

# 1000 YEARS of RUSSIAN CULTURE

(Lecture, The Colorado College, Feb. 26, 1990)

Dear Music friends,

It is my first meeting with an American audience. First of all I would like to apologise for my English, which is, perhaps, my own English. Then I would like to introduce myself.

I am a composer, member of the USSR Composer's Union, a theoretician and a music teacher. After a secondary and a music school, I went to a music college and a conservatoire. Yet, the most important part of my education was six years of study under, and more than 20 years of friendship with a great musician Philip Hershkowitz, composer and theoretician, bright representative of the New Vienna School. He was pupil of Alban Berg and Anton Webern in Vienna. In 1939, he escaped from the Nazis to the USSR. For years, he tried to return to Austria, but was refused each time he applied. He could go back to Austria thanks to Gorbachov's perestroika and perhaps a little thanks to me. I have dedicated to him my Violin Concerto the last part in which was a cadenza to a Psalm, "...When the Lord turned again the captivity...", and he was able to return. There was supreme justice in him dying in the Vienna that was his city. In Russia, he could not publish a single work. My duty is to publish his works, which will exist much longer than his earthly life.

You will certainly see I am not a musicologist. Everything I am going to say is from my point of view as a composer. You will agree that one who talks about music talks about himself. This is not a problem in this case because I belong to Russia music myself, don't I?

The topic of our lecture is Russian Music of the XX Century, but if I must speak in the aspect of the overall program, "The Phenomenon of a Nation USSR", I must begin from a distance. Let us look at a thousand years ago. Russian music is certainly a European music. I want to compare and trace the difference between Russian and Western European musical cultures.

I must say, that a thousand years ago the pictures were approximately similar. The Russian epic *былины* and the chronicles *летописи* report that music in old Russia played a great role and had a great influence on society. Russian epical heroes *Садко*, *Добрыня*, *Баян* sang for princes at feasts, and if they did not make a big impression, we would have hardly remembered them. They were undoubtedly remarkable artists. The epic gives them beautiful press. This is quite similar to the bards and minstrels in Western Europe.

The adoption of Christianity in the X century had a double significance. First of all, it meant acquisition of a written language, and the appearance of chronicles as a genre in contrast to epics. Christianity undoubtedly had a good influence on moral attitudes in society. I can only welcome its second to Russia after a thousand years since its adoption. On the other hand, the Russian Orthodox Church following the Greek Orthodoxy with its asceticism and severity could not manage without violence.

So the pagan was destroyed, but yet too much from the heathen culture seemed unacceptable to the church. (See what I am driving at? The repressions of 1948 were not the first in Russian music.) Priest, monks and later the Czars successfully fought with everything than was at variance with their views on the purpose of piety. Looking after piety meant looking after choral church music, brought from Greece, adapted to the Slav language and nearly from the moment of its appearance had a strong tendency to canonisation. The looking after piety also meant giving orders to destroy the *skomorokhs* - Russian pop groups of the day, to burn their instruments, and fight against everything we call secular. That policy and restrictions on relations with Western Europe, owing to the choice of Greek type of Christianity resulted in a long era of stagnation and depression in the Russian culture.

I shall not swear that the priests were incorrect in their aesthetical estimate. I can also imagine that Russian musicians could be quite vulgar and lacked the high Christian spirituality. In any case their music was an expression of living freedom. Otherwise why should they fight it? The most important thing that in a situation when the Russian church had not created a genre, but canonized a form of liturgy, the suppression of secular music meant almost the destruction of the tendency towards development in the historical perspective right up to the XVII century, when the Iron Curtain had been losing its metal quality and polyphonic music came to Russia with a modern system of notation, and, at last, when Peter the Great had opened the new era, and music appeared in Russia with the other Western innovations as a phenomenon of West European culture.

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So Russia was late in music. The appearance of polyphony in Russia was only in the century of Johann Sebastian Bach. Now let me dwell a little of Peter the Great. It was said that Peter had cut a window through to Europe. But the question is, what penetrated through that window?

Peter wanted to see strong Russia in military and economic sense. He realised that the Iron Curtain led Russia in to a deadlock. Peter was actually

educated in the West. Like Khrushchev, Peter likes many things in the West. And many of them he adopted readily. He makes trade more active, builds, create factories, probably after the Western pattern. Russia assimilates the Western culture many elements of which are actually implanted by Peter and, certainly not without violence.

