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At the Watershed: Russian Music in the First Decades of the 20th Century

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The study examines the socio-cultural context of Russian music in the decades immediately preceding and following the October Revolution of 1917, focusing on several aspects: personalities representing pre- and post-revolutionary Russian (in exile) and Soviet (at home) musical activity and culture; second-tier national composers; "industrial music" of the early Soviet period; and Soviet cultural management in music behind the Iron Curtain. Portraits of composers little known to Western listeners and academic audiences are presented. The spectrum of musical styles and aesthetics is considered. Issues of ethnic diversity and religious affiliation of Russian composers are relevantly explored. Songs of the First Revolution (1905), the Civil War, and Soviet mass songs are briefly touched upon. The scope and choice of themes of the study provide a holistic approach to topics that are usually addressed separately: before or after the 1917 Revolution; classical music or folk/popular songs.

Keywords: Russian music, Soviet music, October Revolution, industrial music, Soviet cultural management

Introduction

More than a hundred years have passed since the October Revolution of 1917. Four, or rather five generations have succeeded each other, the country has been communist, socialist, capitalist, and something new, not yet quite clear which one. But what has always been clear about Russia is that it is as unpredictable in terms of social structure and change as it is full of talented individuals who have always found a basis for their creativity and vision of new horizons.

One of the areas in which Russian creativity has always found its reflection was music. On the one hand, Russian music as a professional artistic phenomenon was neither a part nor an offspring of church compositional activity, as was the case in Western countries, although since the late 18th century it adopted European tonality, musical forms, instruments, and ensembles makeup. Moreover, it was completely at odds with the Russian Orthodox Church, which did not accept instrumental music at all, approving only *a cappella* singing. On the other hand, being a fairly secular art for aristocrats and intelligentsia, Russian music became somewhat special in terms of the use of instruments (primarily woodwinds) in orchestral works and, later, the inclusion of Russian folk melodicism in the European musical texture.

By the end of the 19th century, Russian music had won respect in the West, primarily thanks to P.I. Tchaikovsky, whose symphonies and operas stood alongside the works of such major European composers as Brahms, Verdi, and Wagner, and whose three ballets—*Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*—were unrivaled up until the three ballets of I. Stravinsky. The St. Petersburg school, somewhat less known

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internationally, also produced several names, which became known for the strength and originality of their statements, such as M. Mussorgsky with his *Pictures at an Exhibition*, *Songs and Dances of Death*, and the opera *Boris Godunov*.

Another reference point would be the multinational makeup of Russian composers. The names of composers, beginning with the end of the 19th century and especially in the 20th century, speak for themselves: César Cui, Maximilian Steinberg, Reinhold Glière, Nikolai Medtner, Dmitri Shostakovich, which testifies to their French, Jewish, German, and Polish origins. One of the greatest teachers of the St. Petersburg school of composition and instrumentation, N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov, himself a distinguished composer, mentored not only such illustrious names as Igor Stravinsky, but also Maximilian Steinberg and several other composers, including Mikhail Gnessin who became one the leading members of the St. Petersburg Society of Jewish Folk Music, founded in 1908 not without Rimsky-Korsakov's patronage. About ten years earlier, M. Gnessin's three sisters—Evgenia, Elena, and Maria, each of whom studied piano and graduated with honors from the Moscow Conservatory—founded the Gnessin Institute in Moscow (now the Gnessin State College of Music).

If the Gnessin siblings were the children of the Rostov rabbi Fabian Gnessin, then the founders of the St. Petersburg and Moscow conservatories, the Rubinstein brothers, came from a Jewish family that converted to Christianity in the first third of the 19th century. These facts, not particularly remarkable in themselves, do not seem to be a mere coincidence and therefore deserve comment.

> The history of the Jews in Russia, before and during the first decades after the 1917 revolution, is a complex amalgam of segregation, poverty, exclusion, persecution, and extraordinary intellectual and cultural achievement both within the confines of Jewish society and culture and also outside in the larger non-Jewish Russian world. The significance of Russian Jewry to the development of modern Russian culture, and indeed to the central elements of the modern Russian national self-image, cannot be overestimated. (Botstein, 2015)

The beginning of the 20th century with its seething socio-cultural cauldron, the First Russian Revolution of 1905, Decadence and, finally, two revolutions of 1917, which marked the beginning of a 70-year era of communism-socialism in the world, was marked by musical events that already went beyond the Russian space, after which what was happening in Russia and what was developing in the West as Russian émigré culture began to exist in parallel, without touching each other, with the exception, perhaps, of Prokofiev, who visited the role of a Russian emigrant in the West, and... chose to return to the homeland.

But first things first. What, let's zoom in, were the main figures of the Russian musical space by the mid-1910s?

