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How to Stage Soviet Operas in the 21st Century: Navigating Russian Music Heritage amidst Revival and Boycott

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In the midst of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the discussion on "Soviet" operas abroad acquired a new dimension. The parallel occurrences of boycotting Russian music and the resurgence of Soviet Russian music provoke questions about the power music embodies, while also challenging the notion of music as detached from the current political turmoil. This paper frames the complex persona of Sergey Prokofiev and his two "Soviet" operas within the context of the recent resurgence of Soviet operatic productions in Russia.

▪ **Keywords**: opera, Sergey Prokofiev, Stalinism, music heritage, 21st century

Med rusko-ukrajinsko vojno je razpravljanje o »sovjetski« operi zunaj Rusije dobilo nove razsežnosti. Vzporedno pojavljanje bojkota ruske glasbe in ponovni vzpon sovjetske ruske glasbe sprožata vprašanja o moči, ki jo glasba uteleša, hkrati pa spodbijata pojmovanje glasbe kot ločene od političnih dogajanj. Članek uokvirja kompleksno osebnost Sergeja Prokofjeva in njegovih dveh »sovjetskih« oper v kontekstu nedavne ponovne oživitve sovjetske operne produkcije v Rusiji.

▪ **Ključne besede**: opera, Sergej Prokofjev, stalinizem, glasbena dediščina, 21. stoletje

Introduction

When discussing music in the context of heritage and tradition, the first thing that comes to mind is folk music, perceived as a genuine and accessible collective effort passed down from one generation to another. Therefore, Western classical or academic music is often not the primary consideration when reflecting on heritage and tradition. Nonetheless, the pervasive influence of classical music in shaping national and local identities is omnipresent, embodied, for instance, in edibles such as Mozartkugeln offered to delighted tourists in Salzburg, or in the romanticized image of Venetian gondoliers serenading with Italian operatic arias. Similarly, in Russia, the grandeur of classical music, particularly large-scale scenic forms such as opera and ballet, is a crucial element of the imperial legacy that continues to thrive on stages in Russia and abroad, symbolizing Russian culture in both local and global contexts. Acknowledging the truth of the previous claim, exploring classical music heritage is essential, or at least thought-provoking, as it provides a key to understanding the broader picture of Russian cultural heritage and its role in contemporary contexts. Moreso, in current times, the Russian heritage of the past has unveiled its unbreakable connection with the present in a very tangible way. Namely, the current Russian aggression in Ukraine has sparked an uncommon public debate on Russian musical heritage at the global level.

We find ourselves in a peculiar time when classical music, often viewed as a relic, an anachronistic marvel accessible to a limited population, has suddenly become part of a broader political discussion.

Given that the scope of this highly intricate topic exceeds the limits of a journal paper, the research coordinates were positioned with great precision. To effectively address the broad and complex issues related to *what* and *why* enters the process of heritagization, the decision was made to focus on a single artistic figure as a starting point for a more extensive discussion. The composer in question is Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953), and the focus is not on any of his music but specifically on his two Soviet operas,[1] *Semyon Kotko* (1940), which portrays the Civil War (1917–1923) in a Ukrainian village, and *The Story of a Real Man* (*Povest' o nastoyashchem cheloveke*, 1948), based on the story of a real-life Soviet hero, Aleksey Mares'yev (1916-2001), during World War II. Despite some scholars declaring the demise of opera and viewing it as detached from any contemporary relevance, many are nevertheless opposed to such statements – such voices include literary and cultural studies scholar Herbert Lindenberger (2010), and also cultural anthropologist and opera studies scholar Vlado Kotnik who contends that, in modern times, "the machinery of opera is not only being kept alive, […] but it is also growing steadily", concluding that "the opera system is becoming larger and more complex than during its supposed heyday" (Kotnik, 2016: 105).

As early as the 1920s, opera began to be recognized as fertile ground for propagating Soviet ideology (Tarakanov, 2005). This led to the genre's significant transformation in what musicologists now refer to as the Soviet or Stalinist opera project of the 1930s (see Bullock, 2006; Frolova-Walker, 2006; Vlasova, 2017; Seinen, 2019). Suddenly, the criteria for evaluating art began to operate under entirely different norms, and operatic authors assumed a dual role, functioning as both artists and ideologists simultaneously. Of course, the connection between opera and politics/state was well-established since the genre's early days, and extends beyond the case of the Soviet/Stalinist opera project and its purported current revival. Political and opera studies scholar Mitchell Cohen dedicates his relatively recent monograph to the "political operas", describing them as those that "address politics and political ideas directly or indirectly; or that harbour important political implications; or that say or suggest something important about the politics of the times in which they were written (and sometimes about our own times – or apparently so)" (Cohen, 2017: xiii). However, what happens when the political operas in question address political ideas rather explicitly? Furthermore, and echoing the latter part of Cohen's statement, what do these operas reveal about their own times, and more importantly, about our own?

[1] In the context of this paper, "Soviet opera" refers not only to operas composed during the Soviet era and within Soviet territory, but more specifically, it pertains to operas that encapsulate the Soviet grand narrative, subjectivity, and historicity. In essence these operas revolve around Soviet topics and subjects.

The aim of this paper, anchored in the fields of critical heritage and opera studies, is to address the ambiguous status of Soviet operas with Soviet themes in the 21st century, particularly in Russia. More specifically, it explores the circumstances under which the operas originally designed to reinforce Soviet mythology and support the construction of a new Soviet historical narrative are performed in contemporary times. The central part of this study, formulated as a case study of Prokofiev's Soviet operas and their contemporary afterlives, employs thematic analysis of data obtained from newspaper articles, music criticism, and interviews following recent stagings of the operas. This approach was chosen to gain firsthand perspectives and insights into the overarching question of this study. The collected data, situated within the context of multiple ongoing academic debates, aims to elucidate whether these operas, in light of current circumstances, can ever be considered merely as artistic relics; given their complex political and ideological implications, and their incorporation into the contemporary cultural landscape aligning with current aggressive Russian foreign policies.

