

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

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Proceedings of the International Conference *Beyond the Centres: Musical Avant-Gardes Since 1950*  
Thessaloniki, Greece, 1-3 July 2010, <http://btc.web.auth.gr/>

**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.

The new music in the Soviet Union began to form at the end of the 1950s. It was created by a new generation of composers that emerged just at this time. The atmosphere in Soviet society had changed quickly after Stalin's death: the problem of spiritual freedom gained prominence. The word "Thaw" became a symbol of the times; it served as the title of Ilya Ehrenburg's novel and also denoted the entire historical period.

The founders of liberalism were mature statesmen, but the new generation had to put the ideas into practice. Younger people were unprejudiced, and they were free of the fear for their lives that had characterized the elder generation. Last but not least, the young had the natural potential energy to create new life and new art. For the first time in Soviet history, social conditions were no obstacle.

The old ideological barriers and prohibitions crumbled in a wink of the eye. Isolationism came to an end. The new attitudes are exemplified in Rodion Shchedrin's article "Creative Courage", published in the magazine *Sovetskaya Musyka*. (7, 1955). The young composer appealed to his colleagues not only to renew their own creative activity but also to extend their knowledge of modern music. By "modern music", however, Shchedrin understood the work of Debussy, Ravel, Mahler, and Stravinsky—which had been inaccessible to professional Soviet composers, to say nothing of music lovers.

But the situation changed quickly. The works of many Western composers were soon heard in Soviet concert halls. Soviet musicians were able to obtain recordings and other materials from the West. Young composers study the music of the avant-garde and tried to overcome the backwardness of the local scene. Soviet life as a whole became more open. Young composers could sometimes even attend festivals of modern music (but only in the Eastern European countries of the "socialist Democratic camp"). The most important such event was the Warsaw Autumn Festival, the first held in 1956. This Polish festival specialized in avant-garde compositions, and pushed radicalism to the maximum degree possible in the Soviet bloc. The Warsaw Autumn Festival was like an open window for young Soviet composers. They could

hear authentic new music there and make friends with foreign colleagues. They could also present their own avant-garde work. Compositions by more than 20 Soviet composers were played in Warsaw in the 1950s and 1960s. These were often the

most radical composers whose pieces were rarely performed in public in the Soviet Union: Galina Ustvolskaya (1962), Alfred Schnittke (1965, 1967), Arvo Pärt (1965), and especially Edison Denisov (1964, 1966, 1968, 1969, 1970).

These composers and many of their young colleagues focused their attention principally on the Western postwar avant-garde. However, they also had to become familiar with earlier innovations that covered almost the whole of 20<sup>th</sup>-century music: the neofolkloristic idioms of Stravinsky and Bartok, the neoclassical method of stylistic variations, and the New Viennese school with its free atonality and serial structures. The younger generation faced the task of recovering in the lost prestige of Soviet music from the early part of the century. When the Robert Craft accompanied Igor Stravinsky on a 1962 visit to the Soviet Union, he remarked that Soviet composers had fallen "a light year" behind the West.

Of course, the young composers did not see "catching up with and overtaking" their Western colleagues as their primary task; they only wish to express themselves in the new musical language.

The new language was associated for them with the twelve-tone serial technique and timbre composition. These purely technological ideas were very important for the younger generation because they emphasized the rational perfection of composition above all, and the new composers had no fear of aridity and dryness. Exact knowledge and skill, as an antidote to the pseudo-classicism and pathos of the Stalinist era, became the ideal. A similar process could be observed in Germany, where the young artistic generation felt that it had a duty to overcome the heritage of the Nazi era.

The piano cycle *Musica stricta* by Andrey Volkonsky, completed in 1956, was the first composition written according to the twelve-tone method. The composer was 23 at the time.