The Turning Point

When thinking of Russian composers of the early 20th century, the following names come to mind: Sergei Rachmaninoff, Alexander Scriabin, Igor Stravinsky, Nikolai Myaskovsky, and Sergei Prokofiev. These five composers have different profiles in terms of their contribution to the treasury of Russian music, regardless of how avant-garde or conservative the style of each of them was.

What these individuals had in common was that they were all highly educated musicians who studied with great composers of previous generation, following the traditions of the Moscow and St. Petersburg schools that had developed by the mid-19th century. The two conservatories, founded in St. Petersburg (1862) and Moscow (1866) by the brothers Anton and Nikolai Rubinstein, were distinguished from the beginning by the highest

level of skill and knowledge, which put them on a par with the best musical educational institutions of the time, currently occupying 14th and 8th places in the world, respectively[1].

The turning point came around the mid-1910s, at the height of the Decadent movement that swept Russia at the beginning of the 20th century with the publication of Valery Bryusov's landmark poem *The Coming Huns* (1905), in which he "welcomes the new barbarians coming to destroy the old culture and usher in a new, younger civilization on its ruins" (Lodge, 2010, p. 276). The Russian intelligentsia could not help but feel that the time for great changes was coming. The First Russian Revolution of 1905 showed that the timer had been set, and it was a matter of, if not months, then only a few years for the revolution to return.

One of the above composers, Alexander Scriabin who died prematurely in 1915 at the age of 43, was perhaps among the most sensitive to the trends of the time. A classmate of Rachmaninoff, with whom he "were close friends, colleagues, and on some occasions, rivals who motivated each other" (Roh, 2015, p. 4), Scriabin, however, was quite different in his early and even more so in his later musical aesthetics.

Scriabin possessed quite a rare cognitive skill—strong association of particular pitches (keys) with particular colors. Having started with works that directly continued Chopin's line in piano work, in the middle period the composer was already forming his own bright style, going beyond the limits of romantic tonality. Outbursts of revolution bubbled up in almost every note of his etudes and preludes, and his orchestral works gravitated towards a universal scale, incorporating ideas of light, dance, and mysterious action. The composer did not finish *Mysterium*, a symphonic poem intended to continue his earlier works of this genre, *Poem of Ecstasy* (1908) and *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1910).

Sergei Rachmaninoff remained true to his Russian romantic style also outside Russia. Rightly considered the greatest Russian composer of the 20th century in exile, he was something of an outsider in the United States, where he settled in 1918. His compositional output diminished significantly after his emigration, and he concentrated mainly on piano performance throughout the United States and Europe.

Igor Stravinsky, who created an unbreakable image as a Russian modernist ballet composer after three of his early ballets were performed with great success by Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* in Paris, unlike Rachmaninoff, managed to establish a reputation as an American composer in the country to which he moved in 1939. Stravinsky with his new wife permanently settled in Hollywood, just a few blocks from Arnold Schoenberg. With that said, they had no contact with each other. Unlike Rachmaninoff, who never received permission to visit Russia after emigrating, Stravinsky visited Moscow and Leningrad in 1962, for the first time since leaving the country in 1914, at the invitation of the Union of Soviet Composers.

Nikolai Myaskovsky, born in 1881, a year older than Stravinsky, a traditionalist called by many—until Shostakovich's star rose—the greatest symphonist of the 20th century, was long considered the father of the Soviet symphony, writing a total of 27 works in this genre, three of which—the 6th, 21st, and 27th—are considered his best, and one of these three, the 21st, is the most famous. "In the 1920s and 1930s, Myaskovsky was the leading composer in the USSR dedicated to developing basically traditional, sonata-based forms"[2]. Like Shostakovich, Myaskovsky never left the Soviet Union, but, unlike him, he was truly traditional and therefore did not encounter either Stalinist criticism (at least, before 1948) or the interest of foreign critics, and seven decades after his death he is remembered less and less.

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[1] Based on *QS World University Rankings* 2024.

[2] According to *Classical Connect* (https://www.classicalconnect.com).

Having lost his mother early and having survived the trauma during the Civil War (1918-1921), when his father, who went out on a holiday in the ceremonial overcoat of the tsarist army, was literally torn to pieces by a crowd, Myaskovsky helped his three sisters all his life, did not create a family himself, and had no children (Lysenkov, 2021).

Sergei Prokofiev, who was ten years younger than Stravinsky and Myaskovsky, had such a unique history abroad as a Russian pianist and composer who found himself trapped at his homeland under Stalin and became a Soviet composer that he would be better discussed in the section on Soviet cultural management in music, two subheadings below, along with Dmitri Shostakovich.

The timeline of the composers discussed in this section and further in the article is presented in Figure 1.

