

THE CHANGING COURSE OF RUSSIAN MUSIC

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THESE lines are written on the eve of the eighteenth anniversary of the proletarian revolution in Russia. Looking back, one can appreciate what vast changes these eighteen years have wrought in the views of the intelligentsia, who, loyal to the Soviet, passed through embittered conflicts, revalued values, smashed many hitherto immovable social foundations and rebuilt anew. Now after many years the "Chinese Wall" of misleading opinion about the new culture of the Soviet begins to crumble, for recently it has attracted wide-spread attention in influential circles of American and European society.

During the last few years a number of the works of Shostakovich, Miascowsky, Shaporin, Mossolow, Veprik, Shebalin and others have found their way to the concert platforms of New York, Paris, London, Prague. Commenting on these performances music critics in Europe and America have frequently displayed a certain lack of comprehension about the trends of modern Russian musical development. This is readily understood if one bears in mind the difference in cultural viewpoint and the lack of contact during the long period when the Soviet was isolated.

Only a year or so ago almost the only musical work accepted in the West as a reflection of modern Soviet life was the frequently performed *Iron Foundry* by Alexandre Mossolow. The success of this work is easily explained. Its clanging din and racket, depicting the purely naturalistic appearance of a certain factory, was taken by foreign critics as the embodiment of the Soviet idea of industrialization and the glorification of toil. But such a merely external presentation can in no wise claim to be the musical expression of the Soviet idea of Socialist labor.

The *Iron Foundry* is almost never played in the Soviet Union. For the audience abroad it is a striking "Soviet exotic," a curious musical experiment; for the Soviet audience at home it is a composition interesting in form, but gelded of ideas.

The later development of Mossolow is more interesting to follow. After the *Iron Foundry* he composed a number of works along the same line of experiment with new sound effects. However these formal quests, dear to many modern composers in the West, cannot long satisfy the meditative artist in whose veins beats the pulse of a new life. In the *Second Symphony*, written in 1934, Mossolow has liberated himself of formalistic tendencies and has created a work emotionally satisfying and full of ideas. The first part of his new *Cello Concerto*, performed recently at a meeting of the Union of Soviet Composers, demonstrated that he has definitely abandoned his old methods and is composing in a new way. The extremely simple language of this concerto—which is, however, very difficult to perform—combines great warmth, harmony of form, clearness of conception, and the emphasis of a sweeping stream of melody.



Many Soviet composers seeking new simplicity, new themes and means of expression, are turning to folklore, which, in the U. S. S. R., proves a rich, inexhaustible well-spring. The culture of the numerous nationalities of the Soviet Union has developed with spectacular rapidity on the foundations laid by the Revolution. New, hitherto unknown resources have been opened up to enrich the musical treasures of modern life. Using the folk music of the peoples of the U. S. S. R. as source material, many composers have already created works of consummate craftsmanship, such as the *Turkmenian Suite* by Boris Shekhter; the *Tajik Suite* by Lew Knipper; the *Chechian Suite* by Alexandre Davidenko; the *Chuvash Songs* by Victor Bielyi, *Songs of the Peoples of U. S. S. R.* by Maximilian Steinberg.

Soviet artists, unlike the old Russian composers, find no inspiration in the inactive-pensive moods of the exotic east. The lethargic and luxurious orientalism found in the sumptuous orchestrations of Rimsky-Korsakow and Borodin do not stir them. The

modern Russian composers feel the ferment of a constructive, throbbing life which, breaking down age-old traditions, creates the young Soviet East.

The former arrogant attitude toward the culture of the national minorities has been completely wiped out. No trait of modern Soviet musical development is more characteristic than this one, which has stimulated young talented composers to arise from among the formerly oppressed and downtrodden peoples, once inhabitants of old Russia.

The Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Eugene Senkar, recently performed the *First Symphony* of the Armenian composer, Aram Khachaturjan. One of the outstanding talents in the Soviet, he was born in the family of a Tiflis bookbinder in 1904, and began to study music when nineteen years old. In 1934, at the age of thirty, he graduated from Miascowsky's class at the Moscow Conservatory. The same year, while still a student in the Conservatory, Khachaturjan completed his E-minor symphony, a work giving every evidence that he is a fully matured composer—a brilliant master of the orchestra. In this startling music, modulated with rich color, Khachaturjan has used national, mainly Armenian subject-matter. But his work does not in the least resemble an imitation of the usual "Oriental" piece. The symphony is genuine and is characterized by fertile rhythms, a complete lack of abandon to exoticism, and a single creative idea in the development and conflict of the themes. I have since been fortunate enough to hear the first part of an uncompleted piano concerto by Khachaturjan, which also expresses an extremely interesting idea. The freshness of the subject-matter, permeated again with native tonalities, the originality of the rhythmic devices and a well developed pianistic technic promise much for this concerto.

