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The Transnational Lyric Community of Soviet Unofficial Music under Late Socialism

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ABSTRACT: Despite the seeming liberalism of Khrushchev's 'Thaw', limitations were still placed on the Soviet arts, and the era witnessed the emergence of a parallel form of underground or unofficial culture. This essay considers a number of vocal works by composers, including Gubaidulina and Schnittke, who experimented with a cosmopolitan range of literary texts, as well as with a more radical musical language. In doing so, these composers not only established a lyric community at home but also engaged with their counterparts in avant-garde circles in Western Europe.

KEYWORDS: song; Soviet Union; underground culture; Gubaidulina, Sofia; Schnittke, Alfred; avant-garde; cosmopolitanism; modern music

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Despite its vast territorial expanse, much of Russia's culture and intellectual life has been sustained by the activities of small salons, societies, groups, and coteries (what in Russian are sometimes referred to as *kruzhki*, or 'little circles'). The vitality of these often informally constituted groupings can be traced, at least in part, to the pervasiveness of state censorship in both the imperial and Soviet periods, when severe limits were often placed on publication, expression, and activism. Even when such limitations have been lifted, or at least relaxed, salon spaces and informal communities have long played an important role in fostering a sense of shared creativity and common identity, regardless of the political or ideological views of their adherents. The limited development of the kind of independent social and cultural institutions that historians have seen as central to the emergence of liberalism and capitalism in Western Europe means that state power itself in Russia has often been exercised from within a relatively limited range of self-selecting bodies.¹ From the court intrigues of the Romanov chanceries

1 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

to the insider politics of the Politburo, authority has been invested in and exercised by small groups of the elect, if not the elected.

Scholarship has done much to illuminate the activities and importance of salons, societies, and other informal groupings at various key moments in Russian history. A particular focus of attention has been the vitality of literary, cultural, and intellectual life during the first half of the nineteenth century, which witnessed both the emergence of Russian romanticism and political challenges to the primacy of the autocracy (most obviously in the form of the Decembrist uprising of 1825).² This 'Golden Age' of Russian culture has an analogue in the early twentieth century, when a sequence of dynamic artistic movements — from symbolism and Acmeism to various iterations of Futurism — unfolded in the apartments, salons, cafes, cabarets, clubs, and studios that were so central to the 'Silver Age' in both St Petersburg and Moscow.³ Radical politics, too, often took place in such spaces, driven underground by the repressive policing on which the autocracy relied for its survival.⁴ Later on, Soviet power would owe much to the utopian communities that thrived in the years immediately after the October Revolution, which were later swept away by Stalin's consolidation and centralization of power.⁵

2 See the still indispensable M. Aronson and S. Reiser, *Literaturnye kruzhki i salony* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929), and *Literaturnye salony i kruzhki: Pervaya polovina XIX veka*, ed. by N. L. Brodsky (Moscow: Academia, 1930), as well as Edward J. Brown, *Stankevich and his Moscow Circle, 1830–1840* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966); A. D. Sukhov, *Literaturno-filosofskie kruzhki v istorii russkoi filosofii (20–50e gody XIX veka)* (Moscow: IF RAN, 2009); Daria Khitrova, *Lyric Complicity: Poetry and Readers in the Golden Age of Russian Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019).

3 D. M. Fel'dman, *Salon-predpriyatie: Pisatel'skoe ob"edinenie i kooperativnoe izdatel'stvo 'Nikinskie subbotniki' v kontekste literaturnogo protsessa 1920–1930-x godov* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2018); *Moskovskii Parnas: Kruzhki, salony, zhurfiksy Serebryanogo veka, 1890–1922*, ed. by T. F. Prokopova (Moscow: Interlak, 2006); Barbara Walker, *Maximilian Voloshin and the Russian Literary Circle: Culture and Survival in Revolutionary Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

4 See e.g. N. Bel'chikov, *Dostoevskii v protsesse Petrashevtssev* (Moscow: Nauka, 1971); John L. Evans, *The Petrashevskij Circle, 1845–1849* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); B. S. Itenberg, *Dvizhenie revolyutsionnogo narodnichestva: Narodnicheskie kruzhki i 'khozhenie v narod' v 70-kh godakh XIX v.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965).

5 Andy Willmott, *Living the Revolution: Urban Communes & Soviet Socialism, 1917–1932* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

As Alexei Yurchak has demonstrated, late socialism was also characterized by the appearance of various quasi-independent groups and alternative societies that encouraged and sustained forms of cultural production and participation that were distinct from those promoted by official state bodies, which technically held a monopoly on such matters.⁶ By way of example, Yurchak cites a literary club, an archaeological circle (*kruzhok*), a group of theoretical physicists, a Leningrad cafe frequented by poets and artists (as well as, in one account, drug addicts and black-marketeers), and a hangout for aspiring pop musicians.⁷ Yet as Yurchak cautions, such bodies ‘did not fit the binary categories of either support of or opposition to the state.’⁸ Some of them may have been at least partially dissident, but the vast majority existed in a more ambiguous zone, somewhere between the official and the underground, giving rise to ‘new temporalities, spatialities, social relations, and meanings that were not necessarily anticipated or controlled by the state, although they were made fully possible by it.’⁹

These groupings thrived on the practice of *obshchenie*, a term that might be translated as “communication” and “conversation” but in addition involves nonverbal interaction and spending time together or being together.¹⁰ Yurchak goes on to define the ways in which *obshchenie* facilitates the formation of communal practices:

The noun *obshchenie* has the same root as *obshchii* (common) and *obshchina* (commune), stressing in the process of interaction not the exchange between individuals but the communal space where everyone’s personhood was dialogized to produce a common intersubjective sociality. *Obshchenie*, therefore, is both a process and a sociality that emerges in that process, and both an exchange of ideas and information as well as a space of affect and togetherness. Although *obshchenie* is an old cultural practice in Russia, during late socialism it became

6 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

7 Ibid., pp. 135–48. For a detailed study of a particularly important literary and intellectual group of the time, see Josephine von Zitzewitz, *Poetry and the Leningrad Religious-Philosophical Seminar 1974–1980: Music for a Deaf Age* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2016).