The XVIII century was a century of Western fashion in everything - clothes, hairstyles, manners... Foreign tongues begin to sound in Russia. Later, theatres, orchestras are invited from Italy, France, Germany, and the Russian ones are established. Peter's reforms are certainly of a revolutionary character, and with human victims - a characteristic of any revolution. At the same time, it is not quite a revolution, in any case, in a Western sense. Russia had not experienced an era of reformation. The serfdom had not been abolished until the second half of the XVIII century. Peter's revolution is a revolution from above. I do mention Nikita Khrushchev accidentally. Like Nikita, Peter wanted to overtake and surpass the West in every way. But they both were very fond of successes by the West without understanding the way leading to such result.

There is a Soviet song: "We are born to make fairy-tale a reality". Paraphrased, this song is now sung, "We are born to make Kafka-tale a reality". (A reference to the German writer of the absurd.) And Peter works miracles. He creates what appears to be Western-style factories, based not a free enterprise and sale of labour, but on serfdom. The most wonderful thing, it was possible! What we cannot imagine at all now is serf theatres and serf orchestras. But they existed, and with their own names and talents. Certainly, Peter's reforms strengthened serfdom and finally extended its existence. The comparison with Khrushchev cannot go too far. You see, Peter and Nikita had absolutely different surroundings, and while Khrushchev's reforms run across the obstacle - the Soviet bureaucratic system, it was thanks to Peter that such a system for the first time created in Russia. And where Khrushchev entered into conflict with representatives of the Soviet culture (though bloodlessly), Peter, to the contrary, opened, and not without violence, the Age of Enlightenment, though with its own peculiarities.

The Enlightenment was concerned with the class of nobility, and not with entire society. Only much later, in the second half of the XIX century the Enlightenment will become national form. The mission of Enlightenment is taken up by the noblemen who represented the cultural elite of society. But they will be late with the mission of Enlightenment and liberation. They will be "destroyed as a class" at the same time as the bourgeoisie in 1917, as you know.

Why I am speaking so long about these things, risking to be dull? It seems very important to me to size up these points without which it is impossible to understand the phenomenon of Russian culture. At the time

when the third estate in the West found its ideology of *liberte, igitalite, fraternite*, when it collected enough strength and energy to declare about itself loud and clear, like Bomarsche. When Joseph Haydn still has his meals in the kitchen, but Mozart already refuses to compromise, in Russia, the enlightened nobility took upon themselves the mission of culture creators in contrast to the West Europe where they were mere consumers. Take a look at all the Russian writers and composers. All of them were noblemen. At the same time when a new human character is created in the West on the basis bourgeois ideology, there appears a similar new type of nobleman in Russia, similar in the ethic sense, though on the basis of a different ideology, the ideology of devotion to the Tsar and the Motherland. This with certain nuances - more to the Tsar and less to the Motherland, and vice versa:

While we by freedom are inflamed  
While honour in our hearts exists  
Let dedicate to Motherland  
The beauty of our souls impulse.

It is interesting to note that later the priority of the social over the personal will, possibly, follow from that Pushkin's idea. But it was after this devotion assumed the character of sacrificial devotion (it is absolutely normal when a person who serves the social interest is ready to sacrifice himself, he can demand the same from the others). And sacrifices will be endless. This, however, will be not Pushkin's fault. He spoke about a free devotion, devotion, based on the inherent criterion of the truth, opposing it to servility.

However, before the nobility will be the creators of culture, they where had to rise to the level of its consumers. The XVIII century was a time of assimilation of the Western culture, a century of fashion for everything Western. Even the Church is not afraid of the Roman influence. It invites many musicians and sends its musicians to Italy. It opens many theatres in the two capitals and in provinces. Little by little concert life becomes more active. The most important things, however, that music becomes part of the daily life for purpose of amusement and also as a necessary element of education for the nobility. It is certainly not of the highest quality, the amateurish dominants everywhere but this is no longer considered a virtue. In the XIX century, in contrast to the XX, to be a consumer and an expert is even quite prestigious.

See how quickly we have moved into the XIX century. The historian has undoubtedly quit a lot to do in the XVIII century. The historian always has a lot to do. The musician, however, inform us that Russian music was born in

1836, the year of the premier of Mikhail Glinka's opera, "Life for the Tsar". So what we call Russian music is 154 years old. It is much or little?

