

Tikhon Khrennikov: The Victories and Defeats of Soviet Music

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This year (2013) marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of one of the greatest Soviet composers – Tikhon Khrennikov: the winner of three Stalin prizes, and also of Lenin and State prizes; Hero of Socialist Labour, People’s Artist of the USSR. Khrennikov was a master of classical music, of the so-called “large forms” – the tradition that has now turned, at best, into a narrow elite club of intellectuals and professional composers, if not dead at all within the West and the so-called “rebuilt” nations of the former Socialist bloc. Yet, he has also succeeded in the popular, the so-called “light”, genre, – and also in the genre of music for the movies, including the most famous ones such as “The Shepherd and the Pig Farmer”, “Devoted Friends”, “Hussar ballad”, etc.

Khrennikov’s compositions are masterpieces of Soviet Song that can be found in any Soviet Song collection. However, for those who are simply the fans of Soviet music, inexperienced in musical criticism, Khrennikov, in this respect, can be just “one of the many”: we can put him on par with such masters of “light genre” as V. Solovyov-Sedoy, M. Blanter, E. Rodygin, B. Mokrousov, D. Kabalevsky, G. Ponomarenko, M. Fradkin, N. Bogoslovsky, V. Basner, V. Pushkov, G. Fere, M. Tabachnikov, E. Kolmanovskii, K. Molchanov, Y. Frenkel, A. Eshpay, A. Lepin, K. Listov, V. Muradeli, A. Novikov, E. Zharkovsky, G. Nosov, E. Ptichkin, S. Tulikov, O. Felzman, A. Flyarkovsky, R. Shchedrin, B. Terentyev, V. Shainskiy, A. Pakhmutova, A. Ostrovsky; and, probably, just below such “monsters” of instrumental genre as Dunayevsky, Petrov or Tariverdiev. More experienced critics note, nevertheless, that his style has had a distinct feature – so to speak, a high degree of perfection according to some aesthetical standards (we will explain later what standards are meant here). This could be one of the reasons why Stalin became interested in Khrennikov so much as to offer him to lead the Union of Soviet Composers at the age of 35. As for the traditional classical genre of music – here we would put Khrennikov on a par with such masters as Kabalevsky and Khachaturian (though below Sviridov or Shostakovich). As we can see, Khrennikov was so diverse that it was not a problem for him to excel in any of the musical genres.

Composer of the Bright Future of the Heroic Age

The very human character of Tikhon Khrennikov represents the typical ideal of the period: a quiet and reserved man, with a passionate and temperamental inside: something that you can see, for example, in the unmatched singing of his “Why the heart is stirred so much” by A. F. Borisov from the “Devoted Friends” movie, or in Khrennikov’s own part played in the “Eastward Train” film. In his work, “...the composer has happily sailed past all the sharp corners and the seemingly inevitable influences. He skirted Shostakovich’s dangerous tragicism; did without the Americanist blues by Dunayevsky; without having dropped to the illiterate trash motivated by material interest, and having rid the style of his arrogant idol, Sergey Prokofiev, of any plaque of modernism. The result was a vigorous, subjected to the rhythmical genre (the waltz, the polka, and then suddenly a slip of bolero) and, in general, very good music, designed to demonstrate the

Soviet optimism, the Soviet composer's quality and the limitless possibilities of Soviet artists"¹. "Khrennikov features some special rosy-cheeked optimism of a citizen of a country which is well-fed and relaxed – the one that we all have heard of but barely visited for the whole of seventy years.... He was the only one who could create the music of a nonexistent state in the cherished "bright future"².