Russian aggression and art in current times

In the midst of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, the question of performing Russian music has become a highly contentious and provocative issue. The often conflicting viewpoints and the difficulty in considering nuances when addressing specific cases make it challenging to establish a uniform approach for the global musical community. The banning of Russian composers and performers began spreading rapidly following the fateful events of February 2022 and continues at the time of writing this text. For example, the 2nd Karol Szymanowski International Competition in Katowice banned the performance of Russian composers, citing "current sensitivities in Poland to Russian culture" and as "a gesture of solidarity with the Ukrainian people" as reasons (Salazar, 2023). Ukraine's former Minister of Culture, Oleksandr Tkachenko, called for a boycott of Russian culture, including Tchaikovsky, which sparked a range of opposing opinions in the West. Many argued that classical music transcends the realm of aggressive politics and should be exempted (The Guardian, 2022). Furthermore, Tchaikovsky faced another ban, this time by the Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra (Quinn, 2022). On the other hand, La Scala's decision to open a new season in December 2022 with Modest Musorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* stirred strong opinions and even led to protests on the opening night (Bianco, 2023). In Berlin, Russian soprano Anna Netrebko's return to the Berlin State Opera stage also prompted protests (Jordan, 2023). Conversely, the Vienna State Opera firmly supported its Russian artists and did not respond to demands for their ban (The Violin Channel, 2022).

In defending the decision to perform Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, Serge Dorny, the general director of the Bayerische Staatsoper, adeptly addresses the core query echoing

through the musical world. He begins by acknowledging the polarizing nature of the issue while also highlighting the peril inherent in this cultural witch hunt:

> Would it not be absurd to banish the entirety of Russian music, the entirety of Russian culture from our halls? Of course, the dilemma is evident: If we play Russian music, we support Putin's propaganda, say some. If we do not play Russian music, we confirm the image of the Russophobic West and therefore also support Putin's propaganda, say others. We could simply replace Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev and their peers, as the repertoire would still be extensive enough – with Strauss, Wagner, Puccini, it would not, however, necessarily be any more straightforward. Because questions also remain with these composers as well. If we set strict standards, we will soon have to remove more from our programmes than we would like to. (Dorny, 2023)

These are just a few recent examples, yet they vividly illustrate the emergence of a fervent debate, one that remains without a definitive resolution. German musicologist Christoph Flamm, specializing in Russian and Soviet music among other fields, provides a comprehensive overview of the ongoing boycott of Russian music. He contextualizes this movement within the backdrop of 20th-century European political upheavals and numerous other cultural bans. Flamm cautions against a blanket approach to boycotting Russian music and advocates for a critical assessment when determining what warrants a boycott and for what reasons (Flamm, 2022: 352). Moreover, while Flamm emphasizes that many of the composers facing boycott have no direct relevance to our contemporary times or to Putin's Russia, he nevertheless acknowledges the existence of compositions that align with and bolster Russian imperialistic, chauvinistic, and militant tendencies (ibid.: 353). As stated in his concluding remark:

> To say that music is fundamentally unrelated to politics is not only naive; it is objectively false. In this regard, a boycott of certain works for moral reasons can be absolutely justified, and it contributes to a much-needed reflection on the layers of meaning in such pieces, which should also be treated as a problematic cultural heritage even in times of peace. (ibid.)

In a separate study, Flamm delves deeper into the enduring European tradition of depicting political and military aggression through music, cautioning that "[s]ometimes art reveals its ugly side: a twisted grimace of xenophobia and chauvinism" (Flamm, 2021: 22). Moreover, he advocates for the role of musicology in unearthing concealed or overlooked contexts and subtexts. This, he argues, serves as a vital means against indulging in an uninformed appreciation of pieces tainted by sentiments of hatred and aggression (ibid.: 21).

If we adhere to Flamm's proposed framework, then Soviet Russian music, and opera in particular, should be approached with meticulous consideration. It is impossible to ignore the fact that Soviet operas, particularly the ones dealing with Soviet topicality and subjectivity served to perpetuate the Soviet mythology on the stage, are unambiguously permeated by ideology, and reflect Soviet militant and aggressive politics. In an era where even figures like Tchaikovsky and Glinka are subjected to scrutiny, one cannot help but hold Soviet composers to an even higher critical standard. In her poignant article, musicologist Marina Frolova-Walker, being well aware of the new Cold War emerging in front of our eyes, advocates for forging an inclusive music history, amalgamating the parallel history of the Soviet bloc into a unified historical canon. However, when juxtaposed with the question of performance, especially of the operas, the task of creating an inclusive music history appears notably less daunting. Because indeed, writing history is one thing – but perpetuating history on the stage for a wide audience is a very hard-to-overlook endeavour. Furthermore, Frolova-Walker, while not in any way condoning Russian aggression towards Ukraine, acknowledges the controversies surrounding Russia and the USSR in contemporary academia. She observes: "We see also a certain *Denkverbot*, where particular shades of debate become taboo and anyone who deviates from the standard description of Russia as 'the evil empire' becomes a 'Russia apologist' or 'Putin's useful idiot'" (Frolova-Walker, 2018: 16).