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A number of talented and promising composers have appeared in the younger ranks of the Soviet. The Leningrad composer Dmitri Shostakovitch, already well known in America, has considerable influence on the creative work of these young men. The symphony written by the twenty-two year old Tichon Khrennikov



NIKOLAI MIASOWSKY

FOUR RUSSIAN COMPOSERS

Representing various ages,
races and tendencies in
Soviet music today.



TICHON KHRENNIKOV



is a tribute to Shostakovitch. Khrennikov is still a student, completing his last year under Shebalin at the Moscow Conservatory. On October 11th his symphony was performed by the Moscow Radio Broadcasting Orchestra. This work captivated everyone by its temperament and youthful, elemental force. Despite a certain lack of independent language, the freshness and sanguine joy of the first part is very exciting. A mocking irony and sarcasm, alternating with broad lilting melodies and emotional outbursts is the characteristic expression of the author. This small symphony is typical of a young artist responding creatively to life about him. The faults are largely due to lack of experience. His healthy aspirations, his boundless optimism win and charm the auditor.

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One of the greatest modern composers, Nikolai Miascowsky, a genuine master of the symphony, about whom, to our regret, too little is known in America, goes his own way. In his book, *Music of Our Day*, Lazare Saminsky writes:

"Miascowsky is a sombre and fastidious spirit, propelled by stark impulses, even storms of restlessness, a spirit avid to translate into music the delirium of Edgar Allen Poe, of Shelley, of Maeterlinck."

I do not cite this passage arbitrarily. It illustrates how completely Miascowsky is misunderstood abroad. When Mr. Saminsky wrote his book, he could have known only the early period of Miascowsky's work, a period actually oppressed by doubts and gloomy forebodings. This opinion, based on familiarity with the first symphonies, is held far and wide in musical circles of Europe and America. Whereas the composer, plunging deep into a Soviet theme in his twelfth symphony entitled *Collective Farm*, has actually created a lively and agitating work full of optimism and faith in the profound historical mission of the changes in the Soviet village. This same feeling is expressed in the *Thirteenth* and *Fourteenth Symphonies*. His *Fifteenth*, performed on October 28th, was given in Moscow by the Radio Broadcasting Orchestra and proved to be a dazzling and stunning refutation of the views generally held about him. Gripped and inspired by a new life, Miascowsky has given it staunch, joyful

expression in music. The first part is the development of a mighty theme which is counterposed to a broad lyrical melody, a perfect example of polyphonic composition. The profound lyrical melodies, the simplicity and deep emotion of the second movement create an impression of radiant clearness. Touches of romantic influence are felt in the gay third part, which is finely orchestrated. The finale is brilliant and tempestuous; here, the rhythm of a folk dance, superbly used by the composer to create an atmosphere of cheer and brightness, leads to an emphatic climax, with the symphony expanding into a triumphant ode of poetic sound. It is a contribution to the repertory of revolutionary art. The clear profound ideas, the simple exposition, the perfect form, the absolute mastery of orchestral composition, the original language, peculiar to Miascowsky alone despite the fact that the symphony is composed in the best traditions of the Russian school—all these make the work one of the outstanding pieces of music of our time.



The musical development of the Soviet presents the most intriguing problem in the history of modern music. Contrary to the expectations of certain circles, the Soviet does not seek at any cost to create "innovations." The language used is by no means the last word in modern music. Soviet composers represent extremely varied creative trends, from the classical musical methods developed in the beginning of the nineteenth century to ultra-modernism.

But creative work in Soviet music is sharply distinguished by a purposeful ideology, a truthful realism in the aspirations of Soviet composers who are stirred by the life surrounding them. Undoubtedly the technical backwardness of certain groups results from too little contact and exchange of experience with their colleagues abroad, from a superficial knowledge of the best examples of modern music in the West. We cannot claim that the new "Soviet style" in music has been discovered. But the immense creative enthusiasm which inspires all in quest of this style, gives promise of ultimate victory.