The essence of this "rosy-cheeked optimism" by Khrennikov cannot be fully understood without an adequate study of some of the works by his Heroic Age contemporaries – such as, for example, the works by Lyubov Orlova, a "marching enthusiast" lady (by Khrennikov's own confession, she was the one for whom he wrote his famous tune of "Moscow Windows" in 1956). Given all the ambiguity (Hollywood charm, aristocratic grooming, etc.), the actress's type is usually described as "the man of modern times, energetic, optimistic, charming, stepping tenaciously into the bright present and the future with a smile"; a diverse personality who is singing professionally, playing piano, dancing, doing various sports (up to performing stunts); cheerful in a good sense of the word, Khrennikov himself. "In four years, there will be a garden city here", "and the gardens will bloom even on Mars" – these lines from Soviet songs serve as the main leitmotif of the "Heroic age" which generated Khrennikov as a composer. It should also be noted that Khrennikov was not at all pompous in his heroic pathos, but he was lyrical: this clearly distinguishes him from some "handicraft experts" within the "Cult of Personality" movement who perished from the history of music, similarly to the destiny of those bureaucrats who participated in the "movement".

Khrennikov's first symphony was written in 1935, and it was followed by two operas: "Mother" (based on Gorky's novel) and "In the Storm" (dedicated to the theme of struggle against Antonov's revolt). Stalin himself visited the premiere of the latter: according to Khrennikov himself, he was greatly inspired by "this attention by the government and party leadership to a young composer's opera".

Patriotic policies pursued by the Soviet government in face of the war are well known (remember the pre-war movies such as "Alexander Nevsky", "Minin and Pozharsky", etc.): it was the time when the desperate romanticism of patriotic struggle united with the rational optimism of the struggle for the socialist society and the communist future of mankind; the Soviet music (including Khrennikov) has done much to add to this "explosive mixture". Let us recall, for example, Khrennikov's music for the theatre performances, such as "The Soldier from the Front", "Don Quixote", "Once upon a time" (by Gladkov – 1942), and the others. The degree of faith and fortitude prompted and inspired by the Soviet pre-war culture has no parallel in history. Let us remember some accounts by the Hitlerite bandits:

"During the attack, we stumbled into a Russian T-26 light tank, and immediately clicked on it right out of our 37-mm gun... As we were approaching it, a Russian with a pistol leaned out of the tower hatch and opened fire on us. It soon became clear that he was without legs: those were severed off when the tank was hit. And despite that, he showered us with bullets from his gun!..." "Such things will not be believed until you see them. Red Army soldiers, while burning alive, continued to fire bullets from inside the blazing homes...." Such courage, fanatical as it may

¹ E. Biryukova. "Music for Children and Youth": "News Time", 38, March 2, 2001

² Michail Fikhtengolts. "Music of the Bright Future", "Izvestia", March 2, 2001.

seem in a predominantly atheistic (by that time) country, cannot be fully understood without comprehending all the power of combining national liberation romanticism, – in particular, the one expressed in the “Hussar Ballad” by Khrennikov, – with the tradition of the proletarian struggle. Khrennikov, being in the army throughout much of the war, continued in the same patriotic tradition: he wrote songs for the soldiers, performed in front of them, and brought Lenin’s banner together with them to Berlin. The most popular among his military works is the “March of the Artillery”.

Stalin’s musical mayor

Brought to the position of the Chairman of the Union of Soviet Composers by the ruling party in 1948, Khrennikov was obliged to carry out the Party line in music: to reincarnate, translate it from the Marxist language to the language of musicology. It had to be done, of course, first and foremost in the classical genre, for the classical and folk genres are the traditions that ultimately determine the rest of the music (it should be noted that during the Stalin era, Khrennikov had many masters of Russian folk genre on the board of the Union of Composers, though this is a topic for a separate article). Directed by the Central Committee, Khrennikov criticized the formalism of some individual works by Shostakovich and Prokofiev; there were “minor” criticism campaigns: for example, the critique of the young composer Alexander Lokshin based on wording by P. Apostolov (musicologist and ideologist of the Central Committee) in 1949. A “campaign against cosmopolitanism among musicologists” was carried out during the same year; it is often stated, however, that it was Khrennikov himself who “procured the Stalin Prize for the same people”, that is, for Shostakovich and Prokofiev; in our opinion, it is done purely to denigrate Stalin, as it is hard to believe that the latter “condescended” to Shostakovich and Prokofiev only thanks to the efforts by Khrennikov, while himself having no reason to appreciate the works of the authors of the “Leningrad Symphony” and the “Dance by the Knights”.^[1]

“Stalin” – says T. N. Khrennikov in an interview with the patriotic newspaper “Tomorrow” – “understood music better than any one of us”. Perhaps, Khrennikov exaggerates here; look, for example, into the memoirs of the writer K. Simonov where he points out how cautious Stalin was in his statements about culture (literature in particular) – he made them only after numerous meetings with the writers, after listening to them carefully, analyzing their opinions, etc. Yet, the fact remains that the party leadership of those times was exclusively attentive to the problem of cultural development of socialism; while the musical culture, its main element that has a huge potential impact on the masses, was given special attention.