Indirectly, Flamm drew a line between music disconnected from our contemporary era and that which might carry some relevance to it. The inquiry arises: What relevance does Soviet music hold in our current times? While Prokofiev and several other Soviet composers may no longer be alive, and though the tradition of music depicting wars is a widespread European convention, is the Soviet Union truly just an entity of the past, a remnant entirely disconnected from our contemporaneity? This is a complex query requiring a multifaceted approach that extends beyond the boundaries of musicology. Notably, contemporary Russia's drive towards (re-)Stalinization and the strategic manipulation of historical memories from the Stalinist era have been extensively explored within scholarly circles (see Lipman, 2013; Kolesnikov, 2015; Khapaeva, 2016) even before the momentous events of February 2022. Considering this context, can the apparent resurgence of the Soviet operatic repertoire on Russian stages be seen as surprising? Can its symptomatic nature be disregarded?

To succinctly summarize the thoughts and discussions presented thus far, three primary critical lenses emerge for assessing the "appropriateness" of certain Soviet operas resurfacing in contemporary times. The first lens is the historical-political context, encompassing both the original and the contemporary milieu; the second pertains to the operatic narrative or theme; and the third revolves around the individual, specifically the composer. While there might be simpler examples to apply to this matrix, the deliberate choice here is Sergey Prokofiev and his body of work. Prokofiev's case demonstrates the inherent challenge of determining which compositions and creators

should be included in the canon, and under what circumstances, more vividly than any other Soviet composer. This paper does not delve into Prokofiev's ballets and operas that have already entrenched themselves in the global canon, nor those lacking a discernible and vivid connection to the totalitarian regime of their time.[2] Instead, its focus lies in exploring the contemporary fate of Prokofiev's two operas on a Soviet topic: *Semyon Kotko* (1940) and *The Story of a Real Man* (1948). Through an examination of these works and their recent revival, the following segment of this paper seeks to unravel the intricate web of associations evoked by these operatic resurrections. Additionally, it aims to illuminate insights into Prokofiev's artistic persona, Russia's current assertive politics, the role of art in the 21st century, and the nuanced treatment of difficult legacies in general.

Prokofiev on the margins

While Sergey Prokofiev is undeniably one of the most celebrated composers of the 20th century and requires no formal introduction, his artistic persona and his association with the Soviet Union and Stalinism warrant a fresh examination, which is indeed receiving attention in current times. In his work, musicologist Richard Taruskin portrays Prokofiev as a tragic figure, a victim of the Stalinist regime. He draws comparisons between Prokofiev and Mozart (Taruskin, 2020: 450), even asserting Prokofiev as the sole 20th-century composer to achieve household name recognition (ibid.: 466). However, despite this sympathetic portrayal, Taruskin also acknowledges the moral complexity inherent in Prokofiev's body of work, dissecting the dilemmas it presents to contemporary audiences. Detailing Prokofiev's challenging political circumstances and the profound impact of the regime's constraints on both his artistic output and personal life, Taruskin ultimately arrives at the conclusion:

> But if we accept the proposition that the drama of Prokofiev's life was an authentic tragedy, does that mean that it transcends moral issues? I certainly do not think so. There are many moral implications that complicate the story far beyond the rather simplistic tale I've been telling of wrong turns and dire consequences. […] Our relationship to his music is fraught willy-nilly with moral implications – our problems, not his. (ibid.: 465)

[2] For instance, prime examples are his ballets *Romeo and Juliet*, premiered in 1940, and *Cinderella*, first showcased in 1945. While these pieces were influenced by the prevailing Soviet cultural and artistic policies of the time, they do not vividly reflect the predominant ideology and artistic doctrine, unlike his two operas centred on Soviet themes, which will be further explored within the context of this text.

Moreover, Taruskin devotes particular attention to Prokofiev's music created due to his Soviet commitments and compositions intended to glorify Stalin and the regime (ibid.: 467–468). While Taruskin condemns these compositions as "objectionable", he also acknowledges the fluidity and continuous negotiation inherent in determining the onset of objectionability (ibid.: 469). Simultaneously, he recognizes that Prokofiev was not the sole composer to craft works in homage to a patron and that such agreements echo throughout the annals of European musical history (ibid.: 470). Nevertheless, akin to Flamm, Taruskin introduces the element of contemporary influence as a criterion into this discourse:

> Unless we are historians, we don't know the Protestants who faced persecution under Louis XIV or the conscripts who died for the sake of his vanity. But Stalin's victims or, rather, those who mourn them are still among us. It is in part for their sake that I object to hearing Stalin praised from the stage of Carnegie Hall, and in particular to see comfortable and oblivious people cheering at the end of a panegyric to a butcher because Prokofiev has provided it with such a nice package. (ibid.: 471)

Within the landscape of Soviet composers during Stalin's era, Prokofiev stands out as a rare figure who transcends the prevailing mediocrity. His undeniable talent and enduring legacy in music history, coupled with the mythologized tragedy he endured under the Stalinist regime, can easily lead one to overlook certain aspects of his body of work that might be considered morally and ideologically unsuitable in today's context. Moreover, Prokofiev's identity exists on the margins, or better yet, borders: he embodies both the "Soviet" while also being rehabilitated from his "Soviet affiliation" within the grand scale of time and history. He represents the national and imperial as much as the European, global, and universal. However, Prokofiev's marginality and the ambiguous nature of his Soviet identity can easily be used as justification for an uncritical approach to performing his unequivocally Soviet compositions. To delve deeper, while the two operas under examination in this paper reflect Stalinist ideals of hegemonic masculinity and militarism, the romanticized story of Prokofiev's life makes us believe that he composed these not out of a deep belief in the system, but rather almost under duress. How does one reconcile these contrasting elements? And if we were to come to terms with the idea that they might be irreconcilable, how can we approach performing Prokofiev's works in the 21st century? Recent revivals of Soviet operas, including Prokofiev's two operas on Soviet topics, demonstrate that both classical music and Soviet-era music in particular bear a weighty political significance far beyond what might be expected from an art form seemingly shielded by the veil of purity, transcending the petty and often violent politics simmering in the distant background.

