

Against Formalistic Tendencies in Soviet Music

Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party, Against Formalistic Tendencies in Soviet Music. February 10, 1948

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The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party considers the opera GREAT FRIENDSHIP (Music by Vano Muradeli, Libretto by G. Mdivani) produced at the Bolshoi Theatre of the USSR on the Thirtieth Anniversary of the October Revolution to be vicious and inartistic in both its music and its subject matter.

The basic defects of the opera lie first of all in the music. The music is feeble and inexpressive. It contains not a single melody or aria to be remembered. It is confused and disharmonious, built on complicated dissonances, on combinations of sound that grate upon the ear. Some lines and scenes with pretensions to melodiousness are suddenly broken by discordant noises wholly strange to the normal human ear and oppressive to the listener. Between the musical accompaniment and the development of the action on the stage there is no organic connection. The vocal part of the opera—the choral, solo, and ensemble singing—produces a miserable impression. As a result of all this, the potentialities of the orchestra and the singers are not exploited.

The composer has not made use of the wealth of folk melodies, songs, tunes, and dance motifs in which the creative life of the people of the USSR is so rich, and especially the creative life of the peoples of the North Caucasus where the action of the opera is laid.

In the pursuit of a false “originality” in music, the composer, Muradeli, has neglected the best traditions and the experience of the classic opera in general and Russian classic opera in particular, which is distinguished by inner substance, by richness of melody and breadth of diapason, by popularity of appeal, by grace, beauty, and clarity of musical form. These characteristics have made Russian opera the best in the world, a species of music loved by and comprehensible to the wide masses of the people.

The plot of the opera, which pretends to portray the struggle for the establishment of Soviet power and friendship of peoples in the North Caucasus in 1918-21, is historically false and fictitious. The opera creates the erroneous impression that the peoples of the Caucasus, such as the Georgians and the Ossetians, were at that time hostile to the Russian people. This is historically false. It was the Ingush and Chechen who opposed the establishment of friendship among peoples of the North Caucasus at that time.

The Central Committee of the Party holds that the failure of Muradeli’s opera is the result of the formalistic path which he has followed—a path which is false and injurious to the creative work of the Soviet composer.

The conference of Soviet musicians, conducted by the Central Committee of the Party, showed that the failure of Muradeli's opera is not an isolated case. It is closely linked with the unsatisfactory state of contemporary Soviet music, with the spread of a formalistic tendency among Soviet composers.

As far back as 1936, in connection with the appearance of Dmitrii Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, *Pravda*, the organ of the Central Committee of the Party, subjected to sharp criticism the anti-popular formalistic perversions in his music and exposed the harm and danger of this tendency to the future of Soviet music. Writing then on instructions from the Central Committee of the Party, *Pravda* formulated clearly the Soviet people's requirements of their composers.

Notwithstanding these warnings, and also in spite of instructions given by the Central Committee of the Party in its decisions on the journals *ZVEZDA* and *LENINGRAD*, on the moving picture *A GREAT LIFE*, and on the repertoire of the dramatic theatres, no reorganization took place in Soviet music. The individual successes of some Soviet composers in the creation of widely popular songs, in the composition of music for the cinema, and so on, do not alter the general situation.

The state of affairs is particularly bad in the field of symphonic and operatic music. The question at issue concerns composers who adhere to the formalistic anti-popular tendency. The very fullest expression of this tendency is found in the works of such composers as Dmitrii Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, Aram Khachaturian, Vissarion Shebalin, G. Popov, N. Miaskovskii, and others whose compositions represent most strikingly the formalistic perversions and antidemocratic tendencies in music which are alien to the Soviet people and their artistic tastes.

The characteristic marks of this music are the negation of the basic principles of classic music: the cult of atonality, the dissonance and discord supposedly expressive of "progress" and "novelty" in the development of musical form; the rejection of such a vital principle of musical composition as melody; and enthusiasm for confused, neuropathological combinations which transform music into cacophony, into a chaotic medley of sounds. This music reeks strongly of the odor of the contemporary, modernistic, bourgeois music of Europe and America which reflects the decay of bourgeois culture, the total negation, the impasse of musical art.

The formalistic tendency in Soviet music had bred in a section of Soviet composers a one-sided enthusiasm for complex forms of instrumental symphonic textless music and a disdainful attitude toward such musical forms as opera, choral music, for small orchestras, for national instruments, vocal ensembles, and so on. The inevitable result of all of this is that the foundations of vocal culture and dramatic artistry will be lost and that composers will forget how to write for the people. Evidence of this is the fact that not a single Soviet opera on the level of the Russian classical operas has been written in recent times.

The loss of contact with the people by some Soviet composers has resulted in the propagation of the putrid “theory” that the failure of the people to understand the music of many Soviet composers is due to the fact that the people are not yet sufficiently “mature” to understand their complex music, that they will understand it centuries to come, and that the lack of popular appeal of certain musical works is nothing to worry about. This thoroughly individualistic and fundamentally anti-popular theory has still further encouraged some composers and musical critics to draw off from the people, from the criticism of the Soviet public, and to retire into their shells.

The cultivation of these and similar views brings the greatest harm to Soviet musical art. A tolerant attitude toward such views indicates the presence among representatives of Soviet musical culture of alien tendencies which lead to a blind alley in the development of music, to the liquidation of musical art.

The vicious anti-popular formalistic tendency in Soviet music also has a baleful influence on the preparation and education of young composers in our conservatories and, first of all, in the Moscow Conservatory (the Director of which is V. Shebalin) where the formalistic tendency is dominant. Respect for the best traditions of Russian and Western classical music is not inculcated in the students, and love for popular creative art and democratic musical forms is not nurtured in them. The work of many students in the conservatories is a blind imitation of the music of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and others.

The Central Committee of the Party finds the state of Soviet musical criticism utterly intolerable. The opponents of Russian realistic music, the partisans of decadent and formalistic music, hold a leading position among the critics. They interpret every new composition by Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Miaskovskii, or Shebalin as a “new conquest of Soviet music.” They glorify the subjectivism, the constructivism, the extreme individualism, and the technical complexity of the language of this music, that is, precisely everything that should be subjected to criticism. Instead of smashing views and theories harmful and alien to the principles of socialist realism, musical criticism assists in the spread of these views by praising and proclaiming “advanced” those composers who in their work share erroneous creative purposes.

Musical criticism has ceased to express the judgment of Soviet society, the judgment of the people, and has been converted into a speaking trumpet for individual composers. Some music critics, instead of giving objective criticism based on principle, have taken to humoring and fawning on these or those leaders and praising their creative genius to the skies, for reasons of personal friendship.

All of this means that some Soviet composers, nourished on the influence of contemporary decadent West European and American music, have not yet shaken off the vestiges of bourgeois ideology.

The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party resolves:

1. To condemn the formalistic tendency in Soviet music as against the people and as leading actually to the liquidation of music.
2. To propose to the Administration of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee and the Committee on the Arts that they endeavor to correct the situation in Soviet music, liquidate the shortcomings set forth in the present resolution of the Central Committee, and ensure the development of Soviet music in the direction of realism.
3. To call upon Soviet composers to become aware of the lofty demands made on musical art by the Soviet people, to clear away everything that weakens our music and hampers its development, to ensure that upsurge of creative work which will advance Soviet musical culture rapidly and lead to the creation of finished works of high quality, worthy of the Soviet people, in every branch of music.
4. To approve organizational measures of the appropriate Party and Soviet organs directed toward the improvement of musical affairs.

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