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THE RECEPTION OF SOVIET MUSIC IN THE WEST: A HISTORY OF SYMPATHY AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Abstract: In this concise survey, the evolution of Western attitudes to Soviet music is retraced: from a certain interest in the early Soviet avant-garde, through “Cold War” attempts to keep alive the works banned under Stalin, to the support of the Soviet avant-garde of the ’60–70s and the recent vogue for Soviet music of a stylistically “moderate” kind, which has never been popular among Russian connoisseurs. Side by side with manifestations of sympathy, some typical misunderstandings are pointed out.

Keywords: Soviet, Western, misunderstandings

It seems that the Western perception of Soviet music (and, indeed, that of Soviet art in general) can be described in more or less the same way as that of the ancient Greeks’ response to the spiritual values of different civilizations. To quote Sergey Averintsev in *The Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature* (Аверинцев 1977: 50): “The Greeks regarded the subjects of the Persian state as beaten serfs; the wisdom of the East was considered ‘the wisdom of the beaten’. Yet, in some periods, the old proverb proves true: a beaten person is worth two unbeaten ones. The experience of ethical behaviour accumulated in the autocracies of the Near East exceeded everything conceivable from the point of view of the Greek and Roman world”. Likewise, the West’s interest in Soviet music – an interest that of course possessed strong condescending overtones, but was not without an intuitive sense of the music’s deeper “wisdom” reflecting its unique existential background – largely influenced its development, stimulated its non-conformist trends and, in all likelihood, protected its most notable and disobedient creators from more serious persecutions.

The history of Soviet music's relations with the outside world – the blessed world where the freedom of spirit never experienced any major threats – started in the mid-1920s, shortly after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and the majority of European democracies. Apparently, the earliest noticeable event was the performance of songs by Aleksandr Shenshin (1890–1944) at the Salzburg Festival of 1924. Shenshin, now completely forgotten, was a cultivated composer of vocal music, especially of elegant romances to texts by Blok and other “Silver Age” Russian poets. In addition, he was an official at the Music department of the People's Commissariat (Ministry) of Enlightenment and a founding member of the Association of Contemporary Music (ASM) – an ideologically free and organizationally rather loose society of *old régime* professional musicians – which began to function earlier that year. Shortly afterwards, the ASM established contacts with the International Society of Contemporary Music (ISCM) and the Viennese publishing house Universal Edition. As a result, the works of the Association's leading members from 1925 were regularly published by Universal Edition¹ and appeared in the programmes of the ISCM festivals. Western publishers and impresarios clearly expected that musicians from the country of the victorious revolution would provide them with works of a revolutionary, “avant-garde” kind, with this, perhaps, having a stimulating influence upon Soviet composers of younger generations; more so because at that time the authorities did not put major obstacles in their way. Relations between the Soviet Association of Contemporary Music and the outside world evolved in a dynamic manner at this time, as is noted in the journal “Sovremennaya Muzyka” (“Contemporary Music”), between 1924 and 1929, with “modernist” composers whose works were performed at the ISCM festivals including, amongst others, Lev Knipper, Samuil Feynberg, Aleksandr Mosolov, and Gavriil Popov. As is well known, after Stalin's “Great Turning Point” (“Velikiy Perelom”, 1929/30) the circumstances surrounding these composers (as well as other likeminded individuals such as Nikolay Roslavets and Leonid Polovinkin), changed radically. Nevertheless, the West preserved some vague recollections of the Soviet modernist trend of

¹ Relations between Universal Edition and Soviet musicians are thoroughly examined in the excellent new book by the Moscow musicologist Olesya Vobrik (Бобрик 2011).