The cases of Prokofiev's two Soviet operas

Semyon Kotko, Prokofiev's first opera centring on a Soviet narrative, although relatively overlooked compared to some of his other theatrical works, maintains a relatively enduring tradition of performance both in the Soviet Union and Russia. Premiered in 1940, the opera portrays the eponymous protagonist's return from the front to his village, only to confront the post-war revolutionary turmoil, where local detractors of the regime and the remaining German troops clash against the Bolsheviks. Unlike another contemporary opera, Tikhon Khrennikov's 1939 *V buryu* (*Into the Storm*), which prominently features Lenin on stage, the "Soviet" affiliation of *Semyon Kotko* is primarily discernible through its thematic overtones, embodied in the conflict between military forces preserving and challenging the newly established socialist rule. As asserted by musicologist Nathan Seinen, Prokofiev aimed to create an opera free from propaganda, committed to the "timeless values of music and drama" (Seinen, 2019: 23). Direct references to the Soviet regime are, thus, relatively scarce: for instance, upon his return, Semyon informs the local villagers about the current political situation and the activities of the Soviet authorities; the establishment of Soviet rule in the village is implied through the presence of a village Soviet, chaired by Semyon's comrade Remenyuk. Yet, despite Prokofiev's aspiration, the opera nevertheless remains inextricably linked to the Soviet context, reflecting the prevailing ideology and contributing to the construction of the Soviet origin myth.

Notably, a revival staged in the Mariinsky Theatre in 1999 by director Yury Aleksandrov still enjoys regular performances in St. Petersburg and numerous other Russian cities. Intriguingly, the opera's resurgence was unexpectedly unrelated to any particular political anniversary or jubilee; rather, as reported by musicologist Iosif Rayskin, it emerged as an autonomous homage to the Russian 20th century (Rayskin, 2014: 56). As elucidated by the director himself, and recounted by Rayskin:

> History is neither good nor bad – it is our history. It is a story of brothers rising against brothers, daughters betraying fathers, of Russian people losing their homeland in the bloody turmoil of the Civil War […]. Somebody, Aleksandrov recalled, suggested changing the text of "Long live Lenin!" and so on. We rejected that idea because it is our chronicle, our Richard III. (ibid.)

The production design by Semyon Pastukh and costume design by Galina Solov'yova are still in use as of 2023.[3] The brutalist metallic hammer and sickle positioned

[3] The images showcasing the set and costume designs are available for viewing at the following link: Mariinsky Theatre. URL: https://www.mariinsky.ru/playbill/repertoire/opera/kotko (accessed 2.11.2023).

at the centre-back of the stage, accompanied by red flags bearing the same symbol, along with three imposing figures of hanged communists, are now perhaps even more menacing than they were in 1999. However, opinions differ on the use of communist iconography on the stage. Scottish music critic Gregor Tassie, for instance, does not perceive a particular problem with it, remarking: "The scenes with red flags are no more disturbing than many operas of the last two hundred years which have political themes present" (Tassie, 2021).

Conversely, the first-ever performance of *Semyon Kotko* by a non-Russian orchestra and choir occurred in Amsterdam in 2016. Russian conductor Vladimir Jurowski presented to the audience a concert rendition of Prokofiev's opera, coupled with a politically-aware approach to the performance, acknowledging the ongoing turmoil in Ukraine. Jurowski concluded the performance by repeating Taras Shevchenko's poem *Testament* (*Zapovit*) in Ukrainian language, which, translated to Russian, originally appears in the 4th act of the partiture (see Prokofiev, 1960). This choice, as described by a certain music critic, resulted in "a deeply moving result. The lady next to me could not contain her tears" (Pinedo, 2016). Specifically, as outlined in the program notes, Jurowski contextualized his decision to repeat the poem as "a personal dedication to ALL people populating today's Ukraine and Crimea" (Camilleri, 2016).

In contrast to *Semyon Kotko*, Prokofiev's final opera, *The Story of a Real Man*, faced a markedly different fate. Premiering in front of a closed audience, it met immediate dismissal, receiving only sporadic performances over the years and failing to establish itself as an integral piece within the Soviet or Russian repertoire. The opera depicts the extraordinary story of Soviet aviation hero and double amputee Aleksey Mares'yev during WWII, tracing his metamorphosis toward becoming the Soviet "real man". As if his "initial form" wasn't already remarkable, Aleksey loses both of his legs in a plane crash, is transferred to Moscow where he receives prosthetic legs, learns to walk again, and ultimately returns to combat. Aleksey, being a symbol of ideal Stalinist masculinity, and the opera itself, even more ideologically potent than previously mentioned *Semyon Kotko*, appeared excessively ideologically charged for Western performance. Additionally, its perceived lack of artistic depth prevented audiences from overlooking its overt ideological connotations, as perhaps occurs in the case of *Semyon Kotko*. Consequently, the opera never graced Western stages. Yet, its reception in Russia had not markedly differ until quite recently. In recent decades, the concert version of the opera was staged in 2002 in Mariinsky Theatre under the baton of Valery Gergiyev.[4] Interestingly, Gergiyev is an avid supporter of Vladimir Putin and was recently dubbed "Russia's most powerful classical musician" (Ross, 2022). Furthermore, in 2005, albeit in fragmented form, the opera was performed in the Saratov Opera and Ballet Theatre,