8 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 34.

9 Ibid., p. 128.

10 Ibid., p. 148.

particularly intense and ubiquitous and acquired new forms, evolving into a dominant pastime in all strata of Soviet society and in all professional, ideological, public, and personal contexts.¹¹

By viewing late socialism through the prism of such social and personal interactions, it becomes possible to set aside simplistic binary oppositions between state and dissident, conformist and rebel, that were ultimately a product of Cold War thinking, and to pay attention instead to what Yurchak described as border zones ‘that were simultaneously inside and outside of the system.’¹² None of this is to deny the often very extreme measures that were used to limit freedom of expression and control cultural production. Nor is it to downplay the impact of such measures on creative artists. Rather, such an approach facilitates a greater understanding of the means by which communities of artists withstood and bypassed the impact of state power, as well as opening up a consideration of the consequences of such strategies on their creative output.

Yurchak’s analysis has proved particularly influential to scholarship on the unofficial music scene that flourished across the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s. As Peter J. Schmelz and Kevin C. Karnes have demonstrated, cities such as Moscow, Leningrad, Kyiv, Riga, and Tallinn supported a lively network of composers and performers which operated not so much in an underground sphere of illegality and dissent but in a parallel world of informal communities and improvised structures.¹³ As Peter Schmelz argues:

Although active participants in a socially meaningful concert subculture, the unofficial composers were in no ways dissidents, or at least no more so than any other creative artists within the Soviet system. The romanticizing assumption is fueled by Western cold war myths of artistic production in the

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., p. 128.

13 Peter J. Schmelz, *Such Freedom, If Only Musical: Unofficial Soviet Music during the Thaw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Peter J. Schmelz, *Sonic Overload: Alfred Schnittke, Valentin Silvestrov, and Polystylism in the Late USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Kevin C. Karnes, *Sounds Beyond: Arvo Pärt and the 1970s Soviet Underground* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

Soviet Union that do a disservice to all artists active at the time by singling out certain ones as more heroic than the rest.¹⁴

Yurchak's account of late socialism, as well as work by Schmelz and Karnes on unofficial musical culture, has implications for scholarly understanding of state bodies too. The officially sponsored artistic unions that were established in April 1932 after the dissolution of the many so-called artistic 'factions' that had thrived in the 1920s have long been seen as repressive vehicles for the repression of a beleaguered cultural elite, the top-down imposition of Soviet cultural policy, and the dissemination of socialist realism throughout the Soviet Union. Yet, as work by Amy Nelson, Kirill Tomoff, Leah Goldman, and others has demonstrated, even the Union of Soviet Composers was characterized by a wide range of informal practices and offered its members various modes of agency.¹⁵ The technical demands required by the high-level training offered at conservatories, as well as the difficulty of applying the theory of socialist realism to a non-representational art form such as music, meant that musical elites were able to operate with an often surprising degree of autonomy, if not independence, even during the Stalin era. State-sponsored initiatives such as the Stalin Prize offered a further opportunity for composers to assert their authority and resolve professional rivalries.¹⁶

A particularly programmatic account of the atmosphere of the early post-Stalin era was given by the composer Edison Denisov in a 1966 interview with the Italian journal *Il contemporaneo*, a supplement to the newspaper *Rinascita*, published by the Italian Communist Party.¹⁷ Reacting to what he regarded as sketchy and inaccurate West-

14 Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, pp. 13–14.

15 Amy Nelson, *Music for the Revolution: Musicians and Power in Early Soviet Russia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Kirill Tomoff, *Creative Union: The Professional Organization of Soviet Composers, 1939–1953* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Leah Goldman, 'Art of Intransigence: Soviet Composers and Art Music Censorship' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Chicago, 2015).

16 Marina Frolova-Walker, *Stalin's Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics* (London: Yale University Press, 2016).

17 Edison Denisov, 'Le tecniche nuove non sono una moda', *Il contemporaneo/Rinascita*, August 1966, p. 12. A partial version of the original Russian, Edison Denisov, 'Novaya tekhnika — eto ne moda', appeared in 'Drugoe iskusstvo': *Moskva 1956–1976*, ed. by I. Alpatova and L. Talochkin, 2 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya galeriya 'Moskovskaya kollektsiya', 1991), 1, pp. 313–15 (repr. in 'Drugoe iskusstvo': *Moskva*

ern media commentary on contemporary Soviet musical life, as well as to the conservatism of Soviet concert agencies and high-profile performers, Denisov set out to describe the ideals and aspirations of the so-called 'young composers':

A characteristic feature of the majority of young composers in the Soviet Union is a striving to expand the linguistic framework of the musical means they employ and a refusal to limit these artificially to the tonal system alone — a system that is very rich in its possibilities, but which in many respects has exhausted itself. Most young composers nowadays made extensive use of the techniques of serial composition, as well as various types of aleatory technique, and in some cases we encounter compositions in which sonority is the guiding principle [...].

