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## FROM MODERNISM TO SOCIALIST REALISM IN FOUR YEARS: MYASKOVSKY AND ASAFYEV

**Abstract:** Two outstanding personalities of the Soviet musical life in the 1920's, the composer Nikolay Myaskovsky and the musicologist Boris Asafyev, both exponents of modernism, made volte-faces towards traditionalism at the beginning of the next decade. Myaskovsky's *Symphony no. 12* (1931) and Asafyev's ballet *The Flames of Paris* (1932) became models for Socialist Realism in music. The letters exchanged between the two men testify to the former's uneasiness at the great success of those of his works he considered not valuable enough, whereas the latter was quite satisfied with his new career as composer. The examples of Myaskovsky and Asafyev show that early Soviet modernists made their move away from avantgarde creativity well before they faced any real danger from the bureaucracy.

**Key-Words:** Socialist Realism, Nikolay Myaskovsky, Boris Asafyev

From 1929 to 1932, Stalin's shock-workers were fuelled by the slogan, "Fulfil the Five-Year Plan in four years!" The years of foreign invasions and White reaction had devastated Russia's economy; now from a base of almost nothing, Stalin set out to transform the Soviet Union into a new industrial great power. Alongside industrialization and collectivisation, the field of culture also underwent a transformation, from the pluralistic ferment of experimentation of the post-revolutionary decade to the semi-desert of Socialist Realism. First the self-proclaimed "proletarian" cultural organisations were used to bludgeon other groups out of existence. Then the same proletarian organisations were themselves dissolved in favour of state unions of writers, painters and composers. Initially, artists were expected to realise vague slogans and principles in their work, and gradually, as a body of officially approved precedents was built up in each art, the details of style and content were filled in. By the time the process was completed, many composers were producing work that bore scant resemblance to their output of the previous decade.

The establishment of Socialist Realism in music should not be considered as a victory of the proletarianists over the modernists. *Assotsiatsiya sovremennoy muziki* (Association for Contemporary Music, hereafter ASM) was the body which had contained most of the modernists during the 1920s (although it was by no means exclusively modernist).<sup>1</sup> And yet Socialist

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<sup>1</sup> The Moscow ASM included Anatoly Aleksandrov, Samuil Feinberg, Dmitry Kabalevsky, Nikolai Myaskovsky, Leonid Polovinkin, Nikolai Roslavets, Vissarion Shebalin,

Realism in music was now spearheaded by former modernists who had directed ASM, or had their music propagated by it or who were otherwise associated with it. The critic Boris Asafyev, for example, was the effective leadership of ASM for much of its existence, and he had won himself the reputation of an ardent champion of modernism; but in 1931, he reinvented himself as a traditionalist composer in his ballet, *The Flames of Paris*, which was very soon hailed as a model for the new style. Nikolai Myaskovsky's symphonies had constituted the core of the ASM symphonic repertoire, but in 1931 his Twelfth Symphony likewise became a model for Socialist Realist symphonic music. In 1936, the same Myaskovsky was one of the first contributors to the new genre of musical panegyrics to Stalin; his song was received warmly by the officials and again served as a model for others. And Prokofiev, who had formerly been ASM's guiding light, returned to Russia and joined with his old friends Myaskovsky and Asafyev in glorifying the Great Leader. And so the list continues.

The present essay seeks to explain why these volte-faces occurred. It will also address the issue of moral judgement that has so often arisen in discussion of both the music and the composers. In the 1930s, the change had been described as a rite of passage from the erring ways of decadent modernism to a new socialist consciousness. Today, the period is usually viewed through a Fall narrative, and individual composers are regarded as hypocritical opportunists or tragic victims. This essay will, through the details of individual cases, argue that the events seldom allow such broad-brushed moral judgements.

Socialist Realist music was not written by the bureaucracy, nor did the bureaucracy even produce any practical guidelines for Socialist Realist composition. It was left to critics and composers to arrive at an understanding of what Socialist Realism meant for music, a debate which occupied the second half of the 30s. The debate was not a free-for-all, of course. The contributions of critics who were known to be close to senior figures in the bureaucracy were given correspondingly greater weight. There were also certain works from the early 30s which carried the bureaucracy's seal of approval, transmitted through such critics. We shall take two of these model works as our starting point, both from 1931, before Socialist Realism had been brought into existence: these were Nikolai Myaskovsky's 12<sup>th</sup> Symphony and Boris Asafyev's ballet, *The Flames of Paris*. But what is this? Myaskovsky and Asafyev had been leading figures in ASM during the 20s, and yet they both managed to compose Socialist Realist music *avant la lettre*? But it was not so much that Myaskovsky and Asafyev were considered to be more ideologically reliable than all other composers;

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and Yuri Shaporin; the much less stable Leningrad ASM at various stages included Vladimir Deshevov, Gavriil Popov, Vladimir Shcherbachov, Dmitry Shostakovich, Maksimilian Shteinberg, Yuliya Veisberg, Alexei Zhivotov, and Iosif Schillinger.

instead, the works themselves offered two features attractive to the bureaucracy: they were stylistically conservative, and featured worthy subject matter – Myaskovsky's symphony was initially entitled *Kolkhoznaya* (The Collective Farm) and Asafyev's ballet was about the French Revolution. How did it come about that these eminent *ASMOVtsi* turned their backs on their former convictions so quickly, even before ASM was formally disbanded? What was going on in their minds during this period of radical change? Did they themselves suspect that they would never again be able to espouse modernism? And, setting aside our dearest prejudices, did they even consider this to be a tragic loss?

