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Russian Music of the Soviet Era: For Archive or Forever

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The purpose of the article is to present several topics in Russian music of the Soviet era (roughly 1920-1990). The time that has passed since the fall of the Iron Curtain allows us to rethink and revise the cultural treasures of seven decades and reassess new research of the last decade, carried out both by people who previously gained a reputation as an authority in Soviet culture, and by scientists who came from this environment and began sharing their vision of the subject after acquiring the skills of a Western scholar. The article is based mainly on the latter research and tries to see its subject as a complete picture, albeit with missing details, so to speak, a postmodern picture that requires the reader to participate in its refinement. The methodological basis of this study is working with published sources through the critical lens of cultural anthropology as it has developed and presently looks.

Keywords: Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Soviet cultural doctrine, formalism, atheistic ideology, sacred music

Introduction

Russian music of the Soviet period, with the exception of the selected works of two giants—Prokofiev and Shostakovich—is quite a *terra incognita* in English musicology of any direction (historical, theoretical, or ethnomusicological). One might wonder whether it is the case that the mysterious Russian soul is difficult to decipher, especially behind the Iron Curtain, or it is simply necessary to know the epoch-making events that took place there in order to fully and competently judge the artistic phenomena of the Soviet era. In any event, until recently, musicologists who came from Russian background, whose parents (or, in any case, ancestors) had Russian (or Russian-Jewish) roots, and who themselves, during a certain period of their formation in the profession, visited the Soviet Union for a relatively long time, were considered authorities on Soviet Russian music. Such scholars include, most notably, Mark Slobin, who shared his experience with Soviet musicologists in Moscow in the mid-1960s (1993), and Richard Taruskin, who in turn shared his experience in Moscow in the early 1970s (2019).

Gradually, this niche of musicological research was expanded by musicologists who left the Soviet Union around the 1990s and, along with the acquisition of language skills and a research worldview characteristic of a Western scientist, it became a new wave of research on material familiar to them from the previous period of life and, importantly, through their native language. These researchers include, among others, Marina Ritzarev and, in the last decade, Alexander Rosenblatt who look back to the 1930s-1980s, presenting the palette of Russian music of that period considering sociocultural circumstances that shed light on Soviet songs, professional music, and even church music, which was a very little studied area.

Throughout the article, various quotations and references, mainly to recent studies, will help us judge whether Soviet music (besides the aforementioned Prokofiev and Shostakovich) is worth studying or whether its

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natural place is simply in the archive. The layout of the topics to be discussed will look like this:

- Turbulations in the life and work of Dmitri Shostakovich;
- The story of Sergei Prokofiev upon returning to his homeland;
- Soviet composers: classics and songwriters;
- A song that represented the USSR in the West for many years; and
- Professional sacred music in the last two decades of the USSR.

Dmitri Shostakovich: Coping With Soviet Cultural Management

Understanding the stylistic changes that Shostakovich undertook every few years—towards atonality, back to clear tonality, again to atonality, and so forth—is completely impossible without taking into account the Communist cultural management in the USSR of the 1930s and, further on, Soviet cultural doctrine of the late 1940s. "Authorities love tonal music—that is, music in familiar scales, with a clear hierarchy of chords and single sounds," states Rosenblatt. "This makes them feel calm: as long as the composers write tonal music, the authorities have nothing to worry about" (Rosenblatt, 2020, p. 79). Shostakovich's First Symphony, a graduate work written in quite a traditional style of tonal music, had a lucky fate from the very beginning—it was noticed by Bruno Walter and Leopold Stokowski, who introduced it to European and American audiences. The young composer became a household name in a fairly short time, being promoted by one of the Soviet leaders of that period, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, with whom the composer had become close.