In recent years, Soviet composers have begun to experiment more and more widely, expanding the framework of their musical language and applying new types of techniques that emerged in the twentieth century, and in this we can see a new commitment to resisting the fundamental risk that threatened our music in the post-war years — that of academism.¹⁸

Setting themselves against the conservatism and implied provincialism of the aesthetic of Soviet socialist realism, this new generation turned instead to the legacy of Arnold Schoenberg's serial technique, in which conventional tonality was replaced by a self-consciously atonal musical language and all twelve notes of the scale enjoyed equal status (similar experiments were subsequently applied to other musical parameters, such as rhythm, dynamics, and duration). For many young Soviet composers of the 1960s, the greatest creative priority of the age involved catching up and assimilating the principles of Western European musical modernism that had been suppressed under Stalin and aligning themselves with the post-war European avant-garde.

1956–1988, ed. by I. Alpatova, L. Talochkin, and N. Tamruchi (Moscow: Galart; Gosudarstvennyi tsentr sovremennogo iskusstva, 2005), pp. 68–70). A complete version is given in *Svet — dobro — vechnost': Pamyati Edisona Denisova, stat'i, vospominaniya, materialy*, ed. by Valeriya Tsenova (Moscow: Moskovskaya gosudarstvennaya konservatoriya im. P. I. Chaikovskogo, 1999), pp. 33–38; subsequent references will be to this edition (I am grateful to Peter Schmelz for providing a copy of this).

18 Denisov, 'Novaya tekhnika', p. 34; all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

An interest in Western modernism was not confined to the world of music. Interest in foreign literature and visual culture was equally widespread during the Thaw,¹⁹ but as Denisov noted, official bodies were often slow to respond to this development. As a result, alternative venues sprang up to accommodate the needs of listeners and performers and facilitated the exchange of new creative ideas. Denisov gives a lively account of his experience of such venues:

Interest in new music in the Soviet Union is very great, particularly amongst students and the technical intelligentsia. On the initiative of young scholars, many institutes often hold evenings of contemporary music. I have had occasion to give lectures about new music in Dubna [a nuclear research centre just outside Moscow], at the Kurchatov Institute of Nuclear Physics, at the Institute of Architecture, at the Moscow Union of Artists, and at various student gatherings, and judging by the attentiveness with which works by Luigi Nono, Pierre Boulez, Vittorio Fellegara, Iannis Xenakis, Luciano Berio, Kazimierz Serocki, and other contemporary composers were heard, one can get a sense of the ever growing interest in new music (these lectures were always followed by long conversations and discussions).

So far works by young composers are rarely performed in our concert venues, even though every premiere takes place in packed halls and to excited ovations by the audience. We have had no occasion to encounter the fabled 'conservatism' of the public — quite the opposite — our public has a particularly acute feeling for innovation, and all our difficulties relate to the conservatism of certain of our fellow composers and above all to the so-called 'musical bureaucracy'.²⁰

What emerges from Denisov's account is the development of a parallel set of institutions that were more responsive to musical innovation than official state bodies such as the Union of Soviet Composers. These alternative spaces, often linked to other branches of scholarship, science, and cultural life, succeeded in giving a platform to new works, whether by members of the Western European post-war avant-garde or by a younger generation of Soviet composers. The world of unofficial

19 Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

20 Denisov, 'Novaya tekhnika', p. 37.

music in the post-Stalin period was rooted, then, in daily forms of *obshchenie* that sustained experimental practices not countenanced by the state. At the same time, the stylistic practices of the unofficial composers emerged from a form of transnational *obshchenie* with various foreign influences that helped to constitute an ‘imagined community’ (to use Benedict Anderson’s influential notion) of creative individuals who were not bound by the state and its institutions.

It is precisely this interaction between liminal spaces within the Soviet cultural and intellectual environment and an international repertoire of modernist music that makes the unofficial music scene in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union so fascinating. Scholarship has tended to focus on the musical innovations that resulted from this encounter, particularly in the experimental works of the 1960s that borrowed atonal, serial, and aleatoric elements from the West. Yet, alongside this musical dialogue (which also saw works by younger Soviet composers taken up in leading Western centres of musical experiment, such as the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music), the unofficial community of Thaw-era musicians had a literary aspect too, one that was expressed in composers’ choice of poetic texts. Evidence of this can be found in the figure of Andrey Volkonsky. Born into an émigré Russian family in Geneva 1933, he settled in the Soviet Union with his parents in 1947, before returning to the West in 1973. He studied at the Moscow Conservatory in the early 1950s, although relations with his teachers and the authorities were not always straightforward. One reason for these complications was his interest in and advocacy of serial music — for Denisov, his *Suite of Mirrors* (*Syuta zerkal*, 1959) was as significant an event for members of his generation as Dmitry Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony (1937) had been for an earlier one.²¹

Gennady Aygi’s description of Volkonsky makes clear just what it was that Volkonsky offered to younger artists of all types:

Andrey Volkonsky, the composer and musician, whom I consider a genius, was, amongst all of us who were part of underground culture, a most refined figure of the highest European culture. What mattered to us was that he was the only one with connections to Europe. After the end of the war, his family

21 Ibid., p. 35.

returned from France to the Soviet Union, and Andrey, despite the danger, kept up his connections with foreign friends. All of Western literature reached him: Ionesco, Beckett, Kafka, and through him we got to know the *Encyclopedia of Abstract Art* [...]. Volkonsky's great prospects, his unusual sense of commitment and dedication to the cause of new art played a huge role that brought us all together and educated us [...]. He was the first to bring the music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance into our lives. Through him we got to know the most recent music of Schoenberg and Webern. In this sense he was a teacher of both artists, and poets and musicians. Without even suspecting it, thanks to his most remarkable impulsive, brilliant nature, thanks to his artistry, he was our Teacher.²²

What emerges here is a portrait of Volkonsky as the embodiment of high modernism — Ionesco, Beckett, and Kafka in literature, Schoenberg and Webern in music, and the visual artists covered in Michel Seuphor's *Dictionnaire de la peinture abstraite* (1957). Modernism comes to represent not just a challenge to Soviet conservatism and the conventions of socialist realism but a form of transnational artistic dialogue that links composers, writers, and artists across national and linguistic borders.