the 1920s and, not least, of its “emblematic” piece – Mosolov’s *Iron Foundry*, which was occasionally heard in concerts and even adapted for stage as a ballet (while in the USSR it remained virtually unheard until the mid-1970s). Boris Schwarz, in his famous treatise *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia* (Schwarz 1983: 63), writing about the early Soviet modernism, states: “The 1920s are filled with names of Russian composers, now dimly remembered, who copied external devices, modernistic tricks, sociological gimmicks”. Fortunately, however, the German scholar Detlef Gojowy, in publishing his own treatise on the Soviet music of the 1920s almost simultaneously with Schwarz (Gojowy 1980), has argued that these “dimly remembered” musicians were able to produce more than the mere “copying of modernistic tricks”. Until now Gojowy’s book remains the only major musicological source on the subject; a Russian translation was published in 2006, and no Russian musicologist has as yet written anything comparable.

From the mid-1920s onwards, the West displayed some interest in the symphonies of Nikolay Myaskovsky (his major champion was Frederick Stock, chief conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, who regularly performed Myaskovsky’s works from 1925 until his death in 1942). The year 1927 saw Shostakovich’s rise to world fame: he appeared at the Chopin competition in Warsaw, and Bruno Walter premiered his First Symphony in Berlin (here it seems appropriate to mention Stock once more: he continued to perform Shostakovich’s Third Symphony, “First of May”, even after its disappearance from Soviet concert halls in the early 1930s). On 20 December 1931 *The New York Times* published an interview with Shostakovich (his first in the Western press). Commenting upon his statements, his interviewer Rose Lee perceptively remarked that “the pale young man with trembling lips and hands” was on his way to become the “composer laureate to the Soviet State” (cf. Roseberry 1982: 79). In their book *Little Golden America*, depicting their American trip of 1936, the popular Soviet humourists Il’ya Il’f and Yevgeniy Petrov mentioned the American audience’s special predilection for three composers: Bach, Brahms, and Shostakovich. It is not unlikely that the Soviet composer’s name was listed in such company partly for publicity reasons. Be that as it may, Shostakovich, whose *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* was

more than once performed in the USA after January 1935, had time to gain a certain reputation there – not without scandalous overtones (the orchestral effects in the scene of Katerina's seduction were qualified by some critics as "pornophony"), but nevertheless rather high.

Among major works condemned in Stalin's years for deviations from the officially approved style, operas by Shostakovich and Prokofiev were occasionally performed abroad before they could be revived in Russia. Thus, Prokofiev's *War and Peace* was premiered at the Florentine Maggio Musicale festival in 1953, a couple of months after Prokofiev's death, under the baton of Arthur Rodzinski (who had conducted the American premiere of *Lady Macbeth* eighteen years earlier), with Franco Corelli and Ettore Bastianini in principal roles (no source on Prokofiev published during the Soviet era mentions the event). Indeed, a recording of this performance is extant (Golden Melodram GM 50052, 2004; Andromeda ANDRCD 5022, 2005), allowing one to judge the degree of the performers' musical understanding. Further, Shostakovich's *The Nose* was staged at the same festival in 1964, by Eduardo de Filippo. The great Italian's staging remained faithful to his style of Neapolitan comedy, which had rather little in common with the tradition of Russian "absurdist" humour, that of Gogol and his distant spiritual heirs of the 1920s, including the young Shostakovich (Giaquinta 2008). Unfortunately, no recording of that production exists, making evaluation of the performance impossible. Especially noteworthy is the fact that Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth* was staged at the Venice Biennale of 1949, during a period in which his circumstances on Soviet soil were somewhat humiliating. By the same time the Hungarian-German conductor Ferenc Fricsay had more than once conducted the symphonic music from the opera in the West Germany. Needless to say, Soviet sources also fail to mention these events.

Other rather unexpected European stagings of neglected Soviet operas include the revival of Lev Knipper's *The North Wind* in Magdeburg (then in the German Democratic Republic) in the mid-1970s. *The North Wind* is a curious specimen of the "Storm and Stress" of the late 1920s, combining revolutionary subject matter (the classical Soviet myth of 26 Baku commissars) with quite "modernistic" musical language; in a sense it is comparable with both "holiday" symphonies by Shostakovich ("October" and "First of May"),

composed roughly at the same time. An opera of similar reputation and destiny – approved at its appearance (1930), then banished from the Soviet cultural scene and still awaiting its revival in Russia – Vladimir Deshevov's *Ice and Steel* (about the Kronstadt uprising of 1921), was staged in 2007 in Saarbrücken, apparently not without success.

