

November 5, 2000

## MUSIC

### Where Is Russia's New Music? Iowa, That's Where

By RICHARD TARUSKIN

IOWA CITY -- RUSSIANS of a certain age are apt to regard the state of Iowa with slightly mordant nostalgia. Nikita S. Khrushchev passed through during his 1959 official visit to America. He took home some Iowa corn, ordered his collective farmers to grow it, produced a historic crop failure and . . . well, you know the rest.

But that was not the reason 14 Russian composers and musicologists gathered recently for a long weekend at the University of Iowa here. Khrushchev's corn mania was nurtured at Iowa State, which has a famous agricultural college. The Iowa City institution (best known, perhaps, for its Writers' Workshop) has long been distinguished in contemporary-music circles. In 1966, with Rockefeller Foundation money, it set up a Center for New Music, one of the earliest campus performance outlets of its kind.

Now led by David Gompper, an energetic 46-year-old composer, conductor and pianist with an admirably ecumenical world view, the center has undertaken a series of display events to acquaint its audience with the work of composers from foreign countries. In 1998 the favored nation was Greece; in 1999, Austria. The Russian Contemporary Music Festival, with three full-length concerts and a slew of meaty conference sessions, was by far the



David Gompper

The composer Vladimir Tarnopolski and the musicologist Svetlana Savenko at the University of Iowa.

---

#### Forum

- [Classical Music](#)

#### Related Web site

- [University of Iowa Center for New Music](#)
- 



David Gompper

Marina Frolova-Walker, left, and Elena Dubinets, musicologists at the festival.

biggest. Though underbudgeted and virtually unpublicized (hence sadly underattended), it was a fascinating and important event.

Information on what has been happening musically in post-Soviet Russia has been hard to come by. In the late Soviet period, when listening to contemporary music carried a mild cachet of dissidence, it had a popular following at home and an appeal to journalists abroad that the Western avant-garde could never command. As long as the Big Troika of Moscow modernists — Alfred Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina and Edison Denisov (along with the fellow-traveling Estonian, Arvo Pärt) — could be seen as living dangerously, their exploits were widely reported and their every premiere was news. When they began living (or, in the case of Denisov, sojourning) abroad, their proximity further magnified them and virtually hid their contemporaries from view.

Since the Soviet collapse, there has not been an official propaganda machine to bring Russian music to the world's attention, and deteriorating economic conditions have vastly inhibited publication and recording. Unsurprisingly, then, Iowa's Russian festival was a showcase of unknowns. Here is the roster of 16 composers, aged 29 to 70, whose music was performed at the concerts: Vladislav Agafonnikov, Yuri Butsko, Irina Dubkova, Andrei Golovin, Faradzh Karayev, Leonid Karev, Mikhail Kollontay, Nikolai Korndorf, Roman Ledenyov, Vladimir Nikolayev, Olga Rayeva, Dmitri Ryabtsev, Albina Stefanou, Vladimir Tarnopolski, Aleksandr Vustin, Sergei Zagny. How many names did you know? This onlooker, thought to be a specialist in Russian music, knew six. If you knew more, kindly keep it to yourself.

Their work covered a stylistic and ideological range at least as broad as any Western country's, showing that beneath the enforced unanimity of Soviet public life, a rich and varied culture always seethed. Svetlana Savenko, the senior musicologist present, noted with a twinkle that "as in a good supermarket, you can find virtually anything you wish" in Russian music today.

Nor did anybody abruptly change styles on Dec. 25, 1991, the day Mikhail S. Gorbachev called it quits. Ms. Savenko, her twinkle now a bit mischievous, reported that foreign visitors had sometimes expressed surprise at this. But if you laughed at the Fidel Castro surrogate in Woody Allen's "Bananas," who on the day after the revolution announced that his little republic's official language would henceforth be Swedish, you know better. All the collapse of totalitarianism did was level the playing field. A hundred flowers now bloom undisturbed, and also unassisted. It's not better for everyone.

Elena Dubinets, a Russian-trained musicologist now living in Seattle and the festival's co-organizer, emphasized in her opening remarks that the event was "unprecedented in plan and scope." The words had a faint ring of irony; for with plurality come factions, rivalries and mutual antagonisms. One had a strong sense that the Iowa participants could never have been induced to inhabit the same room, let alone share a rostrum, at home.

At first glance, one saw the same factions as everywhere, though in the slightly fossilized variants you might expect to find where a status quo had long been embalmed in amber. There was the senior academic faction that in the West would of course comprise serialists but that here consisted of impressionists, folklorists and neo-classicists: what you would have found in an American music department in the 1950's. There were elite modernists, mostly former pupils and grandpupils of Denisov, whose attitudes somewhat resemble those of the European avant-garde of the 1960's (say, Berio or

Ligeti).