Scholarship on the younger generation of Soviet composers has made much of their innovations in musical language, yet their work has a crucial verbal dimension too, and one that further illustrates their conception of a transnational form of artistic community. It is striking, for instance, that two of Volkonsky's most influential works from the 1960s were both settings of contrasting schools of lyric poetry. His *Suite of Mirrors* took nine verses by Federico García Lorca in Russian translations by Vladimir Burich and set them to music for solo voice and small instrumental ensemble. Lorca's republican politics and status as one of the exemplary victims of fascism meant that his poetry ought, at least in theory, to have been acceptable in the Soviet Union. Certainly there was plenty of discussion of Lorca's poetry — and its suitability for musical settings — in official publications at

22 Quoted in 'Drugoe iskusstvo': *Moskva 1956–1988*, ed. by Alpatova, Talochkin, and Tamruchi, p. 50. For a slightly different translation of this interview, see Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, p. 69.

the time.²³ Yet, as Schmelz observes, Volkonsky deliberately chose 'evocative, abstract, and unclear texts' that 'directly opposed the clarity and accessibility demanded by the aesthetics of socialist realism.'²⁴ Accordingly, *Suite of Mirrors* 'portrayed another side to the revolutionary Lorca, one where heroic zeal gave way to exotic abstraction.'²⁵

So much can be gleaned from the cycle's very opening words, which constitute a direct rejection of Soviet values, whether in their religious language or their ecstatic, almost surrealist diction:

Khristov
 derzhit zerkalo
 v kazhdoi ruke.
 Oni umnozhayut
 ego yavlen'e,
 Proektiruya serdtse
 na chernye
 vzglyady.
 Veruyu!

 (Christ
 holds a mirror
 in each hand.
 They multiply
 his aspect,
 Projecting his heart
 onto black
 glances.
 I believe!)

23 Cf. e.g. M. Vaisbord, 'Garsia Lorka — muzykant', *Sovetskaya muzyka*, 9 (1961), pp. 128–30, as well as S. Katonov's review of a more orthodoxly 'civic' cycle of Lorca's poetry (along with settings of Pablo Neruda) by Vadim Salmanov, 'Dva tsikla — dva resheniya', *Sovetskaya muzyka*, 2 (1965), pp. 10–13. Cf. too Natal'ya Shpiller's review of a performance of Kirill Molchanov's equally politically correct interpretation of Lorca's poetry in 'Vokal'nye vechera', *Sovetskaya muzyka*, 6 (1965), pp. 95–96. Volkonsky's resistance to the official Soviet myth of Lorca might also be linked to his awareness of Shostakovich's very popular *Spanish Songs*, op. 100, written in 1956 and based on melodies transcribed from a Soviet citizen of Spanish descent whose family had fled Franco's fascist regime. See Galina Kopytova, 'Shostakovich's Music for *Salute, Spain!* Discoveries and Perspectives', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 14.4 (2021), pp. 479–92 (pp. 490–91).

24 Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, p. 99.

25 Ibid.

26 The original Spanish reads: 'Cristo | tenía un espejo | en cada mano. | Multiplicaba | su propio espectro. | Proyectaba su corazón | en las miradas | negras. | ¡Creo!'

Musically, too, the mirror image of Lorca's poetry led Volkonsky to explore a complex musical language full of 'symmetries, reflections, and refractions',²⁷ rather than the accessible and didactic forms of socialist realism. His next work offered a similarly creative response to language and identity. Superficially, the choice of the traditional folk laments of the Dagestani poet Shchaza of Kurkla, which Volkonsky studied on a number of ethnographical trips to the autonomous region, seems to be aligned with official Soviet nationalities policy. Yet, once again, the radical musical language of *Laments of Shchaza* (*Zhaloby Shchazy*, 1962) disrupted conventional cultural norms and turned state-sanctioned folk poetry into an expression of the pan-European avant-garde.²⁸

Both works drew direct inspiration from at least one important European work: Pierre Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître* (1953–54). Premiered in 1955, Boulez's chamber cantata set surrealist verses by René Char for solo voice and small instrumental ensemble, as well as exploring a highly intricate approach to the application of serial technique. Another work for solo voice and instrumental ensemble that clearly also influenced young Soviet composers was Schoenberg's much earlier *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912). Although noted as an important work of German expressionism, *Pierrot Lunaire* is in fact based on translations of French poetry by the Belgian symbolist Albert Giraud, and hence a significant prior example of the transnational lyric. Thus, through their choice of poetry and their use of a very particular instrumental sonority, Volkonsky's *Suite of Mirrors* and *Laments of Shchaza* establish a creative dialogue with important European precursors, and one that would have been immediately audible to the small coterie of composers and performers familiar with these new works.

Given his background and upbringing, Volkonsky's treatment of the lyric (both musical and literary) should come as little surprise (recall Aygi's description of him as 'a most refined figure of the highest European culture'). What is of equal significance is how his example soon came to be taken up by his contemporaries. Younger composers could signal their awareness of and relationship to global artistic de-

27 Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, p. 101.

