

THE RUSSIAN PANORAMA*

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DURING the entire nineteenth century the development of Russia's music and her composers was shaped by the blind struggle of the art to gain a broader national scope. In the imperial epoch, music was the cherished ornament, the glorification of the regime that oppressed the country. The progressive West became interested in the music of Russia in the second half of the century; yet within its own borders this music remained the possession of the privileged few. Indeed the gap between the Russian masses and Russian music was never greater than at the end of Czardom.

Herein lies the great significance of the revolution. Above all else, it opened vast new social perspectives for the creative artist. Historians must recognize that the days of revolution marked the laying of a new foundation for Russia's musical culture. Though it was not built suddenly and did not immediately replace the old, it differed sharply from the pre-revolutionary order. True, not all the hopes first raised for reaching out to the great mass audience of Russia were realized; and after the revolution there were moments when the effort to create this new art seemed to meet insurmountable difficulties. But there is by now ample evidence of the positive advance of music toward its historic goal, and we shall proceed to examine it briefly.



At the moment of revolution, Russian music was in crisis. The highly developed musical product was reserved, so to speak, for export to the Western world where it was esteemed, while the needs of the home market were neglected. The Russian composer knew that he created chiefly for the West—there his

*This picture of the Soviet composers by a Soviet critic, the first complete survey of contemporary Russia to appear in *MODERN MUSIC*, is included in this issue because the vital developments described have occurred largely within the last decade. — *Ed.*

reputation was made. Russian music of the first half of the nineteenth century drew its creative force exclusively from the thin soil of the intelligentsia and the nobility. The decaying feudal and bureaucratic system hampered the growth of a native music culture still weak at its very roots. In this oppressive atmosphere there arose that extraordinary group, the famous "Troika," Borodin, Moussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakoff, in whom the heritage of the liberal nobility was interpenetrated with a passion for Russian folk-song. The "Western" group, Rubinstein and sometimes Tchaikovsky, borrowed the ready-made musical goods of more advanced countries. The Nationalists, like Moussorgsky, Borodin and to some extent Rimsky-Korsakoff, formed an Eastern school. The combination of these influences resulted in an unexpected cross-breeding, whose fruits were Scriabin's symbolism, Stravinsky's glamorous carnival brilliance and Prokofieff's neo-classicism, which, despite obvious Westernisms, reveal marked nationalist characteristics.



The first contact of the composer—who is the central figure of this study—with the new audience created by the revolution, was fatal to the product of the musical intelligentsia. There was no link of understanding between the artist and his public. The musician, accustomed to write for connoisseurs, stood confused in the presence of the masses. All through the years immediately following the revolution the old masters suffered a kind of paralysis of creative effort; the problems of reconstruction awaited solution by a younger generation. These new men were at first completely inexperienced and so were reduced to borrowing old themes, filling their new forms with old content. Soon, however, a vigorous struggle to better serve the new audience began. The older composers gradually succeeded in re-orientating themselves. They were mobilized to work for the new social order by preparing songs of revolution for designated celebrations. The "Proletcult" (Department of Proletarian Culture), organized the nation's artistic life and promulgated new principles of composition for the mass audience. Later when the Independent Association of Proletarian Composers was established,

power passed into hands of the young men—Bielyi, Koval, Davidenko, Schechter, Chemberdji—who, though lacking sufficient technical experience to produce symphonic and dramatic music with ease, were representative of an *avant garde* point of view.

Recently a successful effort has been made to enlist the complete co-operation of the older masters whose artistic roots are in the historic past, that they may aid in the artistic reconstruction of the country. These men, it must be stated, have tried to play a part from the beginning of the revolution, but were at first hampered. They were reduced to giving private lessons, for the publication of their manuscripts was considered too expensive during the civil war. The inauguration of the New Economic Policy, however, opened up new horizons for the creative musicians. Musical publishing was re-organized (paper again appeared on the market) and editors were once more able to make adequate payments. During the civil war, many important musical positions had fallen into the hands of youths often seriously lacking in musical education but who nevertheless were able to entrench themselves in the affections of the masses and to gain great popularity in the Soviet Union.



The formation of the new federative unions and republics was another vital factor in musical reconstruction. Before the revolution the music of the national minorities can hardly be said to have been adequately fostered. For instance the first Georgian opera was produced only in 1919, and so famous a work as *Alamast* was first performed in 1928, after the death of its composer. The Ukraine, which now boasts so many composers, Latoshinsky, Yanovsky, Kostenko, Verikisky, Revutsky, Maitus and others, was represented before largely by one composer, Lisenko, quite good but hardly independent. Thus it is only now that we can truly talk of music of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. In the Ukraine, White Russia, Georgia, Armenia, new operas and symphonies have been written, folk-song material is being extensively collected with the hope of developing a new vocal and instrumental culture. Recently the

Central Executive Committee organized the great Institute of Sound, which is intended to be a great world center for music.



