



The Year 1948 in Soviet Music

Professor Marina Frolova-Walker

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The Background of the Debacle

Although the War years gave Soviet artists greater leeway, the victory in 1945 led to a tightening of state control. Now that the alliance with the US and UK had served its purpose, Stalin returned to the old rhetoric against "imperialism" and any vestigial Western influences in the arts were to be removed under the rubric of "formalism". The official in charge of the anti-formalist campaigns of 1946-49 was Andrei Zhdanov, acting as head of the Department for Agitation and Propaganda, which was the section of the Party responsible for ideology and the arts. Accordingly, this period of ideological repression is often known as the "Zhdanovshchina".

In the anti-formalist campaign of 1936, music was the first of the arts to receive official criticism, but this time round, it had to wait its turn after condemnations of literature and drama had run their course. The 1948 Party Resolution on music did, however, share a common pretext with the 1936 condemnation, namely an opera that Stalin found disagreeable. Before, it was Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*, but in 1948, it was Vano Muradeli's *Great Friendship*. The name of the document published on 10 February 1948 even invoked the opera by name: "Resolution on Muradeli's opera *The Great Friendship*". While it eventually became clear that Shostakovich's opera was to some extent used as a pretext, the ruse was blatant when it was repeated twelve years later with Muradeli's opera.

On 5 January, Stalin attended the Bolshoi production of *The Great Friendship*, which was billed as the most important musical contribution to the 30th Anniversary of the October Revolution (1947). It was staged simultaneously in several opera houses, and all the productions were lavish, with no expense spared. Like Stalin, Muradeli was born in Gori, Georgia, and he exploited his Georgian nationality to advance his career, even though he was ethnically Armenian. The story of the opera was based on the spread of the Revolution to the Caucasus (in reality, Soviet expansion), and the composer expected that this would be ideally suited to delight Stalin. The protagonist, an "extraordinary commissar", was clearly based on the real-life Bolshevik, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, a senior Soviet official and one-time friend of Stalin who had died in 1937, and was honoured with a grand state funeral. Muradeli's idea backfired, however, for reasons that were unknown to him: there was serious friction between Stalin and Ordzhonikidze when the latter tried strenuously to protect his subordinates from arrest in the Purges. His apartment was searched by the NKVD, leading to a stormy confrontation between Ordzhonikidze and Stalin. The following day, Ordzhonikidze died at home from a single gunshot – probably suicide, prompted by the realisation that his arrest was imminent. The official account was of a heart attack, and the gunshot was only revealed in Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" of 1956. Back in 1948, Stalin had no desire to open this can of worms, so he complained instead about the music, which he accused of lacking the requisite connections to folk music, and even amounted to "cacophony". The score was actually quite innocuous, with none of the modernist elements of *Lady Macbeth*, but there was no arguing with Stalin, and all the productions of the opera were brought to a halt. Muradeli's bewildered colleagues had to formulate their condemnations of the opera for its "formalism" rhetoric. Muradeli understood that it was folly to deny the charges, but he blamed his professional environment for driving him towards the errors of bourgeois modernism.

If Stalin had only wanted to rid himself an opera lauding Ordzhonikidze, the piece could have been banned, and there would have been no need for a general attack on composers. Since the music of the *Great*

Friendship was only a pretext on both counts, what were the actual reasons for the Resolution? We can summarise them under the following heads:

- a) The anti-Western ideological trend instigated by Stalin and Zhdanov after the War
- b) Zhdanov's personal distaste for anything remotely modernist
- c) Zhdanov's opportunism in using the moment for sidelining his rivals (such as the minister Khrapchenko) and establishing direct Party domination over culture, rather than through the mediation of state institutions
- d) The desire of certain previously overlooked composers for recognition and remuneration that had been concentrated for years in the hands of a narrow elite
- e) A sincere aesthetic dislike of modernism among composers of a more traditional bent