It was required to interpret music from the standpoint of true materialism, to determine its origins and base, to lead it through all obstacles without breaking away from the elements of human culture which it rests upon – without letting it turn into a formal set of characters, into strange noise; but also not to ossify within the established schemes, unable to evolve and adapt to changes in technology, culture, language and other social phenomena.

“In the USSR, as in the classical ancient Greece, – confirms T. N. Khrennikov, – music was a major state business. The spiritual influence of major composers and performers in creating intelligent and strong-willed people, primarily through the radio, was tremendous”. From the very first days of the power of the Soviets, the state leadership and the advanced cultural layers

of the country addressed the problem of the development of a new culture in which “the reality is shown in its progressive development, in its movement from the present to the future, within the revolutionary transformation of the world”³. And it was impossible to do it without a thorough dialectical rethinking of the entire past of musical culture.

Music had to reflect, by means of musical instruments, the objective material world (the world of voices, the expressiveness of the human speech, the rhythm of human activity – primarily labour, including military activity, etc. etc.); to continue the tradition of Russian melodism (melody had to be suitable for continuous singing); to reflect the new world, and not the one that was rotting or dying. The music, like the party, had to dialectically combine within itself the popular, people’s nature (Khrennikov, by the way, strictly avoided any fame while living most modestly – as the principal chief of music, he never owned a car except in 1945 when he drove the one donated to him by General Chuikov from Germany) with the experience gained by the privileged classes throughout history of the class society; and, above all, with the revolutionary experience: the great classical heritage had to be examined on the subject of what was historically limited and what was not; it had to be done without looking at any authority in music.[2] Music had to be a “member of the party” in the true sense of this word: popular by content within the developed forms of art, where those forms were applicable to the content of the folk art; it had to reflect, in its development, the permanent progress within the advanced sections of the working class, the peasantry, and the new intelligentsia – the masses that had been cut off previously from all the riches accumulated by human civilization, yet quickly learning and surpassing this wealth at the time; the development of music, at the same time, had to follow the development of social consciousness – while carrying it forward and not letting it linger within the naked realism that only describes the current situation of things. Availability of the composer's language for the masses had to be combined with the advanced spirit based on the best of all the developed forms, and at the same time combined with the truly major task of the art – spiritual mobilization for the construction of a new society and for the heroic, unprecedentedly stoical, deadly, yet competent, noble, sublime struggle for the very right to continue this construction. Ultimately, the works of socialist realism had to be life-affirming in their reflection of the social practice by the classes and strata who owned the future.

Any leader of the Composers’ Union, including Khrennikov, had to face the problem of the adjustment of Soviet musical practice on the basis of the above-mentioned principles. For example, it was necessary to navigate Soviet music between two reefs (deviations). The first one, “vulgar sociological”, – while claiming to create “proletarian music”, – in practice, treated the concept of proletariat in the old capitalist way – as a class deprived of opportunities to learn from the heights of human culture, and thus indifferent to the composer’s skill and able to perceive only a limited, primitive circle of musical images. Originating in the 1920s, this approach posed no real threat to Soviet music by 1948 – in the aftermath of the unprecedented rise of cultural standards amongst Soviet public. However, this does not apply to the latter deviation, closely associated with the international struggle between the two ideologies: bourgeois and socialist.[3]

Russian classical music has always had strong ties with the musical traditions of Western Europe, creatively breaking their light through its national identity. That was her strength, and that became her weakness. As long as the vector of development of capitalism in Europe did not