28 The musical language of both cycles is discussed in detail in *ibid.*, pp. 96–127.

velopments through their choice of literary texts, thereby fashioning an imagined transnational community of avant-garde artists, even — perhaps especially — as they were prevented from travelling abroad, whether to other countries in the Eastern bloc (particularly Poland, where the Warsaw Autumn became one of the most important festivals for contemporary music) or to Western Europe or North America.²⁹ Here, the work of Denisov illustrates the impact of Volkonsky on the world of unofficial music. His *Sun of the Incas* (*Solntse inkov*, 1964) builds on Volkonsky's *Suite of Mirrors* in that it takes a major twentieth-century Hispanic writer — here, the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral — and similarly explores the sonorities of a small chamber ensemble and applies a number of serial techniques. Likewise, Denisov's folkloric *Laments* (*Plachi*, 1966) explicitly echoes not only Volkonsky's *Laments of Shchaza* (although Denisov uses a different Russian word, *plachi*, rather than *zhaloby*) but also Stravinsky's *Les Noces* (1923).³⁰ Such intertextuality is, of course, not exclusive to unofficial Soviet culture. Yet it is clear that not only did such acts of homage serve to fashion a powerful sense of shared identity and artistic friendship; they also created a form of creative community that extended across both time and space.

These chamber-vocal suites by Volkonsky and Denisov tested the boundaries of what was permissible in the context of the often hesitant liberalization of the Khrushchev era, and were often subject to ideological criticism and practical impediments on the part of the Union of Soviet Composers. Despite the advocacy and cunning of adventurous performers (such as the soprano Lidiya Davydova, the conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky, or the percussionist Mark Pekarsky), such works did not always have a straightforward path to performance or publication, and despite a number of important premieres, they often

29 Lisa Jakelski, *Making New Music in Cold War Poland: The Warsaw Autumn Festival, 1956–1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017). As Peter Schmelz, 'Selling Schnittke: Late Soviet Censorship and the Cold War Marketplace', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. by Patricia Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 413–52, has observed, the limitations placed on the younger generation of unofficial composers lent them a distinct cachet with Western audiences, and whilst their works were often criticized or ignored altogether at home, they received considerable exposure at leading Western festivals of avant-garde music.

30 Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, pp. 131–78.

struggled to retain their place in the repertoire, official or underground. They certainly were not heard by the vast majority of Soviet listeners, whether in live performance or state-sanctioned recording, remaining instead the preserve of relatively small communities of like-minded creative artists and their supporters.

There was, though, another instantiation of the musical lyric that emerged within the community of unofficial Soviet composers in the 1960s and 1970s, and which embodied a rather different set of musical and literary ideas. Here, it was the art-song — or, as it is known in Russian — the ‘romance’ (*romans*) that proved to be the ideal vehicle for a series of imaginary transnational encounters. Typically conceived for solo voice and piano accompaniment, the romance had a long history in Russian music, reaching back to the Europeanization of Russian culture in the eighteenth century and flourishing first in the age of romanticism before going on to find its most vital expression in the work of composers such as Pyotr Tchaikovsky or Sergei Rachmaninoff. Rather incongruously for a genre so closely associated with the rise of bourgeois domestic culture, it even survived the October Revolution and the rise of Stalinism.³¹

Scholarship on the Russian romance has tended to emphasize its intimate relationship with Russian lyric poetry, as well as its role in the emergence of a distinct form of Russian national consciousness.³² As with its cousins, the German *Lied* and the French *mélodie*, the Russian romance is often seen as the bearer of a form of identity that is organically rooted in language and nation. As the nineteenth-century composer and pianist Anton Rubinstein argued, ‘song is the only musical genre to have a fatherland.’³³ Yet the romance had a crucial transnational aspect too, with the work of foreign poets — whether in Russian translation or in the original language — figuring as a

31 Philip Ross Bullock, ‘The Birth of the Soviet Romance from the Spirit of Russian Modernism’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 97.1 (2019), pp. 110–35; Philip Ross Bullock, ‘The Pushkin Anniversary of 1937 and Russian Art Song in the Soviet Union’, *Slavonica*, 13.1 (2007), pp. 39–56.

32 See e.g. the classic Soviet-era studies by Vera Vasina-Grossman, *Russkii klassicheskii romans XIX veka* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1956) and *Mastera sovetskogo romansa*, 2nd edn (Moscow: Muzyka, 1980).

33 Anton Rubinstein, ‘Die Componisten Rußland's’, *Blätter für Musik, Theater und Kunst*, 8 June 1855, pp. 145–46 (p. 145).

significant element in its literary constitution.³⁴ Here, the work of two other unofficial composers — Sofia Gubaidulina and Alfred Schnittke — illustrates how a range of poetry could be used to sustain a musical community that was distinct from the official narrative provided by the state and its institutions.