Offending Works and Official Bans

During the composers' meeting at the Party Central Committee, which took place on 10-13 January 1948, Muradeli focused his counter-charges on his most senior and famous colleagues, who, he claimed, had discouraged music that was simple, melodious and accessible, while still venerating Western modernism despite the Party's condemnation of musical formalism in 1936. Several offending works were singled out for criticism at the meeting: **Prokofiev**'s Sixth Symphony was too gloomy, and contained expressionist outbursts; **Khachaturian**'s Symphony-Poem was extravagant and turned its back on his Armenian national roots; **Myaskovsky**'s cantata *The Kremlin at Night* was a depiction of Stalin's tireless work, but it was inappropriately mystical and mournful. **Shostakovich**'s Symphonies 8 and 9 had already faced criticism, and this was repeated at the meeting. In the actual Resolution, published a month later (10 February), this group of four leading Soviet composers was expanded to include Vissarion **Shebalin** and Gavriil **Popov**. Shebalin's music did not stand out as modernist, but his directorship of Moscow Conservatoire since 1942 placed him in the firing line. Popov had been criticised back in the 30s, but had stayed out of trouble since then, but it seems that his name was plucked out of air to replace Dmitry Kabalevsky, who was spared at the last moment (probably thanks to his connections in high places). The offending work cited in the Resolution was Popov's "Heroic" Symphony of 1946.

An official ban on the performance of these and other works was published; the long list extended to much earlier works by the named composers. It was only to be expected that concert administrators would err on the side of caution, to the point that almost the entire oeuvre of these composers disappeared from the concert halls. At the Conservatoire, Shostakovich and Shebalin were fired; in the Composer's Union, Khachaturian was dismissed from his senior position. All six were placed under great stress, and the consequences were to be seen in their declining health: over the following years, Myaskovsky died of cancer (1950), Prokofiev entered his terminal decline (dying in 1953), Shebalin suffered several strokes, and Khachaturian developed a serious heart condition.

The Beneficiaries

As the concert schedules and award nomination lists emptied out, composers understood that the acceptable limits for music had been drastically narrowed. The immediate beneficiaries were composers with a lighter, more populist touch, and conservatives who continued to work the vein of 19th-century Romanticism. The Stalin Prize Committee was freshly elected to reflect the changes, but this did little to solve the problem of finding pieces that could safely be nominated. All the new symphonies examined by the Committee seemed too risky (again, they had to err on the side of caution), so there was no award in that category. Then the same problem arose in the chamber-music category, and there was a danger that a lack of music awards might look like a gesture of protest, so the Committee settled on a blandly safe string quartet by Glière (No. 4) that had been written several years earlier – strictly speaking, this rendered the piece ineligible for an award, but no viable alternatives were forthcoming.

The core of Socialist Realist music in 1948 consisted of works written on folk themes, especially if they came from the national republics. Special encouragement was given to composers from the new Baltic Soviet republics (annexed in 1940, then re-annexed in 1944, after the German retreat). The highly lucrative first-class Stalin prize went to a cantata in honour of Stalin by the Lithuanian Juozas Tallat-Kelpša, and this was also the first time a prize went to a Stalin cantata, since the Committee had previously shunned these pieces of Soviet ephemera. After the 1948 Resolution, it was unsafe to indulge such scruples. Tallat-Kelpša never

received the prize, having dropped dead of a heart attack during rehearsals of his cantata. The following year, another Lithuanian composer, Balys Dvarionas, featured prominently among the prize winners. The award-winning work, his fiery Violin Concerto, had all the life-affirming virtuosic joy of Khachaturian's Violin Concerto (an established Soviet masterpiece), although the Baltic folk material gave Dvarionas's piece a distinctive flavour. Even this piece, which is melodic and accessible, was scrutinised for any hidden formalist elements before given the all-clear for a prize.

The Prize Committee was now afraid of any work that might be considered too highbrow and intellectually demanding, even if it was impeccably conservative in style. This led the Committee to favour popular genres, such as mass songs, or music written for folk choirs and orchestras of folk instruments. Song writers achieved a new eminence in Soviet music, although the leading figure, Isaak Dunayevsky, was criticised for allowing his operettas to be contaminated by Western influences, including American jazz. In the administrative reshuffle following the Resolution, Tikhon Khrennikov was appointed General Secretary of the Composers' Union, and he transformed the post to acquire unprecedented power over his colleagues. He continued to rule over Soviet music for over forty years, until the Composer's Union ceased to exist on the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although he had been a promising young composer of a mildly modernist bent in the 1930s, he became, after 1948, the most notorious and controversial figure in Soviet music, and a formidable obstacle for generations of composers who ventured outside the confines of Socialist Realism.