They describe themselves as today's Russian avant-garde, but they are in no sense rebels: they have inherited their seniors' commitment to old-fashioned academic training and despise composers who lack "technique." To find rebels one had to look to a third group, not necessarily younger than the others, who take what might hereabout seem a somewhat faded inspiration from Dada and Cage but also go in for the kind of border-crossings (serious-pop, high- low, art-commerce) associated in the West, if a little jadedly by now, with postmodernism.

Each group has its own niche festival at home. The seniors get played at the Moscow Autumn, which tourists attend and where big-name artists and ensembles perform. The modernists hold forth at the Moscow Forum, which functions as a branch of the International Society for Contemporary Music and maintains contacts with elite modernists abroad. Its performing ensembles, highly professional and specialized, are the ones most comparable to the new-music groups on American campuses. And the rebels have their Alternativa festival, where just about anything goes except Autumn and Forum fare, and where the main performing groups have names like Ad Hoc and 4:33 (after Cage's immortal bout of nothing). Mixed grills like the one savored in Iowa are served, as yet, only in Iowa.

But if you looked a bit below the surface, especially if you did so with some knowledge of Russian music and its checkered history, much more interesting configurations turned up. There were many at the festival who did not want to be looked at this way, especially the Alternativa crowd for whom nationalities were just another border to be crossed. Mr. Zagny, for example, who at 40 still enjoys (in every sense) the reputation of an enfant terrible, was especially vehement in asserting his right to be considered as a human being, not a Russian. Dmitri Ukhov, the Alternativa organizer, sneeringly consigned the "national question" to the museum, his face suggesting that he had a less dignified destination in mind.

No wonder. Nobody likes to be categorized, especially when the category in question is as fraught with stereotypes as that of "Russian composer." Nor was anybody forgetting that displays of national character had been promoted, and at times insisted on, by the Soviet state. Attitudes toward it opened up a yawning generation gap.

Professor Ledenyov, of the Moscow Conservatory, the oldest composer present, serenely maintained the old Soviet line, asserting that "there exists a Russian school of composers" characterized by "a conglomerate of certain features peculiar to this national culture and its folk music." He even claimed that Moscow and St. Petersburg schools could still be defined just the way they had been in the 19th century (St. Petersburg being "theatrical" and Moscow having "profound psychologism").

The piece he presented to demonstrate his relationship to the living national traditions he described, "Metamorphoses" for viola and chamber orchestra, was attractively lyrical and moody, and did incline more toward the psychological than to the showy. But it was based on a theme by Bach ("Erbarme dich," from the "St. Matthew Passion") and made side references to Schumann, Chopin, Mozart, "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" and bossa nova. Go figure.

The headiest moment at the festival came when Marina Frolova-Walker, a musicologist less than half Professor Ledenyov's age, trained at his conservatory but now teaching at Cambridge University in England, got up to

inveigh against everything he had said. She denied that there ever was any such thing as Russian music, only music from Russia, and hinted that to maintain a nationalistic view of culture was to espouse a reactionary view of society. There were overtones here not only of Russia's eternal identity crisis but also of the mutual suspicions that have always colored relations, in the 20th century, between Russians at home and Russians abroad.

Yet even advocates of the avant-garde occasionally cited nationality as a determinant of style. Ms. Dubinets distinguished Russian minimalism from its Western counterpart. "Minimalism can be oriented not only to commercial accessibility," she said. "It can be very lyrical, sensitive, suffering and compassionate. It can touch the soul and disturb the subconscious." Ms. Frolova-Walker would no doubt call this a salad of clichés. (And not only she: the Russian artist Serge Soudeikine once exclaimed that his mission in life was "to show the world that the Russian can also be gay.") But if a cliché, however disprovable, is accepted by artists and embodied in their art, then it has indeed become a stylistic determinant. And the art it determines is in no way necessarily condemned to banality.

A CASE in point is Mr. Korndorf's "Hymn II," one of the few works presented at the festival that is available on CD (from Sony Classical, with the BBC Orchestra directed by Aleksandr Lazarev). This gleaming piece is recognizably minimalist in its radically reduced material, but the composer said that he had modeled it on the solemn doxologies of the Russian Orthodox Church. And its liturgical character derives not only from actual liturgical sources but also, and at least as much, from the familiar Russian glory-music of the concert and opera stages. (Imagine Gorecki arranged by Rimsky-Korsakov, or a diatonic "Poem of Ecstasy.") One can believe that such a synthesis would have occurred only to a Russian composer without buying into the biology-is-destiny mystique of nationalism.

Resonances of more ancient Orthodox music could be found in other festival offerings, providing an avenue, for those desiring it, toward a genuinely national modernism or modern nationalism. In its pious archaism it proclaims its freedom from the constraints of a more recent past, and it crosscuts generations, uniting Mr. Butsko, one of the oldest composers represented at the festival, and Mr. Karev, one of the youngest. Much of their music (and not only theirs) is based on an imaginative extension of a scale peculiar to medieval Russian chant, credited to Mr. Butsko.