As a student in her native city of Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, Gubaidulina wrote her first songs to conventional enough texts by classical Russian poets such as Aleksandr Pushkin, Fyodor Tyutchev, and Afanasy Fet, and song figured in her early output at the Moscow Conservatory too. There, she discovered Mikhail Prishvin's prose poem *Phacelia* (*Fatseliya*), extracts of which formed the basis of a six-movement cycle for soprano and orchestra written in 1956 (it also exists in a version for voice and piano, in which form it was published in 1975). Prishvin — who died in 1954 at the age of eighty — was an important figure in the early years of the Thaw, when his lyric descriptions of nature became a model for a new kind of less explicitly ideological literature. The cycle became something of a calling card for Gubaidulina too. She included it in the dossier of compositions she submitted for her final examinations at the Moscow Conservatory in 1959, and again in her application to join the Union of Soviet Composers in 1961. It was performed and even broadcast a number of times, and praised in print in the official journal of the Union of Soviet Composers.³⁵

Thereafter, her musical style became more innovative — and her linguistic choices more diverse and unconstrained by the Russian language. In *Night in Memphis* (*Noch' v Memfise*, 1968), she fashioned a cantata for mezzo-soprano, male chorus, and chamber orchestra out of Ancient Egyptian texts in Russian versions by Anna Akhmatova and Vera Potapova. A year later, she turned to a selection of Persian poets

34 For a collection of essays exploring these themes from a number of literary and musical traditions, see *Song beyond the Nation: Translation, Transnationalism, Performance*, ed. by Philip Ross Bullock and Laura Tunbridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). See too Philip Ross Bullock, 'Song in a Strange Land: The Russian Musical Lyric beyond the Nation', in *Global Russian Cultures*, ed. by Kevin M. F. Platt (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), pp. 290–311.

35 V. Borovskii, 'Otkroite vse okna!', *Sovetskaya muzyka*, 2 (1962), pp. 23–28 (p. 24). On Gubaidulina's early creative biography, see Michael Kurtz, *Sofia Gubaidulina: A Biography*, trans. by Christoph K. Lohmann, ed. by Malcolm Hamrick Brown (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), with comments on the songs on pp. 19, 40–41.

(translated into Russian by Vladimir Derzhavin), which she combined to make another cantata, *Rubaiyat*, for baritone and chamber orchestra. If Prishvin's prose poetry had signalled her sense of affinity with Russia's landscapes and its literary language, then the texts of *Night in Memphis* and *Rubaiyat* constitute more adventurous journeys of the literary and musical imagination. Drawing their inspiration from similar cantatas for voice and chamber ensemble by Volkonsky and Denisov (which themselves paid homage to Boulez and other members of the Western European avant-garde), these scores proved too challenging for Soviet cultural politics. *Night in Memphis* was not heard in Russia until 1989, and it initially fell to musicians from other socialist countries to promote it. It was first recorded and broadcast by Prague Radio in December 1970 (possibly as a symbolic protest at the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968), and received its public premiere in May 1971 in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, where the atmosphere was decidedly more liberal than Brezhnev-era Moscow.³⁶ *Rubaiyat* was rather luckier — it was first heard in Moscow in December 1976.³⁷

In these cantatas, Gubaidulina put clear linguistic and stylistic distance between herself and the legacy of the Russian romance tradition. Thereafter, she seems to have felt freer to return to lyric poetry, although her relationship to its national aspects now became complex and fluid. At some point in the late 1950s, Gubaidulina became aware of Aygi, whose description of the impact of Volkonsky on the underground culture of the Thaw has already been cited. A young Chuvash poet, Aygi was encouraged to write in Russian by Boris Pasternak and soon began to make a name in unofficial literary circles in Moscow, as well as abroad. Aygi's friendship with Pasternak at the time of the *Dr Zhivago* scandal in 1958 meant that his works went unpublished, other than in *samizdat* (i.e. unofficial self-publication designed for a small group of trusted initiates) and *tamizdat* (i.e. unofficial publication outside the Soviet Union). It was, rather, as a literary translator that he made his living.³⁸ His original poetry — which did not appear officially in print until 1987 — was much appreciated by trusted friends and col-

36 Kurtz, *Gubaidulina*, p. 92; Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, pp. 264–66.

37 Kurtz, *Gubaidulina*, pp. 82, 126–28.

38 For a convenient biography of Aygi's life, see Sarah Valentine, *Witness and Transformation: The Poetics of Gennady Aygi* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2015), pp.

leagues, and in the summer of 1972, Gubaidulina set five of his poems to music as a short cycle called *Roses* (*Rozy*), which was premiered on 1 March 1973 at the Moscow Youth Musical Club, one of the most important semi-official venues for the promotion of new music.³⁹

A key aspect of the collaboration between poet and composer is the oblique way through which both of them approached the question of Russianness. Gubaidulina's interest in the work of a Chuvash poet might be seen as analogous to her own hybrid identity as a Russian composer of Tatar origin.⁴⁰ Moreover, Aygi claimed that his fragmented, pointillistic poems had been written under the influence of Webern's music, and two of the poems selected by Gubaidulina carry dedications to Volkonsky and to Char (the poet of Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître*) respectively. *Roses* is a cycle, then, which emerges from an ongoing artistic conversation — a form of creative *obshchenie* — between the European avant-garde and the Soviet underground. Although Aygi and Gubaidulina both suffered from the impact of censorship and restraints on creative freedom that were commonplace in the Soviet Union, they nonetheless managed to create an imagined dialogue that extended beyond the russophone world and incorporated both aspects of the Soviet Union's own internal linguistic and national diversity, and elements of the shared legacy of pan-European modernism.⁴¹

Gubaidulina would develop this interest in song as form of cross-border encounter in a number of settings of the poetry of Francisco Tanzer, whom she met in Moscow in 1979.⁴² Born in Vienna, raised in Budapest, educated in France and the United States, and later resident in Germany, Tanzer was a multilingual, cosmopolitan figure who was rather different from many of the Western visitors to the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s (such as Luigi Nono, whose membership of the Italian Communist Party gave him ready access to Soviet

18–21. See, too, Peter France, 'Introduction', in Gennady Aygi, *Selected Poems, 1954–94*, ed. and trans. by Peter France (London: Angel Books, 1997), pp. 17–27.

