Review

Music of the Soviet Era, 1917–1991, by Levon Hakobian. Second edition. Routledge Russian and East European Music and Culture. London: Routledge, 2017. 560 pp.

The book by Levon Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era, 1917–1991*, is the second revised edition of his book *Music of the Soviet Age, 1917–1987*, first published in Stockholm in English in 1998. Accordingly, the new edition includes quite a few additional music analyses (and nearly thirty music examples), as well as an expanded biography and bibliography.

This second edition came out in print in 2017, coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the two 1917 Russian Revolutions (February and October), a most symbolic event. At the same time, a hundred years is quite a short period of time from an historical point of view, and a scholar would be seriously challenged to try to look at such recent history with a detached eye. However, Hakobian is a well-known expert in the field of Soviet music, and his publications on Shostakovich and other related subjects have been recognized all over the world. His new book, therefore, should be of special interest for everyone concerned.

Music of the Soviet Era is a unique phenomenon in many ways. First, despite being a book written by a Russian scholar about the art music of the Soviet period, it was written nonetheless from the very beginning in English, and is intended for the reader with no personal experience of living in the Soviet/post-Soviet cultural space. For such a reader, the book gives a rare opportunity to gaze at the historical panorama of Soviet music from the point of view of a researcher who was formed by the Soviet and post-Soviet experience, but who is also fully acquainted with Western professional literature.

The literature about Soviet music appearing in the West is constantly increasing. If we consider only publications in English, we see several comprehensive volumes on Russian music from Glinka up to today,[1] as well as monographs on outstanding composers and some notable compositions. At the same time, the idea to explore the music of the Soviet period as a particular historical and artistic phenomenon has not yet been considered within Western musicology, so that the book by Hakobian is the first attempt in this field.

Among the many original ideas in the book, three are the most pivotal for presenting his historical concept. The first is the choice of the title of the book—*Music of the Soviet Era*. On the one hand, the practice of calling all music written in those years "Soviet music" has been under discussion from the 1990s, and has been judged wanting. (In Russia, the separate Soviet music course was cancelled, and, since the 1990s, its material has been included in the National music course.) On the other hand, anyone who lived during the Soviet period internalized certain specific traits; the music was also a mirror of the times,

[1] To mention only a few comprehensive publications: Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 2006); Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: from Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2007).

though sometimes with very surprising results. The title of the book, *Music of the Soviet Era*, is a very balanced one, delineating the borders of the historical period while leaving the author the freedom to focus also on phenomena that did not correspond with the Soviet canons.

The second main idea of the book is intriguing, while also being very productive. Hakobian suggests his own culturological concept, which will help explain the difference between Soviet and Western art music, often elusive to an outsider. Up until now, Western observers at times have divided Soviet artists into either conformists or dissidents, with diametrically opposite beliefs. As a result, the picture of what is happening within the borders of the former USSR is incomplete, and important artists not belonging to either group fall out of sight. Hakobian shows the reader the way to set aside the stereotype of the conformist/dissident partition, and to enter the Soviet world without prejudice and ready-made definitions.

In the introduction to his monograph, Hakobian puts forward a concept of a *Weltanschauung* characteristic of Soviet people searching for an alternative to the official spiritual values of their epoch. Hakobian defines the Soviet intellectuals' attitude to life as a unique kind of existentialism, although having very little in common with the existentialism of Heidegger, Jaspers, Camus, or Sartre. According to his point of view, the Soviet "private" spiritual seeking was "centered especially on the paramount subjects of existential philosophy: the tragic splitting of the human soul between good and evil, the impossibility of reaching complete mutual understanding with one's fellow man and the search for self-identity in an alien and absurd world" (p. 3).

It would seem that there is nothing visibly anti-Soviet in such *Weltanschauung*. Nevertheless, Hakobian interprets Soviet ideology as a variant of the religious doctrine of *privatio boni*, and underscores the fact that, according to its Soviet variant, evil cannot exist in Soviet society in principle. In such an ideological atmosphere, even silently ignoring[2] this allegedly unquestionable postulate, and concentrating instead on the contradictions both in the universe and in the individual spiritual world, made a composer a type of an alternative "existential thinker." In exploring the historical facts from this angle, Hakobian presents the depth and multidimensionality of music of Soviet times.

The third success of Hakobian's monograph is in his elegant presentation of the material. In the historical context of the book, he includes numerous mini-essays on composers and/or their works, each time built and presented differently. The abundance of faces appearing in the book evokes associations with the famous picture by Pavel Filonov, "The First Symphony of Shostakovich," where some clearly outlined profiles stand out against the multicolored background of the picture. Thanks to such organization of the text, the monograph certainly will be read with great relish and anticipation, despite the huge amount of material and the many composers mentioned.

[See the picture: http://www.avangardism.ru/pavel-filonov-pervaya-simfoniya-shostakovicha.html]

Summarizing the impression gained from the book, one is tempted to call it "the introduction into the existential chronicle of the Soviet epoch, written via the means of art music." First, the book depicts the times, sometimes cruel, sometimes "vegetarian" (in Akhmatova's definition), which always demanded considerable courage in order to express

[2] As Sergey Dovlatov, a famous Russian writer (1941–90) once said, "Soviet power is a very touchy lady. It's quite bad for someone who insults her. But it is even worse for someone who ignores her."

oneself sincerely and not betray oneself. Thinking about those who were honest with themselves and their audience, while living under frequently unbearable conditions (so difficult for people in the free world to fully understand), one returns unwittingly to the words of the writer Gregory Ryskin, cited by Sergey Dovlatov in his book, *March of the Lonely*: "We had a destiny. Not a biography, but a destiny. And we didn't surrender."

YULIA KREININ
Hebrew University of Jerusalem