

Art of forgetting - Some mechanisms of resistance to microtonal memory in Russia's 1960s avant-garde

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Abstract

Twentieth century thinkers spent decades trying to understand and formulate the mechanisms of the historical development of culture and changes in cultural stratum. According to Arnold Toynbee's theory, the composers' cooperative of the 1960s avant-garde had to become a high-powered converting system, which would adapt early achievements.

During 1910–1920s Russia, ideas of dodecaphony (Golyshev, Obukhov), spatial music (Lourié's "Formes en l'air") and electronic music (inventors Sholpo, Yankovsky and Theremin) were all current. The most separate trend among them was microtonal experiments.

The debilitating effects of the proletarian movement in Russia at the end of 1929 marked the beginning of a fight against militant formalism, and reduced all elements of the avant-garde into an underground movement. So, did the ideas and experiments of these pioneers simply fade away? In my paper, I will examine microtonal aesthetics and practice in Soviet Russia in both the 1920s and 1960s.

In 1955, Georgy Rimsky-Korsakov had renewed the activity of the "Circle of quarter-tone music", the unique union of composers, performers and theorist-lovers of extra-sound-experiences in the Petersburg conservatoire between 1923–1929. This time the Circle was organized in an even more conservative place – the Leningrad philharmonic society, where the dissonant sounds of works by Haba and Wyschnegradsky were there along with the 'sweet-singers' Mozart, Schubert and Rakhmaninov. This daring plan to usher in a Soviet music revival sustained a gradual defeat, yet paved the way to youngsters – Ustvolskaya, Schnittke, Slonimsky, Denisov.

Trying to examine their achievements and influence on future music trends, I mostly learned of their compositions, treatises, and materials of G. Rimsky-Korsakov, in the Paul Sacher Stiftung. Most of the existing printed information given by leading musicologists made research in early 1920s avant-garde Detlef Gojowy, Larry Sitsky needs to be rewritten and reviewed.

In my paper, I would like to pose the question: were that generation's composition methods of the 1960s the lost reversed link, missed by the revolutionary generation of the early XX century.

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Lidia Ader (b. 1985) is a PhD student of Prof Dr Liudmila Kovnatskaya in St Petersburg conservatoire. She is specializing in Russian musical culture of the 1920s (Shostakovich, his musical experience, conservatoire education, musical circles) and musical avant-garde (microtonal music, acoustic, inventions). Her article "Microtonal storm and stress" was published in Cambridge journal "Tempo" (2009, Issue 250). She is a principal organizer of the international three-day bilingual conference "N. Rimsky-Korsakov and his heritage in historical perspective", which is forthcoming in March 2010 in Rimsky-Korsakov museum-flat, St Petersburg, where she is taking a senior researcher position.