Certainly, the speed at which Western culture assimilated was very high. We may say it was a Cultural Revolution. It is time to talk a little about Western Europe about whose culture I talked as if it was one whole.

In the centre of European musical life was opera, Italian and France. On the other hand there were the Viennese classics. Certainly, these developments were not only dissimilar, but, in the certain sense, they were opposites. Could the Russian public understand this? I do not think they could. They have done too much for themselves, displaying their interest in the West.

The Viennese classics were not banned as the New Vienna School was in USSR. (For instance, I personally was for this very reason refused membership by the Composer Union for about ten years.)

Well, what attitude could the Russian audience of the XIX century have towards the Vienna Classics? I think they did not understand the principal difference between the Viennese and other musical traditions. From their point of view they all had the same value. Even if there were people who could understand this difference, they had no chance to appreciate, much less to begin moving in this direction. To achieve this, we must have much more time and much more refined links with the Viennese tradition properly, than those in concert hall between the music and the listener.

Without understanding the dissimilarity in European traditions as the difference in the level of composition, the Russian audience interpreted that difference as a result of the difference in folk melodies. This gave rise to the idea that that the Russian music could be created on the basis of the Russian folk song. Generally speaking, this was a purely Soviet idea: "Let us create a new tradition". Of course, this is very funny. How can they create something, which we can only follow? As you see, this idea from the era of communism had earlier origins.

Well, what did happen in 1836? Mikhail Glinka, a composer with clearly Italian up-bringing and sympathies had written his work in the form French grand opera, partly using the Russian folklore element.

Glinka sad that being in Italy he had not become an Italian (in musical sense). It is a really strange phrase. When and which of the German or French composer was faced with such a problem?

Glinka could have one and only one problem - to win the audience. And he did it. Not in Italy, but in Russia. How he can achieved this? In several ways. His professional level was up to this. He had taken up an extremely

patriotic topic. He also used a folklore element. All this chimed in the patriotic sentiment of the time.

What was a result from the purely musical point of view? What is the level of musicality and organic in that work? The problem was, to introduce the element of the model and in certain sense archaic music into a tonal composition. Doesn't this contradict to the nature of tonal composition?

My answer is, it doesn't if we solve this problem as a problem of form, and not stylistics. Let us take Beethoven's String Quartets on Russian themes. What a wonderful form was achieved in this work thanks to the unusual themes! Or let us take a look at J. S. Bach with his English and French suites and the Italian concerto. Yet, he was interested in the problem of stylistic least of all. He speaks on behalf of Nature, its highest laws, and, if you prefer, on behalf of God our Lord. If he sees any worth idea in connection with, for instance, French stylistic, he seems to tell us, it is a good idea, but if we follow it, our form should be... as follows. We can name all his concerto Italian because in his time the concerto was an Italian genre. Bach does not create a genre or trend. He creates great patterns in all existing genres. He was the first, to discover the truth that it speaking about national music is as meaningless as about national physics or mathematics.

The Russian musicians could not rise to the understanding of supra-national essence of music. And not because the XIX century was a century of Russian patriotism. Simply it is now a very difficult problem, because it seems to many people, even in the XX century, that they could arrive at new results through the exotic. Take, for instance, at Stravinsky, Bartok and the French.

Could folklore in the XIX century or now play any role in creating a composer school? I believe that it could be the role of a sledgehammer in the manufacture of computer, even though I have nothing against sledgehammers. It is a very useful thing.

Glinka said that music is created by nation. We, composers, he said, only arrange it. But do not judge about him from this sentence. He was quite an original composer, not an arranger. Yet, this assertion he made comes from a very popular error that the art-music originate in folklore.

How should we understand this? When we say "folklore" we presuppose a time when music divided into folklore and non-folklore.

The secular, the spiritual, the popular and the refined existed, as I see it, as a single undivided whole. We can not describe as folklore, something, which existed in music before its functional division. We can equally say that folklore comes from music, but it would be better to say, that folklore and music as an art appeared when a functional division occurred in what, we could best describe as "proto-music".

It is wrong to think that folklore is something archaic, frozen, petrified... Folklore today is a living, evolving phenomenon. Pop art is folklore, too, folklore of today. Yet, folklore and music art have meaning and function as different as natural and artificial radioactivity.