Andrey Mikhailovich Volkonsky (1933 - 2008) played a special role in Soviet music of the 1950s and 1960s (he emigrated in 1973 and later lived in France). Descended from an old princely family that often played a distinguished role in Russian history, he received his primary musical education in Geneva, and continued his studies in Moscow after his family returned to Russia in 1947. He knew modern music much better than his Soviet contemporaries did. Before *Musica stricta*, he wrote tonal but non-traditional music influenced by Stravinsky's neoclassical idioms. Then he began to study 12-tone music, and this led to his mature style. *Musica stricta*, however, was connected with polyphonic structures and baroque genres, and therefore had affinities with late Stravinsky and also the Schoenberg of the period of the *Suite for Piano* op. 25.

Later works by Volkonsky were mostly compositions for voice (soprano) and different chamber ensembles: the *Suite of Mirrors* (1959), *Shchasa's Lamentations* (1960), and the *Wandering Concerto* (1967). These works were at the cutting edge of the young Soviet avant-garde. Volkonsky developed Webern's refined structuralism in the direction of Boulez, but in a highly individualistic way.

Volkonsky's serial method of pitch organization was not the only thing that was new for Soviet music. His delicate chamber writing was unusual in general. It marked the true introduction of a modern language in the Soviet composition. Later, many other composers became familiar with the ideas pioneered by Volkonsky.

Another of Volkonsky's innovations was his creative work as an interpreter. An outstanding keyboard performer and organist, Volkonsky brought about a revolution in Russian concert life. He was one of the first to play authentic, renaissance and baroque music; the "Madrigal" ensemble, which he founded in 1964, is still in existence.

Volkonsky became famous as an interpreter. His original compositions however were subject to official criticism, and were practically banned. His music was heard very rarely. This was probably the main reason that he emigrated.

The term "the Soviet avant-garde" was coined by foreign music writers in the early 1960s. In official Soviet publications the word had a sharply negative sense. But the "avant-garde" movement was broad. It embraced many composers from Russia, the Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Baltic countries. The leading lights were three Moscow composers who later came to be known as "the Moscow Troika": Edison Denisov (1929-1996), Sofia Gubaidulina (born in 1931), and Alfred Schnittke (1934 - 1998). Other contributors to the new-style in Soviet music included Nikolai Karetnikov (1930-1994), Sergei Slonimsky (born 1932), Roman Ledenyov (born 1931). Boris Tishchenko (born 1939). Valentin Silvestrov (born 1937), Leonid Grabovsky (born 1935). and Rodion Shchedrin (born 1932).

The avant-garde period in the strict sense did not last long. By the late 1960s, orthodox serial writing had been transformed and gradually disappeared as an actual technique of musical composition. The process was identical to the evolution of Western music, where serialism was followed by aleatoric composition, and then by individual mixed methods of composition.

The initial stages of the mastery of serialism proved, quite naturally to be not only a practical but also a theoretical endeavor. Twelve-tone technique was not taught in the Soviet conservatories; nor were there any true followers of this tradition living in the Soviet Union. The single exception seemed to be Philip Hershkovich, a pupil of Anton Webern and Alban Berg who integrated to the Soviet Union in 1940 and lived in Moscow until 1987. Almost all avant-garde Soviet composers were connected in some way with Hershkovich but there is no proof that he taught them 12-tone technique. Like that of his teachers, Hershkovich's method was founded on the music of Vienna classicism and romanticism.

Instead of live teaching composers had various books and articles which they studied carefully. These included works on twelve-tone composition by Ernst Krenek and Herbert Eirnert. There were also the theory of serialism according to the *Texte* of Karlheinz Stockhausen, and articles by Pierre Boulez and Gyorgy Ligeti. The new music itself was also studied as a technical and theoretical problem. This helped to avoid the direct imitation of Western examples.

What exactly was the nature of the Soviet twelve-tone technique, Soviet serialism, timbre composition, or other new techniques? In general there are no answers to such questions, because it was previously impossible to research these issues.

Everyone knows that 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 aesthetic meant liberation from the dogmas of "socialist realism" and a return to free creative activity. Young composers were full of enthusiasm and 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. For example, Edison Denisov composed his first dodecaphonic works in 1961. A mere three years later, his *Italian Songs* featured the serial organization of rhythm and the dynamics. Denisov used numbered scales like those of Boulez; his technique developed in the same direction: the individualization of serial procedures in each work. In the *Italian Songs*, the serial calculation of distances between entries of parts constituted one such individual feature.

