

WHAT MAKES A GOOD WAR SONG?

REPORT FROM V.O.K.S. ON THE MOSCOW MEETING OF COMPOSERS

DEBATE on the pros and cons of popular war songs was the high point of a recent five-day meeting held by the Moscow section of the Soviet Composers' Union. Not only composers, but poets, musicians, leading workers of the U.S.S.R. Committee on Arts and representatives of military organizations attended and made their views articulate.

The conference opened with a two-day concert-review in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory and the program appropriately presented about seventy songs by composers like Bakalov, Blanter, Dunayevsky, Zakharov, Katz, Kruchinin, Listov, Milyutin, Novikov, Selovyov-Sedoi, Fradkin and Khrennikov. Performers included the Railroad Song and Dance Ensemble, the Pyatnitsky State Russian Folk Chorus, and the Chorus of the U.S.S.R. Radio Committee. Two jazz orchestras also participated.

A free-for-all discussion then took place in the Central Hall of the Composers. Aram Khachaturian chairman of the organization committee of the Union, opened the meeting. There followed immediately a communication from Victor Bielyi which outlined the general problems of writing war songs – the demands of the heroic and lyric genres, the choice of themes and their realization, the folk element, the propaganda uses of such music.

Song writing in the Soviet, he pointed out, is characterized today by great diversity, as the songs composed during the war attest. Among the best are the grand epic, *Oh My Mists*, by Zakharov; *Sacred War* by Alexandrov; *Song of Dovator's Men* by Muradeli; *Son of the Dnieper* by Fradkin; the expressive lyrics, *Evening at Anchor*, and *Play My Accordion* by Solovyov-Sedoi, and *Hearts and Homes* by Blanter.

Bielyi gave special emphasis to the writing of heroic songs, a complex task imposing a heavy burden on the composer. The Russian people are especially exacting in their demands – they tolerate no insincerity, and put up with no high-flown, rhetorical mannerisms.

Bielyi then proceeded to discuss the question of success. He reminded composers of their role in developing the taste of the general public. It is necessary, he said, to distinguish between success rooted in the needs of the people and the easy triumph which often caters to backward taste. He condemned the cheap, lyrical effects achieved by composers who have degraded great themes.

About forty people took the floor in the animated discussion that followed. Their main preoccupation was with the question of folk traditions in Soviet song writing and the role to be played by Russian folklore.

The composer Vladimir Zakharov, author of the highly popular songs *Who Knows*, *Leave-Taking*, and others, based his remarks on his experiences with the Pyatnitsky State Russian Folk Chorus and spoke of the great richness of Russian peasant songs. Observing that the elements Soviet composers are apt to employ come mainly from plaintive Russian songs, he pointed to the necessity for giving us humorous, choral, and other vocal works.

Colonel Tsaritsin rose to stress the significance of the tradition of Russian classical and folk music. He believes that some composers have lost contact with their native earth, which is the reason for many artistic failures. Servicemen, said Tsaritsin, are fondest of the oldtime Russian folk songs, the best songs by Soviet composers, fragments of Russian operas, not of tangos, blues, and waltzes, as some assert.

The artistic basis of our songs, he said, lies not in jazz, but in the tradition of the folk and of Russian classical music.

The poet, Vasily Lebedev-Kumach, speaking from experience, insisted that many Red Army soldiers and commanders also like lively jazz songs.

"All kinds of weapons are good," he said, "if only they hit the target."

According to the composer, Dmitri Kabalevsky, any conscious or unconscious underestimation of Russian folk and classical musical culture is harmful, especially during today's war against the German invaders. The only fruitful trend in Soviet music is the one deeply rooted in folk traditions. Kabalevsky doubted the artistic worth of any trend bound up with songs of the jazz or music hall type.

This assertion called forth objections from a number of others.

"Feelings of national pride may find expression in various forms" said the composer Yuri Shaporin. "In certain historical moments our feeling becomes more acute. Just as a mother loves her child more deeply, strongly

and anxiously when it is threatened by misfortune, so do we express our love for our country more fiercely and passionately when the enemy threatens it. Neither the Polovtsi nor the Pechenegs, neither the Tatars nor Karl XII, nor Napoleon brought Russia so many misfortunes as have been and are still being brought by the hordes of Hitler. It is, therefore, excusable that some of us overdo the label 'Russian.'"

Referring for illustration to a number of songs by Soviet composers – Zakharov, Novikov, Alexandrov, Dzerhinsky, Bielyi, Katz, and others – Shaporin pointed out that if the individual characters of these composers differ, their songs are all ennobled and refreshed by contact with the sources of folk music. "I call upon you to drink at these sources" said Shaporin. "Songs that will be born of the soil, with new rhythms and fresh harmonies will be a worthy tribute to the great heroic people who bear the brunt of this unprecedented war."

Objections were raised by the composer, Nikolai Chemberdji. Stressing variety in genre and the existence of different artistic trends as achievements in Soviet music, he opposed a narrow and over-simplified emphasis on the folk element in art.

Chemberdji wants more attention paid to the quality of the songs, to consonance between the means of musical expression and the chosen theme; vulgarity and banality in songs, he pointed out, often result from lack of conformity between the means of expression and the theme. He spoke also of the immense artistic possibilities of the heroic song and gave, as best examples, the songs: *Sacred War* by Alexandrov, *The Vow of the Baltic Sailors* by Goltz and *Five Bullets* by Novikov.

A number of composers and music critics then tried to analyze more deeply what was meant by folksong traditions. The term folksong, they maintained, should not be limited to oldtime peasant songs. It may also include urban folklore, soldiers' and sailors' songs, songs of the civil war and finally, popular songs by Soviet composers. The influence of the folksong on the contemporary popular song is indisputable, and the opposite influence also exists. Thus, for example, Zakharov's well-written songs are valuable because the composer, proceeding from the oldtime peasant songs, enlivens them with intonations of both folklore and the new popular songs.

Jazz music, and songs of the jazz music hall type, were other subjects of warm discussion. Many took the floor to observe that such songs were also entitled to existence, that in this field too, talent and artistic taste are demanded. However, the limitations of the genre were pointed out; its

inadequacy to express deep feeling when the subject is the great theme of war and heroism.

Interest was aroused also by the short but illuminating talk of Reinhold Glière, chairman of the organizational committee of the Union. He said the most difficult thing in composing a song was the search for the melody. The writing of a song, he insists, is just as complicated and responsible a process as the writing of a theme for a symphony; the melody of a song must be nurtured. The writing of a heroic song is analogous to the composing of the first movement of a symphony; that of a lyrical song to its second movement.

Grigory Shneerson, the musicologist, mentioned the growing popularity of many Soviet songs abroad. Not by chance has the greatest success fallen to the very songs that are the favorites in the U.S.S.R. — *Song of the Counter Plan* by Shostakovitch (to the tune of which the *Hymn of the United Nations* is sung), *Polyushko* by Knipper, *Over Hills and Dales* by Alexandrov, *From Border to Border* by Dzerhinsky, *Songs of Our Country* by Dunaevsky, *The Tank* by Listov, *Song of Moscow* by Khrennikov.

Khachaturian, as chairman of the committee, summed up the results of the four-day discussion and outlined a number of resolutions. Expressing himself in favor of encouraging a variety of trends, Khachaturian said there is only one criterion today for a war song — it must fulfill the main task — to help the people by means of art, in their struggle against the invaders. Let our composers, he concluded, create songs worthy of the unrivaled heroism of this period of the Great Patriotic War.