. Comrade Stalin would be there; also Comrades Molotov, Mikoyan and Zhdanov. They took their places in the government box. Which had the misfortune to be situated immediately above the percussion and the brass. Sections which in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* were not scored to behave in a modest and self-effacing fashion.

He remembered looking across from the director's box, where he was seated, to the government box. Stalin was hidden behind a small curtain, an absent presence to whom the other distinguished comrades would sycophantically turn, knowing that they were themselves observed. Given the occasion, both conductor and orchestra were understandably nervous. In the entr'acte before Katerina's wedding, the woodwind and brass suddenly took it upon themselves to play more loudly than he had scored. And then it was like a virus spreading through each section. If the conductor noticed, he was powerless. Louder and louder the orchestra became; and every time the percussion and brass roared fortissimo beneath them—loud enough to knock out windowpanes—Comrades Mikoyan and Zhdanov would shudder theatrically, turn to the figure behind the curtain and make some mocking remark. When the audience looked up to the government box at the start of the fourth act, they saw that it had been vacated.

After the performance, he had collected his briefcase and gone straight to the Northern Station to catch the train for Arkhangelsk. He remembered thinking that the government box had been specially reinforced with steel plates, to protect its occupants against assassination. But that there was no such cladding to the director's box. He was not yet thirty, and his wife was five months pregnant at the time.

1936: he had always been superstitious about leap years. Like many people, he believed that they brought bad luck.

#

Those who did not know him, and who followed music only from a distance, probably imagined that this had been his first setback. That the brilliant nineteen-year-old whose First Symphony was quickly taken up by Bruno Walter, then by Toscanini and Klemperer, had known nothing but a clear, clean decade of success since that premiere in 1926. And such people, perhaps aware that fame often leads to vanity and self-importance, might open their *Pravda* and agree that composers could easily stray from writing the kind of music people wanted to hear. And further, since all composers were employed by the state, that it was the state's duty, if they offended, to intervene and draw them back into greater harmony with their audience. This sounded entirely reasonable, didn't it?

Except that they had practised sharpening their claws on his soul from the beginning: while he was still at the Conservatoire a group of Leftist fellow students had tried to have him dismissed and his stipend removed. Except that the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians and similar cultural organisations had campaigned from their inception against what he stood for; or rather, what they thought he stood for. They were determined to break the bourgeois stranglehold on the arts. So workers must be trained to become composers, and all music must be instantly comprehensible and pleasing to the masses. Tchaikovsky was decadent, and the slightest experimentation condemned as “formalism.”

Except that as early as 1929 he had been officially denounced, told that his music was “straying from the main road of Soviet art,” and sacked from his post at the Choreographic Technical College. Except that in the same year Misha Kvadri, the dedicatee of his First Symphony, became the first of his friends and associates to be arrested and shot.

Except that in 1932, when the Party dissolved the independent organisations and took charge of all cultural matters, this had resulted not in a taming of arrogance, bigotry and ignorance, rather in a systematic concentration of them. And if the plan to take a worker from the coal face and turn him into a composer of symphonies did not exactly come to pass, something of the reverse happened. A composer was expected to increase his output just as a coal miner was, and his music was expected to warm hearts just as a miner’s coal warmed bodies. Bureaucrats assessed musical output as they did other categories of output; there were established norms, and deviations from those norms.

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At Arkhangelsk railway station, opening *Pravda* with chilled fingers, he had found on page three a headline identifying and condemning deviance: muddle instead of music. He determined at once to return home via Moscow, where he would seek advice. On the train, as the frozen landscape passed, he reread the article for the fifth and sixth times. Initially, he had been shocked as much for his opera as for himself: after such a denunciation, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* could not possibly continue at the Bolshoi. For the last two years, it had been applauded everywhere—from New York to Cleveland, from Sweden to Argentina. In Moscow and Leningrad, it had pleased not just the public and the critics, but also the political commissars. At the time of the 17th Party Congress its performances had been listed as part of the Moscow district’s official output, which aimed to compete with the production quotas of the Donbass coal miners.

All this meant nothing now: his opera was to be put down like a yapping dog which had suddenly displeased its master. He tried to analyse the different elements of the attack as clearheadedly as possible. First, his opera’s very success, especially abroad, was turned against it. Only a few months before, *Pravda* had patriotically reported the work’s American premiere at the Metropolitan Opera. Now the same paper knew that *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* had only succeeded outside the Soviet Union because it was “non-political and confusing,” and because it “tickled the perverted taste of the bourgeois with its fidgety, neurotic music.”

Next, and linked to this, was what he thought of as government-box criticism, an articulation of those smirks and yawns and sycophantic turnings towards the hidden Stalin. So he read how his music “quacks and grunts and growls”; how its “nervous, convulsive and spasmodic” nature derived from jazz; how it replaced singing with “shrieking.” The opera had clearly been scribbled down in order to please the “effete,” who had lost all “wholesome taste” for music, preferring “a confused stream of sound.” As for the libretto, it deliberately concentrated on the most sordid parts of Leskov’s tale: the result was “coarse, primitive and vulgar.”

But his sins were political as well. So the anonymous analysis by someone who knew as much about music as a pig knows about oranges was decorated with those familiar, vinegar-soaked labels. Petit-bourgeois,

formalist, Meyerholdist, Leftist. The composer had written not an opera but an anti-opera, with music deliberately turned inside out. He had drunk from the same poisoned source which produced “Leftist distortion in painting, poetry, teaching and science.” In case it needed spelling out—and it always did—Leftism was contrasted with “real art, real science and real literature.”

“Those that have ears will hear,” he always liked to say. But even the stone deaf couldn’t fail to hear what “Muddle Instead of Music” was saying, and guess its likely consequences. There were three phrases which aimed not just at his theoretical misguidedness but at his very person. “The composer apparently never considered the problem of what the Soviet audience looks for and expects in music.” That was enough to take away his membership in the Union of Composers. “The danger of this trend to Soviet music is clear.” That was enough to take away his ability to compose and perform. And finally: “It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly.” That was enough to take away his life.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jon Cerrone:

Now a day people that Living in the era everywhere everything reachable by match the internet and the resources within it can be true or not need people to be aware of each data they get. How people have to be smart in getting any information nowadays? Of course the solution is reading a book. Studying a book can help people out of this uncertainty Information specially this The Noise of Time book as this book offers you rich details and knowledge. Of course the info in this book hundred per cent guarantees there is no doubt in it everbody knows.

Clarence Cobb:

The ability that you get from The Noise of Time will be the more deep you digging the information that hide inside words the more you get considering reading it. It does not mean that this book is hard to know but The Noise of Time giving you enjoyment feeling of reading. The author conveys their point in specific way that can be understood by means of anyone who read that because the author of this book is well-known enough. That book also makes your current vocabulary increase well. So it is easy to understand then can go with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We advise you for having that The Noise of Time instantly.

Jessica Jones:

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Michelle Morrow:

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