The Slavophile tendency in Russian music is comparable to Russian Marxism with its assertion that Russia is going its own special way. And it corresponds with the ideas about the reforms instituted by Peter the Great. Where this way has led USSR we already know. My polemic here is certainly not with Glinka, but with people who, in the XIX and XX centuries, in the era of fight against cosmopolitanism made Glinka out to be a prophet of the Slavophile trend. However we judged his music, Glinka's significance is, that he raised the plank of Russian music to a higher professional level, quit European if we do not mean the Vienna Classics. This means that precedent had taken place. Active musical life and mass education for the nobility reveals remarkable talents. So it all started.

And here we come to Anton Rubinstein. He had tremendous significance as a first pianist of genius in Russia, and as an enlightener. In Russia he played a role of Ferenz List as a pianist and an originator of a piano school. On the other hand, his role was the same as Felix Mendelsohn as the founder of the conservatoire. Please do not forget that he, not being a composer of note, even though he was the teacher of Pyetr Chaikovsky, the first Russian composer who made a definite influence on the Western art.

It was only thanks to the great artistic charm and energy that Rubinstein could overcome the resistance, and it is worth noting the difficulties he overcame, to appreciate his victories. Government circles who opposed popular education and, consequently, the supporters of the special Russian way, critics and composers who were members of the "mighty handful" like Balakirev, Borodin, Moussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov - the all opposed the creation of the conservatoire. It is very interesting to note the Slavophiles arguments against the conservatoire. The conservatoire is harmful because it spreads mediocrity, narrow-minded professional understanding in music, ignoring the national ideological creative problems. It is a very important thought, in view of its continuation into the XX century. I would like to comment.

Perfectly naturally, we cannot oppose every *ideological creative problem* versus professional one because every problem is posed and solved in the profession, not in a vacuum. On the other hand, what are these so-called *ideological creative problems*?

If they **musical** problems, they must be solved by the professionals. If they aren't, they can't be put before music. What national or state problems can the art assume without losing its purity and only acquire an applied

significance? From the point of view of politics, the arts become valuable only when they influence the minds. From the point of view of culture, the arts lose all their value when they begin to serve any purpose except for the influence of the soul.

The XX century is an improvement on the XIX in many ways. Whereas in the XIX century such ideas emerged in the form of discussion (at worst, as a political fight and, nevertheless, not at a government level), in the XX century the principles of “*narodnost*” (my friend translates it loosely as the *popular spirit*) and *the party character* will imposed by a dictator in the level of decree.

Today our conservatoire has arrived at the purpose, which was intended by the supporters of the special Russian way. But they would hardly have been delighted. Today, they no longer speak about “*narodnost*” and the “*party spirit*” to the their students, as they did in the Stalin’s time and much later. The situation is not better now. Today the can get from the conservatoire anything but a real professional grounding. If he has a real desire, he can certainly learn something. This happen in no way thanks to the existing situation, but in spite of it. A teacher appeals to the student’s talant, and does not bother about hes profession, having no profession of his own.

This is happening today. In 1867 A. Rubinstein was forced to leave his conservatoire feeling that he had not enough strength to protect it from the influence of the Royal court and from Slavophiles. This, however, was not an utter defeat.

Piotr Chaikovsky had already graduated from St. Petersburg Conservatoire. He was already teaching at a new Moscow Conservatoire, opened by Nikolai Rubinstein (Anton’s brother), and the stripling Russian conservatoires in no way looked like the bureaucratized educational establishments run by the USSR Ministry of Culture. There would be yet possibilities to invite the best of what was at hand and what could be transplanted from the West to the Russian ground. And the ground was nice. It is interesting to note how the Jewish talent enthused by a possibility make a dash up the social ladder, revealed itself very actively, especially in violin performance. Yet, this came as a result of Leopold Auer’s efforts, an Austrial violonist invited to St. Petersburg. He created a major Russian school of violin – Yasha Heifitz, Myron Polykin, Misha Elman, Tsymbalist – thousand of names.

The Rubinstein brothers had raised the piano school to remarkable heights. All the Russian composers are, first and foremost, pianists of genius. The young Russian music, which had grown out the art of performance, elevated this art to such heights, from which it has been falling constantly, but



nevertheless cannot make a final fall. The flourishing was very bright, and even in the craft of composition, even though in this the word “flourishing” should be replaced with the word “progress” because this craft needs deeper roots and a longer-running start.