The turning point enforced on Shostakovich and his contemporaries in 1936 would prove to be a matter of regret to figures of authority in Russian music history such as Gerald Abraham, and indeed, adds an alternative dimension to the perspectives evolving at that time on Western soil. In his book, *Eight Soviet Composers*, Abraham appreciates Shostakovich's early works for their grotesque "Gogolian humour" and peculiar "demonism" (Abraham 1943: 18), but regards the Fifth Symphony as "merely dull", citing it as a work of "Shostakovich exorcised" (1943: 29). The response of the Western musical world to this so-called "exorcism" – including an array of perspectives on his "Leningrad Symphony" – is already well known and as such, there is no need to reiterate it here.² Indeed, one could argue that the Western perception of Shostakovich during his lifetime is the best illustration of the parallel with the Greek perception of the "wisdom of the beaten" mentioned above (cf., in particular, the recently published letter by Sir Isaiah Berlin describing Shostakovich's visit to Oxford in 1958: "The whole thing has left me with a curious sensation of what it is to live in an artificial nineteenth century – for that is what Shostakovich does – and what an extraordinary effect censorship and prison has on creative genius. It limits it, but deepens it" /Berlin 2009/).

The obvious change of Western attitude towards Shostakovich came in his late years and indeed after his death (perhaps, not without at least some influence from the infamous *Testimony*), this being an indicator of a deeper and subtler kind of understanding. While this would prove to be more realistic, there remains a level of misunderstanding. Indeed, heated discussions between Shostakovich "revisionists" and "anti-revisionists", summarized in such volumes as *Shostakovich Reconsidered* (Feofanov and Ho 1998) and *Shostakovich Casebook* (Brown 2004), seem strange to anybody who knows the Soviet situation from the inside. In contrast to most Westerners, we can easily imagine how one and the

² Some information on this subject may be found in my monograph on Shostakovich (Акопян 2004).

same person can be both a model of non-conformist thinking and a Soviet “loyalist”, a composer of ideologically stainless works, and a banner of “Sovietness” in culture. The psychological mechanism at work is, indeed, simple and standard for the Soviet reality, though it defies explanation in terms of “normal” ethics. It is roughly described by the old Russian proverb *S volkami zhit’ – po-volch’i vit’*: “He who lives with wolves will learn to howl”. In his attitude to the regime, Shostakovich was no more principled than his average fellow-citizens of sound mind. Tikhon Khrennikov was correct in his memoirs (largely dishonest, to be sure), when he described Shostakovich as “a normal Soviet man, moulded in the same way as any of us” (Хреников 1994: 171). Richard Taruskin virtually confirms Khrennikov’s opinion describing the Moscow audience’s reaction at the premiere of Shostakovich’s Fifteenth Symphony: “[t]he outpouring of love that greeted the gray, stumbling, begoggled figure of the author [...] was not just an obeisance to the Soviet composer laureate. It was a grateful, emotional salute to a cherished life companion, a fellow citizen and fellow sufferer, who had forged a mutually sustaining relationship with his public that was altogether outside the experience of any musician in my part of the world” (Taruskin 2009: 302).

