

Beautiful Lost Sounds of the Soviet Union

By Andy Glover-Whitley



When in 1990 the old decrepit and rotten Soviet Union finally vanished off the face of the maps of this world and was replaced by the new Russian Federation who benignly bestowed independence on most states (*a few did have to fight for it such as the Baltic states*) that had been part of its vast make up. It was not just the political face of the Soviet Union that changed but its artistic life and outlook altered so dramatically, and so quickly, that most creative artists were not able to, or were not prepared for the sudden freedoms of non-political interference that they had been used to under the old communist regime. Many found themselves unable to survive financially as the state no longer financed them and many fell silent forever. The old was again swept away in total rejection no matter its quality or beauty. Some would say that that was a good thing, others would argue that the old cannot be cleared away that easily. And so it has been proven, not only in Russia itself but also all its former satellite states too.

Many though now hanker after the nostalgia of the old glory days of the communist era and as such a large upsurge of interest in the music of this period has arisen not only in Russia but also here in the West where many composers from this "Iron Bloc" period were completely unknown. Some would say that they should have remained unknown but there was a strange style of music that the Soviet Union encouraged and nurtured that is not to everyone's taste but much is of a value that we should not underestimate or criticise. It has been called many things, "Socialist Realism" and "Communist Modernism", and due to these unfortunate tags it has suffered neglect and disrespect from all quarters.

Most people, when we think of the old Communist Russian Composers, think of

Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khatatchurian and may be even Kabalevsky or even Rodion Schechedrin but the first three were actually reluctant communist followers even though there is no disputing they were Russian nationalists in their outlook, with only Prokofiev having a more international outlook than any of them due to his stay in the west. These were the names we know and admire but these were actually composers with a different outlook than the rest of their colleagues in the Soviet Union. The actual 'Composers Union of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' allowed the first three men some degree of freedom to express individuality rather than having to write to a prescription as dictated by the politburo of the state and this is probably why their music became so revered and admired and to an extent survived as well as the quality of its inventiveness.

Having said this even they did get criticised, heavily, and in particular in the 1948 Zhdanov diatribe that criticised most composers writing in the Soviet Union as being "*formalist*" and "*out of touch with the people*", a formal grubbing in the Soviet newspaper "Pravda" and at that years conference of the composers union in Moscow. Shostakovich had already suffered Stalin's wrath back in 1934 after his opera, "Lady Macbeth of the Mtzensk District", where he was given a public ridiculing in the press, and feared greatly for his life.



Shostakovich

Prokofiev

Khatachurian

But what of the other composers who did tow the line, or fall foul of it such as Alexander Mosolov, or wrote solely to please the bureaucrats of the state. Gerald Abrahams stated it well in the introduction of his small book from 1943 entitled "Eight Soviet Composers", published by OUP:

"The problem was posed by the Soviet Government, which treats composers very handsomely but, paying the pipers, insists on its right to call the tunes. Being a government of the people, it insists on music for the people,...."

There were many composers of this ilk, and many of them were extremely fine craftsmen who wrote some of the finest Soviet indoctrinated music in the world. Due to Soviet Russia's inward looking stance these composers developed a unique soundworld of Sovietness that complied with the states "Socialist Realism". Many were copyists or

pastiche composers in that they took the ideals of the orchestration and melodic developmental techniques that Shostakovich, in particular, used and developed, they then took these and turned them into a uniquely Soviet soundworld and concept of composition that we in the West find strange and yet beguiling at the same time.

