

RUSSIA REVISITED

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WHEN, after an interval of some twenty years, I sailed forth to visit the country of my birth it was, apart from sentimental reasons, with a double purpose: to collect first-hand information about Soviet music from Soviet composers themselves, and to arrange for performances of American music in the U. S. S. R. I was more or less conversant with the chief problems of Soviet music, had followed the rise and the downfall of the RAPM, (an organization of self-styled proletarian composers, dissolved by Government decree on April 23, 1932, along with similar organizations in literature and art), had read the Soviet music periodicals, *Proletarian Musicians*, *Music and Revolution*, *Contemporary Music*—all now extinct—and *Sovietskaya Musika*, the most long-lived of the Soviet music magazines. I had acquired some perspective. For instance, I knew that Mossolov's exercises in machine music are considered less important within the bounds of the U. S. S. R. than they are abroad. On the other hand, the importance of the old Russian school in Soviet Russia was greater than had been imagined. (As a supreme compliment to Shostakovitch's *Lady Macbeth*, an important critic compared it to Tchaikovsky's *Pique-Dame*.)

All this I had read, but I could not form a living picture from the mosaic. For myself, I indulged in some statistics. Russian music is notoriously "sad," pessimistic; it is fashioned on the minor modes. There are more symphonies, sonatas, quartets in minor keys than in major. But in Soviet music, successor to Russian music, I was to find the opposite mood. The prevalence of major tonality is striking, and determines the very spirit of Soviet music. And rhythmically, march time is greatly favored, with the eight-bar period as a symmetric unit. At the time of the RAPM's hegemony, 4/4 time and major tonality were almost

de rigueur. After the dissolution of the RAPM an encouraged composer, in a statement given to Sovietskaya Musika, declared: "Now I can learn how to write in 3/4 time again!"

However the RAPM only emphasized to the degree of absurdity a tendency that was natural. Russian music could stand a lot of majorization and squaring of time. The great popularity of Prokofieff's music, particularly during his first visit in the U. S. S. R. in 1927, was due to the fact that Prokofieff fitted into the times; he was "consonant" with the epoch, as the current saying has it. And in Prokofieff's music, until recently, square time and major tonality were dominating outward features.

The shining star of Soviet music is, of course, young Shostakovich. (He accents his name on the third syllable). So it was not without frank curiosity that I went to see him at his apartment on Dmitrovsky Pereulok in Leningrad. I momentarily forgot whether it was house number 5, apartment number 3, or the other way around; but it was a warm September day and the windows were opened; someone was playing the piano so energetically, and the music was so unmistakable in style, that I knew at once this could be only Shostakovich. I directed my steps towards the sounds; the door bell rang inharmoniously and the music stopped. So this is Shostakovich, at last! Young, dynamic, bespectacled, he looks like his pictures—a rare phenomenon in the musical world. We went into the studio and plunged right off into a discussion of his music. I flung questions at him. Does he believe in utilizing vulgar music (galops, sentimental street-songs, military band marches) without submitting it to musical distillation? How does he regard his work *The Nose*, which was driven out of the opera house by the then powerful RAPM? Why did he depart from the modern uses of this opera's music? Is he interested in the twelve-tone system? Shostakovich was eager to answer. He does not repudiate the music of *The Nose*, and he would show me the full score, as soon as it was returned from the theatre, where it still remained despite the cessation of performances. Yes, he was interested in the twelve-tone system, he knows Schönberg, and still better does he know Berg, but he finds he cannot do anything with the Vienna idiom. He tried, though, and some of his progressions reflect the schooling of

Schönberg. I told him that Stravinsky was present at the performance of *Lady Macbeth* in New York and commented favorably on the music. Shostakovich admires Stravinsky and produced an arrangement for piano in four hands which he had made from the score of the *Symphony of Psalms* in order to absorb the musical substance of that work by frequent hearing and playing. I was frankly amazed at his patience and industry, and this in the midst of composition of his own fourth symphony, which he feels is going to be his most important work. It was my turn to give information. Among other things, I told him of the orchestra of percussion that Varese uses in *Ionization*. To my surprise Shostakovich had heard of the work and even had the score, which was given to him by a friend. He seemed to be well informed about music abroad. During his recent trip to Turkey he got hold of Stokowski's recording of his own *First Symphony* and brought the disc to Leningrad.

In the meantime tea was served, and I met Shostakovich's mother and his wife. We started a vague conversation about Shostakovich's coming to America. He is shy about his pianistic powers, although he graduated from the piano section of the Leningrad Conservatory as early as 1923. But he is going to compose a special concerto for America—next year, perhaps. The present *Piano Concerto* is scored for a string orchestra and a trumpet only, and it has already been played in America.

On to Moscow, to look over the archives of Tchaikovsky's House-Museum at Klin. In the suburban train I made musical observations; a group of youngsters singing songs modelled after the familiar Russian patterns, but infused with new strength. There is nothing lackadaisical about them. Hanns Eisler, along with Soviet composers, writes many of them. These songs are not anonymous, and yet they possess the flavor of "naturals." Needless to add, they are all in the optimistic major tonalities, some in the Mixolydian mode so well suited to rapid dance tunes. The youngsters got off at a station, and, as though specially for the purpose of demonstration and comparison, a woman with a child took a seat in my car and started an "individualistic" song in a very, very minor mode.