Let us begin with Asafyev. During the 20s, he was ASM's leading polemicist, a tireless champion of musical modernism. Even at the close of the 20s, not long before his Socialist Realist ballet, there are still no signs of any ambivalence, as demonstrated by the following passage to be found in his "Letters from Paris" of 1928–9. Having closely followed the twists and turns of Stravinsky's modernism, he now warns that some of Stravinsky's recent practices compromise the modernist character of his neo-classicist project:

*Stravinsky is stubbornly sincere in striving to simplify his style; he takes deliberately simplified material, but binds its separate elements according to the "new syntax". ... It has to be said that many times in his Apollo, Stravinsky very wittily takes up the position of a reactionary in relation to himself. He achieves the desired simplicity by selecting the most naïve chords, as it seems, in order reassure ears which long for the familiar. But by combining such familiar chords in an unfamiliar way, he immediately turns himself into an innovator. These are happy paradoxes! It is quite another matter however, when in search for even greater simplicity, he happens to fall into some well-worn progressions, and, unawares, he works such common-or-garden elements into his fabric, up to "neologisms" of the Wagnerian variety. Then one begins to feel sorry for this great contemporary composer. Nearly all of Apollo's music is born from a deliberate attempt to weave new fabric from old thread. This fabric is very uneven, for in some places the ear chances upon regrettable cheap patches, which spoil the effect. No matter how elegant the orchestration, these patches cannot be ripped off and the listener cannot help but feel that the composer has chosen a dangerous path for himself.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Asafyev, "Pis'ma iz Parizha" *Letters from Paris*, 1928/9 (first published posthumously in 1954, but originally intended for public consumption). See B.Asafyev, *O baletе: stat'yi, retsenzii, vospominaniya* (Leningrad: Muzika, 1974), 160–175 (165–166). English translations throughout this article by Jonathan Walker and Marina Frolova-Walker.

And yet the same man who sees fit to police the modernism of Europe's most fashionable composer, produces, a couple of years later, a neo-classical ballet which knows nothing of modernism – it is purest pastiche throughout, and could as easily have been written around 1800. What happened during this short period to bring about such a volte-face?

Now we must introduce the other main player in the drama, Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (hereafter RAPM). This organisation had begun life in 1923 as a group of young musicians whose polemics were notable more for their vigour than their sophistication. From these modest beginnings, RAPM developed over the next five years into an extremely powerful network that spanned all the principal musical institutions: radio, the Conservatoires, and the state music publishers. This swift rise to power was due largely to RAPM's acquisition of some very skilled operators, such as Yuri Keldish, who knew how to win the favour of the bureaucracy. By the late 20s, in the final stage of Stalin's consolidation of power, the sudden leftward turn in official rhetoric meant that RAPM's time had come. ASM had never enjoyed friendly relations with RAPM, and now they faced censorship and intimidation in a music world that was now shaped by their rivals.

Most of the prominent ASMovtsi were accordingly displaced from their positions and lost their customary sources of income during this period. Among them was Asafyev, who found that his writings could no longer be published. Rather than despair, he abandoned his career as a critic and musicologist, and instead turned his hand to composition. He did not lack experience, for in the years prior to the Revolution, he had worked as a hack composer, writing routine ballet scores for the Mariinsky. On his return to composition, he decided to put his musicological researches into practice by writing an historical ballet. The result was the *Flames of Paris*, on the first French Revolution; and Asafyev used contemporary or near contemporary pieces from Gossec, and Mehul as well as quoting revolutionary songs such as the Marseillaise, *Ca ira* and the Carmagnole; he also drew from earlier French composers, such as Lully and Marais. All of this pre-fabricated music was held together with Asafyev's own pastiches in the same styles.

It should be clear that Asafyev was in no way attempting to compose a neoclassicist work in the manner of Stravinsky, otherwise the ballet would have been an outrageous artistic crime according to his own strictures; as he readily admitted, "when I took a fragment of an existing work, I changed nothing in it". Still, he felt the need to justify the work by the standards of the day; for example:

*The melodic and rhythmic content of the Third Estate's music was in part transformed from "feudal material" rooted in everyday life, and in part freshly created and nurtured by the French revo-*

*lutionary bourgeoisie; it contains all the best, "fireproof", "non-decadent" elements that nourished 19<sup>th</sup>-century European music.*<sup>3</sup>

This is a melange of his own "intonation theory", and the particular style of Marxian aesthetics current at the time. The chosen material was "revolutionary" and therefore resonated with the present day; furthermore, Asafyev claimed to have embodied the past "in clear images, full of the ideological and emotional influence of our reality".<sup>4</sup> Thus, his ballet was historical in form, and contemporary in content; this fitted well with Socialist Realism, when it was formulated a few years later, for according to this aesthetic, the content – the subject matter – must be progressive, but the form – the style of music employed, must keep clear of the supposedly progressive music of the declining bourgeoisie.

Does this ballet simply fall outside the scope of the modernist principles found in Asafyev's critical writings of the 20s? This could have been argued if Asafyev presented the work as an historical excavation, an exercise in applied musicology rather than an artistic achievement. But instead he wanted to have his cake and eat it. When connoisseur-critics such as Sollertinsky said that no one could take this patchwork of pastiche and prefabricated chunks to be a serious artwork, Asafyev would claim that the ballet was merely a musicological project.<sup>5</sup> But at the same time, he did not disclose the sources of music he had used, and he took offence when his peers in the Composers' Union prevented him from voting alongside them, and sent him back to the musicologists' section. He claimed to be a genuine composer, and *The Flames of Paris* was *his* ballet. In the end, the ballet was indeed the starting point for Asafyev's new career as a Socialist Realist composer, and a liberation from the modernist standards which he was not capable of upholding as a composer, and which in any case were of no use to him in these changed times.

