Dancing to Stalin’s tune
SUE GAISFORD

The Noise of Time
JULIAN BARNES

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OR
SOME
WEEKS in 1936, Dmitri Shostakovich would stand all night at the lift doors outside his fifth-floor apartment. So convinced was he that he would be arrested that he’d chosen to be ready, fully dressed, with a small suitcase packed, so that his wife and baby would not have to see him taken from them. For the first couple of nights, his three packets of Kazbeki cigarettes stayed in the suitcase, for he would need them for his interrogation. But on the third night he reasoned that they would probably be confiscated anyway, so he stood and smoked. Eventually, he decided to sleep on his bed, still dressed, with the suitcase beside him. He was not taken away.

In Stalin’s Russia, even your brand of cigarettes was determined by status. Kazbeki, with their image of a galloping horse and high, Georgian mountains suggesting freedom, were for artists; party officials smoked strong, cheap Belomory, marketed with a map of the Soviet empire, while the Great Leader himself had exclusive use of Herzegovina Flor, though he chose almost to pull them apart, messily stuffing the tobacco into his proletarian pipe. The ironies are heavy, and inescapable.

With such anecdotes, such details, Julian Barnes presents three episodes in the life of one of Russia’s greatest, and most compromised composers, each of them 12 years apart, each characterised by catastrophic events: the condemnation of his previously celebrated opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk; a visit to America where he was compelled to denounce Stravinsky; though he privately revered him; his enforced joining of the Party, under Khrushchev’s only slightly less repressive rule.

It was a truly tragic life, dominated by coercion and humiliation, governed by the need not only to stay alive himself, but also to protect his family and friends.

Yet there is a bewildering lack of empathy: it is curiously unmoving. Barnes makes such extended use of flashbacks that it is often hard to keep track of the essential narrative, and he uses the third person like a kaleidoscope, sometimes focusing on the perceived memories and anxieties of the man, sometimes pulling back into an almost factual, omniscient commentary.

Though it is a short book, there is much use of repetition, which can add emphasis but can also seem inappropriately didactic.

Fiction has often made free with the lives of real people. Barnes acknowledges his debt to several biographers, not least to the man himself, who might well – as Barnes hints – have hoped that posterity would distinguish between the worst of the life and the best of the work; between pessimism and despair. This might not be easy: he told the violinist Fyodor Druzhinin to play the first movement of his last chamber work, the Fifteenth Quartet, “so that flies drop dead in mid-air, and the audience start leaving the hall in sheer boredom”.

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