³ Y. Kremlyov, “Aesthetic Problems of Soviet Music”, p. 8.

slow consistently down, this symbiosis spawned brilliant results, putting Russian music in a leading position in the world. But as soon as the Western society started to creep into a general crisis of the capitalist mode of production, the situation began to change dramatically. Modernist art that reflected the doom of the capitalist reality (or even an escape from reality into abstract forms) by artistic means, was consistently losing the gains acquired by the classical art. Trends of modernism, already noticeable in the works of Debussy, reached their apogee in the artistic method of the “Viennese School”. Having gone through A. Berg’s expressionism, A. Schoenberg’s constructivism, and the abstractionism by Anton Webern, classical music, deprived of its humanistic orientation and the tonal organisational system, as an art ceased to exist.

In the aftermath of the revolution the best representatives of Soviet music, while traditionally evolving in a constant dialogue with European musical culture, could not avoid the passion for cultural modernism. Modernism, with all its will towards the individualistic personality, nerve-irritating naturalism and sexuality, infected such deep and originally gifted artists as Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian and many others. Young Khrennikov also could not escape a passion for modernism. His first works – a symphony and a piano concerto – have, along with powerful realistic tendencies, a modicum of modernist originality; and, according to the opinion of the critics – supporters of modernist aesthetics, quite talented one. The more valuable is the fact that Khrennikov, already at that time, made a confident choice in favour of realism on his own: his very first opera – “In the Storm” – is a bright and talented proof.

It is often believed that in the aftermath of the death of Stalin, – when various “Marxist” dogmatists such as A. N. Yakovlev, who subsequently (in the 1970s) became persecutors of the ideological communists, went on “free-all” – Khrennikov, according to some sources, used his administrative position to ‘save’ hundreds of musicians and composers from the so-called “repressions”, such as the baiting “Sinyavsky and Daniel case” in the sphere of literature; it has to be understood, of course, that the terms “repression” and “harassment” are often used by the oligarchic lackeys and the servants of the bazaar art to denote any criticism of art from the progressive positions. It is possible to believe that those so-called “Sharikovs of Marxism” simply did not understand anything in the musical sphere, as compared to other spheres of art, although it was often enough to go straight ahead with the “party line” – that had occurred in earlier times, too, compensated only by the revolutionism and comprehensive literacy of such senior ideological managers as Zhdanov.

Interesting facts indicate that the party campaigns never were “child massacres” as it is often thought: reading through the documents, once can see that composers actively protected themselves in the discussions, and that the degree of democracy during the meetings was incomparably high by modern standards. The “Sharikovs” of those days behaved very humbly compared to the Czarist or modern officials and bosses. At the same time, we should not indeed underestimate Khrennikov’s role as a fine diplomat and man who not only understood a lot about music and was never inclined to give up his principled positions, – which is also why, in the end, Stalin put him in charge of the Union. One should also note Khrennikov’s role as an excellent organizer and a caring, friendly, attentive manager and economist who was never limited to the ideological aspects of that work on the highest musical post. “Tisha will sort everything out” – that is what composers often said.

Khrennikov and the degeneration of Soviet music

Since the late 1950s, many representatives of the Stalin-Zhdanov's version of socialist realism school of art have gone from Soviet patriotism infected by Marxist aesthetics, and via just Soviet patriotism, towards patriotism that was "Soviet" in words but anti-Soviet in reality. Does that refer to Tikhon Khrennikov as well? Well, let us analyze the facts.

After the 20th Party Congress, with the weakening of true socialist tendencies in the development of Soviet society, modernist trends in the composition increased significantly. Without qualified support from the Party leadership and minds, Khrennikov could fight only against extreme cases of modernism in the creative practice. The avant-garde trends in the writings of Soviet composers were not restrained and started to grow like a snowball. This circumstance led eventually to the fact that modernist aesthetics started to be considered as a norm; respectively, the principles of socialist realism were pushed to the periphery of the artistic life of Soviet society and marginalised. It is significant to say that with regard to works by Tikhon Nikolayevich Khrennikov, modernist trends, too, begin to displace realistic orientation with time.[4] If we compare, for example, his instrumental concertos, – their imagery and musical language are evolving from the cheerfulness and clarity to the modernist alienation and complexity of the language: <http://classic-online.ru/ru/listen/74120> – Early (1959), a violin concerto and later (1975) <http://classic-online.ru/ru/listen/74124>

