

THE SOVIET FOSTERS A PROVINCIAL ART

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THE economic and political upheavals which Russia has undergone have reverberated deeply through her artistic life. The development of music, especially, has suffered a violent shock. Once again the opportunity is at hand to demonstrate the dependence of artistic production on historical events and social conditions. It is, indeed, a very complex relation, one that is impossible to control, or to exploit after a fashion that will determine the character and growth of art according to our own desires.

Such a rational and systemized direction is exactly the goal, as everyone knows, of the present governors of Russia. They desire to guide the country's art as they do its economic and political life. The creation of a proletarian art is being vigorously pushed, a definite attempt being made to counteract the so-called feudal or bourgeois culture by art forms in harmony with the new communist state.

In the field of music, these efforts have signally failed. Russian music received the shock of war and revolution and its destiny was profoundly modified by the tempest that swept over the country. But the modifications were altogether different from those the communists and their followers among the musicians consciously attempted to effect. It is now definitely established that the immediate result of the revolution was not the birth of a proletarian art. Russian music, as a consequence of war, revolution, and the subsequent emigration, was torn in two directions, and we have, today, the Russian music of the Soviet, and the Russian music of western Europe. And what characterizes the music of Soviet Russia are the traits of an essentially isolated and provincial art.

This Soviet music is a branch that has been detached from the main trunk of western culture to develop for better or worse in a

special environment. The Russian music of Europe remains a still integral part of occidental art and plays an important role in its development. The war and the revolution forced Russia to live on its own resources. For eight years, from 1914 to 1922, Russia was separated from the rest of the world, and when this isolation came to an end, when one by one the barriers were lifted, and the material obstacles pushed aside, the differences were already so marked, so deep, that the effects carried over. These will probably be felt for a long time to come.

German, French, English and Italian music have continued in a parallel development, by reacting on each other. Since 1914 the growth of Russian music has been more independent and, from a certain point of view, more regular, because it has been along one straight line. And here lies the crux of the situation. The future historian will, I am sure, approach with special interest this singular moment in the evolution of Russian music when it begins its solitary life, relying on the energy within itself. But he will be forced to admit that, in an aesthetic sense, this withdrawal had unfortunate consequences. What has happened here gives us a foretaste of the great danger attending all separatism in the modern world, even in its effect on an art as vital and rich as was Russian music before 1915.

From Glinka to Scriabine, Russian music is clearly the product of assimilation by native genius of occidental influence. It was in close and constant contact with the great German and Italian masters, and the French (Berlioz), that brought it to a fine flowering in the works of the Five, of Tchaikowsky, and still later of Scriabine. First by imitating the west, and later by reacting against, and adapting it to their own ideas, Russian composers grew conscious of their power and acquired mastery. In their turn they eventually influenced the western artists, bringing them a new music through Moussorgsky and others of the Five which was so powerfully felt in France, later through Scriabine which was especially effective in England and America, and finally through Stravinsky who is now ready to revolutionize the musical art of the west. The valuable results of these reactions are beyond dispute. And is it not significant that it is precisely in occidental Europe, among the Russian emigrés, that the two greatest con-

temporary Russians now pursue their work—Strawinsky and Prokofieff ?



The critics and the public of most countries have a tendency to exaggerate their national artists. It is a natural failing, very pronounced today in France, England, Germany, Italy, Austria and Czecho-Slovakia, but nowhere, it seems to me, is it so developed, so overtly and naïvely expressed as in Russia. From a perusal of Russian publications one might conclude that music has never flourished there as at the present moment. And at the same time one senses a certain disdain, even a defiance toward western music. This is the manifestation of a chauvinistic spirit which formerly animated Slavophile ideals.

It is difficult for western Russians to verify from a distance the judgments of these admirers of Russian music, as it is still not easy to procure the scores. We are, however, beginning to make the acquaintance of Soviet works, and there seems to be a wide divergence between these judgments and our appreciations. Certain exaggerations appear, which can only be the direct consequence of a long isolation which falsifies the sense of proportion and distorts the perspective.

