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Remembering October: The Great Socialist Revolution and its musical memorialisation

Abstract. Memorialisation of the communist takeover of October 1917 became a fundamental public and private exercise of Soviet Russia. Music played an important, even essential part in these rituals of displaying history,[1] which were performed as acts both of self-assurance and of claim to power. This occasion gave birth to ambitious and utopian compositions, but also to ambiguous, ironic works as well as opportunistic ones. These different music manifestations of anniversary allow depicting the development of cultural politics and aesthetics of Soviet Russia. Further examples will include early efforts in musical constructivism, in early Socialist Realism, and in post-war Stalinism.

As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, it was essential for the Central Committee of the USSR to see public rituals believed rather to be only followed.[2] Not surprisingly, music as the most persuasive art was therefore an ever accompanying element in one of the crucial Soviet rituals, the anniversaries of the Great October Revolution of 1917. The quantity and the diversity of the works written on the occasion of this exercise, ranging from big oratorios to pieces for solo instruments, invite to pick up some pieces and take them as symptomatic examples of the respective stages of Soviet cultural history and aesthetics, the variety of designing, of aestheticizing ideology, of musical storytelling and memory making.

1924: Individualistic remembrance of the Revolution

Nikolaj Mjaskovskij was one of the first composers who enunciated musically the memory of the Revolution. Being a witness of the actual Soviet overthrow and the subsequent civil war he was deeply traumatised by these events. With his Symphony no. 6 E flat minor, written between 1921 and 1923, premiered in 1924, he managed to express his experience through symphonic practice. In refusing to give his symphony a fomenting/official character (what Soviet cultural policy basically intended music for) Mjaskovskij rather designed it according to personal considerations as well as literary inspirations (like *Les Aubes* of Belgian symbolist Émile Verhaeren which deals with the

death of a revolutionary hero), resulting in a sort of early Soviet-era *Pathétique*.

He included some meaningful musical elements and quotations in his symphony of the Revolution, culminating in the final movement, that starts with a euphoric paraphrase on two famous songs of the French Revolution, the *Carmagnole* and *Ça ira*, only to be silenced by the medieval sequence *Dies irae* and baroque *suspiratio* (sigh) motifs. Beyond that (as a then outrageous reference) the Orthodox burial hymn is interpolated. In such a form Mjaskovskij's symphony was received very well and enjoyed great popularity until Stalin's coming into power. Perhaps this success was based on the audience's immediate decoding of this symphony as a musical symbol of the difference between the profane power of the Revolution and the belief in an ultimately untouchable hereafter.

1927: Official vanguard commemoration

The first significant official musical memorisation of the Revolution came with the decennial, the ten-year jubilee of the October Revolution in 1927 for which Prokoll (the Production Collective of the Students at the Moscow Conservatory) provided the 'citizen's Oratorio' *Put' Oktjabrja* ('The path of October'), retelling the events of the revolution in thirty-two episodes, complete with some 'revolutionary' devices like declamation, but ending baroque – with a fugue.[3] This experimental, heterogonous nature caused *Put' Oktjarbja* some discussion about its educational aptitude[4] and left the work with no noteworthy follow-up. Another, much more accomplished contribution to the decennial was done by an individual composer, the twenty-one year old Dmitrij Šostakovič who was commissioned to write a correspondent work (because of the young composer's international success with his First symphony). Šostakovič provided his Symphony no. 2 *Oktjabrju* (To October), a musical dichotomy, consisting of one very daring avant-garde movement (with a wall of sound made up of micro motifs) and a second, vocal one in which Šostakovič tried to stylise paradigms of Agitprop. In its Janus-face-form this symphony was intended by its author to celebrate the October revolution as the due date of a 'project of modernity' resulting in an analogous 'revolutionary"

piece of music, but keeping the ‘old’ genre of symphony – at least as a frame.

