

## UNDER THE RED FLAG

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**A**RTISTIC developments in Russia today can be appraised only through the eyes of the proletarian. Distances should not be measured in pounds. Let us illustrate the incongruity of our western standards when applied to the U.S.S.R., by the dialogue below:

**PROLETARIAN:** We believe that art is a manifestation of class consciousness, a weapon to complete the revolution and to support the Socialist structure.

**BOURGEOIS:** But art should be free; no program must restrict the creator; his product has no definite purpose.

**PROLETARIAN:** By making art political we mean to relate it to life. We conceive of art, life and politics as a unity which gives art strength and effectiveness. In previous ages art has been the servant of other interests. Remember the art of the church and the princes and of former bourgeois-revolutionary epochs.

**BOURGEOIS:** Yet eternal value is attained only when the artist breaks the bonds of his age. Herein lies the task of the artist with vision. Spiritual content and the quality of development are the decisive factors. How we react to classical works of art has nothing to do with class consciousness. The standard of evaluation is the completeness of artistic expression.

**PROLETARIAN:** That is a subjective standard. Even you will concede that the generations after the classic artists were not unanimous in their judgments. There is no absolute art work. Appraisals change and what is liked today is avoided tomorrow. We abhor esthetic evaluations. We ask what the ideology of a work of art is and to what extent this work is effective in terms of its ideology. The problem of art today is not to make stylistic experiments but to serve the class-war.

BOURGEOIS: I cannot conceive that a real artist will permit himself to be harnessed. You wish to extort a tendency and force it on the creator. His work then becomes mere reporting or advertising. You make the artist a propaganda director of your system, nothing more. To be effective, he must stoop to the taste of the masses. In Germany we have seen how the attempts of our composers to create a "Gebrauchsmusik" have been thwarted. The more snobbish an artist, the clearer his progress.



And so on and so on. The two sides will never come to a conclusion. They will always talk past each other. Criticism of the political art of the Soviet countries from a European standpoint is futile. Let us, then, try to enter into the spirit of Russia today, and examine the assumptions that underly its esthetic philosophy.

First: Art cannot be separated from politics. There is no special political art, for art is a component of politics. This conception includes everything belonging to the socialistic structure and is documented by the administration of the Five Year Plan. It not only embraces industrialization, collectivization and production, but politics also busies itself with the cultural structure, from the care of children to the formation of a proletarian art.

Second: As the structure is being completed in feverish haste, the handicap of centuries between Europe and the U.S.S.R. must be overcome in the shortest possible time. The idea of the socialistic program of construction is not hidden behind a mystical cloud. It is based on reality. Everyone can check up, can see for himself that great progress has been made, that the situation becomes more satisfactory daily, that the system does function.

Third: The people are transformed. The former rulers have emigrated or been liquidated and the bourgeoisie have died out or been assimilated. Youth reigns. Work is now not a means to gain, but an end in itself, the socialist program of construction is the goal of life. This is the incentive which focusses personal interest, the sporting spirit in work. A socialistic competition between factories or "shock-brigades" arouses as much enthusiasm as a football game elsewhere. The people can be optimistic, the revolution has given them the gift to laughter.

The problems of revolutionary art induce a realistic style; as an announcement of the "Association of Proletarian Musicians" has described it, "realism that does not seek to photograph reality in exact detail, but to present the motivating laws of the actual in clearer, truer fashion than life itself." Therefore every artistic expression which depends on words or on visual perceptions is pushed into the foreground.

In the musical field this unrelenting impulse to direct action results in lifting texts to a plane of equal importance with music, so the proletarian composer creates chiefly songs and choral works.

Problems of concert management have not been completely solved in the U.S.S.R. More concerts are held than in European centers; every city has several orchestras, with or without leaders; performances are given daily in the large concert halls and in the workers' clubs. Yet it is "bourgeois" music that is mostly presented. Although the programs contain isolated subjects like *Music and the Machine*, *Music and Revolution etc.*, the tendency to "direct action" is limited. These concerts are artistic events of the second class. They have an educational value. It should be noted, nevertheless, that they are usually sold out.

The works of the young composers of the U.S.S.R. who are known in Europe and America belong to this category. They are followers of the mode who have put their services at the disposal of the proletariat, but their music is fundamentally bourgeois; for example, Schostakowitsch, Mossolow, Knipper, Deschewoff, Schaporin, etc.

The real new development is materializing in the field of "people's music," to be played or sung by the masses. That is where the work of the Association of Proletarian Musicians begins. The new songs of this group of composers have attained an immediate, factitious popularity. They are simple, singable tunes, the basis of whose texts is preponderantly the program of construction. The revolution has been already attained, so the songs recall its noteworthy events. To some extent they celebrate agricultural work, for example, how the old hand plows have been abolished in favor of tractors which give a hundredfold harvest, for which no prayer need be offered to a papal deity. Martial characteristics prevail. The songs have a contagious

appeal and have an impudent, sometimes provocative gaiety. The state publishing establishment gets them out in a simple form, often printing editions of 1,000,000 copies. One copy containing two songs costs from six to ten kopecks (the price of a glass of tea); nevertheless, dissemination is principally oral, through instructors in the clubs, through children, shock-brigades etc. The most important composers of these songs are Davidenko, Koval, Bieli, Vassiliev-Buglaj.