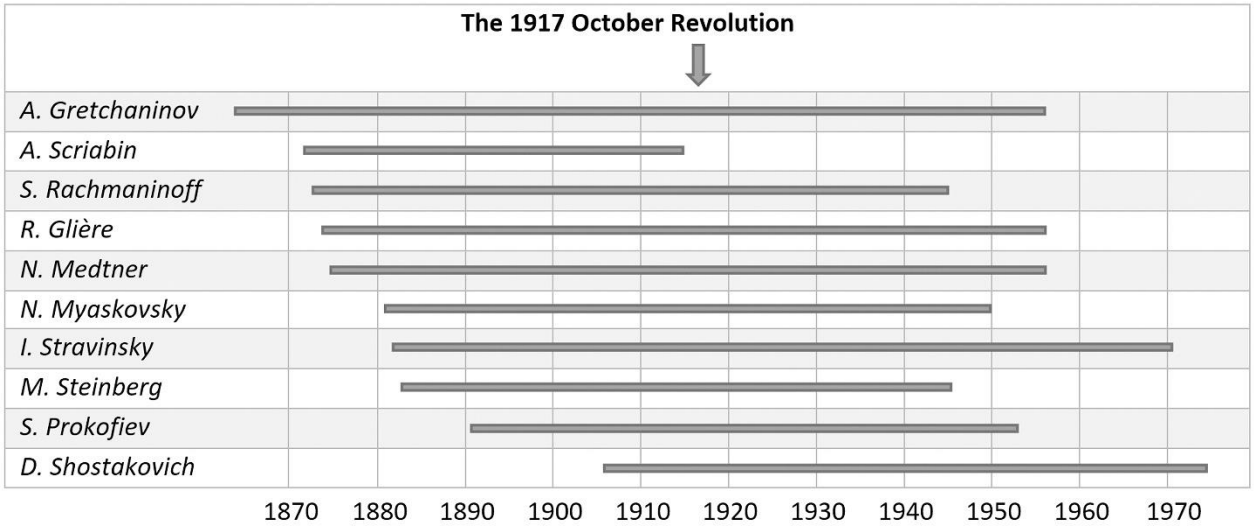

Figure 1. The timeline of the Russian and Soviet composers discussed in the article.

In the Shadow of Big Names

The Russian and Soviet composers discussed in this section were, to varying degrees, overshadowed by their compatriots who were more innovative, more experimental, more melodically gifted, or simply more fortunate. These "second-tier composers" will be given attention and respect below, following the chronological order of their birth: Alexander Gretchaninov, Reinhold Glière, Nikolai Medtner, and Maximilian Steinberg.

Alexander Gretchaninov, who was 53 when the October Revolution broke out, could have been excluded from this list (for being eight years older than Scriabin, who comes next), but he was so consistent and prolific in his mature years that he rightfully deserves consideration here. After his first encounter with the piano at the age of 14, the future composer began his musical education three years later, against the wishes of his father, who wanted the boy to continue the family business. Gretchaninov first studied at the Moscow Conservatory with such celebrities of his time as S. Taneyev and A. Arensky. However, in the late 1880s, having quarreled with Arensky, he moved to St. Petersburg, where he continued his composition studies with Rimsky-Korsakov. Gretchaninov, according to L. Sabaneyev,

> […] had a strong desire and intention to write music accessible and understandable to the general public. And not trivial music for the "rabble," but artistic music.
>
> And he achieved this, he really became one of the most popular and widespread, beloved composers for the average level of musical understanding. He wrote conveniently for voices (male and female singers were delighted). He wrote for

> the choir. This is an area in which little had been done in Russia, there was a demand for composition for a vocal ensemble. He wrote sacred music, in which Russian music was not very productive at all, and finally, he wrote for a children's choir, for which almost nothing had been done.
>
> As a result, his popularity became very great, [...] competed with Tchaikovsky's, and many singers even found that Gretchaninov was higher and "more convenient than Tchaikovsky," which certainly had some truth in it[3]. (Sabaneyev, 2004, p. 87)

Not being in tune with post-revolutionary life in Russia, the composer with his second wife moved to France in 1925, and with the outbreak of WWII, to the United States, where he lived until the end of his days.

Reinhold Glière, being a contemporary of Rachmaninoff and a private teacher of the young Prokofiev and his older fellow Myaskovsky, was himself gifted with outstanding melodic talent and continued the vibrant romantic line of 19th-century Russian music into the 20th century.