39 Kurtz, *Sofia Gubaidulina*, pp. 98–100; Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, pp. 300–02.

40 For a thoughtful treatment of Aygi's relationship to language and nationality, see Valentine, *Witness and Transformation*, pp. 27–54.

41 On Aygi's multilingualism, see Natal'ya Azarova, 'Mnogoyazychie Aigi i yazyki-posredniki', *Russian Literature*, 79–80 (2016), pp. 29–44.

42 Kurtz, *Gubaidulina*, pp. 142–43.

cultural institutions in the post-Stalin era).⁴³ Gubaidulina first used one of Tanzer's texts as a spoken epilogue to her trio for flute, viola, and harp, *The Garden of Joy and Sorrow* (*Sad radosti i pechali*, 1980), and in 1983, she completed *Perception*, a thirteen-movement score for soprano, baritone, and seven string instruments which featured nine texts by Tanzer, as well as a number of quotations from the Psalms.⁴⁴

Given Gubaidulina's interest in questions of translation, deracination, and dislocation, it is striking that she largely avoided the poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva, at least in song. Along with other Russian modernists of the early twentieth century (notably Akhmatova, Pasternak, and Osip Mandelstam), Tsvetaeva's poetry was extensively rediscovered in the post-Stalin period and soon taken up by composers.⁴⁵ The most famous figure to tackle Tsvetaeva's complex and challenging poetry was Shostakovich, who set six of her poems on themes of love, art, power, and posterity for contralto and piano in 1973.⁴⁶ Yet the pre-eminence of this cycle — whether with performers or in scholarship — has tended to overshadow the variety of other musicians who were drawn to her verse, such as the Leningrad composer Boris Tishchenko, whose Second Symphony (1964) for chorus and large orchestra is explicitly called *Marina*, and who followed this with a short cycle of three songs in 1970. Tsvetaeva's poetry even found its way into the variety repertory (what is called *estrada* in Russian), as exemplified by the popular *chansonnière* Alla Pugacheva.

43 On Nono's impact on the world of unofficial Soviet music, see Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, pp. 45–46, 62–64.

44 Kurtz, *Gubaidulina*, pp. 152, 172–73. *The Garden of Joy and Sorrow* itself attests to Gubaidulina's markedly syncretic interests when it comes to questions of culture, national identity, and belonging. It arose as a result of her reading both of Tanzer and of Ivan Oganov's *Revelation of the Rose* (*Otkrovenie rozy*), a historical novel based on 'the turbulent life of Sayat-Nova, an Armenian lyric poet and folk singer of the eighteenth century who later became a monk'. As Gubaidulina recalled, her composition conveyed 'the impression of two poetic worlds that had coalesced within me into the unified image of an Eastern garden where everything lives in stillness and pain of Francisco Tanzer's Western poems. Thus the opposing elemental essences of East and West quite naturally became one in me' (quoted in Kurtz, *Gubaidulina*, pp. 150–51).

45 For a bibliography of musical settings of all four poets, see Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandel'shtam i Boris Pasternak v muzyke: *Notografiya*, ed. by Boris Rozenfel'd (Stanford, CA: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Stanford University, 2003), especially pp. 64–102.

46 Christopher W. Lemelin, 'To Name or Not to Name: The Question of Shostakovich's Interpretation of Tsvetaeva', *Musical Quarterly*, 93.2 (2010), pp. 234–61.

In many ways, Gubaidulina felt a profound affinity with aspects of Tsvetaeva's life and work. It was, she believed, 'a quirk of fate' that she had been born in Chistopol, not far from Elabuga, where Tsvetaeva took her own life in 1941.⁴⁷ Not only was Tsvetaeva one of the greatest Russian modernists; she was also a perpetual outsider, whether as an émigré in interwar Prague and Paris, or as one of the few émigrés to have returned to the Soviet Union. As indebted to German romanticism as she was devoted to Pushkin, she saw all poets — at least great ones — as outcasts. As she provocatively claimed in her narrative poem *The Poem of the End* (*Poema kontsa*): 'In this most Christian of worlds, | Poets are Jews!' (*V sem khristianneishem iz mirov | Poety — zhidy!*).⁴⁸ Yet, despite such potential affinities, Gubaidulina avoided setting her poetry as song. Instead, that task fell to her close contemporary Schnittke, who — as his name suggests — was partly of German and German-Jewish origin, and whose family lived in Austria in the 1940s. As a student at the Moscow Conservatory in the 1950s, Schnittke had composed conventional enough romances to poems by Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tyutchev.⁴⁹ Yet, in an interview, he claimed to prefer 'Rilke, Trakl, or Baudelaire' — hardly figures central to Soviet cultural politics, even during the Thaw.⁵⁰ In 1965, at a time when he was most fascinated by the possibility of the serial technique of composition, Schnittke wrote his *Three Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva* (*Tri stikhotvoreniya Mariny Tsvetaevoy*), a figure who might come closer to his interest in those poets (Tsvetaeva, along with Pasternak, partook in an intensive correspondence with Rilke in 1926).⁵¹

In an interview with Enzo Restagno, Gubaidulina suggested that part of Tsvetaeva's attraction for Schnittke — who was born in the

47 Quoted in Kurtz, *Gubaidulina*, p. 6.

48 Characteristically, Tsvetaeva prefers the offensive term *zhid* to the more neutral *evrei*. Marina Tsvetaeva, 'Poema kontsa', in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 7 vols (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1994–95), III (1994), pp. 31–50 (p. 48).

49 For a discussion of Schnittke's vocal works, see Gavin Dixon, *The Routledge Handbook to the Music of Alfred Schnittke* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), pp. 90–101.