Since until the mid-1930s, the creative atmosphere of Soviet music was both innovative and daring, Shostakovich experimented a lot with trendy atonality, ironized in the genres of opera and ballet, and closely communicated and worked together with such outstanding personalities as the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold. The collapse came about in 1936, when Stalin attended a performance of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. "The next day, *Pravda*, the central organ of the Soviet press, published an unsigned editorial 'Muddle Instead of Music,' which was the first blow to be publicly delivered to the young composer by Stalin's criticism" (Rosenblatt, 2020, p. 80). Deadly scared, the composer withdrew from rehearsals his new, Fourth Symphony, switched to a traditional tonal style, and seemingly regained the authorities' favor, which meant he was again being performed, that is he had income from work as a composer. This style is characteristic of all of Shostakovich's works created during WWII, including his iconic Seventh Symphony with its famous "invasion theme" in the first movement.

The second blow to be delivered to Soviet composers, first of all to Shostakovich, came in 12 years, in 1948, when Soviet cultural doctrine began to act. Composer who gradually came back to the elements of his early style was accused for "formalism," that is following the style characteristic of modernist Western composers like Schoenberg (See First All-Union Congress, 1948). This time, the composer needed a decade to lie low and wait out the change of mood in the leadership, and in fact, the change of the leadership that had died by that time. However, during this again traditional tonal period, Shostakovich created *24 Preludes and Fugues*, op. 87 (1951), a worthy response to the Bach's cycle *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and a number of other works, including the so-called *Waltz No. 2*, which over time became the composer's most popular work in the West.

In his last years, when, it would seem, there was nothing to be afraid of, Shostakovich, whose language had become almost completely atonal, was still very careful in using Schoenberg's 12-tone technique, and if he used it, then only 11 tones (so as not to be reproached for formalism), or the 12 tone rows served as a contrasting background for completely tonal music. The book of composer's memoires, issued in English by the musicologist

S. Volkov (1979) made quite a brouhaha in the West: many of former Soviet citizens who were living already in the USA considered this book slander, in so free and caustic language it conveys the composer's sayings, recorded by a musicologist in the last days of Shostakovich. Only with the passage of time, it became clear that this was the living language of the composer himself, documented by the Soviet musicologist who left for the West...

Sergei Prokofiev: Two Muses, Peter, and the Wolf

Sergei Prokofiev's brief story unfolds as follows. Born in 1891 in Sontsovka (Russian Empire, now part of Ukraine), he completed his education at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, excelling as both a composer and a pianist (graduating in 1909 and 1914, respectively). In May 1918, Prokofiev departs Russia, initially residing in the United States before settling in France. Throughout the 1920s, his name is gaining recognition in the Western world, yet he remains overshadowed by Rachmaninov as a pianist and by Stravinsky as a composer. Despite Parisian music critics suggesting in the early 1930s that Prokofiev was "almost a citizen" of the French capital, the use of "almost" implied that he did not receive official acknowledgment and its ensuing consequences. "He was only semi-successful in the West. He didn't attain the degree of fame that would satisfy his ambitions," says pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy. "In the West, he tried to be even more avant-garde than he was naturally, and it didn't work. He was going along with the tastes of fashion, but it was against his nature." (Cited in Norris, 2003).

This situation gradually planted in the composer's mind the idea of returning to his homeland, and from 1927 Prokofiev regularly appeared in the USSR, until one day he decided to come for good. This was facilitated by the state order to create the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* for the Kirov (now Mariinsky) Ballet, received by the composer in 1935. The time of arrival of the composer and his family turned out to be the most inopportune: the Soviet authorities began then to control over cultural activities throughout the range of arts. Even musicologists fell under the all-seeing eye of the Communist Party. Taruskin tells the story of musicologist Valentina Konen, who returned to the USSR in the early 1930s with her father after a 10-year stay in America and who, after her father's conviction and execution, was declared the daughter of an "enemy of the people", which made her life and career incredibly difficult (2019, p. 23).