*The Flames of Paris* was given its premiere in Leningrad, in the autumn of 1932; its Moscow premiere came in the following spring, followed by a triumphant tour of the provinces. In spite of the "connoisseurs'" scorn, the ballet was a great success with the public and won the approval of the bureaucracy. Asafyev's next ballet, *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*, was based on a story by Pushkin; accordingly, it was written in the Russian style of the generation before Glinka. The new ballet was singled out for praise by

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<sup>3</sup> B.V. Asaf'yev, "Muzika tret'yego sosloviya", in B.V. Asaf'yev, Yu.N. Kharlamov, S.N. Bogoyavlenskiy, *Plamya Parizha* (Leningrad: Leningradskiy Gosudarstvenniy Akademicheskii Teatr Operi i Baleta", 1934, 6–11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Derzhanovsky's letter to Asafyev of 22 Apr 1930, RGALI, fond 2658, opis' 2, delo 45.

none less than Kirov, head of the Leningrad Party Committee. This is how Asafyev reported it later:

*It is interesting that one of our country's great outstanding figures, in a conversation with me about The Fountain of Bakhchisarai, remarked sensitively upon the rightness of my starting point (aspects of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and of the deeply romantic feel of the music: "and yet you breathe our emotions". He could not have known my thoughts, but he came to express the above himself.<sup>6</sup>*

This was the birth of the so-called "romantic ballet theatre", which came to flourish in the Soviet Union; in the West, the genre is known chiefly through Khachaturian's *Spartacus*. This development signalled the legitimisation of escapist popular entertainment with high-art trimmings (or kitsch, as some would say), a characteristic feature of the Stalinist era. Asafyev soon abandoned his historicist excuses and continued to write simple and comfortable traditionalist scores as a composer, rather than as a musicologist. And, in due course, his example was followed by many of his Composers' Union colleagues, including those who had been scornful in the beginning.

Now let us turn to the story of Myaskovsky's Twelfth Symphony and his conversion to Socialist Realism, a story that unfolds in his correspondence with Asafyev, who was a lifelong friend. They adopt a confessional tone and eloquently witness to the human aspect of these institutional battles.

Myaskovsky had never been an ultra-modernist, but this applied equally to the bulk of ASM's membership. During the 1920s, he devoted most of his creative energies to a series of five symphonies, largely in a dark, expressionist vein. Most of these symphonies were accorded a premiere at ASM concerts, and enthusiastic previews appeared in the ASM journal, *Sovremennaya Muzika* – written by the chief reviewer, Asafyev, or by Viktor Belyayev, complete with detailed "thematic analyses".<sup>7</sup> We would be wrong, therefore, to imagine that these symphonies were perceived as conservative within ASM; they were in the mainstream of ASM's activities, while the music of someone like Alexander Mosolov was on the ultra-modernist fringe.

Myaskovsky's letters to Asafyev<sup>8</sup> document in some detail the changes in his outlook during the period of RAPM's attacks on ASM. In May 1929,

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<sup>6</sup> Asafyev, *O baletе*, 253.

<sup>7</sup> See Igor Glebov, "Myaskovskiy kak simfonist", *Sovremennaya muzika*, No 3 (1924), 66–77; V. Belyayev, "Russkaya simfoniya i simfonicheskoye tvorchestvo N.Ya. Myaskovskogo", same issue, 77–86; Belyayev, "Myaskovskiy, Gedike, Aleksandrov", *Sovremennaya muzika*, No.5 (1925), 17–29; Igor Glebov, "Stroitel'stvo sovremennoy simfonii", same issue, 29–32; V. Belyayev, "Devyataya simfoniya Myaskovskogo", *Sovremennaya muzika*, No.15–16 (1928), 109–113.

<sup>8</sup> Myaskovsky's letters to Asafyev, Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Literaturi i Iskusstva (RGALI), fond 2658 (Asafyev), opis' 1, ed. khr. 641–642; opis' 2, delo 51. At

Myaskovsky is still confident, denying that RAPM has any real power to back up its threats; he tries to allay Asafyev's fears, and says there is no point in arguing back. His tactics seems to be to withdraw and wait until RAPM is exposed (this must have been a policy of many at the time). In December 1929, he mentions that RAPM has now started calling ASM "social-fascists" – the standard Stalinist epithet for Social Democrats, who were now to be shunned by Communist parties in the West, by order of Moscow. In April 1930, Myaskovsky has clearly become worried: he implores Asafyev not to defend Prokofiev against RAPM's attacks, since this would be too dangerous; he also states plainly that ASM seems to be losing support among the bureaucracy. Later in the same month, he reflects upon the news of Mayakovsky's suicide; the papers had presented the act as a result of illness, or some purely personal travail, but as Myaskovsky sees it, a man of principle sold out, then found himself unable to live with the consequences. The suicide was a watershed for both musicians: Myaskovsky's asks "Was Mayakovsky right?" and Asafyev's even goes so far as to say "Well done Mayakovsky";<sup>9</sup> it seems that they felt they were now on the same slippery slope. In May, Myaskovsky reports that RAPM has grabbed the most important positions in various musical institutions. We now see the first signs that he is trying to ingratiate himself with his tormentors: he confesses that he has written a couple of military marches as a member of a composer's brigade, and he also gives his report on a RAPM concert to which he was "for some reason" invited. In September 1930, he jokingly imagines Asafyev changing sides. Finally, in October 1931, he accepts that the battle is lost and that RAPM has managed to destroy ASM. A period of withdrawal now begins, during which Myaskovsky sets to work on his 12<sup>th</sup> Symphony. Here is how he related the history of its conception in his official autobiography:

*When the first appeals for the collectivisation of peasant agriculture were heard, this idea exerted a great fascination upon me – it seemed especially revolutionary to me in its consequences. At one of the Muzgiz meetings, Marian Koval' suggested that I might take up a subject for a composition in connection with this, namely "The Sowing".<sup>10</sup>*

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the time of research, access was unfortunately not granted to Asafyev's replies to Myaskovsky, held in the archive of the Glinka Museum in Moscow.

<sup>9</sup> See Derzhanovsky's letter to Asafyev of 22 Apr 1930, RGALI, fond 2658, opis' 2, delo 45.

<sup>10</sup> N.Ya. Myaskovsky, "Avtobiograficheskiye zametki o tvorcheskom puti", in *N.Ya. Myaskovsky: Sobraniye materialov* in 2 vols, (Moscow: Muzika, 1964). Vol. 2, 5–20 (18).

It is hard to confirm or challenge Myaskovsky's claim to have been "fascinated" by the idea of collectivisation, but the mention of Koval' as a source of inspiration rings true. Although Koval' was a prominent member of RAPM, he was also a former student of Myaskovsky's, and the two were by no means on hostile terms. Commenting on the ever declining quality of RAPM's musical produce, Myaskovsky says that "Koval' is still holding on, thanks to his temperament and spontaneity, but he too slips up every now and again". In other words, he is talented but erring in his ways. It is quite another matter after RAPM triumphs over ASM; then Myaskovsky is prepared to follow the lead of the younger generation, who are better attuned to the times. And so he came to write his 12<sup>th</sup> Symphony, using the favourite narrative scheme of the time: we pass from the suffering of a village in pre-revolutionary times, then through the struggle of collectivisation, and finally emerge in the joyous victory of the collective farm. The symphony was, of course, far removed from the expressionism of his symphonies of the 20s, but it can hardly be denied that the work is dignified and well-crafted. The RAPMovtsi rejoiced and immediately began to promote the symphony. On 6 April 1932, Myaskovsky writes: "I am doing my best to sabotage the performance of my 12<sup>th</sup> symphony, which they want to turn into an 'event' ... For me, the 12<sup>th</sup> symphony is a compromise, and in private I'm ashamed of it, in the same way I used to be ashamed of the 5<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps this touch of banality will later grant it the kind of life that has been refused to my best symphonies."

Just two weeks later, RAPM was disbanded on the orders of the bureaucracy<sup>11</sup>; but while the organisation was destroyed, its individual members were not in any trouble, and most RAPM's active members were able to find comfortable jobs in the restructured musical institutions. In 1933, Myaskovsky was still complaining about the "scum" and "riff-raff" around him, and continued to absent himself from most public activities. While the 12<sup>th</sup> symphony went from success to success, he embarked on the composition of his 13<sup>th</sup>; this, however, was much closer in spirit to the darker works of the 20s, and Myaskovsky was shocked to receive a harsh reprimand from Asafyev for issuing a work that was so far out of step with the ideological climate. Myaskovsky replied in a manner that appears ironic on the surface, but on closer reading, I believe it reveals that Myaskovsky was himself in turmoil at the time. Myaskovsky seems unsure whether he should defend his work, or admit to a wrongdoing, as if he is already imagining himself in front of a disciplinary hearing. In the end, he tells

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<sup>11</sup> The resolution of the Politbureau of the Party Central Committee of 23 April 1932 was entitled "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations"; ironically, the abbreviation RAPM was misspelled there and in the follow-up documents as RAMP – a sign of the much lesser importance assigned to "proletarian musicians" in comparison to their powerful literary counterparts.



Asafyev that he is only a curious observer of the new reality, not a real participant. But if this was still true in 1933, we find that he is much more engaged three years later, and has evidently absorbed all the rhetoric of Socialist Realism. Expressing his support for Asafyev's music he says:

*When, from time to time, I consider the reception accorded to your music by our "connoisseurs", I am amazed how people just don't know how to listen. Well, I can understand Prokofiev or some modernist, who need constant jabbing, a repeated and deliberate violation of the momentum (even if there is nothing to justify it), and who avoid any kind of sentiment like the plague, not even letting a tiny bit peep out. But the majority is not like that! ...*

*Increasingly, I find myself convinced that music which might not seem technically complicated still needs to be given more than one listening, and then its significance emerges. ... It is important that music which is good and true receives its proper recognition from simple listeners.*

This passage signals that Myaskovsky has now completed his journey from modernism to Socialist Realism. Certainly he may have wanted to flatter Asafyev, who has now become an ultra-conservative composer, but this did not require him to launch into a criticism of Prokofiev as a modernist – at the time, the returning prodigal had not yet fully adjusted to Socialist Realism, and he showed no relish for the kind of music Myaskovsky was now writing.<sup>12</sup> Myaskovsky, in this private letter, uses the same rhetoric that we hear from the critics in *Pravda* or *Sovetskaya Musika*.