Apart from this sense of community, there is a further consideration that needs to be discussed; one that perhaps seems strange and unusual for a Western observer. It turned out – and this was more than once acknowledged by Western commentators – that works of art expressing Communist ideology and keeping to orthodox Socialist Realist stylistic conventions could be quite enjoyable and possess genuine artistic value. This was just the point that distinguished Soviet Socialist Realist art from its Nazi German counterpart, whose aesthetic inferiority seems to be self-evident. As Richard Taruskin’s example proves, the very fact that Socialist Realist music of Stalin’s era is still performed worldwide may be perceived as a challenge to public morality. In the collection of Taruskin’s essays on Russian music (Taruskin 2009), we find many of invectives against Prokofiev as author of *Alexander Nevsky*, *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution*, *Toast* (to Stalin’s 60th birthday), *Ivan Grozny*, and other works expressing the ideology of Stalinism, as well as against performers (including Mstislav Rostropovich and Valery Gergiev), who proved to be ‘unscrupulous’ enough to include such politically tainted music in their programmes. In his persistent desire to expose Prokofiev’s lack of principles and the immorality of the repertoire

decisions of his performers, however, Taruskin more than once misrepresents facts and transgresses the rules of *bon ton*, but the very point of his invectives remains largely unclear. Obviously, his rhetoric will have no influence upon the public perception of *Alexander Nevsky* and other works of the same kind, while their Stalinist message will have no influence upon public morals – now it is merely an empty sound, a by-product that matters not at all. Those who have outlived Soviet power (here I venture to speak in the name of a very considerable part of my fellow-citizens), do not react to the communist phraseology so emotionally. After the shameful downfall of Communism, it even ceased to be ridiculous. Now we simply do not care for it. But, I dare say, we can separate the wheat from the chaff and appreciate everything valuable that grew out of the poor soil of Socialist Realism. The great pianist Svyatoslav Richter said about Prokofiev's *Toast to Stalin*: “This is a revelation rather than a work” (Рихтер 1961: 470) – but who will accuse Richter of sympathies with Stalinism?³

Taruskin's example is revealing: though his pre-eminence as specialist in Russian music is incontestable, in his writings on Soviet music he, not unlike many other Western writers on Soviet matters, shows both sympathy and misunderstanding: on the one hand, a sympathy with the music's unique existential background, and, on the other hand, a limited understanding of something vital, though not always easily explainable, about Soviet psychological and ethical attitudes. In any case, his vision, with all its insights and shortcomings, is conditioned by his position as a person who looks at things from an outsider's point of view. Characteristically, in his hermeneutical efforts he omits the field where the “otherness” of Soviet musical production is not so easily perceptible, namely the so-called Soviet avant-garde that flourished in the 1960s, 1970s and the most part of 1980s.

³ A question suggests itself almost automatically: we have no comparable great composers setting Hitler's and other Nazi authors' texts to music, but should we perform such music if we did? The answer lies in the question itself: no valuable artifact can be mentioned as inspired by the Nazi ideology, since no decent artist wanted to identify himself with Nazism (isolated exceptions only confirm the rule) – while the Communist ideology proved (and still proves) to be attractive for many. This is quite understandable, not because the latter's practices were more “humanistic” (of course they were not), but because Communism's roots are Christian, i.e., instinctively more acceptable in the Western world (even to atheists) than the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, which is expressly pagan. Hence, works “tainted” with Communist ideology will be performed in spite of any protests, just as Communist parties will continue their existence in democratic countries, albeit on the margins of the political life.