1931: Remembering Lenin

Within the efforts of keeping the memory of the Revolution alive through artistic devices, the cult of Vladimir Il’ič Lenin’s personality became an important criterion. An outstanding example of this is Vissarion Šebalin’s ‘dramatic symphony’ *Ленин* (Lenin, 1931), scored for an ensemble consisting of a narrator, solo voices, choir and orchestra. Shebalin’s *Lenin* was preceded by two symphonies by him – the no. 2 (1929) still exhibited charateristic paradigms of the late 1920s with a polystylistic asymmetry, a struggle of progressive passages, sometimes aphoristic, sometimes ‘constructivist’, and sometimes more appellative, mass-oriented (which can be seen carried out in diatonic fanfares and a turning back to the idiomology of nineteenth-century Russian ‘national’ symphony). In contrast, *Lenin* was designed by Šebalin as a balanced synthesis of oratorio and symphony, as Michael John has stated rightly in his monograph on early Socialist realism in music.[5] Using a narrator reciting inflaming poetry by Vladimir Majakovskij, Šebalin transformed the traditional Evangelist’s part in oratorio and passion into an enunciator of communism’s own saint, Lenin.

Taking a closer look at Šebalin’s symphony its monothematic construction attract attention: all themes derive from only one motific germ (which bears surprising similarities with the fugue subject from Anton Bruckner’s Symphony no. 8). Furthermore, it is striking that Šebalin fell back on contrapuntal techniques, considered ‘bourgeois’ and very soon to become part of the the catalogue of ‘formalistic’ modes. However, here they were still tolerated as instruments of Lenin’s consecration. The monothematic configuration can been read as Šebalin’s effort to give his symphony cyclic coherence and to abandon the polystylistic variety of his own earlier symphonies, but also of Šostakovič’s recent Symphonyno. 3, premiered in 1931 like Šebalin’s *Lenin.*

1932: Towards Socialist Realism

Most notably, the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution (1932) saw two symphonies, both indicating the transition from the avanguard/anti-romantic style of the Lunačarskij era towards the never fair defined aesthetics of Socialist Realism, the doctrine that had been heralded the very same year. There was Dmitrij Kabalevskij's Symphony no. 1, like Šostakovič's Symphony no. 2 in two extended parts, but without the stylistic dichotomy of the younger colleague's work. Obviously Kabalevskij tried to deliver a sort of a Soviet 'per aspera ad astra' ─ symphony, complete with pounding timpani beats reminiscent of similar passages in Beethoven, Brahms and Čajkovskij.

But it was another symphony that drew the attention during the memorial festivities in 1932. Of all Soviet composers it was Mjaskovskij who offered an effort in Socialist Realism on that occasion. Written also to celebrate the end of the first five-year plan for the national economy of the Soviet Union, Mjaskovskij presented his Symphony no. 12, which was associated with the collectivisation in the countryside.[6] This symphony was one of the first pieces of music which tried to fulfil the three maxims of Socialist Realism – party-mindness, ideological commitment and national spirit.[7] While Mjaskovskij complied party-mindness and ideological commitment with the symphony's subtitle and a vaguely drafted program (the development of a Russian village before, during and after the collectivisation),[8] he met the demands of representing 'national spirit' in a sort of moderate, defanged neoclassicism rather than through the paradigms of Russian 'national' symphonism): a way which should become abundantly applied after 1945, especially by composers of Soviet satellite states.

1937: Prokofiev and Glière

The twentieth anniversary of the Revolution happened to be in 1937, the infamous year of Stalin's Ežovščina (Great Purge), the year oscillating between 'terror and utopia' as Karl Schlögel has put it out.[9] Having returned permanently to the USSR the year before, Sergej Prokof'ev, eager not to lose Stalin's acceptance composed the *Kantata k dvadcatiletiju Oktjabrja* ('Cantata for the twentieth