But what was Myaskovsky's attitude to his own work as a composer? Here are some fragments from his diary and letters of the 1930s and 40s; first, some disappointments:

31 Jan 1930

*I tried to write music of the "broad type" – doesn't work.*<sup>13</sup>

21 Jul 1933

*I completed the finale [of the 14<sup>th</sup> symphony] – it came out all wrong and in the minor ...*

<sup>12</sup> There is a hint of bitterness in Myaskovsky's letter of 10 Dec 1937 to Asafyev (same collection), "he [Prokofiev] no more than tolerates my music, and although this does not determine our relationship for me, but still it creates a kind of glass wall [between us]". Prokofiev, for his part, complained to Asafyev that Myaskovsky did not want show him his 15<sup>th</sup> Symphony; Myaskovsky had pretended that the work was still unfinished, but Prokofiev guessed at the reason: "Perhaps this is [revenge] for the 14<sup>th</sup>, since I'd been rude to its finale" (Prokofiev's letter to Asafyev of 12 July 1934, RGALI, fond 2658 (Asafyev), opis' 1, yed. khr. 674.

<sup>13</sup> Fragment from Myaskovsky's diary reproduced in V. Ya. Men'shikova, "Tvorcheskaya letopis' N.Ya. Myaskovskogo", in *N.Ya. Myaskovsky: Sobraniye materialov*, 443.

23 Jul 1933

*Decided to write another finale, in the major ...*<sup>14</sup>

25 May 1934

*I put together a vile chorus (a cappella) about the Chelyuskin heroes...*<sup>15</sup>

12. Sep 1935

*I composed a rather weak romance "Autumn on the Collective Farm" ...*<sup>16</sup>

12 Mar 1936

*I wrote a song for the 1<sup>st</sup> of May – it seems none too good ...*<sup>17</sup>

8 Jan 1940

*[T]he C-major overture for Stalin's 60's birthday didn't come out well: it is somewhat repetitiously solemn, and monotonous in its sonority. The worst thing is its lyricism – because of my hurry, it came out sounding dull.*<sup>18</sup>

4 Jan 1946

*For four days I've been labouring on the [national] anthem. For some reason it comes out really badly; the text is rather wooden, without any emotion.*<sup>19</sup>

But there were also moments of great satisfaction, and it is interesting to see what now fired Myaskovsky with enthusiasm:

*Then I suddenly rushed to compose a new symphony (in the Russian style)... there is much in it that is interesting for me, things that I hadn't tried before. I wonder whether it has something of Glinka's idea (when he was dreaming of a Russian symphony). I tried to neither aesthetisize nor formalize... but to keep the fire going.*

*Now this is already the second quartet in which I feel I have found my own style of quartet writing – it's also not bad in terms of*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>18</sup> Myaskovsky's letter to Asafyev of 8 Jan 1940, RGALI, fond 2658, opis' 2, delo 51.

<sup>19</sup> N.Ya. Myaskovsky: Sobraniye materialov, 457.

*sound, it seems. I should try again. There are no musical discoveries there, only lyrical outpourings...*

Thus, Myaskovsky by no means turned into a mere hack. Yes, hack-work was required of him, as it was of all his colleagues, but he still had plenty of scope for producing work that gave him pleasure. He still set himself certain creative tasks that fuelled his imagination, only these were rather different from those of the 20s: now he was trying to solve the problem of nationalist symphony, or searching for the perfect quartet textures. "Lyrical outpourings" may have now occupied the place of "musical discoveries", but they were as important to Myaskovsky now as the search for novelty had been in the past. Can we really say that his creative vision was brutally undercut by the demands of the Soviet regime, when he was busy changing with the times and, able to respond to change earlier than most of his colleagues? At times, it is true, he felt squeamish about his own Soviet success, which, in his own words, "wasn't bought with currency that I would consider my own or to be valuable". But this was little different from what he had said in the 1920s, when, for example, he lamented the fact that his relatively conventional Fifth Symphony was the best loved by the public.

What can we say of Asafyev in this respect? In the modernist climate of the 1920s, he would never have dared to indulge himself as a composer, since he was not capable of meeting the modernist challenge that he pressed on others. The changes in the years around 1930 certainly put an end to his influence as a critic, but it opened a new avenue for his musical abilities, the composition of ballet scores on scenarios of his own choosing; even those who greeted his new career with scorn soon had to show him respect, and even emulated his example. He earned himself fame and a comfortable life for doing something that he thoroughly enjoyed. If Socialist Realism served anyone well, it was Asafyev.

Did any of the other ASM modernists prove more willing to hold fast to the principles they had espoused in the 20s? If we pay attention only to the words and actions of the organisation, it appears that ASM was unyielding to the end. After all, the same manifesto, with its vigorous commitment to artistic experiment, remained in place until ASM's dissolution; and as late as 1930, the organisation subjected traditionalist composers to heavy criticism in the pages of its journal. But this is misleading. When we turn to the membership of ASM, we find that their individual behaviour was quite different from their collective pronouncements. The careers of Asafyev and Myaskovsky were not at all exceptional: even Alexander Mosolov, the most radical of all the ASM modernists, was already eager to make light of his modernist credentials in order to pick up an opera commission:

*Now on the music: let not my terrible notoriety as a "leftist modernist" frighten the administrators and theatre directors; I will do my best to make my opera "accessible" and singable.*<sup>20</sup>

And so a year before ASM collectively criticised the traditionalists, their star modernist was rushing to transform himself into a traditionalist.