Repentance and Comebacks

The great freeze could not last indefinitely. Zhdanov died in August 1948, and there was no one at the top to promote his anti-formalist policies with comparable zeal. In the spring of 1949, the official ban on composers accused of formalism was lifted. The turning point came in a telephone conversation between Shostakovich and Stalin's secretary. Shostakovich was instructed to join the Soviet delegation at the "Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace", to be held in March that year in New York. Shostakovich replied that his presence in the delegation was likely to draw awkward questions that could embarrass the Soviet Union, since his own music could be performed freely in the US, but was banned at home. The problem was immediately rectified, and Shostakovich was duly sent to New York. Nevertheless, Soviet composers continued to labour under burdensome restrictions until after Stalin's death, a situation that owed much more to Khrennikov and accomplices than with senior Party officials, who had already backed off. Older, internationally famous composers like Prokofiev and Shostakovich were now answerable directly to Khrennikov, who took pleasure in humiliating them.

Composers who had received criticism in the Resolution, or in the Composers' Union meetings held afterwards, had to produce evidence of willingness to undergo reform, just as Shostakovich had done a decade earlier. The experience had hardened Shostakovich, and the second time around, he was able to act with a cynical efficiency, turning out a cantata, *The Song of the Forests*, that celebrated Stalin's reforestation plans for areas that had been devastated during the War. Although there are some striking moments in the piece, Shostakovich so immersed himself in a safe Socialist Realist style that his individual voice was all but undetectable. The Cantata received a first-class Stalin Prize, enabling Shostakovich to regain his security and material comforts. Still, this easy victory was also a capitulation: the evidence of his reform in 1937 was the Fifth Symphony, an enduring masterpiece that has won over generations of listeners, whereas *The Song of the Forests* was just another piece of Soviet ephemera, glorifying Stalin in a borrowed 19th-century Russian nationalist style.

Prokofiev lacked Shostakovich's resilience, and he had no prior experience to draw from. As evidence of his reform, he made an earnest attempt to create a Socialist Realist opera, *Story of a Real Man*, but this only prompted another round of harsh criticism. Working through severe illness and helped by friends and advisors, he used Shostakovich's prize-winning *Song of the Forests* as a model for his own oratorio *On Guard for Peace*, and this, together with a suite of music for children, sufficed for his rehabilitation. Still, this was not a return to the *status quo ante*, and even when he thought he was negotiating the restrictions successfully, he could still face unpredictable criticism: his Seventh Symphony, for example, was written in a transparent and easy-going style, but the humorous finale was attacked because it was open to (malicious) interpretation as mockery, with hints of the grotesque style of his early modernism.

Myaskovsky had not faced any serious criticism before 1948. His style had matured prior to modernism in the last years of the Tsar, and from the early 30s, he was a (reluctant) pioneer of the Socialist Realist symphony, and this won him the leeway he needed to continue writing serious symphonies, which could

even win him prizes. Many of his colleagues thought that his appearance on the list of formalists lacked any justification. Despite his age and ill health, he staunchly refused to issue a written statement of repentance (which both Shostakovich and Prokofiev had done). He continued to write the music that best suited his talents, namely, textless chamber music and symphonies, which were still in his preferred style, whatever the attitudes of officials or colleagues. After his death, his final symphony (No. 27) won high praise, although it was a defiantly assured statement that made no effort to win official favour (there was an air of regret that this éminence grise of Russian music had been treated shabbily at the end of his life).

The Desk Drawer

A new phenomenon of these years was the composition of pieces that were inappropriate for the time, in anticipation of better times. Alongside the Socialist Realist scores that brought him official praise and private shame, Shostakovich wrote several major works “for the desk drawer”, including his Quartets Nos. 4 and 5 and his Violin Concerto, intense pieces whose style is unmistakably his. There is one work that even shifted from official to private: the Jewish Folk Cycle of 1948. Written in an accessible melodic idiom, these songs might have been intended as a celebration of Israel which had just declared independence. Stalin approved of the struggle for independence as a blow to Britain, which controlled the territory. Once that goal had been achieved, Stalin turned against Israel, since its Arab rivals were much more valuable as strategic allies, and he soon promoted an antisemitic campaign under the euphemism of “anti-cosmopolitanism”). The Jewish songs cycle then became a work for private performance only, and an expression of Shostakovich’s solidarity with his Jewish friends and colleagues.