[4] More information on performances of the opera in Mariinsky Theatre can be found on the following link: Mariinsky Theatre. URL: https://www.mariinsky.ru/about/exhibitions/prokofiev125/povest_1948 (accessed 2.11.2023).

directed by Andrey Sergeyev and conducted by Yury Kochnev,[5] commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Soviet WWII victory (Kovalevsky, 2005). However, the opera was staged in its full version for the first time in 2015 in Vladivostok at the Primorsky Stage of Mariinsky Theatre.[6] It was directed by Irkin Gabitov and conducted by Anton Lubchenko as part of the Na Strazhe Mira festival,[7] celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Soviet WWII triumph. As elaborated by Vladimir Moroz, who sang the main role:

> It is impossible to imagine a more noble theme for an artist than the defence of the homeland. We all live thanks to our grandfathers and great-grandfathers. And throughout life, we must carry our gratitude to them for this feat. We have something to be proud of, something to tell our children. This opera is another tribute to the heroes who defended the homeland from invaders. (Sholik, 2015)

The 2015 performance of the opera abounds in melodramatic patriotic references and distressing visual imagery. It is difficult to remain indifferent to scenes where Aleksey, injured, crawls through a pile of lifeless frozen bodies, or when he, frightened and psychologically tormented, pleads with doctors for mercy during the amputation.[8] Prokofiev's portrayal of masculinity, or the ideal "real man" that Aleksey strives toward becoming, is characterized by superhuman resilience, indomitable will, and ultimate sacrifice in the fulfilment of one's duty. The opera's didactic nature, educating the audience in correct performance of both masculinity and patriotism, has not diminished in contemporary revivals; rather, the political backdrop against which this operatic revival is positioned reinforces the message even more strongly. I interpret this performance as a deliberate effort to draw on historical legacies to legitimize and motivate current military endeavours, thus creating a bridge between past sacrifices and present undertakings.

According to a certain journalist's review after the premiere, Prokofiev's opera is "highly relevant because it is essential to introduce the young generation to our Russian heroes", but also that "[w]e are duty-bound to tell the youth about individuals like Mares'yev, as it is crucial to instil a love for one's country" (Neshchedrin, 2015). Additionally, another journalist emphasizes the pressing need to bolster patriotic

[5] Although information about this performance taking place can be found on the theatre's website (see Saratov Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre. URL: https://www.operabalet.ru/playbill/?y=2005&m=12&d=6, accessed 2.11.2023), more information can be found in various news articles found online. See, for instance, Kovalevsky (2005).

[6] Until 2016 known as Primorsky Opera and Ballet Theatre.

[7] In English "On Guard of Peace".

[8] The whole performance can be watched on YouTube, see: @Anton Lubchenko. 2020. S. Prokof'yev. *Povest'o nastoyashchem cheloveke*. Primorskiy teatr operï i baleta, A. Lubchenko. YouTube, 18 November, duration 2:11:21. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cr4o75y41CI (accessed 20.7.2024).

sentiments within contemporary Russian society, highlighting the immense ideological potential inherent in the operatic genre:

> Strengthening the patriotic dimension in the public life of our country requires a corresponding artistic representation. […] Opera as an art form is much more conservative and upholds the ideological front with compositions created during the era of the great Soviet style, which in recent decades have fallen into undeserved oblivion. (Khaknazarov, 2015)

In an interview, Gabitov explained his motivation to pursue staging of this almost forgotten opera by Prokofiev. He articulated his aspiration to work on Prokofiev's three war operas, *Semyon Kotko*, *War and Peace*, and *The Story of a Real Man*, as follows: "Completely different wars, but everywhere there is the Russian person, the Russian spirit, Russian culture, and Russian national worldviews as they have been formed over two to three hundred years". When prompted to elaborate on the meaning of the "national worldview", Gabitov explained: "It is love for the Motherland, it is selflessness, it is self-sacrifice. That's what Prokofiev's last opera and its hero, pilot Aleksey Mares'yev, are all about." Responding to why this opera now, Gabitov added: "To know that one can live a second life, return to duty, even if misfortune has shattered you! What it takes is to be a person with inner strength! A real person! Russian!" (Zhzhenova, 2015).

However, the celebration of the 70th jubilee extended beyond the staging of Prokofiev's *The Story of a Real Man*. Gabitov also staged Kirill Molchanov's *Zori zdes' tikhiye* (*The Dawns Here are Quiet*) at the Tsaritsyn Opera Theatre in Volgograd.[9] Molchanov's opera was also performed in a concert version at the Mariinsky Theatre, conducted by Zaurbek Gugkayev.[10] Notably, this opera continues to be performed, firmly establishing itself within the repertoire. Recently, in January 2023, it was performed in a concert version to commemorate the Day of Full Leningrad Liberation from the Siege of Nazi Troops.[11] Another interesting case is *Krïm* (*Crimea*), inspired by Marian Koval's opera *Sevastopol'tsï* (*People of Sevastopol*), directed by Yury Aleksandrov and staged in fateful 2014.[12] This production is presented in an unusual genre described by the director as an "opera-rally". While preserving the music, Aleksandrov completely reworked the score, dividing the narrative into three temporal layers: the Crimean War, World War II, and the present day, integrating contemporary events in Ukraine (see Vol'gust, 2014).

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[9] See Tsaritsyn Opera. URL: https://www.tzaropera.ru/repertoire/opera/24-a-zori-zdes-tikhie (accessed 2.11.2023).