Be that as it may, Prokofiev, his wife, the Spanish singer Carolina (Lina) Codina, and their two sons arrived in Moscow bearing Soviet passports that had been issued and reissued, in order to take residence in a splendid four-room apartment located on the Garden Ring, granted to the family of the individual anticipated to become the primary Soviet composer. Additionally, the Soviet authorities, making a rare exception, permitted him to bring along a luxurious blue Ford, a recent acquisition shortly before his arrival. Much later, Shostakovich commented on Prokofiev's lack of understanding of where he was arriving due to naivety:

> And this was where Prokofiev landed like a chicken in soup. He came to Moscow to teach them, and they started teaching him. Along with everyone else, he had to memorize the historic article in *Pravda* "Muddle Instead of Music." He did look through the score of my *Lady Macbeth*, however. He said, "Amusing." (Volkov, 1979, p. 36)

Further events developed as follows. The article "Muddle instead of Music" was followed by another article in *Pravda*, "The False Ballet", criticizing Shostakovich's ballet *The Bright Stream* (premiered in 1935).

> After such devastating reviews by the official press, the management of the Kirov Theater could not risk it. The premiere of the ballet [Romeo and Juliet] could cause not just discontent on the part of the authorities, but real persecution. The situation was complicated by the fact that one of the authors of the libretto of Prokofiev's ballet, Adrian Piotrovsky, was convicted and executed in 1937. His name was removed from all documents. (Rosenblatt, 2019a, p. 5)

Prokofiev's family life was then truly complicated and actually came to an end, since his wife, who was his muse throughout the 1920s and until their arrival in the USSR, which she resisted as best she could, unsuccessfully tried to leave the USSR with their children. At that same period, after attending with his kids a couple of performances at the Moscow Children's Musical Theater, Prokofiev was invited to write something for this theater. This is how the musical fairy tale *Peter and the Wolf* appeared, probably the most unconventional in 20th century classical music. "If Sergei Prokofiev had composed nothing except *Peter and the Wolf*, he would have left a sizable mark," argues Smith. "The work has helped introduce generations of children to the instruments of the orchestra and the concept of telling a story through music, fulfilling the goal Prokofiev set for himself in 1936" (2008, para. 1). This brief and unusual musical composition, which does not fit into any existing genre of classical music, managed to present a class of its own. In the 1990s, Mikhail Gorbachev, Bill Clinton, and Sophia Loren narrated it for disks.

Prokofiev met his second muse in 1938 in a sanatorium in Kislovodsk. A student at the Literary Institute, Mira Mendelssohn was 23 years old, he was 47. Three years after meeting Mira, Prokofiev left his family, taking with him only a small suitcase. The story of the divorce lasted 10 years, and finally, when in 1948 Prokofiev formalized his second marriage, the next day his first wife was imprisoned in Stalin's camps, where she remained until the death of the "leader of the peoples" in 1953, after which she was finally able to leave for France. Prokofiev, shortly after his ex-wife went to prison, suffered a stroke from which he never recovered, and died on the same day as Stalin, so his funeral was modest and unnoticed.

Whoever Else Comes to Mind

In the *Preface to the Complete Collection of My Works and a Brief Reflection upon This Preface*, for bass and *piano, op.123* (1966), Dmitri Shostakovich, in his typically ironic manner, speaks out about countless number of Soviet composers whose works, like his own, will sink into oblivion. To the credit of Soviet composers, Shostakovich includes "many foreign composers" here, without naming anyone by name.

Every joke has a bit of truth. The list of names of Soviet composers alone, according to the registers of every single regional or republican branch of the Union of Soviet Composers, can be five times the number of words in this article. He who would be asked to name the top five names of "Soviet classical composers" and another five as "songwriters", would have a difficult task. And yet, the names that directly come to mind in the category of "Soviet classical composer" (except the two aforementioned giants) are Reinhold Glière, Nikolai Myaskovsky, Georgy Sviridov, Alfred Schnittke (although not a single melody directly comes to mind), and Aram Khachaturian with his win-win *Sabre dance*.

It's a little easier with songwriters: Isaak Dunaevsky and Alexander Tsfasman certainly pop up in memory, both associated with the most popular mass songs, film music, and Soviet jazz of the 1930s. Dmitry Pokrass, Yan Frenkel, Oscar Feltsman, and Nikita Bogoslovsky will compete for third and fourth places, but it is impossible not to leave a secure place for Vasily Solovyov-Sedoi!

Still, if you have not yet decided on your choice, then someone who will help you is...