There was one extreme case of this pursuit of divergent official and private paths, unknown for years to all but a few musicians in her confidence. The composer in question was Galina Ustvolskaya, who had been a leading pupil of Shostakovich. During the lean years of 1948-53, she produced a series of Socialist Realist cantatas (which she held in contempt), while she simultaneously created her own utterly original modernist language, austere but often fiercely intense, in her private works. The pupil became an inspiration to the teacher, and Shostakovich paid tribute to her by repeatedly quoting (unknown to most listeners) passages from her Trio in his String Quartet No. 5. While Shostakovich’s private works of the period were all premiered in the mid 50s, Ustvolskaya’s startling music of the period had to wait until the late 60s to gain a public airing. The Leningrad Union of Composers became supportive, and organised concerts devoted to her music in the 70s, and finally, at the close of the 80s, her music began to win an international audience, with performances, recordings and the publication of her scores. There are vague hints in Shostakovich and Stravinsky of the possibility of such music, but Ustvolskaya extends these so far in her own direction that they barely qualify as inspirations. She continued writing music in her own idiom through to the early 90s, gradually evolving, with a tendency towards ever stranger and more abrasive sounds.

The Death of Stalin

How many pieces of music commemorating Stalin do we know? Please get in touch if you can think of one. The cult of Stalin was immense, his funeral saw millions of sincerely tearful people, and yet within two weeks, any further glorification was discouraged, and Soviet citizens began to speak in hushed, embarrassed tones of the disappearing “personality cult”. There has perhaps never been a more extreme reversal of official rhetoric in any state that has not just undergone a coup or revolution. Another three years had to pass before Khrushchev discussed Stalin’s crimes frankly in his “Secret Speech”, while covering up some of his own (the document was leaked and soon known the world over).

Nine months after Stalin’s death, the Leningrad public was able to hear the first new Shostakovich symphony in eight years. This was the Symphony No. 10, the largest of his works for desk drawer, which begins with a vast epic slow movement and ends with a brisk tongue-in-cheek glorification of the composer himself (through a motif whose notes stood for his initials). Just after the premiere, Khachaturian published an article exhorting his peers to fight for their artistic freedom. The restrictions were relaxed on a piecemeal basis over the next few years, until the 1948 Resolution was formally revoked a decade after it was published.

We must bid farewell to our motley collection of Soviet composers, closing with one last reflection on Prokofiev, who was, in a sense, the unluckiest of all. Unlucky because he never saw the gradual return of artistic freedoms, since he died on exactly the same day as Stalin, so that his death was entirely overshadowed for some time, even among his fellow composers. In 1949, he composed his Cello Sonata

when his music was banned, his first wife was in a labour camp, and he himself was at risk of imminent death from illness. One ray of light in his life was Mstislav Rostropovich, who, ignoring the unpropitious circumstances, kept pressing Prokofiev to write more works for cello. The Sonata's writing for cello is something quite special – we hear the instrument's low, masculine voice, but Prokofiev does not permit himself to indulge in the familiar elegiac tone (typical of the cello writing in many a concerto). There is something effortful in the struggle for beauty in the Sonata, as if Prokofiev is entrusting to his art all that he was unable to do in his life at the time. The piece makes many demands on the performer's technique and interpretative powers, and it is a challenge for the listener too, but it rewards us with some truly transcendent moments.

By Way of Conclusion

At the end of this course, we return to the opening conundrum: how can it be that in those very dark years under Stalin, we find so many remarkable pieces – pieces that still speak to us, delighting us, or inviting us to share their grief or outrage? How is it that we find great art in those cruel times? Some of the masterpieces, it is true, express a veiled opposition to the regime, while others look away, and others again seem indifferent or even supportive?