In conclusion, I have rejected two narratives of modernism's demise in the Soviet Union. On the one hand, there is the popular romanticised account which tells us that a tragedy unfolded, a tragedy of courageous, pioneering artists who were broken on the wheel of Stalinism, to face a lifetime of humiliation in the composition of music beneath their dignity. On the other hand, there is the now much less popular account of those who retain some degree sympathy for Stalinism, according to which our composers were saved from the decadence of bourgeois modernism and learnt to see the true dignity of Socialist Realist art, through the wise counsel of Stalin. The Cold War is long over; and new demons have at last been found to replace communism. It is surely time, therefore, to set aside the vestiges of Cold War rhetoric, and examine this period as historians, not as polemicists. The early Soviet modernists made their move well before they faced any real danger; the changes in their music were certainly due to political circumstances not of their choosing, but then much the same could be said of their modernism in the decade following the Revolution. And most of them enjoyed a degree of privilege unknown to most Soviet citizens, with official and public respect, and a comfortable and secure life. Even the stormiest episode in their careers, the *Zhdanovshchina* of 1948, was very tame compared to the travails their colleagues in the literary arts had to suffer; this is not surprising: wishful thinking aside, it is much easier to unsettle a paranoid dictator through a novel or drama, than through a piece of music. If Soviet composers are to be compared to any other group of artists, it is surely the monumental sculptors and painters – there we find much the same kind of busy routine, leavened with imaginative work inside carefully circumscribed limits; and we have the same guarantee of constant employment, relative privilege and respect.

***Myaskovsky's letters to Asafyev, RGALI fond 2658  
(Asafyev): opis' 1, ed. khr. 641–642; op.2, delo 51. Transl.  
Jonathan Walker and Marina Frolova-Walker***

13 May 1929

My dear Boris Vladimirovich, how you always amaze and even astonish me! Some less-than-civil upstart suffering from clogged-up bile

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<sup>20</sup> Mosolov's letter to Asafyev of 27 Jan 1929, RGALI , fond 2658 (Asafyev), opis' .1, ye. khr. 633.

ducts only has to blabber out something about you, and you are panicking already: persecution, asafyevshchina, and so on and so forth. As if everyone is a Lebedinsky or a Keldish... It comes down to a particular clique of people who are not very ceremonious, granted, but who are themselves not without sin; they are not as influential as you imagine. True, Lebedinsky hangs around in Glaviskusstvo, and the fellow is undoubtedly very insolent – but this is plain for others to see, and after our Conservatoire story did the rounds (its sources did not remain entirely secret), the clique has lost its status, not least among the more serious and influential circles. ...

Argue with them? But with whom exactly, and about what? Can you dispute with the barking of dogs? What can you say in reply to these people, when ... perpetual scoffing characterises their behaviour? Had you been very shrewd and declared only the orthodox line – their line – it would have still been no good, because they *deliberately* close their ears to anything that doesn't issue from their swamp. They can only be caught in the act, or subjected to mockery etc., but are you really capable of that? In short, I cannot accept all your moaning and groaning...

1 December 1929

After Prokofiev left, the fuss started here – the ASM are social-fascists and so on. So much revolting scum rises to the surface at a time like this!

8 April 1930

On no account agree to give a talk about Sergei [Prokofiev]. This will do nothing for you. People argue at cross-purposes. How will you prove that Sergei's music is acceptable because it is good, when they will reply that it's not good because it's not acceptable? ... Why assume the role of a Don Quixote – as if you are not suffering enough oppression already? And Derzhanovsky always goes too far when he thinks he has support; the problem is that he always exaggerates the amount of support he has, so when he gets into a mess, he drags all his associates with him. This is not a good time for speaking in support of Prokofiev – it is better to say the same things over and over again, than to tilt at windmills. Prokofiev will prevail [in the end] and triumph over them all.

29 (?) April 1930

Ah how tired I am of all this fuss! Was Mayakovsky right? I don't know. Spiteful gossip has it that if only he could have seen just how he was to be buried, he would have held back from shooting himself. It seems that he came to feel a great emptiness inside – [hence his farce,] *The Bathhouse* – and like a "true Russian", he was naturally in conflict with himself, his conscience troubled. His fate was clear to me already

when I met him at Meyerhold's last autumn – the look on his face was too alert and inquisitive, as if were searching for something.

17 May 1930

I'm still ... poring over my vile military marches – how fed up I am with them! There is nothing more boring and joyless than military orchestration (not in the abstract, but in the practical sense – no resources whatsoever). ...

Your enemies, the VAPMovtsi (in fact they are your *friends*, only showing it in their own way!), have gradually executed a complete takeover of our Muzsektor. And since this will help to satisfy their hunger (in the direct sense of the word) to some extent, they should by and large quieten down over time, especially since they are becoming obsolete in front of their own eyes. What they are writing now is unimaginable. Now we have also got all kinds of competitions, shockworkers' brigades of composers (I was writing my marches also as a shockworker, as a member of a brigade!), and it is here that their water-supply productivity on the one hand and the decreasing quality on the other hand become obvious. The last *pokaz*, to which I was invited for some reason, was truly pitiful – the worst was Davidenko, who has begun simply to write vulgarities. Koval' is still holding on, owing to his temperament and spontaneity, but he slips up every now and again as well. Beliy is a very gifted and independent-minded musician, but in this context, he is like a cow in the saddle: an emotionalist, a Romantic, delivering a *chastushka* with Tristanesque music. This is not a laughing matter – it's tragic. Chemberdzhi is becoming pettier from one opus to the next. And so on. In the end, Lunacharsky is right when he says that proletarian music is not yet out of high school. Of course, all of them are gifted to varying degrees, but still *half-educated* schoolboys, in spite of the fact that the bulk of them have graduated from the Conservatoire. ...