> Despite living through a period of almost unparalleled political turmoil, Glière somehow managed to carve out a consistently successful career, both in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. In the later part of his life, he was hailed as an ideal exponent of Socialist Realism, composing works that not only had an instantaneous appeal but, to the delight of the Soviet bureaucrats, also avoided any unwarranted contamination with Western modernism. (Levi, 2022)

Awarded the Glinka Prize, for which he was nominated by A. Glazunov, A. Lyadov, and... the founder of *The Mighty Handful*—M. Balakirev himself for his Third Symphony "Ilya Muromets" (premiered in 1912), one of three Russian epic romantic symphonies of the early 20th century, along with Scriabin's *Divine Poem* and Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony, Glière later received, along with two other Glinka Prizes, three Stalin Prizes and three Orders of Lenin, becoming the only one of his kind in the history of Russian music and ending his professional career as the chairman of the Union of Soviet Composers.

Considered by many as a Tchaikovsky throwback utilizing "a musical language that would have sounded old-fashioned even 40 years earlier" (Levi, 2022), Glière nevertheless left a bright mark on Russian music of the 20th century, bringing a fresh stream to the concert genre, creating concertos for French horn and orchestra, harp and orchestra, and a unique concerto for soprano (vocalize) and orchestra.

The composer's most significant work, however, is his ballet *The Red Poppy* (1927), rightfully considered the first Soviet ballet. This work is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, the ballet underwent several revisions, the first of which was due to the requirements of the State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre in Leningrad, where the work was staged in 1929, two years after the Moscow premiere. Yet, two later editions were already solely determined by ideological reasons. Thus, the libretto of the 1949 version was significantly changed to reflect the events preceding the Chinese Revolution, which in itself was an important political milestone for the USSR. In addition, in the 1959 edition, the title of the work was changed for *The Red Flower* due to "the dissatisfaction of the Chinese delegation with the mention of poppy—the opium plant" (Sapanzha & Balandina, 2017, p. 34).

The ballet was so popular, and also promoted by the Soviet government, that porcelain figurines of the ballerina who danced the main role were produced at the Leningrad Porcelain Factory, and the perfume industry mastered the perfume "Red Poppy", while the durability of the scent was supposed to be at least 40 hours (Sapanzha & Balandina, 2017, pp. 35-36).

The next person to consider would be the Russian pianist and composer of German descent Nikolai Medtner, who, being a Russian romantic traditionalist of the Rachmaninoff type and having left Soviet Russia

[3] Hereinafter, the translation of Russian sources is mine—A.R.

in the late 1920s, did not arouse much interest among either Soviet or Western music critics and listeners. However, in recent years, interest in this figure, as well as in other masters of Russian music who until now remained in the shadows, has increased.

As it looks today, Russian piano music of the first third of the 20th century is, in essence, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin and... Medtner. All three were primarily pianists who entered the composers' circle somewhat later. The other two Russian pianist-composers, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, are perceived more as composers, but the former, especially Rachmaninoff and Medtner, are composers thinking in terms of piano texture, sound, and aesthetics.

Born in Moscow to the wealthy family of Karl Medtner and Alexandra Goedicke, Nikolai studied piano with his uncle Fyodor Goedicke, the father of his cousin Alexander Goedicke, also a pianist and composer, whose departure from the *gymnasium* to the conservatory served as a family precedent, on the basis of which Nikolai's brother Emilii won the argument at the subsequent family council on the matter, and Nikolai was allowed to devote himself to musical pursuits (Martyn, 2016, p. 4).

Emilii was an extraordinary figure in the family. A philosopher, literary and music critic, he was an admirer, supporter, and later a promoter of the poet and theorist of Russian symbolism Andrei Bely. In the 1910s, he began to visit Germany frequently, showing interest in the theory of Sigmund Freud and becoming close to his follower Carl Jung, telling him about Russian symbolism. At some point, he became Jung's patient. And there were plenty of reasons for this. Emilii's wife, violinist Anna Bratenshi, soon after their marriage and moving to Medtner's family house, fell in love with his brother Nikolai, and her feeling turned out to become mutual. "The ménage-à-trois was to continue for the next fifteen years, an island of stability through all the political turbulence the three must have experienced in the first two decades of the twentieth century" (Kirsch, 1997, p. 28). Emilii traveled around Germany and Switzerland, became friends with the founder of anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner and spent less and less time at home until 1916, whereupon (or rather, after the death of his mother) Anna received a divorce and the "go-ahead" to marry his brother. From then on, Anna and Nikolai were inseparable and, being a childless couple, lived in perfect harmony until the composer's death in London in 1951.

What musical style is characteristic of Medtner's works, each of which is either for solo piano or includes the piano as the main or accompanying instrument?