Rubinstein did much to spread the appreciation the Viennese traditions coming down from J.S.Bach. Russia had not risen up to the classic’s criteria and, as before, based itself on very different sympathies. A genial pianist Rachmaninov was still trying to combine a piano concerto with a Russian song. Skriabin is a Chopin fantastically assumed the mimicry of Wagner. All this, as well as the striving of Stravinsky, speaks about the lack of school and also about the existence of great talents.

What do I mean when I say, “school”?

By nature, Man strives not only to independence, but also for unity. School is not only a circle of people united by common sympathies and interests. School also means a unity based on the common understanding of high classical criteria. Only the great Schoenberg, whose realisation of Vienna’s tradition had risen to a scientific level, could achieve this.

This level had not been achieved by Russian music. The presence of high talents and bright individualities did not attest to a flourishing of culture. I see it is a paradox. Neither Bach, nor Mozart, or Beethoven, or Mahler and Schoenberg were “bright individualities”. They were **great persons**.

Generally, the longing to be a bright individuality, to have a face of one’s own, or in modern term, image, is a characteristic of Russian music. A face on one’s own cannot be invented. It comes from the Lord, too. This feature and the striving to be expressive first of all, and not musical is the corollary of a dominance of performing origin in Russian music rather than composing one.

Nevertheless, I would like to recall a conversation I had with Philip Herschkowitz. At that time I told him that my way to modern music begun with S.Prokofiev. “So did mine”.

Like Rachmaninov, Skriabin or Stravinsky, Prokofiev was certainly no classic at all. Prokofiev was is no trunk for the genealogical tree in music, but only a branch. The development will not stem from him. He cannot have serious followers, but the branch can be alive, too...

As you see, I have been in the XX century for a long time. May be from the very beginning?

The XX century focuses on itself all the problems, which have ever appeared in Russian history. It began, this terrible XX century not in 1900, but in 1914. The World Wars, revolutions, communism, fascism, another spell of stagnation in culture... It would be better to say that it moved by inertia, and

the inertia was very strong, particularly at the beginning. But as grate Mandelshtam said, “The sonatina of the Sowiet type-writers is only a shadow of those mighty sonatas”. History has very ironical face. They thought it was a communism, and it was appeared a pagan. Germany and Russia finally united in common negation of the Vienna tradition. What in Hitler’s Germany was called *Kulturbolschevismus* was in Stalin’s Russia describe as *formalism*, *cacophony* and *marasmus of bourgeois culture*.

This pagan fought against culture more successfully than Christianity against the pagan. Why did Prokofiev come back to Russia? For Stalin to give him prizes with one hand and send his wife to a concentration camp with the other? For him to become member of the Composer’s Union, the sense of which no one could explain to me? But sense there certainly was. The dictator needed to gather everyone in one herd, appoint the herdsman, and, with a hand of iron, to manage music. Today the Composer’s Union unites, as a monopoly, three different functions: a trade union, an impresario, and a patron of music, so called. If a composer wants to live, that is to be able to publish and perform he must not work in music, but make a career in the Composer Union and in the establishment, the famed *nomenclature*. For the first time in my life I asked the Composer Union to help me to get the air ticket so I could come to come to you in America. (You know that for the Soviet people it is now very difficult to by a ticket to go abroad.) The Composer Union have a quota ticket reservation of its own. I was given the answer that “it is very difficult financial operation”, and I realised that only *nomenclature* may travel abroad. And *nomenclature* does its bit. Now the USSR is a unique phenomenon. Only the Composer Union in Moscow alone consists of 600 members (without those who are not privileged to be members). My teacher, the grate musician was not a member. Six hundred members! But what we need is only one Beethoven! (As you can see, it is an exaggeration. I certainly have nothing against Mozart or Wagner.) As it is said by our economists, this has come as a result of “the extensive method in management of the national economy”. It is really a phenomenon that directly corresponds to the declared topic of our lecture... truly with a negative nuance.

It was a joke: “The West must by all means help Russia in *perestroika*, because a West is greatly indebted to Russia, because Russia has made its communist experiment, bringing it to the absurd”. It is certainly a very valuable negative example. I would dislike it very much to see the German scientists in the right with their proverb, “Ein experiment, kein experiment”.