It must be granted that a country which has given us Glinka, Moussorgsky, Scriabine, and Strawinsky, is, in all likelihood, still productive of young talent, probably has greater potentialities than old Europe. Among the young men, Melkih, Polovinkinn, Krioukov, Chebalinn, Mossolov, Chenchinn, and Chirinsky, of whom much is expected, there may indeed be some who will reveal new beauties to us in the future. But we can speak now only of the present, of those who are known. It is, moreover, not a question of individual talent, but of the soil from which it must grow, the atmosphere, the general character of the culture that produces it. And it is just this general atmosphere which seems to me abnormal, the soil which is unhealthy.

What characterizes the works of the best known composers in Russia today, Miaskowsky, Feinberg, Krein and Alexandrow, is,

to use a somewhat pedantic term, their heteronomy, or, to put it in another way, the subjection, the dependence of their musical thought on other than musical elements. The musical values do not have an absolute existence, a significance in themselves, but are used, more or less consciously, as a means of expression or suggestion. The existence of the musical idea as such, so often affirmed in theory, is denied in the practice of nearly every composer in Russia at present.

This psychological leaning has always been a failing of Russian music. From Glinka to Scriabine (and Glinka was perhaps the first one to completely free himself) most of the great composers have fought against it, often without success, turning now to the plastic and literary, now to the exotic, now to the pseudo-classic. Those who have resisted the first temptations, have almost invariably succumbed to academic weaknesses—Tanieff, Glazounow, Medtner, Goedike. Tchaikowsky represents the psychological *par excellence*. And it is certainly his music in a new aspect that dominates Russia today. When Russia was isolated, it turned in the most natural direction and impregnated itself with Tchaikowsky. The great success of Scriabine, whose influence is beginning to decline, is due to what he had in common with Tchaikowsky, that element which makes his music an unusually powerful means of expressing emotional exaltation.

I do not at all wish to imply that their works possess no intrinsic musical value. Scriabine has written many pages marked by a musical beauty which is directly apparent and owes nothing to psychological content. Even Tchaikowsky was too powerful a creator, his ideas too intense, not to attain occasionally a complete autonomy as in *La Belle au Bois dormant*, *Casse-Noisette*, *Le Lac des Cygnes*. But their general tendency remains psychological, and it is this tendency which manifests itself today in the works of Miascowsky and Feinberg.

Miascowsky confines himself to instrumental music, having already written eight symphonies, two sonatas and a few pieces for the piano. His *Fifth Symphony in D major* is characteristic both of him and of that type of music whose significance lies in the feeling from which it springs and which it stirs in the hearer. It has intrinsic musical value only in spots. It is marked by the

use of devices whose emotional effect is powerful, but whose musical interest is either nil or at best completely worn down by dint of repetition: the harmonic progressions, the sequences which do not, properly speaking, form a development of the musical idea and are justified only by extra-musical considerations. To this category belong also the half-tone ascensions and the chromaticism which are never truly relevant to the melodic structure, but merely reinforce the expressive effect. The works of Miascowsky abound in devices of this kind so that their musical system, so far as it is perceived by the hearer at all, quickly vanishes, absorbed by the emotions they arouse.

His melodic vein, related to that of Tchaikowsky, and sometimes even Moussorgsky, is rich enough. Some of Miascowsky's phrases have a true musical beauty, an undeniably absolute value, but generally, after the first statement of the theme, he has recourse to his favorite methods. The andante of the *Symphony in D* is typical; the theme, simple and naïve, has great charm, it is a beautiful musical idea, plastic to a degree. But this idea never has the opportunity to grow of itself, the intrinsic logic is not developed. To cover the ground the composer employs either expressionist methods to augment the emotional effect, or the academic formulas of development.

In this oscillation between the Scylla of the academic and the Charybdis of heteronomy, Miascowsky merely exemplifies the dual weakness inherent in all the Russians, in the psychologic Moussorgsky, the pictorial Rimsky-Korsakow, the exotic Borodine, the mystical and metaphysical Scriabine. In fact in all the arts, not only in music, it is with the greatest difficulty that the Russian idea preserves its autonomy, clings to the absolute value of the aesthetic concept which has its own meaning, as self-sufficient as that of a logical or mathematical idea.

The monumental forms which Miascowsky affects, even the plasticity and elegance of his writing, the excellent proportions of his symphonies, are academic, scholastic. He is a master and knows his technique perfectly. But it is the craft of the conservatory, which reduces the methods of the great musicians to formulas and receipts. He falls constantly into the conventional symphonic mold, which is so perfectly fixed in all its details that whoever