> Medtner cheerfully admitted that he was something of an anachronism. His natural musical sympathies lying with the western classical masters on the one hand and with Tchaikovsky on the other, he began his career at the very point when music was about to be led in new directions, in Europe by Strauss and Schönberg, and in his own country by Stravinsky and Prokofiev, for all of whom he developed an almost pathological distaste. (Martyn, 2016, p. 12)

Given that the composer himself considered his music archaic, the question arises as to who might have been interested in publishing the works of an "old-fashioned" composer in the era of modernism. The Zimmermann family, music publishers who started their activities in St. Petersburg in the 1870s and moved to Leipzig in mid-1910s have become such ones. Three generations of this family, who established themselves as leading promoters of new Russian music in Europe, published the composer's works successively until the mid-1930s, resuming contacts shortly after WWII (Lomtev, 2023, pp. 61-62). Zimmermann's early publications of Medtner's works served in the 1960s as the basis for the publication in the USSR of the complete works of the composer, to which the composer's widow devoted the last years of her life, returning from London to Moscow after her husband's death and taking direct part in this project.

The last composer worthy of mention in this section is Maximilian Steinberg. Once called the hope of Russian music, Steinberg, however, entered the history of Russian/Soviet music not as a major composer, but rather as a respected teacher of composition at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, under whom several future composers studied, most notably D. Shostakovich. Maximilian Steinberg studied with N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov and, moreover, married his daughter Nadezhda in 1908, for which reason he first had to convert to Orthodoxy.

> One of the ironies of history is that Steinberg's ballet *Metamorphose[s]* was scheduled for the same 1913 season as the *Rite of Spring*, and Stravinsky, who was jealous that Rimsky favored Steinberg and that Steinberg married Rimsky's daughter, did everything he could to thwart Steinberg's competing work. (Botstein, 2015)

Things did not go beyond the premiere performances of the ballet "Midas", which was part of the musical and mime triptych *Metamorphoses* based on Ovid in 1914 in Paris and London at S. Diaghilev's "Russian Seasons".

While, anyway, in the 1910s and 1920s, Steinberg was a sought-after composer, his luck started to decline by the mid-1930s. Ballet *Till Eulenspiegel* written in 1936 and already planned for production at the Kirov (Mariinsky) Theatre, was never staged, most probably giving place to Prokofiev's *Romeo and Julia*, which in turn was banned by the theatre management. In the following decades, Maximilian Steinberg's music is rarely performed, while the liturgical work *Holy Week of Ancient Chants* for large mixed choir, completed already in 1927, has not been performed in Russia at all (up until 2016), for religious music along with religious practices were banned there for decades starting in the early 1930s.

Steinberg, according to the recollections of his contemporaries, was a pleasant person to talk to, who was liked by literally everyone who met him on his life's path. Those who noted Shostakovich's complete lack of anti-Semitism tend to attribute this to "admiration and affection for his teacher that sustained his decency and courage on this issue" (Botstein, 2015).

Maximilian Steinberg died right after the WWII, in 1946. His wife survived him for 24 years. The couple had three children who have been distinguished in biology, art, and philology (Jancevičius, 2022).

"Industrial Music" in the Early Soviet Era

Imitation of machine sounds and other ways of reflecting the passage of time and technological progress, having appeared in Western classical music somewhere in the early 19th century, reached their heyday, becoming a kind of milestone, in the first decades of the 20th century. The most impressive technical invention and its development by the 1920s was certainly the train with its moving heart, the locomotive. In 1923, French composer Arthur Honegger composed the *mouvement symphonique* (symphonic movement), a six-minute piece for orchestra called *Pacific 231*, which, as the composer describes in the score, was intended to convey to the listener "the quiet breathing of the machine at rest, its effort in starting, then the gathering speed, the progress from mood to mood, as a 300-ton train hurtles through the dark night, racing 120 miles an hour" (Varineau, 2017).

In Russia, the railway also had a unique multifaceted significance in technological and cultural history as the pinnacle of engineering art, an institutional structure, a catalyst for development, and a powerful source of artistic inspiration. Following the late abolition of serfdom in 1861, Russia found itself at a historical crossroads: on the one hand, a population of newly freed peasants entered urban centers and industrial projects without prior exposure to modern labor systems; on the other, inventive minds filled the offices of Tsarist administration generating complex technical visions that demanded viable implementation strategies. This

paradox—a simultaneous backward glance and forward thrust—defined much of Russia's 19th-century encounter with modernization.

Among the earliest cultural artifacts to engage critically with the railroad was Nikolai Nekrasov's seminal poem *The Railway* (1864), inspired by the construction of the Nikolayevskaya line (now the Saint Petersburg–Moscow Railway), built between 1843 and 1851. Nekrasov's text offered a metaphor-rich and searing indictment of Russia's nascent capitalist order, one that exploited the labor of recently emancipated serfs. Published in *Sovremennik* in 1865, the poem came to be recognized, particularly in the Soviet era, as one of 19th-century Russian literature's most compelling anti-capitalist statements. Its politically provocative nature led to the suppression of the journal that dared to disseminate it (Chukovsky, 1965), highlighting the tensions between artistic expression and autocratic oversight.