[10] See Mariinsky Theatre. URL: https://www.mariinsky.ru/playbill/playbill/2015/2/8/3_1900 (accessed 2.11.2023).

[11] Mariinsky Theatre. URL: https://www.mariinsky.ru/playbill/playbill/2023/1/27/3_1900 (accessed 2.11.2023).

[12] More on Yury Aleksandrov's artistic biography can be read on the following link: St. Petersburg Opera. URL: https://www.spbopera.ru/en/troupe/yuriy-aleksandrov (accessed 2.11.2023).

Aleksandrov conceived the idea amid the turmoil in Ukraine, emphasizing that the performance entry would be free, asserting that "you can't sell tickets for a rally" (Tsinkler, 2015). Aleksandrov also staged Yuly Meytus's *Molodaya gvardiya* (*The Young Guard*),[13] premiered in 2016, and Vano Muradeli's *Oktyabr': 17-ogo* (*October the 17th*) in 2017 to commemorate 100 years since the Revolution.[14]

What these operatic revivals are reinforcing are, first of all, the continuous mythologisation of the Soviet/Stalinist past, second of all, the revival of that same past, and third of all, the continuity with it. In earlier work, Kotnik asserts that opera functions as "an interpellation system, which transforms myth into reality, art into spectacularity, and society into rituality", and it is capable of "dispersion of modern mythology in relation to society" (Kotnik, 2004: 335). Namely, Kotnik acknowledges opera's universal mythological and mythologizing potential, asserting that even when reflecting contemporary themes, operas retain a degree of "mythical" quality, noting how the audiences perpetually participate "in operistic reanimation of this 'mythical context'" (Kotnik, 2004: 325). Naturally, the cosmogonic myth, in case of Soviet opera, is not set in a distant and hazy ahistoric realm, but in 1917, while the myths of heroes, instead of figures such as Hercules or Prometheus, oftentimes follow real-life heroes of the regimes. Indeed, in Soviet narratives, historicity and mythology, instead of being antonyms, suddenly merge into the same concept; although set in contemporary times, and although highly historically charged, Soviet operas have a pronounced mythological quality. Cultural policy scholar Ruth Bereson approaches opera as a state-legitimising ceremonial ritual, "a symbol of the continuity of governments", and "an integral part of state ceremonial" (Bereson, 2002: 3). However, when viewed within the broader context of the Stalinist and Soviet operatic revivals, as well as a potential tool of establishing historical continuity with the totalitarian regime of the past, to echo Bereson's approach, Prokofiev's "Soviet" revival loses its benign appearance. Upon closer examination of the artistic quality present in some of the operas, it becomes evident that *art* wasn't the primary, or even a significant determining factor in selecting what gets access to the contemporary stage. The dominant criterion was ideology, the ritualistic perpetuation of history on stage for a broad audience. The objective extended beyond the celebration and commemoration of significant Soviet anniversaries and history; it also aimed to establish connection between Soviet past and the position of present Russia in a broader geopolitical context.

[13] Interestingly enough, Meytus (1903-1997) was an Ukrainian, and the opera *The Young Guard* is originally written in Ukrainian language.

[14] Another version of the title found in online sources is *Oktyabr' 17*.

Soviet opera as a difficult heritage?

It is difficult to approach the heritage of Soviet opera in one singular way. While the musicological instinct leans towards examining the score in search of answers when addressing the issue of present-day Soviet operatic revivals, the key in disentangling this intricate trend turned out to be the mere act of acknowledging that music and artistic expression play a minimal role. Instead, it is politics, memory, and power that wield significant influence. Therefore, adopting a mindset that transcends the confines of a single discipline, recognizing Soviet operas primarily as heritage, and delving into critical heritage studies, which grapple with the "complex questions of the power that heritage entails and produces" (Lähdesmäki et al., 2019: 2), could propel us closer to comprehending the current resurgence of Soviet opera on the Russian stages.

As asserted by heritage studies scholar Laurajane Smith, heritage is "a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present" (Smith, 2006: 2). The same sentiment echoes in Rodney Harrison's definition of heritage, which he describes as "an active process of assembling a series of objects, places, and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present, associated with a particular set of values that we wish to take with us into the future" (Harrison, 2013: 4). Furthermore, Harrison emphasizes the significance and immediacy of delving into heritage by asserting that, "heritage is primarily *not* about the *past*, but instead about our relationship with the *present* and the *future*" (ibid.: 4), further defining it as "a set of attitudes to, and relationships with, the past" (ibid.: 14). As explained by Gustav Wollentz, heritage plays a role "within a landscape for negotiating the meaning of the past in the present" and serves "as an incentive for tracing continuity and/or discontinuity and contributing with a sense of belonging and/or disassociation for individuals, while at the same time directing such incentives towards the future" (Wollentz, 2020: 1–2).

We could perceive Soviet operas as benign *sons de mémoire*,[15] intended to aid remembrance and serve as a conduit linking us to the past; as mere artefacts encapsulating the outdated socialist realist doctrine, Soviet history, the totalitarian regime, meticulous control of artistic production, artistic negotiations, and, for some composers like Prokofiev, real-life tragic human destinies. Perhaps we could approach them as perplexing curiosa too burdened by ideology to be frivolously displayed on global stages. However, despite this perspective, as previously discussed, since these operas are indeed staged and manipulated as a tool in Russian mnemonic politics, linking Soviet militaristic grandeur to present-day martial activities in Ukraine, their status requires thorough re-evaluation.

[15] Could be translated as "sounds of memory". Analogous term to Pierre Nora's (1989) *lieux de memoire*.