While I cannot offer an exhaustive answer in these closing remarks, I can offer an overview of the factors that contributed to this unique situation:

- a) Classical music under Stalin was sustained by huge **investment**. There was planned and consistent investment in music education, talent-scouting, building opera houses and concert halls, creating new orchestras and choirs, building instruments, nurturing virtuoso performers and educating audiences. This investment also extended to composers, of course, and sometimes to the point of prodigality, when large advances for pieces that never materialised did not have to be returned. The efforts that produce thousands of mediocre composers are statistically likely to produce hundreds of solid, accomplished composers, and a handful of exceptional artists. Those exceptional talents were encouraged and rewarded with induction into the Soviet elite (admittedly, accompanied by the often arbitrary disciplinary measures wielded against members of that elite every so often).
- b) Although Soviet rhetoric often emphasised the value of collective labour and the collective struggle for socialism, the bulk of money and effort directed towards the arts promoted and encouraged **individuals**. The concept of genius was alive and well, and exceptional individual achievement was highly valued (at the same time as others were collectively worked to death in the gulags or forced to fall in waves before enemy fire on the battlefield). The ideal of collective work in the arts never prevailed, as it did later in Communist China. An individual artist could be shunned, denounced or arrested, but on another day praised, rewarded, extolled, indulged, and given all sorts of privileges. Artists in command of a substantial talent knew that their efforts were likely to bear fruit and receive recognition. **Professional bodies** representing artists may have been encumbered with bureaucracy and sometimes needed to promote mediocrities to fulfil ideological goals, but they generally did much to encourage and facilitate the work of the best. The times when they lost the ability to carry out this task were relatively brief episodes, as in 1948. They continued to advocate for artistic excellence even if it was embodied on works that clearly fell outside Socialist Realism. Individual artists were sustained and validated by these communities, even though they sometimes seemed like snakepits when observed from the sidelines.
- c) The ideological restrictions and uprooting of modernism led to the cultivation of high-art music that was indeed **accessible**, that sought to communicate with a wider audience rather than shunning it or mocking it. This music is melodious, it is able to articulate emotions, it makes use of familiar musical topics or refers to popular genres, it is clear in structure, aiding the listener with repetitions of passages – in sum, it nurtured everything that modernism avoided. Soviet concertgoers, in turn, received this music as something **intended for them** (as opposed to something for wealthy connoisseurs or for a hermetic intellectual elite). Even the broader population did, to some extent, believe that high art belonged to them and they could partake of it if they so wished at almost no cost. All the propaganda about **art for the people** rubbed off on both the artists and their public.

- d) There was an advantage in writing **textless music**, which was **obscure in meaning**. Despite hordes of exegetes, such music was hard to pin down. Opera suffered from so much political interference because it had words and a story line, and often historical characters who could pass in and out of favour, or who had to be portrayed in a certain way. By contrast, Stalin never thought of meddling with symphonies. Except for the hiatus after the 1948 Resolution, symphonies and chamber music enjoyed great prestige, and continued to trade in vague, mixed, or mutable messages. In lieu of religion, they gave their listeners moments of escape, consolation, and transcendence. In conditions of scarcity, poverty and ugliness, they provided moments of transformative beauty. In conditions of regimentation, they provided a space where the imagination could roam free.

Why do we, here in the West, today, assign a high value to these cultural products of Stalin's Soviet Union? I think there are two main reasons. Firstly, those who still seek out classical music in performances and recordings generally want music that makes sense to them (even if it requires some effort and repeated listening), and they enjoy the play of melodies and emotions no less than Soviet audiences. Secondly, these listeners have some awareness of the history, dark but fascinating, of the society that produced this music, and they know something of the exciting biographies of the composers. This context heightens the value of the pieces for listeners and performers. We feel, today, that this music allows us, in an untrammelled and non-didactic way, to expand the spectrum of our experiences and deepen our understanding of life. We feel enriched by them and may suppose that by contemplating the suffering of others in another country nearly a century ago, our capacity for sympathy with the plight of others today is expanded (perhaps). Sometimes the music and its history even press us to make difficult critical judgements about the possible coexistence of beauty and evil in an artwork, and how we might embrace the former while still remaining mindful of the latter.

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