One of the first writers who mentioned the ‘non-conformist’ trend in Soviet music – though, obviously, knowing next to nothing about it – was André Hodeir (Hodeir 1961). Several years later, in mid-1960s, the production of new Soviet avant-garde composers – Edison Denisov, Valentin Silvestrov, Andrey Volkonsky, Alfred Schnittke, Arvo Pärt, Sofiya Gubaydulina, and few others – became known in the West. Some works – first of all Denisov’s *The Sun of the Incas* and Silvestrov’s *Eschatophony*, both performed in Darmstadt under Bruno Maderna – even caused a certain sensation. Naturally, the brave people who refused to act according to the rules of the system enjoyed sympathy. On the other hand, the Western critics frequently commented on their oeuvre in a rather condescending manner; it was treated as something not devoid of interest, but nevertheless second-rate – indeed, as a largely imitative and stylistically “impure” offshoot of the great international avant-garde. It seems that the outside world has, for some time, lacked the perspicacity to acknowledge that the art of these composers has a deep metaphysics of its own. The attitude began to change, one might suppose, after the European tour of the violinists Gidon Kremer and Tat’yana Grindenko with the 1st *Concerto Grosso* by Schnittke (in the 1977/78 season) and, especially, after the world premiere of Gubaydulina’s *Offertorium* played by Kremer in 1981 in Vienna. Yet a certain superciliousness was felt even in some critical responses to the Cologne festival of non-conformist music from the USSR (Spring 1979) and to the concerts that took place during the exhibition *Paris–Moscou* (1979), as well as in the utterly naïve “Notes on the Soviet Avant-Garde” by Joel Sachs (Sachs 1984).⁴ Rather superficial, full of inadequacies and factual errors are the major francophone books treating both “official” and non-conformist

⁴ Though the recent and most fundamental study of the Soviet avant-garde of the ‘60s (Schmelz 2009) shows an infinitely better understanding of the subject matter – we, post-Soviet musicologists, should be thankful to the American scholar who did the work that should have been done much earlier by somebody from amongst us – even there a degree of superciliousness or superficiality can be found. For instance, Schmelz ascribes the Soviet avant-garde composers’ mature penchant for “a less confining, often familiar, language” and their “renewed interest in meaningfulness and intelligibility” at least partly to their “socialist realist tutelage” (p. 274) – as if this shift in their artistic behaviour was a step back, towards their “socialist realist” roots (for which they were allegedly “applauded by official critics” [ibid.], which is not true). More plausibly, this was a result of their growing self-awareness as non-conformist spiritual leaders, exponents of a certain world outlook that could not be expressed in words. For some details, cf. my articles on the subject (Hakobian 2004, 2009).

music of the Soviet age (Di Vanni 1987; Lemaire 1994). However, it would be unfair to pay too much attention to the fact that people on the other side of the Iron Curtain were sometimes less than adequate in their understanding and appreciation of our artistic achievements. Much more important is the fact that the most original and enduring part of our musical heritage could survive and flourish mainly on account of support from abroad.

As regards the combination of sympathy and misunderstanding so characteristic of the Western perception of spiritual values created under the Soviet rule, I would like to conclude with a quotation from Pierre Boulez's interview given to an unnamed Russian questioner in 2005.⁵ When asked about his opinion of Gubaydulina, Boulez showed no interest in her music; instead, he discussed the backwardness of Soviet Russian composers of Gubaydulina's generation: "Frankly speaking, when I got to know the music of these Russian composers, I realized that they had been isolated for too long from the models they had needed from the very beginning. To be sure, they tried to make up for what they'd missed, but there are things that you need to know from the outset. This is [...] a matter of education, of ABC; and their education was too traditional. They are guilty of nothing, of course, but for them, the discovery of the West came too late".

All this sounds quite trivial and, to an extent, humiliating, but then Boulez turns to a more interesting matter:

– The power of Russian musicians is in their isolation. When doors open, silence falls.

– But in the '60s and '70s they were isolated...

– Yes, they still lived in a closed space and resisted pressure. But then windows opened – and what has remained? I remember [the Nazi] occupation. This is not the same, of course, but we can compare these anyway. The German occupation [of France] was a difficult time. However, concert halls and theatres were overcrowded. [...] But subsequently, only a few years later, the theatres were half-empty. The craving for culture was dwindling away as Balzac's 'magic skin'. This is a typical situation. People derive their strength from resistance. When there is nothing more to resist, their strength leaves them. This is my impression".

⁵ See in: <http://www.21israel-music.com/Boulez.htm>.