As explained by historian David Hoffmann, the Soviet regime crafted a historical account of World War II to unify the populace and validate its governance. Putin's government later revived specific parts of this narrative to strengthen patriotic sentiment in modern Russia (Hoffmann, 2022: 3). Hoffmann even goes as far as proclaiming the memory of World War II as "a pillar of Russian official culture and a centrepiece of national pride" (Hoffmann, 2022: 1). Once contextualized as a vessel of ideology in current Russian WWII commemoration politics, especially amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, even Soviet operas by Prokofiev, who successfully solidified his place in global music history, take on a new and deeper significance. As discussed by William Logan and Keir Reeves:

> Governments encourage particular memories and provide rituals and venues for memorialisation, which may be benign if such actions promote the development of tolerant states and societies based on human rights. In many cases, however, state authorities engage in retelling history, inventing traditions and celebrating heritage in ways that serve their own interests, which are often as crude as maintaining a grip on power. (Logan, Reeves, 2009: 2)

Specifically, Logan and Reeves address the concept of "difficult heritage", focusing on sites that represent distressing or shameful events from a nation or community's history. As one of the pioneers in the concept of difficult heritage, Macdonald defines it as "a past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity" (Macdonald, 2009: 1). Following this definition, Prokofiev's Soviet body of work cannot be inherently considered difficult, especially from the Russian standpoint, as it doesn't pose a difficulty in constructing a "positive, self-affirming identity". To add on Taruskin's earlier quote in the text (Taruskin, 2020: 465), could this perceived difficulty be exclusive to *our* perspective rather than inherent to Russian understanding? Despite the inclination to label Prokofiev's Soviet operas, or Soviet operas as a whole, as part of difficult heritage, the present dynamics within the Russian commemorative framework suggest they are less "difficult" and more of a "triumphant" heritage. Macdonald's idea of the "identity-affirmative nature of heritage-making" (Macdonald, 2009: 2) holds a dual perspective: while the "liberal" world and its perceptions regarding what fits into the global canon may have dismissed Prokofiev's Soviet works, in Russia, these compositions firmly align with the prevailing political and ideological climate, as evidenced by recent revivals. Is the categorical suppression of heritage, as observed in Western contexts, the sole approach to articulating a critique?

In a thought-provoking article intriguingly titled 'Who's Afraid of Socialist Realism?', musicologist and cellist Alexander Ivashkin provocatively asserts: "Soviet music still

exists, whether they like it or not. The Soviet period lasted for only seventy-three years, but it made an important impact on post-Soviet and Western culture, and on Western understanding of Russian culture" (Ivashkin, 2014: 448). While it is essential to consider Ivashkin's statement in its proper context – acknowledging that the socialist realist afterlives he mentions are deeply intertwined with music and aesthetics – it nonetheless prompts reflection. The issue at hand does not appear to be socialist realism or Soviet music per se – at least not entirely – but rather the nature of the afterlives these cultural forms assume in contemporary times. Imperial remnants, whether manifested in objects, practices, values, or, as in this case, opera (encompassing all these aspects), persist in our present, subtly or overtly influencing contemporary cultural trajectories. In the current climate, where Soviet imperial afterlives are perhaps more pronounced and potentially menacing, one is left to ponder the most appropriate response to them. Although the prevailing approach to these cultural remnants, particularly in music, currently seems to be one of boycott, the recent work of Alexander Raskatov, a composer of Russian descent, Soviet upbringing and an international career, suggests an alternative path.

Namely, in the same article, Ivashkin also references Raskatov and his opera *Sobach'ye serdtse* (*A Dog's Heart*) commissioned by The Netherlands Opera House in Amsterdam and premiered in 2010. Raskatov's opera, notable for its polystylistic nature, employs "Soviet" genres such as revolutionary songs and *chastushka*[16] to create a soundscape for Mikhail Bulgakov's 1925 satire of the Soviet revolution (Ivashkin, 2014: 444). In this context, the sounds associated with the Soviet era are utilized as auditory relics, serving to bridge historical space and time while being imbued with symbolic significance. A rather recent opera by Raskatov, *Animal Farm* first premiered in Amsterdam in 2023, written after Orwell's eponymous allegory of the Soviet and Stalinist regime, resonates even more critically in contemporary times as his previously mentioned work. As explained by the opera's director, Damiano Michieletto:

> The opera has the possibility – including for the many people working together on a performance – of being a mirror of society, and it can take a critical look at the society. My dream is that we will succeed in finding a language which ideally unites words and music, as they did at the end of the 16th century when opera was invented. And I'd like to see us find a socially and politically focused view, as they did in ancient Greece. Ultimately, I'm excited by stories which relate to the world we live in. (Láng, 2023: 24)

[16] A traditional Russian folk genre that deals with topics such as private life, community life, and politics. Although the tradition dates back to before the Revolution, it gained immense popularity during Soviet times.

Raskatov further solidifies the connection to the Soviet past through the libretto. For example, he incorporates quotes from prominent Soviet figures such as Stalin, Trotsky, and Beria, explaining this choice by noting: "When Orwell wrote his book, he did not have all the knowledge we have today about the early years of the Soviet Union" (Van Tongeren, 2023: 64). Furthermore, the opera, dedicated to Dmitry Shostakovich's widow, Irina Antonovna Shostakovich, references and reminisces the sounds of Russian and Soviet classics, Prokofiev and Shostakovich included, as pointed out by dramaturge Sergio Morabito (Morabito, 2023: 17). Moreover, conductor Alexander Soddy highlights the parallels between Raskatov's work and Shostakovich's famously denounced opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, particularly "in terms of irony, social polemics and political satire" (Soddy, 2023: 28).

