

Nikolai Roslavets, Yuri Kholopov, and the (Post-)Soviet conception of a musical avant-garde

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Abstract

In this paper I will examine one of the last unpublished papers of Yuri Kholopov (1932-2003), "Nikolai Roslavets and the Russian Avant-Garde" (2000). In it he describes crucial concepts surrounding the avant-garde in the 20th century, taking current trends from the West and recycling them in methods acceptable to Soviet authorities. It seems that Kholopov, under pressure from these authorities, found ways of analyzing controversial music that would be acceptable to the existing apparatus, thus facilitating the introduction of such music to Soviet audiences. For example, he speaks of a "New Tonality" instead of accepting any sort of break with tonality. He says "Berg's 'Wozzeck' is...tonal, even with his system of 'leit-tonic.' Webern's song cycle op. 25 has a 'new' tonal structure... Schoenberg's Op. 25 Suite for piano is uni-tonal. Messiaen's pieces No. 3 and 5 from his cycle '20 Gazes...' are also uni-tonal." Kholopov used conservative language to describe avant-garde composers in a Soviet environment while devising a sophisticated system for understanding their music through his idea of Neotonicity. About Roslavets, he writes "In his scheme Roslavets presents the synthetic chord not as a *chord* but as a *row* of pitches [emphasis added]. (This corresponds exactly to the notion of 'set' from American music theory, developed by Babbitt and Forte.)" Again, Kholopov is reconciling ideas from the West with musical understandings from Soviet Russia. By examining Kholopov's methods for grappling with the Avant-Garde in music, I will show how he, through his own new means, was able to explain avant-garde phenomena in a Russian context and, thus, how he was able to introduce avant-garde works in the (Post-) Soviet Union.

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Philip Ewell: Assistant professor at the Hunter College of the City University of New York. He received a B.A. in music from Stanford University, an M.A. in cello performance from Queens College (New York), and a certificate in cello performance from the St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music in Russia, before beginning doctoral studies at Yale University in music theory. He finished the Ph.D. there in May, 2001, with a dissertation, advised by Allen Forte, on Alexander Scriabin that included archival work in Moscow, Russia, and studies at the Moscow Conservatory with Yuri Kholopov. His writings appear in numerous scholarly journals and he has appeared at conferences in North America, England, Germany, and Costa Rica.