

Classical Music Review

A Russian Winter

Rejoice, comrades! Four programs display the intensity and sweep of twentieth-century Soviet music.

By Peter G. Davis

Most Russian composers of the past century have been politically engaged, whether they wanted to be or not. Aaron Copland may have been gay and dangerously left-wing at a time when neither orientation was widely acceptable in America, but all that was seldom openly discussed or even strongly expressed in his music. Compare that with the situation of his great contemporary in Soviet Russia, Dmitri Shostakovich, who not only wrote his anxieties directly into his scores but also often feared for his life. He might well have been jailed, even executed, by Stalin had he not been so internationally renowned.

So it's not surprising that Shostakovich, whose centenary we celebrate next year, was a key figure in the recent spate of thematic concerts spotlighting Russian music. "Revolution 1905" was the subject of the latest American Symphony Orchestra program in Avery Fisher Hall, Leon Botstein conducting, and the central item of interest was Shostakovich's Symphony No. 11. This hourlong score dating from 1957 is practically a minute-by-minute musical description of the first, abortive Russian Revolution, which resulted in the massacre of workers in St. Petersburg's Palace Square on "Bloody Sunday" (January 9, 1905): the day's quiet icy dawn, the shattering event itself, a poignant elegy for the dead, and a wild finale that erupts with all the confrontational fury to come.

At least that's the explanation Shostakovich offered, and nothing could have been more politically correct at the time than this in-your-face, often luridly graphic example of Soviet poster art. Now, of course, it's become fashionable to suggest that the composer may have had something different in mind and was actually describing the brutality, slaughter, sorrow, and horror of the recently concluded Stalin era. Well, maybe he was—after all, music is essentially a sonic abstraction, and who's to say what the notes truly represent? Either way, the Shostakovich Eleventh is a smashing roof-raiser and won't bore anyone. The ASO program also featured three Russian scores written shortly after the 1905 massacre, and before we listened to them, Botstein asked us to consider the ways, if any, that music can inform our understanding of history. These mildly diverting pieces hardly succeeded in doing that, but at least Stravinsky's brief *Fireworks*, Glazunov's soulful *Song of Destiny*, and *Miaskovsky's Silentium*, an orchestral parable after an Edgar Allan Poe tale, were well worth resurrecting without any special pleading.

When music is put to words, a composer's intent becomes a lot less ambiguous, and there was no mistaking the message of the recent New York Festival of Song program in Merkin Hall. In fact, poets were the main focus here, principally Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) and Alexander Blok (1880–1921), who were even more harshly treated by Soviet authorities than the composers who set their poems to music. "Living a double life as outlaws and reluctant conformists," as NYFOS artistic director Steven Blier provocatively observed in his program notes, "they wrote their own complex, multi-layered story of Russia's history in song." Prokofiev's Akhmatova cycle came early in the careers of both poet and composer (1916), bleakly lyrical observations of lost love, lost sunlight, lost opportunities, and lost youth. Shostakovich's Blok songs are even more stabbing, visionary and personal rather than

politically controversial, written almost as recuperative therapy after the composer had a heart attack in 1966.

The program branched out from there and into even more intriguing regions: Georgii Sviridov's earthy songs based on the poems of Sergei Yesenin (1895–1925), best known for his brief and chaotic marriage to Isadora Duncan; Rachmaninoff's positively ecstatic musical response to the mystical poetry of his fellow émigré, Konstantin Balmont; and introspective songs by Tchaikovsky and Cui to the texts of Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), the poet revered by all Russian composers. Soprano Dina Kuznetsova and baritone Nicolai Janitzky did the vocal honors, but the real hero of the evening was Blier, who devised the program, played the piano accompaniments, wrote the illuminating annotations, and provided spoken commentary.

The month's grandest gesture on behalf of Russian music was made by the Juilliard School, which devoted its annual Focus Festival to "Breaking the Chains: The Soviet Avant-Garde, 1966–1991." Focus's tireless and enthusiastic artistic director, Joel Sachs, once again presided over an ambitious six-concert survey, one that took a brief look at the last generation of Soviet composers but mostly concentrated on younger figures now exploring new avenues of musical expression. Some were Russians, but we also heard from important musicians living in the now autonomous republics of Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—32 scores by 29 composers in all, and a festival intended by Sachs to honor "those brave outsiders who defied the censors and the career-makers to follow their own visions."

The opening concert featured music by senior composers born in the thirties, all of whom had a rough youth but survived to hear global acceptance of their music. I especially enjoyed *Ode to a Nightingale*, by Valentin Silvestrov from Ukraine, with its darting circular vocal line punctuated by mysterious, improvisatory twitters from piano, harp, and muted brass—presumably evocative of the elliptical, dreamlike stasis that is a feature of Ukrainian literature. An early work by Arvo Pärt written in 1966—*Pro et Contra*—reminds us that this questing musical mind from Estonia was once interested in collage and twelve-tone techniques before he became famous for his more euphonious "holy minimalist" sacred works. The concert ended with the gritty Violin Concerto No. 3 by the late Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998), now acknowledged as Russia's most significant composer since Shostakovich. Like his predecessor, Schnittke faced oppression, artistic discrimination, and chronic ill health. All that left an unmistakable imprint on his brooding, expressively intense scores, which draw on polystylistic techniques that sometimes seem to embrace and reflect the entire range of music history. He too (to quote that Chinese proverb) lived in "interesting times." That wasn't so long ago, but we are just beginning to discover how richly creative they were.

Revolution 1905

American Symphony Orchestra.
January 16.

Blok And Akhmatova: Poets Without Heroes

New York Festival Of Song.
January 19.

Breaking The Chains: The Soviet Avant-Garde, 1966–1991

Juilliard School.
January 21–28.