50 Alfred Schnittke, *A Schnittke Reader*, ed. by Alexander Ivashkin, trans. by John Goodliffe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 19.

51 Rainer Maria Rilke, Marina Zwetajewa, and Boris Pasternak, *Briefwechsel*, ed. by Jewgenij Pasternak, Jelena Pasternak, and Konstantin M. Asadowskij (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag, 1983).

Volga German capital of Engels — was the fact that she was ‘a poet who also had two souls, a Russian one and a German one’. To this, Gubaidulina added a third component — Schnittke’s Jewish origins, which, she argued, could synthesize the ‘opposing elements’ of his character.⁵² Schnittke himself was profoundly aware of his ambiguous relationship to the boundaries imposed by language and culture. After his emigration to West Germany in 1990, he confessed to a friend:

I understand that there is no home for me on Earth. In Russia I am either a Jew or a German. Arriving in Germany, even there I begin to feel that something separates me from Germans. Three things separate me: I come from Russia, I am a Jew who doesn’t know Hebrew, I was born in a German region, but in the USSR. There [in Germany] I am a Russian composer.⁵³

It is important not to overstate, exoticize, or essentialize the question of Schnittke’s national identity (or, for that matter, Gubaidulina’s), yet it is interesting to note how drawn both of them were to poets who resist easy categorization along national lines. Just as Gubaidulina had explored the poetry of Aygi and Tanzer (not to mention Russian translations of Ancient Egyptian and Persian texts), so too did Schnittke turn to non-Russian verses as a means of questioning the implicit nationalism of the Russian song tradition. His tangential relationship to that tradition can be seen in his decision, in 1988, to set three German-language texts by his brother Viktor, a German translator and noted figure in the Volga German community to which the Schnittke family belonged. Before that, in 1980, he had paid homage to Gubaidulina herself in his *Three Madrigals* (*Tri madrigala*), with words by the very same poet — Tanzer — to whom she was so frequently drawn. Schnittke’s selection is strikingly transnational in its linguistic and musical identity. The first poem is a setting of Tanzer’s original French text, ‘Sur une étoile’, followed by ‘Entfernung’ (in German) and ‘Reflection’ (in English). Each song reflects aspects of its respective musical culture

52 Enzo Restagno, ‘Un’autobiografia dell’autore raccontata da Enzo Restagno’, in *Gubaidulina*, ed. by Enzo Restagno (Turin: EDT, 1991), pp. 3–91 (p. 28).

53 Quoted in Schmelz, *Sonic Overload*, p. 290.

(‘an old French chanson’, ‘a Viennese alpine trait’, ‘the euphony of a spiritual’).⁵⁴

Driven underground by censorship, sidelined by personal rivalries, and resistant to the stylistic demands of socialist realism, Gubaidulina and Schnittke employ heterogeneous literary texts as a means of escaping the limitations placed on them by Soviet cultural politics. Both composers found ways of addressing their marginalized position within official Soviet culture by embarking on a wide-ranging series of hybrid literary and musical encounters with a range of non-Russian poets, or with Russian poets whose linguistic and cultural practices resist straightforward understanding along narrow national lines. As Schnittke himself argued: ‘Cultural boundaries must not be preserved. The idea is inadmissible. I regard as grossly mistaken all those attempts that have been made to preserve them throughout many centuries and decades, especially in the last hundred and twenty or thirty years.’⁵⁵ For Gubaidulina and Schnittke, a sense of belonging to a wider community of writers and composers was an important reaction in dealing with their own uncertain place in late Soviet musical culture.

Moreover, song itself — so long associated with the intimacy of the salon and the world of chamber music — proved itself to be the ideal genre for a celebration of artistic friendship and creative collegiately, especially when the official structures of state life excluded the unofficial composers from full participation in the Soviet musical institutions.⁵⁶ To judge by commercial recordings and the scholarly literature, Schnittke and Gubaidulina are more often associated with vast and ambitious scores — three operas, nine symphonies, and a large number of concertos in the case of the former, a heterogeneous series of syncretic spiritual works for chorus and orchestra in the case

54 Dixon, *Handbook*, p. 94. The importance of Tanzer — whether as a poet or as a marker of shared friendship and artistic values — also extended to Denisov, who set five of his poems from the collection *Blätter* for soprano and string trio in 1978, as well as including his verses in his *Requiem* (1982).

55 Schnittke, *Reader*, pp. 19–20.

56 For a study of Valentyn Syl’vestrov’s song cycle *Quiet Songs* (*Tikhie pesni*, 1974–77) that emphasizes its handling of artistic friendship and cultural intimacy, as well as its reflective relationship to Russian nationalism, see Philip Ross Bullock, ‘Intimacy and Distance: Valentin Sil’vestrov’s *Tikhie pesni*’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 92.3 (2014), pp. 401–29.

of the latter. Yet each composer also turned to the concision, precision, privacy, and even subjectivity of the lyric at key moments in their creative lives in order to engage in a form of dialogue — or *obshchenie*, to return to the term proposed by Yurchak at the start of this chapter — that emerged from the unofficial artistic venues they inhabited, as well as aspiring to a relationship with their European contemporaries that was no less forceful for being a largely imaginary one. The stories told here remind us that histories of literary and musical genres that exclude questions of translation and otherness tell us only part of the story. The underground was always elsewhere.

Philip Ross Bullock, 'The Transnational Lyric Community of Soviet Unofficial Music under Late Socialism', in *Rethinking Lyric Communities*, ed. by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti, *Cultural Inquiry*, 30 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 113–33 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-30_05>

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