Visual culture has engaged with the same topic in a parallel register. Konstantin Savitsky's 1874 painting *Repair Work on the Railway* complements Nekrasov's poetic critique by depicting the grueling physicality of railway labor. The work stands in direct dialogue with Ilya Repin's iconic *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1873), and together they constitute milestones of Russian critical realism, offering profound commentaries on social exploitation through distinct artistic media.

The Soviet period (1917-1991) witnessed a deepening of the railway's symbolic resonance, particularly in music. Lenin's proclamation—"Communism is Soviet power plus electrification of the entire country" (Lenin, 1967, p. 30)—elevated the railroad into a symbol of industrial progress and ideological promise. Contrary to prevailing assumptions about the restrictive influence of Party control over artistic domains from the very beginning, the early Soviet years were marked by remarkable experimental latitude. "Until the mid-1930s, the creative atmosphere of Soviet music was both innovative and daring" (Rosenblatt, 2020, p. 80). Thus, the composer Vladimir Deshevov's 1926 score for the theatrical production *Rails*, conceived in the genre of industrial melodrama, innovatively fused orchestral timbres with actual mechanical sounds. Although only a concise piano miniature survives from this project, its bold sonority impressed even the French composer Darius Milhaud, who heard it while in the USSR in the late 1920s and called Deshevov a "genius" and "extremely original"[4].

From the mid-1930s onward, however, railway-themed music, especially in the genre of popular song, increasingly reflected the ideological contours of Soviet life. Yet the shift from creative experimentation to didacticism did not negate the genre's emotional potency. The same enthusiasm that had characterized early musical portrayals of the railroad was now harnessed to project an almost utopian vision of collective endeavor and social transformation. In this context, the train came to symbolize the forward momentum towards a classless society. By the late 1940s, the motif evolved further to reflect the Soviet citizen's intimate identification with the national landscape—captured vividly in songs that evoked the act of gazing out of a train window with a sense of personal belonging and civic pride. A notable example is *Travel Song* (1949) by Sergey Vasilyev (lyrics) and Isaak Dunayevsky (music), a composition that found a deep resonance with a wide Soviet audience and embodied the emotional embrace of railway imagery for the purpose of ideological affirmation.

Gradually, starting in the 1950s, the industrial theme slows down due to the lack of constant demand from the Soviet authorities. One of the rare cases of using industrial themes and sounds in the music of that time was

[4] According to *Last.fm* (https://www.last.fm).

Georgy Sviridov's music for the film *Vremya, vpered!* [Time, forward!] (1965), a fragment of which has since served as an introduction to the central Russian TV news program *Vremya* [Time].

Cultural Management over Music

Following the October Revolution of 1917, Russian artists, writers, and musicians encountered the need to reconcile their creative pursuits with the new Soviet ideology. For many, this alignment posed little difficulty due to the established tradition of *critical realism* and the revolutionary spirit prevalent in Russian art and music in previous decades. However, it was music that assumed a crucial role in the Communist ideological apparatus, serving as a vehicle for propagandist messaging. The impact of this on the life and work of the leading Soviet composers of that period, primarily Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev, did not take long to appear.

Yet, despite the increasing ideological constraints, the period until the mid-1930s, as mentioned above, was still marked by an experimental spirit in Soviet music and theater. The young Shostakovich tried his hand at atonality and infused irony into opera and ballet forms, collaborating with such prominent figures of the time as the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold. Prokofiev, who lived in the West during the 1920s and was tired of competing with his fellow-émigrés Sergei Rachmaninoff and Igor Stravinsky, was thinking about returning to his homeland. In 1935, he accepted a state commission to create the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* for the Kirov Ballet in Leningrad, signaling his return, which proceeded relatively calmly about a year later.

The situation changed dramatically for Soviet composers in January 1936, when Stalin attended a performance of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*. The following day, *Pravda*, the Soviet central newspaper, published an unsigned editorial titled "Sumbur vmesto muzyki" [Muddle instead of music], marking the first public denunciation of a Soviet musician by Stalin. The article's impact was immediate: Shostakovich withdrew his new Fourth Symphony from rehearsals and began to reconsider his musical language. In this period, many of Shostakovich's acquaintances vanished into the notorious dungeons of the NKVD[5], the Stalin's secret police. According to the composer's son, Maxim Shostakovich, his father narrowly escaped arrest after being interrogated by the NKVD about his interactions with Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, who had for years supported the young composer (Ardov, 2003, p. 59). Tukhachevsky and Meyerhold were eventually executed in 1937 and 1940, respectively.