15 September 1930

Why are you still whining? Read the last *Proletarian Musician* (No. 5) – for you will find there almost admiring recognition of your writerly persona in an article by the same Keldish, with a dose of grimaces and reservations, granted, but nevertheless complete recognition. Just wait – they will soon entice you to join their Proletarian camp! Though what you are going to do there is not entirely clear to me, since they still have no need for the "essence" of music. ...

22 October 1931

Indeed your circumstances must have been quite appalling, but now this is the fate of any ideologue with real brains, talent and a world-view.

The present time is for hacks and time-servers, who thrive on cannibalism ... Gunzburgs and Grubers can't create anything, they can only pick somebody else's pockets. It's good that you are working on music – at least you are producing something that can be taken or not taken, but which at least cannot be used dishonestly for the feeding of various scoundrels. Here [in Moscow] the activity of various ideologues was directed mainly towards grabbing the cushy jobs (Muzgiz, the Arts Academy, and now also the Radio) and the destruction of the Association for Contemporary Music. Now they've achieved everything, and Derzhanovsky, for example, is again without a job. As for me, I had kept my distance from all of this, but now I'm withdrawing completely: I'm only nominally still at the Conservatoire, but I've abandoned teaching classes until spring; I practically never go to Muzgiz – I remained only a consultant, having resigned from editing. Still, this has a lot to do with my illness, which I still haven't overcome ...

6 April 1932

... I am doing my best to sabotage the performance of my 12<sup>th</sup> symphony, which they want to make an "event" ... For me, the 12<sup>th</sup> symphony is a compromise, and in private I'm ashamed of it, in the same way I used to be ashamed of the 5<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps this touch of banality will later grant it the kind of life that has been refused to my best symphonies.

18 September 1933

We are getting pettier and pettier every day – there is too much riff-raff in all our musical-social depths. And the real "musicians" are getting older and stay in hiding. If I'm upset, then it's only on my own account, for I feel my loneliness more and more in spite of having lots of friends.

The filth that is pouring out of *Sovetskaya Muzika* (it's even hard to work out just what it is – deliberate filth or just dim-wittedness and stupidity) is characteristic of the whole tone of our musical life today, which is being poisoned by Chelyapovs, Gorodinskys, Gusmans and the like – small fry...

I am now doing my best not to show my face anywhere – I avoid the activities at both the Union and the Radio, where I've been stuck for nearly a year; I'm avoiding even Muzgiz – it has also become so very petty...

24 December 1933

Dear Boris Vladimirovich, I have been trying to gather my thoughts in order to reply to your letter. I am still puzzled by the impression my 13<sup>th</sup> Symphony made on you. [Your reaction] is strange and incomprehensible

to me, and in fact I am terrified by it. What is the matter? Does it mean that there are certain forces in us which act contrary to our will and consciousness? In this era, which ought, in principle, be so bright and exciting, I think it a tragedy that a work should appear that contradicts its author's aims. Where does this stupid sickness and ulcerousness come from, suddenly gushing forth and poisoning anyone who's around? What is this? An unintentional revelation of the true essence of things or only the overcoming of all the scum of the past, a self-liberation? I was especially struck by the fact that you were so affected by all this, while I myself had a strangely masterful approach to this work: I was "making" it on the basis of some very rigid premises of a more-or-less technical sort that I found very valuable. The musical ideas that were laid in the foundations of this work, were probably full of some pus which poisoned the whole work and gave such a destructive and denunciatory colour to it.

But what if all our brightness and excitement is only a fascination with the process of achieving, and upon "achievement", when we begin to live "prosperously", and probably free of trouble, we will be confronted yet again by an "idealist" emptiness, and what now seems to be a throwback, will then reveal its more significant meaning? – although I am more inclined to think of myself as someone who is obsolete, someone for whom all these excited achievings can only be the object of sympathetic observation, rather than a personal matter. Worst of all, in spite of the long period that has passed since the composition of the 13<sup>th</sup> symphony and the pitiful echo born of its momentum, the 14<sup>th</sup> symphony, I still feel quite empty...

In your letter I still managed to find some attempts at cheerfulness – in relation to yourself – which I was very glad to see in compensation for my defeat. I am deeply pleased that you have firmly and ardently decided to struggle for your right to create. I had a feeling that your *Fountain [of Bakhchisarai]*<sup>1</sup> would be given if not an openly hostile reception, then one with a dose of impudence. "For pity's sake, what can be difficult about it? Everything is as simple as pie to us". Here is how I understand the pitiful psychology of these petty people: since there is nothing there to rack your brains over, and everything *seems* clear, then it cannot be such a simple matter: "the author wants to deceive us and palm off some rubbish to us, but we are smarter than this, we have seen through his ploy and ... remained dissatisfied". The initiated public and the so-called "connoisseurs" are always the same: one needs to astonish them with incomprehensibility or insolence (as Shostakovich does with his vulgarities).

19 November 1936

When, from time to time, I consider the reception accorded to your music by our "connoisseurs", I am amazed how people just don't know



how to listen. Well, I can understand Prokofiev or some modernist, who need constant jabbing, a repeated and deliberate violation of the momentum (even if there is nothing to justify it), and who avoid any kind of sentiment like the plague, not even letting a tiny bit peep out. But the majority is not like that! ...