The most exalted musical form was the Symphony, followed by the String Quartet. All composers in the Soviet Union were expected to portray the nation in a positive, heroic and beautiful way. Gone were the clashes of sound that we in the west were encompassing and experimenting with. Socialistic Historical Struggle was the rigor of the state and this is the ideal behind many of the great Soviet Symphonies. The peoples struggle to overcome adversity and lead the way to a Utopian world of communist ideals. Many of the Symphonies take this as their desired, and then **safest**, option, but also some of the composers set patriotic poems to the Symphonic form praising the ideals of Lenin or Marx or even Stalin. Some took hero's of the state as their extra external models such Yuri Gagarin or workers from one of the factories who had made a great contribution to the struggle for socialism. Some wrote about the beauty of the countryside, but even here they had to be careful that they towed the state line. Most played safe to save their own skins, especially under Stalinism, or face the hell of the Siberian Gulag prisons. These composers were looked upon as lackeys of the state system when the old Soviet system was swept away, not as survivors who did what they had to not to end up in the Gulags. They suffered as did their music, but now many are being rehabilitated in the east and the west and although many of the symphonies are long winded bombastic affairs full of musical symbolism that only the people in the old Soviet Union would have understood many of them have a genuinely original musical viewpoint and soundworld that is well worth exploring and listening to if you get past the politics and Socialist Realist gestural dogmas.



Azerbaijani Landscape

There are many many composers who were unknown in the west but are now only just being heard for the first time. Many from the Ukraine and the southerly states of the Soviet Union such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Khazakistan, Uzbekhistan and Armenia. Not places we associate with Orchestral writing. Many found their musical language in the landscapes of the Asian Steppes and landscapes of their homeland regions, this is so

poignantly portrayed in sound that it is a musical genre in its own right as it is a sub-genre of the Soviet dominated musical ideal.

One of the finest was a composer named Kara Karayev (1918-1982) from Azerbaijan, who studied with Shostakovich. His Symphony No.1 is stunningly atmospheric and takes off from where Shostakovich stopped with his 10th Symphony. This is no mere copy of the great composer but uses the lessons that Karayev had obviously learnt from Shostakovich. In a way it seems that he had learned that to survive the regimes anger and bullying tactics you had to ape Shostakovich's style rather than be totally individual. This is not to say that it is not a beautifully composed and thought out work in this genre for it is unique and entrancing, and if you do enjoy Shostakovich then you will certainly enjoy the plaintive long sweeping melodies and joyous sections to the full.



Kara Karayev

Here are a few names that are well worth looking out for on Youtube or in recordings that are now considered strange or odd due to the recording techniques used out in the satellite states of the Soviet Union where many were recorded. Once you can get past that you come up against some fascinating and breath-taking music that is well worth exploring and enjoying. It stirs the blood or soothes the brow in equal measure in ways much western music has never quite been capable of.

Kara Karayev (Gara Gareyev) - Symphony No.1 "To The Memory of the Heroes of the Great Patriotic War" & Symphony No.4

Andrei Shtogarenko - Symphony No.1 &4

Bogoslovsky - Symphony No.4 "Pastoral"

Vissarion Shebalin - Dramatic Symphony on the Mayakovsky Poem "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin"

Lev Knipper - Any of his Symphonies

Vassily Kalinnikov - Symphony No.2

Ahmed Djevdyet Gadzhiev - Symphony No.4 "In Memory of V.I.Lenin"

Vyacheslov Ovchinnikov - Symphonies 1 & 2

Levon Astvatsatryan - Symphony No.1 "Soviet"

Sultan Gadzhibekov-Symphony No.1
Veselin Stoyanov - Symphony No.1
Gaziza Zhbanova (*one of the few female composers represented her*) Symphony No.1
Levko Kolodub- SymphonyNo.11
Lazarai Ssaminsky - Symphony No.2
Alexander Fliarkovsky - Symphony to Coeval
Vasif Adigezalov - Symphony No.3
Yevgeny Stankovich - Symphony No.3
AlexanderTchaikovsky - Symphony Symphony No.3
Boris Tischenko -Symphonies 4 & 6
Alexander Ajemyon - Symphony No.3
Vladim Salmanov - Symphony
Sulkhon Nazidze -Symphony No.6 "Passione"
Andrei Eshpai – Symphony No.4

Most of these works are on Youtube and not always in great recordings but at least we get an idea of their power and excellent techniques. This list barely scratches the surface of this massive unknown world of fine music. Spend some hours browsing and you are bound to find something of a treasure trove and certainly one or two works that will resound within yourselves. Enjoy.