Yet, whatever current Marxists may say about Khrennikov's aesthetical perfectness that was waning alongside the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, he always was an ideological Soviet patriot, and a social realist who never composed any song to praise one of the leaders, and began to roll onto the position of musical modernism only after the full withdrawal of the party from the principles of Marxist aesthetics. He did not give up his positions after a sharp turn in the direction of the CPSU apparatus towards final restoration of capitalism in the USSR. "I consider" – said T. Khrennikov in an interview with "Tomorrow" – "Gorbachev and his followers as traitors to the party and the people, who intentionally arranged the persecution of Soviet art."

Having governed Soviet music (including the Tchaikovsky Competition) for more than 40 years, Khrennikov was forced to resign in December 1991 – when the state, its budget and all structures disintegrated. The 78-year-old master shut the door of his office with the words: "That's it, now I have nothing to do here anymore". Nevertheless, he led an active artistic life in Moscow even after the restoration of capitalist relations. Back in the early 2000s, he could often be seen in theatres – and he was the greatest fan of the theatre, – at concerts, etc. T. N. Khrennikov died at the age of 94, narrowly missing his last "plan" – to hold on to 96. The monument to the outstanding composer stands in his hometown of Yelets since the time when Master was still alive.

Endnotes:

[1] In fact, the campaign was not without serious overlaps: for example, the Chief Repertoire Committee (GlavRepertCom), amid the battle against modernism, cancelled the performance of a number of works by Shostakovich: The Piano Concerto, 8th and 9th Symphonies, and some

others. There is evidence that in 1949 Stalin, on his own initiative, called Shostakovich, and he was very surprised and outraged by the zealous officials; after that, the ban was lifted, and Shostakovich as the leading Soviet composer was sent abroad as part of a cultural delegation.

[2] For example, the artistic tradition that comes from a rebellious, full of contradictions, creativity by Beethoven, is more valuable for socialist art than the tradition that is going on from the other pillar of German music – Bach. His contemplation and poise matches the spirit of the era of construction of a new society to a lesser extent (which, of course, does not bring his works into “second-grade”, as the ideologues of the “vulgar sociological” would try to present it. Here the main thing is the choice of the main path of development of socialist music). At the same time, not all Beethoven’s elements are equivalent from the standpoint of Marxist aesthetics: just like the works by his great contemporary – Hegel – Beethoven’s music, thoroughly imbued with instinctive dialectics, sometimes lacks specificity in its expression. The Thoughts of the Master were occasionally expressed through several scholastic forms inherited from a different cultural epoch. Beethoven’s followers created a form that reflected the early days of the “socialization of mankind” to a greater extent – the “programme music”. Yet, having brought music back to the life of popular masses, Schubert, Schumann, Wagner and other romantic composers lost the power and pathos of Beethoven’s dialectics to a significant extent. Apparently, the primary task of the Soviet musical culture was (and still is) to combine Beethoven’s principles of the dialectical development of music with the democratism of forms used by the romantics.

[3] There is documentary evidence that clearly indicates that this fight was supervised by the secret services of imperialist states – like the financial and informational support that was given to the avant-garde art in its most nihilistic, cynical, idealistic, non-objective, apolitical, introspective, socially-detached forms.

[4] It should be mentioned that, despite all the modernist distortions, Soviet music kept up the mighty realist potential until the victory of the bourgeois counter-revolution. A large number of true masterpieces of mass song were created in the 1960-80s; remarkable results had been achieved in the music for the movies: for example, such an (already) classical work by Georgy Sviridov as the “Blizzard”. Even such a recognized leader of Soviet avant-garde as Alfred Schnittke also wrote very expressive, intelligible music for various films: let us recall, for example, the memorable, full of drama, “soundtrack” from the movie “Hot Snow”.

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