While this article is being written, the Union of Soviet Composers has become preeminent in organizing Russian music. Its members are pledged to support the socialist program of construction with their art, and all Soviet composers are enrolled, from Ippolitoff-Ivanoff, seventy-four years of age, to those eighteen-year-olds who have plenty of enthusiasm though they may lack something in musical education. The struggle between the older and younger generations has come to an end; the idea that the revolution would entirely destroy the old music has been abandoned, to be replaced by a conviction that the new must be the successor of the old. The former masters are again held in high esteem and at the fifteenth anniversary of the Soviets, Ippolitoff-Ivanoff, Vasilenko, Krein, Miascowsky took precedence over the younger men.

Michael Ippolitoff-Ivanoff, born in 1859, the pupil of Rimsky-Korsakoff now lives and works in Moscow. In 1931 he added to his enormous production of five operas, several symphonies and other music, by completing *The Wedding*, the unfinished musical comedy of Moussorgsky, which is now frequently presented on the stage of the radio theatre. Recently he became interested in ethnological research on the music of the oriental tribes of the U.S.S.R. Another composer of the earlier generation, Sergius Vasilenko, born in 1872, combines a strong nationalist style with a tendency toward the modern French and a love of oriental exoticism. His works include the opera, *Son of the Sun* (on the Boxer Revolution in China), three ballets, symphonies, tone poems, orchestral suites and so on. Reinhold Gliere, born in 1872, also a follower of this school, is the author of the famous ballet *The Red Poppy*, which is now the chief theatrical attraction in Moscow for citizens and foreigners alike. His new opera *Shaksenem*, based on Turkish legends, will be given its premiere in the Turkish theatre at Baku.

The best known composer of this group is Nicholas Miascowsky, the greatest symphonist in the Soviet Union. Born in

1881, he spent his youth as a military engineer, and only in 1906 did he begin his career as a musician, studying with Liadoff and Rimsky-Korsakoff. His most flourishing period of activity has been since the October revolution and his twelve well-known symphonies fall easily into two groups, the first five, which reveal a kind of depression and fatigue, and the last seven, which seem energized by a new vitality released through the revolution. His twelfth symphony, a forceful work, is dedicated to the Kolkhoz; it celebrates the construction of collective farms.

Mention must also be made here of Alexandre Krein, born in 1883. Absorbing the modern French influence of Debussy and Ravel and later turning to Scriabin, he set himself, during the revolution of 1905, to a study of the melodies of the Jewish masses. He is now famous for two musical odes, *Lenin* and *The Shock Brigades of the U.S.S.R.*, written to texts by Stalin. His bright, bold style, reflecting new and vigorous tendencies in music, is in strong contrast to the contemplative mood and manner of his fellow composers. The opera *Zagmuk* written around a legendary Eastern hero of the Rienzi type, is a splendid example of a new dynamic orientalism. Vessarion Shebalin, the youngest composer to be mentioned in this connection, was born in 1902 in Siberia and was a pupil of Miascowsky. His best known work, also a symphony to Lenin, is a hybrid in form between a symphony and a cantata. His style is unusual for its austerity and neatness. Shebalin is one of the most active organizers in the Union of Soviet Composers.



We cannot present here an exhaustive picture of the younger composers of Russia today. Their chief preoccupation is the effort to create an antithesis to Western tendencies in the technical field and to achieve maximum accessibility to the new mass audience. How, in a word, shall they utilize the achievements of Western culture without drifting away from the theme of the actual living present, from the requirements of the people who are actively building up life and are not predisposed to contemplation? This is the main problem. The latest musical harvest of Soviet Russia, the symphonies written for the fifteenth October celebration, have shown that one solution has been to re-

lax the emphasis on formal perfection of the virtuoso technician and substitute an entirely new technic which places the sociological requirement first.

Outstanding among the young composers working toward the new Soviet symphonism is Dimitri Shostakovitch, born in 1906, who has inspired the Soviet musical world by his works. At eighteen he created a symphony which, when played in Berlin under Bruno Walter, astonished his European audience. His greatest achievement is the opera *The Nose*, from the story by Gogol; taking next rank in his production are the two revolutionary symphonies, the *Offering to October* and *May the First*. He has written music for several sound-movies and is now preparing a three-act opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtzensk*. The second composer in this group to emerge as a well defined personality is Vladimir Scherbacheff, born in 1895. At first strongly influenced by Stravinsky and then by the more extreme Western musical vanguard, he is now giving us excellent works revealing a new interpenetration of artistic and social tendencies, designed to obliterate national and geographic barriers within the Soviet Union. Maximilian Steinberg, born in 1883, the teacher of Scherbacheff and Shostakovitch, is a prolific composer, his most important music being three symphonies in which the monumental style of Glazunoff is applied to Soviet mass melodies.