The repercussions of Stalin's criticism extended to Prokofiev as well; following the article "Sumbur vmesto muzyki", a subsequent article condemned Shostakovich's ballet *The Bright Stream*, creating an atmosphere of fear that led the Kirov Theater to cancel the premiere of *Romeo and Juliet*. The situation was further complicated by the execution of Adrian Piotrovsky, one of the ballet's librettists, whose name was subsequently erased from official records. Even musicologists were not immune to the party's scrutiny, as illustrated by the case of Valentina Konen who, returning to Soviet Russia in 1931 after a decade in the United States, found her career in jeopardy when her father was declared an "enemy of the people" and executed (Taruskin, 2019, p. 23).

The second wave of Stalin's cultural purges would occur in the late 1940s, targeting mainly writers and composers. In 1948, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a decree in which, criticizing Vano

[5] That is, Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), a government body of the USSR that operated from 1934 to 1948 to ensure state security, intelligence, and the maintenance of public order. The immediate successors of the NKVD were the MGB (Ministry of State Security) and later the KGB (Committee for State Security), which had additional functions such as foreign intelligence and counterintelligence—A.R.

Muradeli's opera *The Great Friendship*, it effectively branded leading Soviet composers, beginning with Shostakovich and Prokofiev, as "formalists" (that is, followers of Western modernists like Arnold Schoenberg who had clearly departed from the classical tradition), which was a grave accusation. Shostakovich, who had been highly productive during WWII and seemed to have regained favor with the authorities, found himself again on the defensive. Forced to publicly accept the party's criticism, Shostakovich expressed his commitment to aligning with Soviet realistic art, despite the difficulty of changing his compositional style[6]. Soon after that, he was dismissed from his positions at the Leningrad and Moscow Conservatories. This period saw the rise of the Zhdanov Doctrine, named after Andrei Zhdanov, the secretary of the CPSU[7] Central Committee, who dictated that all artistic endeavors must adhere strictly to the party line. Although Zhdanov's death in 1948 marked the end of his direct influence, the doctrine's effects lingered for another decade. It seems that Shostakovich managed to recover from this second blow only in the 1960s.

During this period, Prokofiev's personal life clearly became complicated. His marriage to the Spanish singer Carolina (Lina) Codina, who resisted their move to the USSR, broke up, and she tried in every possible way to leave the USSR. Prokofiev's later years were marked by declining health and increasing isolation. In 1938, he met his second wife, Mira Mendelssohn. However, the legalization of their relationship, which required first a divorce that took 10 years, coincided with the imprisonment of his first wife in Stalin's camps, where she remained until 1953. Shortly thereafter, Prokofiev himself suffered a stroke, which gradually led to his death on the same day as Stalin in May 1953—a demise that went virtually unnoticed amid the major political event. Despite the tragedies that marked the last years of his life, Prokofiev's legacy lives on, thanks in large part to that same ballet *Romeo and Juliet* (eventually staged) and his musical fairy tale *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), which continues to introduce young audiences to classical music.

Songs and Songwriters

Songs from the time of (and directly connected with) the First Russian Revolution (1905) can be considered among the earliest surviving examples of Russian *urban* musical folklore, created, most likely, not without the participation of professional musicians. While the genres of Russian drawn-out songs and dance songs, both accompanied and unaccompanied, are associated with rural folklore and have a modal rather than tonal basis, the songs of the Russian Revolution of 1905 are the result of half a century of development of the musical genre of urban song and perceived as definitely tonal. Some of these songs, which in the following decades were supplanted by newly created songs, would be preserved half a century later by D. Shostakovich in his Eleventh Symphony "1905" (composed in 1959), which is entirely based on these songs, adapted to the tonal language of the composer.

The Russian Civil War (1918-1920), which followed the October Revolution of 1917, brought with it its own set of songs that lasted for decades, leaving behind unrivaled examples such as "Katyusha", which was sung and loved for decades not only in the USSR, but even became part of the Israeli musical folklore brought to Palestine during the British Mandate in the 1920s by waves of *aliyah*. Israeli songbooks contain at least a hundred

[6] "No matter how hard it is for me to hear the condemnation of my music, and even more so the condemnation of it by the Central Committee, I know that the party is right, that the party wishes me good and that I have to look for and find concrete creative ways that would lead me to Soviet realistic art. I understand that this is not an easy path for me, that it's not so easy for me to start writing in a new way. [...] But I can't help but look for these new ways, because I am a Soviet artist, I was brought up in a Soviet country, I have to seek and want to find a way to the heart of the people" (Union of Soviet Composers, 1948, p. 343).

