

Music and the Epoch of Socialism

L.F. Boross

Moscow, March 15th 1936

Let us consider music for a while. Not because there is ‘nothing else to talk about,’ and that, therefore, owing to a temporary lack of more vital matters, we are compelled to fall back upon such a subject – of no apparent political importance.

Such is not the case. First, because, in this country of Socialism, there is never a lack of subjects of importance – every hour, one might say, events occur which merit our attention and recording. And, second, because music is important and has become a matter of the highest political importance to the people of this land. The discussion which has been proceeding, with regard to the direction of development of musical creative work is not confined within the narrow limits of purely musical circles, of musical journals and those columns of the press customarily devoted to musical criticism. On the contrary, large numbers of the people of this country have been participating in this discussion.

The ruling people – who already are in closest personal and creative contact with their poets, writers and scientists; whose factories and collective farms provide the most sympathetic and agreeable meeting – places for poets, writers and scientists; and out of whose reservoir of power new poets, writers and scientists have arisen – are now about to conquer the domain of music.

To millions of workers and collective farmers, nowadays, the concertos of Bach, the symphonies of Mozart or of Beethoven, the operatic music of Tchaikovsky and the lieder of Schubert, are as familiar as are the poems of Pushkin, Heine and Mayakovsky, the dramas of Shakespeare or Schiller, or the novels of Tolstoy, Romain Rolland, Sholokhov and others, as well as that rich new literature now being produced by writers in the Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Tadjik, Tartar or other tongues.

The people of the Soviet land is now assimilating classical music with the same mastery and driving urge towards the varied beauty of life as it has the classics of literature. And it desires not only the creations of the past, but has become sufficiently mature to possess its own music, music which shall be ‘worthy of the greatness and joyousness of the victories of Socialism.’

So spoke the great slogan on the wall of the Moscow Conservatoire, when, on March 1, between 1,500 and 2,000 workers, of the Kalinin metal works, gathered for a discussion with the best known of the Moscow composers in order to exchange opinions regarding the present tasks of musical composition.

The demand for the Socialist development of the art of music, and for raising it to higher levels, has become a genuine demand of the people. And, as is the case with all the demands of the people, the Communist Party and press also adopted the demand. The struggle has begun, then, for the new music – the music of the epoch of Socialism.

Surely never before did an epoch of musical creation rest upon so broad a basis? Upon the very day when the conference took place, between the workers of an entire factory and this large group of composers, I came across the following items in the daily paper:

‘A conservatoire has just been opened in the village of Mali-Viska, in the Odessa District. For the present, the conservatoire has two subjects: piano and singing. Sixty-five children belonging to collective farmers and workers of the Machine-Tractor Station, are studying there.’

‘The Tambov Musical High School has assumed patronage over a number of neighbouring collective farms. Musical instruction is to be provided for those men and women of the farms who are interested, assistance will be given to their amateur musical societies, and concerts and lectures on music will be arranged, to be given in the actual villages.’

‘In Tashkent, on February 26, the first performance took place of a new Uzbek opera.’

These three items selected from one newspaper, in one day; hundreds of similar items, appearing daily in the entire press, reveal the tremendous extent of popular interest in music.

It was in such an atmosphere of wide and intense interest that the first great discussion, regarding the present direction of musical composition, arose; its centre being the latest opera of the renowned Leningrad composer, Shostakovich.

Naturally, every notable event in the life of the Soviet Union, every process of clarification of thought, is for the capitalist press and occasion for abuse or misrepresentation of our Socialist system, for their stupid and spiteful insinuations with regard to Soviet life.

The Criticism of Shostakovich’s New Work.

Shostakovich is a young and highly gifted composer. He was in search of a ‘new direction;’ and then – both his opera. ‘Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk,’ and his ballet, ‘Clear Stream,’ met with universal rejection from both the more serious critics and the public. His works were rejected by the Soviet public precisely because he had not found a new direction, but had followed the course of the ‘newer’ art of the period of bourgeois decadence – a period in art which the Socialist Revolution had long overtaken and left behind. He sought to erect the structure of a new Socialist art of music upon the foundations laid by Schonberg, Alban Berg, Stravinsky, and others. We will not enter here upon a discussion of the merits of these particular composers. It is beyond contradiction that some of them, and particularly Schonberg, manifestly possess great artistic gifts. Also, the discussion concerning Shostakovich is not related to the question as to whether he is or is not a gifted composer. The question concerns his relationship to the epoch in which he is working, and to those masses – who are establishing Socialism – for whom he must work.