At Klin I proceeded to the Tchaikovsky museum and arranged

to see the manuscripts. While absorbed in the original of *Pique Dame*, I met a stocky, bald man, Youri Shaporin, a symphonist now making his mark, who also was staying in Klin, working at his opera, the *Decembrists*. With a professional lack of dignity I attacked him, and he willingly played for me and discussed his own music and familiar technical matters. His *Symphony*, very Russian, built on a large scale, has been heard in London, and his name is often mentioned with Shostakovitch's. But what a contrast! Shaporin is no experimenter in new music. He writes solidly and believes in the virtue of unshakable tonality. Had there not been an evolution in our own conception of modern music, Shaporin could hardly be classified as a modern. There is nothing in his symphony or in his opera that could not have been written fifty years ago. . . . It is characteristic, however, that in his earlier works, in the two piano sonatas, in the incidental music to Zamiatin's *The Flea* there is a modicum of modernity. The score of *The Flea* is particularly interesting because of the orchestration, which calls for sixteen *domras* (an old Russian string instrument, ancestor of the balalaika) and three *bayans* (accordeons, called bayans by their trade name just as our gramophones are called victrolas, even when they are not Victrolas.)

Lest someone should imagine that Soviet music is conservatively regimented, I hasten to introduce a Soviet modernist, a Moscow conservatory professor, Heinrich Litinsky. My first acquaintance with him was through a caustic article in *Sovetskaya Musica*, which showed him to be a master of his metier, but evidently a promoter of meaningless art. However there was so much meaning and musical sense in the musical examples that I forgot the critic and made it a point to get hold of his music. I was not disappointed. I do not know of many works in the literature for solo instruments equalling in inventive craft Litinsky's *Sonata for Violin Alone*, and a *Sonata for Viola*. What is particularly attractive in these works is the sober realization of rich potentialities of new scales without the octave terminal. He has also written five quartets, all of them fine pieces of effective composition. Litinsky says his entire musical outlook has been created by the spirit of the proletarian revolution, and his declaration has a political import. If the Revolution can give a place

to Litinsky and to Shaporin, both admirable workers in their disparate fields, then a wide range of professional activity may be considered as definitely assured in the U. S. S. R.

Moscow days proved as feverish as those in Leningrad. Julian Krein paid a call. After several years in Paris, he had come back to Moscow, where he started ten years ago as a musical prodigy of thirteen. At twenty-three he still remains a prodigy. He has produced an enormous bulk of work, astonishingly mature. Where is he to be placed in our parliament of composers? His idiom is "modern" in the 1920 sense, too modern for 1935. There is no question as to his talent. He has found his style, too, and even in our backward times he can go on being modern without retreating to some safe antiquity.

On a second trip to Leningrad I called on Rimsky-Korsakov's son, Andrey, to get copies of those Hartmann exhibition pictures which inspired Moussorgsky to compose his famous suite; there I met Gniessin. His music is not new to the world; his formative years were well rounded before the revolution. But it was interesting to see his newest scores, the *Symphonic Monument*, a sort of musical panorama of the inter-revolutionary years, 1905-1917, and also his incidental music to a play about a village Jew, liberated and exalted by the revolutionary upheaval.

The wife of Andrey Rimsky-Korsakov is Julia Weissberg, a composer well-known from the Balaieff days. She played her *Negro Lullaby*, which seemed to contain a little too much Mousorgsky for a Negro piece. I like much more the Wagnerian breadth of her orchestral ballads and fairytales.

The last day was spent with Maximilian Steinberg, now Director of the Leningrad Conservatory. His latest symphonic work, the *Turk-Sib* is written to glorify the famous railway. With a fine sense of humor he warned me that there was nothing militantly modern in the score, but I feel I can enjoy Steinberg's orchestral writing even without compulsory dissonances.

Leaving Russia, in the railway cars in Poland you can, for the price of one zloty, have the use of a pair of ear-phones to listen in on the radio. I heard Moscow and, while listening to the music, summarized my impressions. Soviet music is not Russian music, it is larger, for it includes the music of all the other peoples

of the U. S. S. R., and this music, Turkmenian, Bashkirian, Georgian, Armenian, begins to exercise its influence on Russian music in a manner different from the days of the National School when Moussorgsky and Balakirev used Oriental motives for the sake of local color. The Turk-Sib has really done something to music,—composers as different from each other as Steinberg, Mossolov and Litinsky have utilized “Turkmenian music,” with excellent effect. Now, with gramophone recordings and scientific ethnological expeditions in search of songs, authenticity of material seems to be secure.

Parallel to the revival of regional music, the art of mass song fortifies the waning spirit of Russian folk-music. An international revolution, by some paradox of dialectics, has reinforced the national stream and has created new national tributaries. In the process, “leftist” music may have suffered a setback. But then the conceptions of “right” and “left” in art have become so confused during the last fifteen years that we no longer know whether we are radicals or reactionaries in defending “modern” music as our own esoteric creed.