[7] Abbreviation for Communist Party of the Soviet Union—A.R.

songs of Russian origin from the 1920s and 1930s with Hebrew lyrics translated from Russian or newly written.

The mass song emerged in the Soviet Union as a leading genre of songs, starting from the 1930s through the 1950s. Ritzarev points out that the leading Soviet songwriters of the 1930s were of Jewish descent. Indeed, the first names that come to mind would be Isaak Dunaevsky, Alexander Tsfasman, Dmitry Pokrass, Yan Frenkel, and Oscar Feltsman. These composers who moved to major Soviet cities, along with those who emigrated to *Eretz Israel*, shared a common goal of contributing to the creation of a new cultural identity. This trend underscores the complex interplay between individual artistic ambition and the broader socio-political context in which these composers operated (Ritzarev, 2012, pp. 36-37).

The international resonance of Soviet songs is illustrated by a 1980 survey conducted by Moscow Radio, which identified "Kalinka", "Katyusha", and "Moscow Nights" as the three most iconic Russian songs. While "Kalinka" and "Katyusha", both military marches, gained fame largely through performances by the Alexandrov Ensemble (widely known in the West as the Red Army Choir), "Moscow Nights" stands out for its lyrical and soulful nature, a characteristic that sets it apart from its more militaristic counterparts.

The melody of "Moscow Nights" was composed by Vasily Solovyov-Sedoi in 1955 under the original title "Leningrad Nights". Initially, the song received little attention, and even the composer did not anticipate its success. However, circumstances shifted in 1956 when the Soviet government, in a post-Stalin Thaw era, commissioned a film about athletics. The filmmakers, seeking to avoid the monotony of the usual marching music, turned to Solovyov-Sedoi, who repurposed his earlier composition. Given that the film was centered around the 1956 Spartakiad of the Peoples of the USSR, held in Moscow, the song was retitled "Moscow Nights". The song gained international prominence at the closing ceremony of the 6th World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1957. This event cemented the song's status as a symbol of the Soviet Union on the global stage. The song became so emblematic of Soviet culture that its opening notes, played on a vibraphone, have been used as the time signal for the *Mayak* music radio station since 1964. One of the key figures in bringing "Moscow Nights" to the world was the American pianist Van Cliburn, a student of the Russian-born pianist Rosina Lhévinne. Cliburn, who won the inaugural International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958, frequently performed his own piano version of "Moscow Nights" at concerts in the United States and around the world (Lechs, 2024, p. 5).

While "Moscow Nights" remains a quintessential expression of the Russian soul everywhere, two other iconic songs, "Kalinka" and "Katyusha", more often represent the Russian cultural identity of the Soviet era abroad, along with Shostakovich's Waltz No. 2, which has become popular in recent years, and Prokofiev's ever-fashionable musical fairy tale in which [Soviet pioneer] Peter captures the Wolf, unable to help the swallowed duck, whose quacking in the wolf's belly can be heard both in the narrator's final words and in the orchestra. A very symbolic ending to the story invented by a composer who found himself trapped upon returning to his homeland.

Conclusions

Summarizing the above, the author would like to note that the selection and sequence of the topics covered in the various sections of this study were aimed at presenting the period in its palette, which did not imply deep excursions into topics with which the reader may be familiar from publications of recent years, in particular, by the author of this essay. That said, the following reference points seem to be vital for bringing in order the impression of the multifaceted profile of Russian music of this period:

- Over the course of several decades, Russian music developed in different spaces (at home and in exile) by composers whose choice to stay or leave the country after the Revolution could determine the style and the very number of newly created works.
- The religious and national makeup of Russian composers was quite diverse: among them were people of German and Polish descent, as well as people from Jewish families, some of whom (before the Revolution) converted to Orthodoxy, which was then a condition for full entry into the composers' (as well as any other) professional community.
- Some composers can be classified (today) as "second-tier"; however, they once had the same weight as first-tier composers, but were less innovative or simply less able to promote themselves. Their names and works are now the subject of research and public interest.
- In the early Soviet period, there was "industrial music". Works that fell into this category used the sounds of machines, including factories and trains, while being simultaneously depictive, documenting, and ideologically driven works.
- Soviet cultural management of music was part of life behind the Iron Curtain. Since the early 1930s, the Communist Party demanded that writers, artists, and composers align with Soviet ideology in their works. Those who did not seem to understand the requirement paid with their lives or, at best, by having their works banned from publication and performance.
- Songs of the First Revolution (1905), the Civil War (1917-1920) and Soviet mass songs became an important source of inspiration for Soviet composers or part of their creative program in the period from the 1930s to the 1950s.

The chosen context of the topics and their coverage allows us to further develop any of them, both in terms of stylistic analysis and the socio-cultural layers of the historical, geographical, and political realms of that time and place.

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