As much attention as is devoted to the distribution of these songs is given to keeping them free from the popular appeal of all bourgeois "nonsense." Fake gypsy romanticism, Russian romances of the pre-war days, tearful sentimentality, have vanished. The products of bourgeois mass-production in art, the American and European "hits," are banned. For are not these the expression of the false social forms of the bourgeois classes? Utilitarian music—for dancing (fox-trots, tangoes, waltzes and rumbas)—is not to be found and is not missed by the proletarian youth who, moreover, lack the means of utilizing it.

Modern music, in the European sense, is officially avoided as an esthetic pastime. I quote the Association of Proletarian Musicians again: "Modern bourgeois music reaches the pinnacle of subjectivity, becomes pure egotism and has almost completely lost its social significance as a means of spiritual communication."

In spite of this, Schönberg, Hindemith, Hauer and Stravinsky are performed. But of the European composers only Hans Eisler has made any real contact with the working masses.

The repertoire of opera theatres is perforce confined to the old works, for the attempts to create a new, revolutionary opera, carried out so far chiefly by non-proletarian composers, have not yet succeeded. The typical revolutionary opera is still Mousorgsky's *Boris Godunow* (in the original version obtained from Lamm, not with Rimsky-Korsakov's revisions). Davidenko is now working on an opera which is awaited with great interest. For the rest, the programs waver between *Carmen*, Wagnerian operas (whose texts they want to rewrite) and Rimsky-Korsakov. They are still giving Krenek's *Jonny*, but that is a survival from the art-politics of the "Nep" period, when modern European art was taken as a pattern.

The fundamental status of the dance remains the same. Although dramatic action was the basis of the ballets of the Russian imperial dance corps, a somewhat abstract art was in formation. The dramatic action was a framework that remained a support more or less superfluous to the esthetic enjoyment of pure dance proceedings. During the later evolution of the emigrated Russian Ballet in France the emphasis was on absolute value, although not to the same extent as in the Central European dance.

The revolution might have been expected to wipe out the ballet as the clearest artistic document of Czarism. But, though the greatest dancers emigrated, the remaining group was not dissolved. The gaps were soon filled with young talents. Dancers like Zaplin and Messerer, or the prima-ballerina Simeonowa are the equals of the best stars of the imperial ballet.

The realism which is demanded in this field is obtained by a leaning to pantomime. The dramatic action must advance the revolutionary idea, that is obvious, and the ballet, *Red Moon*, by Glier, proclaimed as a model of this form, was awaited with great expectations. It proved a bitter disappointment. With the exception of a revolution scene that closes the work as a "happy ending," there are only sporadic appearances of anything positive in a work which provides a whole evening's entertainment. Choreographically, the presentation is an obvious one. It shows Red sailors demonstrating the advantages of collective work to Chinese coolies. Outside of this nothing brings to mind the present. It is the oldest kind of ballet, the tasteless climax being an opium vision with silver-winged dancers and ballerinas armored in scales playfully capering by the seashore.

Nothing in the traditional ballet routine has been disturbed. Even the schools, which pursue a free existence apart from grand opera, have kept the old technic as the basis of their systems. Isadora Duncan's school still remains but has little influence.

Naturally the young dance artists of Moscow try to mitigate the rigor of the ballet tradition. They understand the new physical abandon and value the significance of expressionistic possibilities of the body. They have never gone as far, however, as their Central European colleagues. Wigman and Laban are familiar in the U.S.S.R. only as names. The dancers of the

Soviet Union are almost completely isolated from the developments of Central Europe and are thrown on their own resources. Even the artistic growth of Diaghilev in France had no reaction on the Soviet artists. Among the European dancers only the gifted Valeska Gert has visited Moscow. Her conceptions satirizing the age resulted in the founding of new schools.

The directors of proletarian culture are quite displeased with the developments in the field of the dance. Here too the situation is similar to that in music. Choreographers who are known to us, like Lukin and Goleisowsky, only follow the mode. And though Goleisowsky has great imaginative richness, he has no contact with the masses. He lacks fundamental sensitivity to the requirements of the present. So say the proletarian critics.

Numerous dance groups are trying to develop a proletarian dance art, principally the Dramatic Ballet and the Theatre of the Art of the Dance, directed by Vera Maja. The dance plays a great role in the productions of Tram, the workers' theatre. Among the soloists, only Alexander Rumneff appears important.

In the dance as in music, there is a great bustle. There are innumerable performances and all are sold out. But the important thing is not the cultural result which has thus far been attained but the creation of "cells" out of which spontaneous activity by the masses can develop. When the bourgeois social dances were proscribed, mass dances developed, mostly improvised under the direction of young instructors. The technic of the Central European *Bewegungsschor* is still alien, but the roots are there. The dances are created as spectacles. At the great festivals, the demonstrators' path leads them in hundreds of thousands across the Red Square. They proclaim the rhythm of the work of construction. At other times, thousands of workers assume positions in the form of the symbol of the Soviet Union and carry on calisthenics. The attempt is made to present a relationship to work even in simple gymnastic movements. These are the elements that dominate the dance in the clubs and "culture" parks. There is nothing final about it. They try and discard, and try something else. Art in the U.S.S.R. today is in process of construction.