Increasingly, I find myself convinced that music which might not seem technically complicated still needs to be given more than one listening, and then it's significance emerges. ... It is important that music which is *good* and *true* receives its proper recognition from simple listeners...

The [16<sup>th</sup>] symphony has had a stormy success here; some naïve persons were even saying "at last I had managed to write a true symphony"! It is true that the symphony sounds excellent. It is energetic, very clear and melodic, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement is openly emotional in a grandiose way, while the ending of the finale is extremely effective in its humble simplicity and softness. But the content, the effects, the technique, the harmony – all of this is very much second-hand! Is that what does the trick?! In any case, to me this success seems quite undeserved and for this reason it cannot please or stimulate me.

10 December 1937

You are writing about recognition for me, and all that. I do not believe in it, and do not value it, because it wasn't bought with currency that I would consider my own or to be valuable. ... The only works of mine to enjoy success are those which I cannot possibly consider to be my best. Neither the 16<sup>th</sup> symphony (accessible, to an extent impressive, but on the whole eclectic), nor the new 18<sup>th</sup> (which is, in effect, only a cheerfully clear trifle, totally problemless) are dear to me, or valuable. As for the new 17<sup>th</sup>, which in my opinion is more integrated, goal-oriented and richer in content than the others, this is still somehow being kept at arm's length; but it is this symphony that I feel is more significant and responsive to the present moment, not through song and dance [*chastushki i poplyasushki*], but instead through serious thought and intensity of emotion. But hey, it makes no difference. In any case I am trying not to make use of this "recognition", as far as possible not to notice it – I have absolutely no intention to shoulder any obligation to produce exaggerated expressions of something that isn't me.

8 January 1940

... the C-major overture for Stalin's 60's birthday didn't come out well: it is somewhat repetitiously solemn, and monotonous in its sonority. The worst thing is its lyricism – because of my hurry, it came out sounding dull.

18 February 1940

Now this is already the second quartet in which I feel I have found my own style of quartet writing – it's also not bad in terms of sound, it seems. I should try again.

Regarding Asafyev's Cantata-Song about Stalin; I've got it I like the introduction but the rest is cold; as regards warmth, my Stalin overture didn't come out either ...

*Марина Фролова-Вокер*

ОД МОДЕРНИЗМА ДО СОЦИЈАЛИСТИЧКОГ  
РЕАЛИЗМА ЗА ЧЕТИРИ ГОДИНЕ:  
МЈАСКОВСКИ И АСАФЈЕВ

*(Резиме)*

Успостављање социјалистичког реализма у музици не треба сматрати победом "пролетера" (чланова *Руске асоцијације пролетерских музичара – РАПМ*) над модерним (припадницима *Асоцијације за савремену музику – АСМ*). Управо су неки од ранијих модерниста који су били груписани око АСМ-а утрли пут социјалистичком реализму, као на пример музиколог Борис Асафјев и композитор Николај Мјасковски. Док су симфоније Н. Мјасковског, писане двадесетих година, биле експресионистичке и представљале језгро репертоара АСМ-а, његова Симфонија бр. 12 (1931), инспирисана борбом за колективизацију, постала је модел за музику какву је совјетска држава тражила. Б. Асафјев је 1932. године доживео велики успех са својим балетом *Пламенови Париза*, чији је сјех базиран на догађајима из Француске револуције, а представљао је пастиш музике француских композитора 18. века и сопствене музике у том стилу. Да ли су ова дела представљала социјалистички реализам *avant la lettre*? Комунистичка бирократија није никада написала било каква практична упутства за композиције социјалистичког реализма. Било је остављено критичарима и композиторима да се сложе око тога шта треба да значи овај правац. Наравно, у дискусији нису могли да учествују сви који су то желели. Већу тежину су имали ставови оних који су заузимали вишу позицију у бирократији. Наведена дела су била привлачна бирократији: била су стилски конзервативна, а обрађивала су прихватљиве теме. На приговоре зналаца какав је био Иван Солертински, да се балет *Пламенови Париза* не може сматрати озбиљним уметничким делом, Б. Асафјев је одговарао да је то само музиколошки пројекат. Да би се потврдио као композитор (увредио се што га нису примили у удружење композитора), наставио је да бави компоновањем. Сачувана кореспонденција између Н. Мјасковског и Б. Асафјева пружа увид у пут који су они врло брзо прешли из модернизма у социјалистички реализам. У једном писму Н. Мјасковског из 1932. године стоји да он чини

све да саботира извођења своје 12. симфоније, иначе топло прихваћене од званичника, јер је се стиди, сматрајући је компромисним делом. Карактеристична је и његова тврдња у писму из 1933. године, да је он само радознали посматрач нове стварности, а не прави учесник.

Аутор овог рада одбацује уврежене наративе о повлачењу модернизма у Совјетском савезу. С једне стране, постоји популарна романтична прича о трагедији храбрих уметника које је сломио точак стаљинизма и који су били принуђени да се понижавају пишући музику испод свог достојанства. С друге стране, постоји и сада много мање популарна прича оних који имају симпатије за стаљинизам. Према њима, композитори су успели да се спасу од декаденције буржоаског модернизма и увере се у истинско достојанство уметности социјалистичког реализма. Данас нам, међутим, изгледа да су рани совјетски модернисти начинили преокрет пре него што су се суочили са било каквом реалном опасношћу. Многи од њих су уживали привилегије какве није познавала велика већина совјетских грађана.

UDK : 78.036 (=82) "193-" : 78.071.1 МјасковскијН/АсафјевВ