

The second Russian avant-garde: Cultural and religious afterimages

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Abstract

Cultural and religious afterimages became the initial attraction and stimulus for the formation of a subculture of new music that developed at the margins of the Soviet Union's 'official' concert life. This paper considers the twentieth-century Russian musical avant-garde as a single historical-artistic process and demonstrates its temporal nature by taking into consideration three main conditions: experimentation, negation of the functional and transcending the worldly. The aim of this discussion is to contextualise the late twentieth-century Underground composers and acknowledge Scriabin's (1872-1915) and Shostakovich's (1906-1975) versions of *Sobornost* as consequential in the evolution of the 'Second avant-garde.' Alexander Scriabin's aesthetic code is remarkably similar to that of the Mystics. They considered art bearing the promise to reveal true reality and provide a passage to a divine, transcendental world. In sharing this perspective, Scriabin attached metaphysical significance to the concept of the 'artist as a creative vessel' that, similar to Nikolai Berdyaev's (1874-1948) 'ethics of creativity', affirm the value of the unique and the individual. In order to effectively contextualise the 'unofficial' activity developing underground, it is important to define what constituted the 'official' sphere. The universal spiritual values that occupy the main material of Shostakovich's late works formed an *ersatz* spirituality that took the place of the spiritual guidance that was difficult for audiences to attain during his time. In contrast to Scriabin's and Berdyaev's 'ethics of creativity', Shostakovich's 'ethics of redemption' encouraged art that would form secular parables and paid less attention to the metaphysical significance of the artist as an individual creative vessel. In the Soviet Union of the early 1960s, the ideology of socialism was beginning to give way to the need for individual expression. Young composers discovered religion as a vehicle for this means of self-expression. The use of avant-garde techniques and religious symbolism by the Underground composers was a way to protest against the enforced atheism and also restore Scriabin's condition of the 'artist as a creative vessel.' In this sense, the Second avant-garde composers turned out to be both innovative and traditionalist in order to find a path along which it would be possible to keep music progressing amidst ideological uncertainty and violence.

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Anna Pelekanou completed her BA in Music with Music Technology at Hull University specialising in electroacoustic composition. In 2003 she was awarded her Masters of Art degree in Music from Nottingham University. She is currently in the final year of her PhD degree in Musicology under the supervision of Dr Robert Adlington. Anna's primary research to date has focused on music produced in the Soviet Union and Russia, including that by Shostakovich, Gubaidulina and Schnittke. She is also keenly interested in: music perception, aesthetics, sociology of music, concepts of the avant-garde, modernism, Russian philosophy, structural and syntactical pattern recognition and intuition as a mode of perception-creation.