

ON WORKING IN AN AGE OF SOVIET POWER

Gerard McBurney *You grew up in an age of Soviet power and the saturation of all parts of the former USSR with Soviet culture. Western listeners nowadays often have rather a crude and limited knowledge of Soviet music, whether they think of it as Shostakovich or as Red Army marches. But in fact it included many other composers and many other genres. What was your attitude to Soviet music when you were growing up? What do you feel about Soviet music now (if anything!)?*

Giya Kancheli I would not mention Shostakovich's name next to the Red Army Marches. Few people ask themselves why most contemporary music lovers have taken Shostakovich so much to heart. I think there are many reasons for that, but I would single out one of the most important ones. The pain inherent in his music turned out to be a global pain. His music had a very significant influence on my generation of composers, and unlike the Red Army Marches, it was a subject of serious reflection. Despite the multitude of victims those regimes caused, Fascism, Communism and the Soviet Empire now belong to the realm of history. But art created in the time of totalitarianism will live on for centuries. I would make a shortlist of Thomas Mann, Schoenberg and Shostakovich. But if I were to continue the list, it would include many of my colleagues who lived and worked during the Soviet regime.

GM *In your recent work Styx you include among the different names offered up for mourning those of the late Alfred Schnittke and Avet Terterian. Schnittke, Terterian and you all belong to a generation of new Soviet composers, a generation including many other friends and colleagues like Valentin Silvestrov, Arvo Pärt, Sofia Gubaidulina and others. How much do you think that your friendship and shared experience with these composer-contemporaries helped shape your own musical path? Who are the colleagues whom you most admire?*

GK Compared to my colleagues living in Russia, Ukraine and the Baltic Republics, I found myself in a privileged position, for the following reasons. I lived in Georgia, where the ideological pressure of Khrushchev's regime in the 1960s had a very different nature from that experienced in those republics. I was blamed for being cosmopolitan, for writing "un-Georgian" music, while my friends were being accused of state treachery. The other reason for my relative well-being was my musical language, which for some reason did not cause hostility among music officials. I even remember feeling a certain embarrassment — my music was performed by the best orchestras in the best halls, and very often it was conducted by one of my best friends, Djansug Kakhidze. Meanwhile my friends Schnittke, Arvo Pärt, Silvestrov — whose music I adored — were not only rarely performed, but hugely criticised. And only because they wrote their own music. I too wrote my own music and never tried to please or appease the tastes and requirements of others. When I think back to those times, I always feel grateful to my colleagues for being so understanding and noble in their attitude towards my music. True artists are not full of envy. Today they are all world famous, although one of them is unfortunately no longer with us.

GM *In your early career you worked a great deal with the distinguished Tbilisi theatre-director Robert Sturua. Could you describe your work together? How do you think your long and highly practical experience of the theatre in the long run affected your non-theatrical music?*

GK As I have already mentioned, I have been blessed with incredible luck from the very start of my artistic journey. I was surrounded by a truly brilliant circle of friends and owe a great deal to these people who continue to influence me to this day. One of the best examples is Robert Sturua with whom my friendship and collaboration dates back to the 1960s. I am always caught off guard when I am asked (and this happens all the time) which composers have influenced my development. I am always tempted to mention my friends who are not necessarily composers, conductors or performers, but people who have nothing to do with art. Collaborating with an artist like Robert Sturua has, of course, influenced my work. Despite the specific nature of the theatre music that I wrote for plays by Sturua, I ended up using themes, images and fragments from it in many of my symphonic works, and later in chamber music. I am grateful to destiny for giving me the opportunity to work and be friends with such outstanding figures like Robert Sturua.

GM *Whatever the frustrations of life in the Soviet Union, for artists and musicians it seems to have lead to an unusually intense degree of collaboration between, especially, performers and composers. Who are the most important performers with whom you have worked? To what extent has your music been shaped by the way that particular musicians play?*

GK I already mentioned Djansug Kakhidze and his role in my life. My later collaborators included Gennadi Rozhdestvenskii, Valery Gergiev, Yuri Temirkanov and Yuri Bashmet, and each one of them influenced me in one way or another. Later in life I have been blessed with interpreters such as Gidon Kremer, Lev Markiz, Mstislav Rostropovich and Vladimir Ashkenazy. If I add to this list the names of my Western collaborators to this list, then the regime where I grew up becomes irrelevant and I thank the fate that continues to 'spoil' me to this day.

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