Alfred Schnittke also worked intensively with serial structures in the early 1960s. Like Denisov, he developed very quickly. In early composition of this type, *Music for Chamber Orchestra* (1964), Schnittke used the technique that Boulez had used in *Structures*. However, Schnittke soon became critical of this system, and above all of the way it dealt with time. Schnittke noticed that strict adherence to Boulez's 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.

Of course, other composers were also using the idea of progression. As a universal theory, it was developed by Karlheinz Stockhausen in his famous concept of the formant spectrum. 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. Questions of priority are not, of course, as important in music as they are in science. Nevertheless, they must be taken into account within the context of avant-garde innovation. While some new features introduced by Soviet composers may at times appear to be simple borrowings from the West, they turn out upon closer examination to be quite original.

Schnittke's orchestral piece *...Pianissimo...* (1968) is a good example. At first sight, it seems to resemble Ligeti's micropolyphonic compositions *Atmosphères* or *Lontano*. Yet while Ligeti used only canonical technique, *Pianissimo* employs a strict serial system. More importantly, the striking crescendo form in Schnittke's piece is vastly different from the surrealistic "eternity" of Ligeti's compositions. The similarity of textures highlights the divergent technical and aesthetic senses of the works.

Soviet composers wrote many outstanding avant-garde works throughout the 1960s. Nikolai Karetnikov's *Fourth Symphony* and Valentin Silvestrov's *Third Symphony* merit attention. Avant-garde ideas influenced even the composers, like Dmitri Shostakovich, who used neither twelve-tone nor serial techniques. His later works contain specific sequences that include freely elaborated, non-repetitive dodecaphonies.

Avant-garde developments therefore permitted Soviet music to overcome its long isolation from international artistic trends. Ever since, major stylistic events in Soviet music have occurred almost simultaneously with those in the West. Yet this has in no way meant a loss of originality.

By the late 1960s, the period of adaptation was over and Soviet composers began freely developing avant-garde conceptions. Strict serialism no longer seemed irreconcilable, and elements of traditional music penetrated into new works, giving birth to stylistic mixtures or "symbiotic compositions", as Stockhausen called them. Schnittke's previously mentioned *...Pianissimo...* was by no means "pure". In the climax, and the pitch progression imposes a "straightened" set form on the octave. The powerful sound of perfect consonance, after the complicated twelve-tone micropolyphonic texture, creates a sharp dramatic contrast that marks the high point of the composition. Later, such methods led to Schnittke's mature style, which the composer himself referred to as "polystylistics." His new works, such as the first five symphonies and instrumental concertos, made Schnittke's name famous outside of Russia.

This is only one example of the development of strict serialism towards various mixed forms. Similarly, timbre composition lost its universality and became a part of contemporary music writing. Earlier, this trend had been less important for Soviet composers than for Western ones. Its special technology seemed to prevent its broad application: the important electronic element of timbre composition barely existed in the USSR. Soviet composers used new sounds in the concerto genre. Gubaidulina, Schnittke, and others used such sounds to embody "the voice of the main character" in quasi-dramatic compositions.

The idea of spatial composition also received less attention from Soviet composers. Only rarely did they turn to spatially-divided sound groups as in Stockhausen's *Gruppen* or the works of Xenakis. Valentin Silvestrov and Gija Kancheli made intensive use of spatial effects, but within the context of the usual symphonic orchestra.

On the whole, the avant-garde period in Soviet music did not last very long. Nevertheless, it was a strong trend. The best composers of the postwar generation belonged to the avant-garde. The avant-garde period was also short in Western music. It did not cover even one generation of composers. The avant-garde did not last long, just as an explosion does not last long. The different conditions in the Soviet Union and in the West must also be taken into account. Western composers were free to realize even the most radical plans, their works were performed and published, and permanent institutions supported them: festivals, broadcasting, summer courses, and so on. The Soviet composers had none of these resources. Moreover, they were permanently under siege by officialdom. On the other hand, they enjoyed the support of the leading cultural elements in society, of an intelligentsia that applauded every manifestation of spiritual freedom.