The case of Raskatov's recent oeuvre, dedicated to the critical examination of Soviet and Stalinist histories, illustrates an alternative use of music – specifically opera – in addressing political crises. Interestingly, Raskatov also engages with Soviet afterlives, however, not by summoning them to promote a narrative of historical continuity or to celebrate the grandiose aspects of the Soviet and Stalinist past, but rather as a cautionary tale. His work serves to reveal the dangers of repeating the history, thus offering a critical reflection on the past and its implications for the present.

Conclusion

The resurgence of the Soviet operatic oeuvre on contemporary Russian stages is deeply intertwined with contemporary commemorative policies, dangerous utilization of historical narratives, and, subsequently, the conflict in Ukraine. The contemporary Russian cultural and political landscape vividly demonstrates how music can be actively wielded for political and ideological agendas. It illuminates how the music of a bygone era can be repurposed in constructing national identity, nurturing patriotic sentiments, and strengthening the continuity between Soviet and Russian martiality.

However, the relevance of Soviet and Russian music extends beyond the operatic revival. The various afterlives of Soviet music, whether through the resurgence of nearly forgotten Soviet operatic works on Russian stages or the provocative reinterpretations in Alexander Raskatov's recent compositions, alongside the boycott of Russian music, all point toward one direction – toward the power of the cultural and musical capital, unveiling it as a potent tool of agitation. The operas mentioned, regardless of their treatment of the Soviet past, demonstrate that the genre is not merely a cultural artefact detached from contemporary issues. Instead, they actively contribute to the construction of parallel and opposing cultural narratives. The contrasting treatments of musical heritage – its erasure in some contexts and revival in others – demonstrate that classical music is not merely a relic of the past or anachronistic ritual, but a potent

and relevant vessel of power in the present, participating in and shaping global political and cultural discourse.

It is important to keep in mind that the process of negotiation surrounding heritage reflects less on the past itself and more on our present circumstances and the landscape within which these negotiations unfold. This text, serving as a cautionary narrative, aligning with the perspectives of Taruskin (2020) and Flamm (2021), advocates for a critical approach in determining what, and under what circumstances, should be presented to a wide audience. It warns against perceiving music as purely ethereal, devoid of semantic layers that may harbour, at times, perilous ideologies. This intricate network of boycotts and revivals underscores another critical point: Soviet music in the contemporary world is far from being merely a historical relic. While some remnants of a distant chauvinist past may subtly permeate today's operatic stages and concert halls – echoing Taruskin's earlier sentiments – the influence of Soviet regime and its legacies is more pronounced than one might hope, and so are the uses of the past within the contemporary state policies. To reference Ivashkin's thoughts, we do not have to be afraid of socialist realism, Prokofiev, Soviet, nor Russian music – the real danger pertains to the nature of afterlives this music is given.

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Kako uprizarjati sovjetske opere v 21. stoletju: ruska glasbena dediščina med oživljanjem in bojkotom

Namen članka je preučiti status glasbe in glasbene dediščine, zlasti »sovjetskih« oper Sergeja Prokofjeva, v kontekstu rusko-ukrajinske vojne, ki se je začela leta 2014 in stopnjevala leta 2022. Kompleksnost Prokofjeve osebnosti na presečišču različnih nacionalnih, političnih, ideoloških in umetniških poti osvetli izzive (ne)promoviranja in (ne)izvajanja umetniških del v določenih okoliščinah. Članek se ne poglablja v estetiko in umetniško kakovost kot meril za ocenjevanje primernosti dveh sovjetsko obarvanih oper Prokofjeva, *Semjona Kotka* (1940) in *Zgodbe o resničnem človeku* (1948), temveč ju postavlja v širši okvir trenutnega sovjetskega, zlasti stalinističnega opernega preporoda, ki ga je bilo mogoče opaziti po izbruhu konflikta. Argument proti domnevi, da je nedavna oživitev Prokofjeva posledica resnične želje po ponovni predstavitvi njegovega zapostavljenega opusa širokemu ruskemu občinstvu, je podprt z novo in nenadno aktualnostjo nekaterih drugih sovjetskih oper v zadnjih letih. Poleg tega je ponovni vzpon sovjetske in stalinistične ikonografije, glasbe in pripovedi v ruskih gledališčih lahko tudi znamenje ustvarjanja povezav med sovjetsko preteklostjo in nemirno sodobno rusko politično pokrajino. Sovjetske opere s tega stališča niso več omejene na področje umetnosti ali glasbenih artefaktov,

temveč so instrumentalizirane kot veliki nacional(istič)ni rituali, ki ohranjajo sovjetsko preteklost na odru za širše občinstvo. Medtem ko vključevanje tem, kot so vojne, politika in zlorabe, v zahodne opere ni nič nenavadnega, imajo obravnavane sovjetske opere novo razsežnost, ko so dejavno uporabljene za podporo zgodovinski kontinuiteti, občutku nacionalne identitete in pripadnosti ter kot didaktično orodje, ki občinstvo poučuje o pravilnem izvajanju patriotizma. Ker je proces dediščinjenja aktiven, razkriva več o odnosu do preteklosti kot o preteklosti sami. Skladno s tem nedavne oživitve nekaterih oper Prokofjeva nimajo veliko opraviti s samim Prokofjevom ali domnevno kakovostjo njegovih dveh sovjetskih oper, temveč v veliki meri služijo političnim ciljem v sodobni Rusiji in obsežnemu spominjanju na stalinistično veličino v sodobnem ruskem političnem diskurzu.