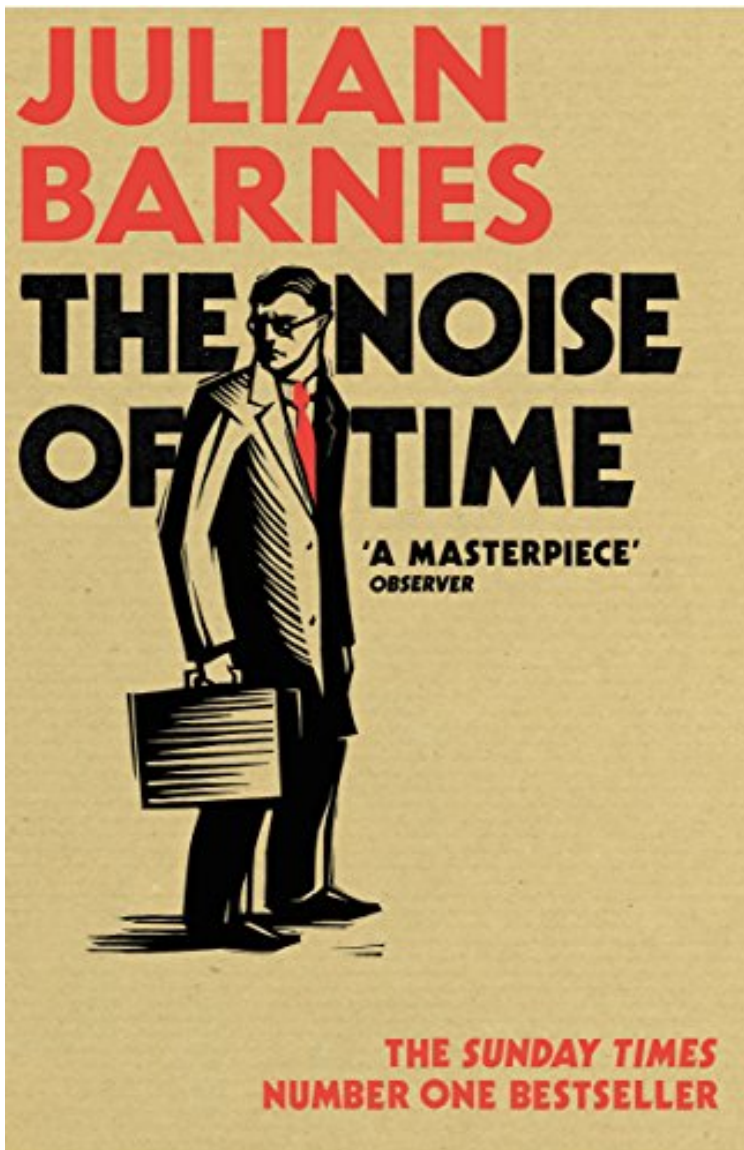


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The Noise of Time



Par Julian Barnes
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur'BARNES'S MASTERPIECE' - OBSERVERIn May 1937 a man in his early thirties waits by the lift of a Leningrad apartment block. He waits all through the night, expecting to be taken away to the Big House. Any celebrity he has known in the previous decade is no use to him now. And few who are taken to the Big House ever return.Stunning Sunday TimesA profound meditation on power and the relationship of art and power It is a masterpiece of sympathetic understanding I dont think Barnes has written a finer, more truthful or more profound book Scotsman A tour de force by a master novelist at the top of his game Daily ExpressExtraitAnd 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 operas fault for being such a success at home and abroad it had aroused the curiosity of the Kremlin. It was Stalins 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 Stalins 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-Korsakovs 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 directors 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 entracte before Katerinas 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 directors 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 states duty, if they offended, to intervene and draw them back into greater harmony with their audience. This sounded entirely reasonable, didnt 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 miners coal warmed bodies. Bureaucrats assessed musical output as they did other categories of output; there were established norms, and deviations from those norms. # 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 districts 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 operas very success, especially abroad, was turned against it. Only a few months before, Pravda had patriotically reported the works 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 Leskovs 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 couldnt 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. Revue de presse "Densely written, masterfully told tale." (Esquire) "Moving and often genuinely tense." (Reader's Digest) "Disturbing, darkly comical and an ideal intellectual palate-cleanser to kick off the new year." (Saga Magazine) -- s "Undoubtedly one of Barnes s best novels, and a great way to start the literary year." (Sunday Times) -- s "A new, short, highly concentrated novel meditating in brief paragraphs on the art and compromise with power over 50 years in the life of the composer Shostakovich." (David Sexton Evening Standard) -- s