One may understand the development of music, as followed by Schonberg and the other ‘new’ composers, as being a protest against the shallowness of creative art during the period of the decline of capitalism. Nauseated by the barrenness of this capitalist society, but blind to the right methods by which it may be abolished – and blind also to the emotions and desires of the masses whose mission it is to abolish it – these artists isolate themselves from society, taking refuge with an aristocratic disdain for the world, in a preoccupation with pure form. By means of their music, they seek to arouse new excitements, believing that this sets them in the form of a new culture. Their tragedy lies in the fact that their art – which while alien to the real grave-diggers of capitalism, the masses – in reality, becomes nothing but a banal titillation for the most jaded hangers-on of the bourgeoisie, the bitterest enemies of the new society and the new culture. They have, in fact, abandoned their old supports without discovering a new foothold.

But it is the proletarian revolution which has built up the new basis for this foothold, upon the ruins of the old world of exploitation. It is only by means of the victory of Socialism, of the working class, that this vast new ‘public’ has been created, which constitutes fertile ground for the birth of a new art. Increasing prosperity has also brought with it that increasing need and desire for culture and art, to which we have referred above. A new social culture is advancing to new and hitherto unattainable heights. To the masses who are advancing with this culture, any turning away or reversion from the fertile, fermenting life of Socialism – which is their life, filled with their desires and energies and joy in labour – is completely alien. They demand that

their artists shall express this life of theirs – which has no counterpart in history – in worthy, adequate forms. To clothe in artistic form the spirit of these victors of Socialism – this is the task of socialist art, of socialist music.

But Shostakovich remained imprisoned by the outlook of the jaded petty-bourgeois intellectuals who desire no longer to pursue the old paths but who can find no new ones – because they never leave the stuffy confines of their own studios. He was rejected not because he marched on ahead of life; but because he remained behind it. It was not the conservative public which rejected him, but the real modernists – the revolutionary people who have built, not merely a new art-form, but a new life-form, a new world – and who are eagerly reaching forward towards a new art which shall be worthy of the new life they have created.

What Music Shall Express the Epoch of Socialism?

It is not possible to answer the above question in a purely academic manner. Musical composition itself is now just beginning to answer it concretely. Previous experience in this field – although much less fruitful than in the other arts – has made manifest the following hints as to the direction to be pursued. As apart from Shostakovich's works, the new opera of the young composer, Dershinski, – 'Quiet Flows the Don' – has enjoyed great public approval. This particular work is – both in text and in music – not a bit 'conservative.' Yet, it may be established that this work, also, is not entirely free from a certain abstract manipulation of form. But it does make a definite effort to ally its mass-appeal and comprehensibility with a high artistic level of accomplishment. For such is the problem of Socialist art - difficult, it is true but a problem which life itself forces upon our powers of solution. To speak to, and be understood by, millions; and yet to speak, not in primitive terms but in the terms of a high, sensitive and finely shaded artistic medium – such is the task of Socialist art.

It is a task which could not have been accomplished in any other historical epoch, but may be accomplished in the epoch of Socialism. Because Socialism, and Socialism alone, is capable of making the highest achievements of art the property of the mass. Socialism gives the masses the opportunity of living prosperously. It removes from their minds the daily anxiety over their existence, the fear of the morrow, and gives them that security of livelihood which provides the millions with the material basis for a highly developed cultural life. Socialism provides the masses, not only with the opportunity of a daily improvement of cultural level – but the actual means towards securing it. Those conservatoires, springing up so rapidly in factory or on farm, represent something very significant. It is the people, which is familiarising itself with the finest works of the composers of the past but is reaching beyond them towards something further; the people, which, while valuing its folk-songs and songs of the struggle, nevertheless can find in them no adequate expression of its varied, many-coloured, joyous and triumphant existence; a people which not merely fights for a better life, but is already enjoying a better life; it is this people which will define the course of development of the new music, with its own life, needs and moods. Its life provides a rich background for the growth of an art which shall be unequalled, not only in content but also in artistic form.

International Press Correspondence, No 15, Vol. 16, 21st March, 1936, pp.412 – 413.