Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

“He is generally regarded as the greatest symphonist of the mid-20th century, and many of his string quartets, concertos, instrumental and vocal works are also firmly established in the repertory. His numerous film scores, extensive incidental theatre music and three ballets are of more variable quality. In 1936, political intervention cut short his potentially outstanding operatic output; such interference continued to blight his career, belying the outward signs of official favour and recognition that increasingly came his way. Amid the conflicting pressures of official requirements, the mass suffering of his fellow countrymen, and his personal ideals of humanitarianism and public service, he succeeded in forging a musical language of colossal emotional power. The music of his middle period is often epic in scale and content; it has been understood by many Russians, and in more recent years also by Westerners, as chronicling his society and times, conveying moods and, as some would argue, experiences and even political messages in notes, at a time when to do so in words was proscribed. Since the appearance in 1979 of his purported memoirs, which expressed profound disaffection from the Soviet regime, his works have been intensely scrutinized for evidence of such explicit communication. However, his intentions in this respect continue to provoke disagreement, not least because of the problematic status of the sources involved. He published articles and made speeches under varying degrees of duress; for much of his life his correspondence was liable to be read by censors; he destroyed almost all letters sent to him; he kept no diary; and his reported confidences to friends and family are of varying reliability. Meanwhile, the musical dimensions of his works remain comparatively little examined. He played a decisive role in the musical life of the former Soviet Union, as teacher, writer and administrator. He was also an active pianist, frequently performing his own works until disability prevented him. His last concert appearance was in 1966.”

- Grove Music Online article by David Fanning and Laurel Fay
Leatherby Libraries offers many resources, both physical and electronic, to those interested in learning more about Dmitry Shostakovich, Russian music, and Soviet culture during the 1930s and ‘40s. A simple search in the Library’s catalog will show you that many of these items are located in the 3rd floor M. Douglas Music Library. In addition to the many books, scores, and CDs about Shostakovich and other Russian composers of this time, be sure and check out the online Music Research Guide for access to a vast array of electronic resources like Naxos Music Library (a database that allows one to listen to almost 100,000 streaming albums of art music), RILM (to access musicology articles about the interpretation of Shostakovich’s music and the influence of Soviet government in his composition), and Grove Music Online (the online home of the tried and true New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians).

If you don’t know where to start or would like some suggestions on relevant materials, talk to a librarian at the Reference Desk or contact Scott Stone, Performing Arts Librarian at sstone@chapman.edu