American Pianist Who Fell in Love With Soviet Song

> An international survey conducted in 1980 by the Moscow Radio revealed three Russian songs that people primarily associate with this category: *Kalinka*, *Katyusha*, and *Moscow Nights*. While the former two ones, being a military march by genre, are known mostly through their performance by the Red Army Song Ensemble, the latter song differs substantially, being one of the most soulful songs ever created in Soviet Russia. (Rosenblatt, 2019b, p. 120)

The composition of the song's melody can be traced back to 1955, credited to Vasily Solovyov-Sedoi, originally titled *Leningrad Nights*. Surprisingly, the initial expectations for the song were modest, as neither its performance nor its success was anticipated by the composer himself. However, fate had other plans.

Fast forward to 1956, a year marked a shift in the Soviet state's post-Stalin era, particularly evident in the unexpected production of sports documentaries. One such film focused on athletics, and to avoid monotony in the form of typical marching musical accompaniment, the directors opted for a departure, steering towards more lyrical songs. In this endeavor, Vasily Solovyov-Sedoy, known for his melodic gift, collaborated with poet Mikhail Matusovsky to create a song for the film. The musical material emerged from the composer's previously overlooked collection, and given the context of the film centered around the 1956 Spartakiad of the Peoples of the USSR in Moscow, *Leningrad Nights* underwent a transformation, becoming *Moscow Nights*. Two famous singers were offered to record this song, and none of them agreed, unable to feel the lyrical nature of the work. It was not a professional singer who undertook to perform this song for the film, but actor Vladimir Troshin, in whose performance this song went down in history, became the most popular among radio listeners after its first airing.

The year 1958 was marked by the First International Tchaikovsky Competition held in Moscow, where the 1st prize in piano performance was awarded to the young, previously unknown pianist Van Cliburn, representing the United States. The award of the first prize to an American musician occurred at the very peak of the Cold War and served as the first sign of warming relations between the USSR and the USA. Yet, besides the above context, Van Cliburn turned out to be a person who greatly contributed to the international popularity of *Moscow Nights*, having performed his own and at the same time very Russian-style piano version of the song at the final concert of the competition and then at many other concerts in the United States and around the world. Van Cliburn, a student of the famous Russian-born pianist Rosina Lhévinne, absorbed from his teacher a love of Russian melodic music and brought this love to his version of the song, which became increasingly popular.

The first phrase of *Moscow Nights*, played on a vibraphone, was used for decades, beginning in 1964, as a time signal on the popular news radio station *Mayak*.

Sacred Music by Soviet Composers: At Home and Abroad

Throughout the history of the USSR, Soviet composers were never associated with writing church music. As it is widely known, religion was marginalized there during that period, and the development of church ritual and music was not generally observed.

> Although most religions were never officially banned, the state advocated the abolition of religion and to achieve this goal, officially declared religious beliefs as superstitious and backward. Many churches, synagogues, and mosques have been destroyed or turned into museums of atheism, a vivid example of which was until recently the Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg. (Ng, 2023, p. 288)

However, in the final decades of Soviet history, that is, in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, authorities, though not supportive, ceased to ban the creation of religious music, whether liturgical, paraliturgical, or of any spiritual nature. That said,

> […] there were no rules for writing church music in a country that adhered to an atheistic ideology for decades, so Soviet composers who wanted to work with Christian texts had to choose between traditional and modern musical styles, based only on personal aesthetic preferences. (Rosenblatt, 2022, p. 544)

Historically, Maxim Berezovsky (1745-1777) and Dmitry Bortnyansky (1751-1825) first introduced the Western musical style of the Classical period into Russian sacred music of the late 18th century in unaccompanied choral works of paraliturgical content (Ritzarev, 2006, Ch. 6, 8, 13, 14). Yet, "[i]t is taken for granted that the golden-era Russian music of the last two centuries is all secular, while Russian sacred music of the same period had a humiliatingly low profile" (Ritzarev, 2023, p. 68).

Who were those Soviet (or former Soviet) composers who, starting in the mid-1970s in the USSR and then in other countries where they moved, primarily Germany and Israel, wrote their works of religious or at least somewhat sacred content? The following persons belonging to three generations (born in the 1910s-1950s, respectively) fall into this category: G. Sviridov, A. Schnittke, S. Gubaidulina, A. Pärt, and J. Bardanashvili.