anniversary of the October Revolution'). As major topics of his cantata he named 'the great Socialist Revolution itself, the victory, the industrialisation of the country – and the constitution'.[10] Prokof'ev composed these subjects in mind with the tradition of Agitprop, Proletcult and the Worker's Music Olympiads of the late 1920s[11] respectively. To that effect the composition calls for about fine hundred participants including two choirs and four orchestral ensembles (symphonic, brass, drums, accordion). The various lyrics that he used 'sanctioned' texts of communism – Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Lenin and above all – Stalin. These texts are arranged in a collage of various styles – from the ferocious manner of the early Soviet avant-garde to the neo-classicist and to the new simplicity of early Socialist Realism. It may be because of this kaleidoscopic nature of the cantata that today it is merely regarded as a testimony of Prokof'ev's tongue-in-cheek-view of Stalin's Soviet Union rather than a sincere avowal. A question that is difficult to answer as the semantics of this music are floating. Take for example the heart of the composition, the section with Stalin's words about the Soviet constitution of 1936 with Prokof'ev using a very simple, diatonic declamatory style. Is this honest idealism or ironic playing with the aesthetics of Socialist Realism like it was done much later in visual arts (such as in *Stalin and the Muses* by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid; 1981-82)? Not surprisingly, the cantata was not accepted for a public performance in 1937. Instead of it, Prokof'ev's own Symphony no. 4 and Šostakovič's Symphony no. 5 were played.[12] Prokof'ev himself was hit by this refusal which not only mulcted him of a highly ranked appearance before the public but made him a suspect of counter-revolution.

The twentieth anniversary of the Revolution was also celebrated by Reinhold Glière in his *Toržestvennaja uvertjura* ('Festive overture'). Glière was actually one of the conservative, 'bourgeois' composers who were trained in Tsarist Russia but afterwards admitted themselves to the Soviet Union. The success he had with works like the *Fantazija Na prazdnik Kominterna* (Fantasy for the Festival of the Komintern) in 1924 (paraphrasing the *L'International* /'The Internationale') and the first Soviet ballet *Krasnyj mak* ('Red poppy'; again with an interpolation of the *The Internationale*) entitled him. In the *Festive overture* he played out the 'national spirit card',

blending in some folkloristic episodes to represent the specific way of Soviet national cultural policy, the so called 'korenizacija'[13] (rooting) which was 'guiding' the multiple peoples of the Soviet Union to become 'autonomous' national republics (which – needless to say – was actually quite the opposite).

1947: Megalomania

While Prokof'ev's Cantata for the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution (1937) is the most contradictory musical work dedicated to the memory of the Revolution, it is Aram Hačaturjan's symphonic poem C Major (which would become his Symphony no. 3) that is the most monumental. Subtitled 'an apotheosis of joy, of confidence in the future, a hymn to labour', it was written to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary in 1947, but became one of the compositions that were used as a pretext of the terrible payoff Andrej Ždanov staged in 1948 with the leading composers of the Soviet Union. There the symphony was labeled and disregarded as being a prime example of condemnable 'formalism'. And an experiment in form and musical architecture it was indeed.

The symphonic poem is remarkable for its sheer dimension, hardly achieved elsewhere in Soviet symphonic music. Hačaturjan arranged it for a huge ensemble consisting of augmented orchestra plus fifteen extra trumpets and an organ. One is reminded of the colossal plan for the Dvorec Sovetov (Palace of the Soviets) architect Boris Iofan had planned in the 1930s. Yet, the work emerges not as a simple, overblown exercise in monumentality: The fanfare motives, obviously inspired not only to signify the triumph of the Revolution but also the victory over Nazi-Germany, are turned into increasing repetition, division and overlapping which result in bitonal effects, interrupted by similar composed organ solos and some stylized patterns of Armenian folk music. This was probably done unintentional by Hačaturjan, out of pure joy in experimental toying with orchestral forces. All the more tragic is the defamation of him that the symphonic poem caused.

The year 1947 also brought three works by Prokof'ev: his *Prazdničnaja poema Tridcat' let*

(Festive poem 'Thirty years') op. 113, a sonata for violin solo op. 115, intended to be played unisono by pupils of music elementaries,[14] and another cantata, this time the very short, very 'tamed' cantata *Rascvetaj, mogučij kraj* ('Flourish, mighty homeland') – in the style of his earlier *Zdravica* ('Toast') to Stalin's sixtieth birthday (1939), but this time not so much the 'great leader' himself was praised but the Soviet Union 'transformed' by Stalin, according to the then omnipresent slogan 'Life becomes better and better'.

