

The Russian avant-garde of 1950s and 1960s: Aesthetics and technical problems

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Abstract

The avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s had to do first of all with the idea of pure musical invention. The work must be a self-sufficient sound object, which expresses only itself and is, in this sense, like a natural thing. For the young Soviet composers, this aesthetics meant liberation from the dogmas of "socialist realism" and a return to free creative activity. Young composers had no inhibitions about learning. But they were very headstrong pupils.

Because they had to catch up with Western music, the distance between the mastering of the twelve-tone system and total serialism turned out to be very short. Examples of it can be found in Denisov's and Schnittke's compositions of the early 1960s. Schnittke noticed that strict adherence to rhythmic series produced monotonous periodic structures based on succession of equal cycles. There was neither growth nor stability, but only successions of random chance. As a solution, Schnittke offered a principle of progression based on a strict numerical sequence. Arvo Pärt and Sofia Gubaidulina had already developed similar systems of pitch and rhythmic progression. Other principles, such as timbre composition based on micropolyphonic texture, were also in general use. The latter was discovered by György Ligeti, but his works of the early 1960s were not known to Soviet composers at the time. Therefore, the micropolyphonic texture in the works of Schnittke and Pärt emerged independently. (Schnittke's orchestral piece *...Pianissimo...* (1968) may be a good example).

By the late 1960s, the period of adaptation was over and Soviet composers began freely developing avant-garde conceptions. Strict serialism developed towards various mixed forms. Similarly, timbre composition lost its universality and became a part of contemporary music writing. The idea of spatial composition also received less attention from Soviet composers. For instance, Valentin Silvestrov made intensive use of spatial effects, but within the context of the usual symphonic orchestra.

CV

Prof. Svetlana Savenko graduated from the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory where she studied with Juri Kholopov. Now she is professor of Russian Music there, author of more than 100 publications (including several books) in Russian, English, and German. The major fields of her specialization are Russian music, music of the 20th century including avant-garde and contemporary music. Among her recent books are Stravinsky's biography (ARKAIM, Chel'abinsk, 2004) and the Russian publication of *Chronique de ma vie* and *Poétique musicale* of Stravinsky with commentary (ROSSPEN, Moscow, 2004). She is also a singer; her repertoire embraces compositions from Schoenberg, Berg, Webern (complete set of the songs with Yuri Polubelov: NAXOS, 2007) to many works of actual Russian composers.