Here Boulez indeed, touches upon the most crucial point. Soviet music could not stand the test of the freedom that came suddenly in the mid-1980s. When the discrimination against so-called non-conformist or avant-garde composers ceased, the character of Soviet music's relations with the outside world lost its "intrigue", and indeed, it is no wonder that so many leading ex-Soviet composers choose to emigrate, while during much harder Communist times they flourished at home. The reception of Soviet music in the West entered a new phase. Now the main attention seems to be directed to those middle-of-the-road composers whose oeuvre, until the end of the 20th century, remained on the periphery of the cultural panorama. The catalogues of recording companies abound with such names as Maximilian Shteynberg, Gavriil Popov, Aleksandr Lokshin, Moisey Weinberg, Mikhail Nosirev, German Galinin, Boris Chaykovsky etc.⁶ The process of resuscitating the heritage of neglected composers of the Soviet age – those whose chances to gain international reputation in their lifetime was limited due to the Cold War and other external circumstances – continues with minimal assistance from Russia itself. The Western musical market's penchant for Soviet music of a stylistically "moderate" kind may seem strange to ex-Soviet observers. The hierarchy of values formed among Western connoisseurs differs somewhat from that prevailing in Russia; too many of us perceive the music in question as too "safe", too "tame", too well adapted to Soviet conventions. Being, perhaps, honest, sincere, and masterly, it shows few signs of the inner resistance mentioned by Boulez and, therefore, is (or, at least, seems to be) much less valuable than anything created against the circumstances rather than in accordance with them. No doubt, the perspective will change, and the generations who have no Soviet experience will appreciate the music in question according to its intrinsic aesthetic qualities rather than according to its authors' relations with officially approved Soviet standards. Until then, however, we have to rely on the West, where this music, we may hope, will be regularly performed, recorded, and perhaps also studied by musicologists and, thus, kept alive.

⁶ Significantly, Georgiy Sviridov – a composer whose name is infinitely better known in Russia, and whose music is still quite often performed and recorded in this country – is not represented in this list. Perhaps the outside world's indifference towards his music is conditioned by its emphatically Russian character, as well as by the fact that his own world outlook was strongly chauvinistic and xenophobic (which is attested by his posthumously published diaries).

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Левон Хакобијан

РЕЦЕПЦИЈА СОВЈЕТСКЕ МУЗИКЕ НА ЗАПАДУ:
ИСТОРИЈА СИМПАТИЈА И НЕСПОРАЗУМА
(Резиме)

У раду се прати еволуција западних ставова о совјетској музици током деценија постојања СССР-а и после. Регистровано је извесно интересовање за рану совјетску авангарду из 20-их година, о којој је најавторитативније писао немачки музиколог Детлеф Гојови; постојала је тенденција на Западу да се одрже у животу дела совјетских композитора која су била забрањена у време Стаљина; пружана је подршка совјетској авангарди 60-их, 70-их година и 80-их година, мада је према њој изграђиван амбивалентан однос јер се у тим делима „другост“ совјетске музичке продукције није тако јасно уочавала. У целини гледано, Запад са својим интересовањем за совјетску музику, у којем је, осим извесних примеса покровитељства и попустљивости, било и интуиције за њену дубљу егзистенцијалну основу, у многоме је утицао на њен развој, подстицао је њене неконформистичке токове и штитио од озбиљних прогона њене најзначајније и најнепослушније ствараоце. Захваљујући извођењу у иностранству, неке опере Прокофјева, Шостаковича и Книпера које су биле критиковане и занемариване у СССР-у, добијале су нове прилике за сценски живот у земљи. У раду се скреће пажња и на неке

аспекте „случаја Шостакович“ који се односе на потцењивање од стране западних аутора великог дела његовог опуса који је наводно био одређен околностима друштвене присмотре над радом композитора. Дискусије које су се тим поводом водиле често нису узимале у обзир чињеницу која је домаћим музичарима и уопште становништву била добро позната: да једна иста особа може истовремено да буде узор слободоумног мишљења и совјетски „лојалиста“, композитор дела са извесним идеолошким мрљама и барјактар „совјетскости“ у култури.