The scale contains both B natural in its low tessitura and B flat in its higher one. The extension incorporates all the notes of the chromatic scale into an evolving tonal structure that picks up flats as it ascends and sharps as it descends. The piquant, very original harmonic idiom that emerges from it can be sampled on CD's in Schnittke's Fourth Symphony, a work inspired by Mr. Butsko's "Polyphonic Concerto" for organ, piano, harpsichord and celesta, from which Mr. Karev, a Russian organist (rare breed!) who lives and works in Paris, performed some excerpts with Mr. Ryabtsev joining in at the piano. It is one of the exasperating vagaries of fame that Schnittke is usually given credit for inventing the mode.

Another area in which today's Russian avant-garde works in high consciousness of national traditions, perhaps unexpectedly, is that of electro-acoustical music. As Mr. Ukhov was at pains to point out, the genre has a longer history in Russia than almost anywhere else. It was 80 years ago that Lev Sergeyevich Termen (known in the West as Leon Theremin) invented the dual-antennaed sound-emitter that bears his name, the only musical instrument one plays without touching.

Composers who heard the theremin in the 1920's were often struck by its possibilities. The sounds it produced "between the fixed pitches and tone colors" of conventional concert music revealed to Ernst Toch "a true new vista that Theremin lays open to the composer of music, still incalculable in its consequences." But that promise long went unfulfilled. Theremin himself, scientifically gifted but musically unimaginative, thought of his instrument as a sort of modernized violin or cello, on which he played salon gems like Saint-Saëns's "Swan." His protégée Clara Rockmore mastered Bloch's "Schelomo." By the 1930's, John Cage could write in disgust that "thereminists act as censors, giving the public those sounds they think the public will like; we are shielded from new sound experiences."

It was exciting, then, when Mr. Ukhov produced a tape of Vladimir Nikolayev's "19 Piques" for theremin and string quartet, performed by Lydia Kavina, the inventor's grandniece, at "ALT-2K," this year's Alternativa festival. A thing of feral glissandos and haunting microtones, it finally kept the broken promise of long ago and made the dowdy old theremin (long since consigned to sci-fi soundtracks and rock backups in the West) seem again an instrument of real — indeed, inspiring — possibilities.

But the biggest impression of all (and on all) came from Vladimir Tarnopolski, a world-class talent by any standard. Now 45, Mr. Tarnopolski is an emblematic figure, having been appointed to the Moscow Conservatory's composition faculty in 1992, the first post-Soviet year. Widely acknowledged at home (along with Aleksandr Knaifel of St. Petersburg) as the standard-bearer for Russia's elite modernists, he was given pride of place at the festival. Two of his major works were presented. An opera, "When Time Overflows Its Banks," was shown on videotape in a performance given last year in German at the Munich Biennale, which commissioned it. "Cassandra," a 20-minute composition for a large chamber ensemble (or small orchestra) of 19 players, was put over brilliantly by a valiant band of students and faculty members from the University's School of Music under Mr. Gompper's expert baton.

BOTH were scorching, moving experiences. In "Cassandra," the titular tone of dire prophecy is conveyed by a mounting sonic wave that comes up against cacophonous obstacles in the form of stridently repeated chords and clusters. The work would have had a powerful effect under any circumstances, but knowing that it was written in the spring and summer of 1991, during the time of foreboding that led up to the aborted August putsch, lent it the kind of special poignancy that Shostakovich's works often possess when they are apprehended in their historical context. (It is recorded, along with three other Tarnopolski scores, on a Belgian CD, Megadisc MDC 7838, which is hard to find in America but may be ordered online through [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk), the British Amazon Web site.)

The opera has a similarly obsessive and intensifying shape. Its three scenes are parallel constructions. The first, an abstraction from Chekhov's "Three Sisters" in which the characters typically converse without hearing one another, is followed by a second, in which people today (played by the same singers) are shown discoursing incomprehensibly about art, and a third, in which the same characters reappear once again as people of the future, each confined to a plastic tube, enunciating isolated phonemes accompanied by primal sonic soup from the orchestra. The composer's purpose, as he reported it, was to lay bare "the existential problems of man," namely "the impossibility of communication and of mutual understanding, loneliness and absence of a sense of life," which "are not solved but are redoubled in the course of the development of civilization."

The Sartrean or Beckettish message may strike the Western ear as dated, but the music and the dramaturgy were fresh, gripping and so virtuosically executed as to disarm sophisticated cavil. Besides, there was, as it turned out, a charming disconnect between the art and the artist. When discussion following Ms. Frolova-Walker's paper turned vehement and time ran out, it was Mr. Tarnopolski who suggested that an extra round table be scheduled for the sake of better communication and mutual understanding. When it was pointed out to him that he seemed, after all, to believe in what his opera denied, he answered, ingenuously, "Well, I'm an optimist."

Why, then, such a pessimistic opera? Could it be because the composer had grown up in, and learned to resist, a society that demanded that all art be optimistic to the point of mendacity? Big questions are looming, and my space is up. But the most fortifying thought one took away from the Iowa festival was that in the former land of the Soviets there can now be questions without answers.

**Copyright 2000 The New York Times company**