Although it is difficult to make a geographical distinction among the composers, we may speak now of the young men of Moscow (as apart from those of Leningrad, where most of the young composers mentioned above are living). The Moscow group is large and is heterogeneous in tendency. Mossoloff, born in 1900, of *Steel Foundry* fame, is obviously under the influence of Western urbanism. Leonid Polovinkin, born in 1898, is the composer of several symphonies and some notable musical pieces for the Moscow Children's Theatre. Anatole Alexandroff, born in 1888, has written many sonatas and an opera, *Two Worlds*; he is a follower of Scriabin and Medtner. Samuel Feinberg, born in 1890, is a composer of piano sonatas which give a highly condensed form to Scriabin's ecstatic expression-

ism. Nikolai Roslavetz, born in 1880, is a representative of musical constructivism and is known as the "Russian Schönberg."

Of the older composers in Moscow there are a few who are at present producing little because they have not sufficiently responded to the new psychological environment of the country. One of these, for instance, is Michael Gniessin, born in 1883, whose talent is well known but whose composition has gradually yielded to his work as a pedagogue. His musical interest has passed through several stages; at one time Hebrew music, then classical subjects; now he is exploring the folk-music of Azerbaijan.



Mentioning finally Clement Kortshmareff, who is busy preparing an opera on the subject of John Reed's famous *Ten Days That Shook the World*, I come again to the problem of Soviet opera. This has been one of the chief musical pre-occupations of the last fifteen years but so far we cannot point to any productions which combine the themes of social struggle with new revolutionary forms of music-drama. Esthetic necessity has forced the Soviet composers into a compromise with the rules that govern the technical structure of opera in the Western world. The Soviet music drama has developed in devious and sometimes tortuous ways; along its course we meet such varying specimens as *Son of the Sun* by Vasilenko, *Zagmuk* by Krein, *Revolt of the Eagles* by Pashchenko, *The Decabrists* by Zolotaroff, *The Break* by Pototsky, *The Wind* by Knipper, *Ice and Steel*, by Deshevov. It is impossible, however, to give more than the most general outline here of this pioneer work.



We must now consider the active members of the Association of Proletarian Musicians, which was liquidated by the government on the twenty-third of April, 1931. This organization included a number of young men whose important mission it was to spread music for the masses throughout the Soviet Union. Its leading member was Victor Bielyi, born in 1904, in Kharkoff in the Ukraine, a gifted composer with a decided leaning toward modern formal complexities. Of his works the strongest

are *The March of Hunger* and *Twenty-Six*. A symphonic poem and other works indicate the early influence of French impressionists and Scriabin. Boris Schechter, today the popular composer of mass choruses, also began by first writing elaborate and precious chamber orchestral music. Still another of this group, Alexander Davidenko, started out as a Tchaikovsky adherent and, after a painstaking process of development, has achieved a kind of peasant choral style. He has written a song for the Red army, *The Street in Uproar*, which is heard all over the country. Maryan Koval, born in 1908, cultivates almost exclusively small vocal forms which he reduces by means of a free and primitive use of repeated couplets. He has drawn some remarkable tonal pictures of Soviet life in his popular choruses. Nikolai Chemberdji, who also belongs here, is best known not for his mass music but for his cycle of songs, *Armenia*.



Our conclusion brings us clearly to those musical perspectives which are opened up by the new spiritual and social horizon of Soviet Russia. In this new world the composer, to live and breathe, must escape the confines of salon inspiration. He is beset by the problem of reflecting, in his music, the reconstruction of the world. This demands the maximum of his energy not only in the realm of inspiration and will but also in the more constructive and varied world of technic. Facing the colossal cultural growth of the land, the prospect of infinite work to be done, the Soviet composer is interested primarily in the deeper development of his philosophy. This is the core and center of existence for the group of younger men, who formerly occupied commanding positions in the musical world, as well as of the older masters who have reappeared to take their place. The works written for the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution indicate already that in Soviet Russia music has stepped across the boundary that confined it in the past and has already successfully reached out towards fields which formerly were alien. Soviet music is no longer at the cross road. It is already definitely on the way toward the creation of those large, monumental works which Russia is destined to give to the world.