Georgy Sviridov (1915-1998), considered a master of vocal and choral writing, in the last decade of his life composed the unaccompanied cycle *Chats and Prayers*, faithfully reproducing melodies that the composer could remember from his childhood in a small town, when he regularly joined his mother, who sang in the local church choir.

Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998) and Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931) represent an avant-garde approach to writing liturgical music. Thus, Schnittke's *Requiem* (1975) has a very unconventional set of instruments: organ, piano, bass guitar, and percussion. Gubaidulina's *St. John Passion* can be defined as a unique combination of Russian Orthodox worship (the text is pronounced and sung in Russian) with German expressionism. One of the 2021 comments to the performance of this work on *YouTube* states that "[t]he singers are singing as if they were present at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ."

The transition from avant-garde to minimalism characterizes the creative path of Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), an Estonian composer who, according to the *Arvo Pärt Center* website, is the most performed living (classical) composer. About three dozen works by Pärt, directly related to the Christian canonical-liturgical tradition, were written over four decades—from 1977 to the end of the 2010s. Referring to different divisions within the Christian tradition, all these works are marked by Pärt's unique and recognizable style, which the composer himself calls *tintinnabuli*, referring to small church bells with characteristic overtones. However, the real milestone and in some sense the pinnacle of minimalist expressiveness is Pärt's *My Heart's in the Highlands* for countertenor and organ (2000), to the words by R. Burns (1759-1796). It is an exquisite work written by a postmodern minimalist composer with experience in writing church music, where the vocal line, which is a recitation at one pitch in each phrase, gradually rises upward over eight minutes, using only the three pitches of a minor triad, and then descends downward on the same pitches, one pitch in each phrase. It really sounds like a spirit soaring in the heights.

The ecumenical approach to religious texts in concert music is clearly traced in the works of Josef Bardanashvili (b. 1946), an Israeli composer of Georgian-Jewish origin. Before his arrival in Israel, he was probably "the only [Soviet] professional composer who was seriously engaged in Jewish synagogue music" (Ritzarev, 2016, p. 99, cited and translated in Rosenblatt, 2019c, p. 80). Bardanashvili wrote three works at the crossroads of religious traditions: *Children of God* (1997) on texts from the Talmud, the New Testament, the Psalms, and the Quran; *Haleluyah-Magnificat* (2014) on Hebrew, Yiddish, and traditional Latin texts; and *The Passion of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai* (2016) on texts from the Zohar (the major work on Kabbalah). According to Rosenblatt, who interviewed Bardanashvili, "the composer himself considers these works to be a triptych" (2019c, p. 80).

This ecumenical tradition is followed by a younger generation of composers whose traces come from Russia, such as Aviya Kopelman (b. 1978), an Israeli composer who wrote the *Hebrew Magnificat* (2006), set to Latin, German, and Hebrew texts and representing various aspects of motherhood.

Conclusions

The findings of the study do not provide a clear answer to the question posed in the title of the article. As an undeniable contribution to the world treasury of classical music, Russian music of the Soviet period remains a sphere, which is truly understandable *only* taking into account the sociocultural environment of that time and place.

Of this music, the popular song *Moscow Nights* is undoubtedly widely known; Shostakovich's *Waltz No. 2* and Seventh Symphony—perhaps, along with Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Peter and the Wolf*; as well as Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance* and, for refined aesthetes, *My Heart's in the Highlands* by P ärt. At least these works are familiar to most of the author's acquaintances in California and Israel.

While the primary objective of this article was to acquaint the academic audience with the research subject, exploring significant events in composers' biographies and delving into related background information about the time and place they lived in adds an equally valuable dimension. Revisiting the broader significance of this study, it can be asserted that examining musical art in the context of social upheaval, particularly in relation to religion in a country that had long rejected this worldview, holds additional merit. This approach not only contributes to new research perspectives in cultural and religious studies but also extends its impact to fields such as musicology and art history.

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