1957 and 1967: Banalities

On the occasion of the Revolution anniversary in 1957, Šostakovič dedicated his Symphony no. 11 not to the Revolution of 1917, but to the year 1905, therewith commemorating the other 'big revolution' in Russia – a dedication which was intended as a discrete hint to recently put down Hungarian Uprising the year before. Much less daring was his Symphony no. 12 op. 112, *1917 god* ('The Year 1917', 1961) which came up with a series of historic tableaux, set in music almost cinematically: *Revoljucionnyj Petrograd* ('Revolutionary Petrograd'), *Razliv* ('Razliv', the railway station where Lenin set his headquarters), *Avrora* ('Aurora', the battleship whose firing started the Revolution) and *Zarja čelovečestva* ('The dawn of humanity').

Finally, we are approaching the fiftieth jubilee in post Stalinist 1967, which was glorified not only by Soviet composers but also by those from Soviet Satellites like Hungary – for example by Ferenc Szabó's Vallomás. *A nagy októberi szocialista forradalom ötven* ('Avowal. To the fiftieth anniversary of the great October Socialist Revolution'), using lyrics by iconic Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi to pay homage to 1917, riding the Socialist custom to interpret the Hungarian revolution of 1848/49 as a forerunner to communism.[15] Although in poor health, Dmitrij Šostakovič contributed again – with *Oktjabr'* ('October'), a symphonic paraphrase on a song from one of his earlier film scores, the *Partizanskaja pesnja (*'Partisan Song') of the movie *Voločaevskie dni* ('Voločaevka Days', 1938).[16] As with his Symphony no. 11 and 12, listlessness is also a characteristic of this late 'official' composition of Šostakovič.

Conclusion

'First as tragedy, then as farce' – I would like to end with the words Karl Marx said about the double occurrence of historical events because it can be called a farce that of all works dedicated to the memory of the October Revolution it became Prokof'ev's once refused Cantata (1937) that found its way into Western cultural memory. In Walter Hill's *Red Heat* (1988), a thriller about the nonorthodox collaboration between a cop from Chicago and one from the Soviet Union,[17] starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, the 'Philosophers'-section from the Cantata forms the basis of the film's main titles. This usage (carried out by film composer James Horner) is significant: Just three years before the collapse of the Soviet Empire capitalist mass culture took up a fragment of its anniversary efforts and absorbed it. It could not be more successful and entailed uncountable imitations – Soviet memory-making became transformed in an unexpected, unforeseen way.

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[1] For this aspect see the now classical study of Katerina Clark, *The Soviet novel. History as ritual*, 3rd edn. (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2000).

[2] Slavoj Žižek, *Totalitarismus. Fünf Interventionen zum Ge- oder Missbrauch eines Begriffs* (Hamburg: Laika 2012), 92.

[3] Edmunds, Neil. 'Soviet musical propaganda in the 1920s', in *Soviet music and society under Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Neil Edmunds. New York: Routledge, 2004. 112–3.

[4] Edmunds, 'Soviet musical propaganda', 114.

[5] Michael John, *Die Anfänge des sozialistischen Realismus in der sowjetischen Musik der 20er und 30er Jahre. Historische Hintergründe, ästhetische Diskurse und musikalische Genres* (Bochum/Freiburg: Projektverlag 2009), 470.

[6] John, *Die Anfänge*, 469.

[7] Baudin, Antoine, 'Zhdanov art and Ist international fallout', in *Socialist Realism without shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen, Evgeny Dobrenko. Durham, London: Duke University Press 1997. 228.

[8] John, Anfänge, 469.

[9] Karl Schlögel, *Terror und Traum. Moskau 1937* (Frankfurt am Main: Carl Hanser 2008).

[10] Friedbert Streller, *Sergej Prokofjew und seine Zeit* (Laaber: Laaber 2003), 216.

[11] Streller, *Prokofjew*, 216.

[12] Streller, *Prokofjew*, 217.

[13] Bert Hoppe, *Geschichte Russlands* (Stuttgart: Theiss 2009), 132.

[14] Streller, *Prokofjew*, 280.

[15] Árpád von Klimó, *Ungarn seit 1945* (Göttingen: UTB 2006), 36.

[16] John Riley, *Dmitri Shostakovich. A life in film* (New York: I B Tauris 2005), 35.

[17] Cf. Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's cold war* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2007), 286–91.