Interview with Marina Ritzarev: From Russian Immigrant to Dynamic Israeli Musicologist

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Marina Ritzarev arrived in Israel from Moscow in 1990. In Russia, she had developed an impressive career and was recognized as an accomplished scholar and musicologist. Following her move to Israel, she faced the difficult task of settling into a new home, rebuilding her academic reputation, and becoming accepted as a member of Israel's musicological community. Twenty-five years later, after an active twenty-two-year career at Bar-Ilan University, and assisted by fellowship programs developed by the Ministry of Absorption for immigrant academicians, Marina reflects on her courageous struggle, in which she fought to become an integrated member of Israeli society. Her experiences movingly reveal a creative and determined spirit, whose love of her profession enabled her to persist, overcome, and secure her place as one of Israel's prominent leaders in the field of musicology. The following narrative also sheds light on the genesis of her recent book, *Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture* (Ashgate, 2014; reviewed by Esti Sheinberg in this issue).

Adena:
Beginning with recollections of your native home, can you please tell us about your work as a musicologist in Russia, prior to coming to Israel?

Marina:
Before arriving in Israel, I had already written several books. While I had not planned to be a book-writer, this in fact is what happened; I was able to put the fruits of years and decades of my work into writing.

After I got married, I moved from St. Petersburg to Moscow. Living in these two great cultural centers enabled me to work lengthy hours in archives and libraries that provided me with material for my work on eighteenth-century Russian music, including my PhD and my first three books (1979, 1983 and 1984 [pub. 2006]), which were then followed by a fourth (1987), fifth (1988 [pub. 1991]) and sixth book (1989 [pub. 1994]).

Adena:
When you arrived in Israel, were you able to continue writing?

Marina:
During the first seven years, I wrote very little—partially because I had completed the projects on which I had been working for almost twenty years before leaving Russia. I needed to generate new ideas and, for this, I needed more time. Moreover, these first years were not conducive to creative work. It was impossible for me to write while in a state of constant uncertainty. I did not belong to the local academic society, and yet I was not ready to live as an outcast. Such a state of mind is incompatible with research.

Adena:
When did the breakthrough happen?

Marina:

During my first years in Israel, I needed to develop a sense of belonging. Toward this end, several factors helped me greatly. First, I was assisted by the Ministry of Absorption, which supported me until my retirement, even when I was no longer classified as a new immigrant. Second, Bathia Churgin secured matching funds, which enabled me to join the staff of the music department at the Bar-Ilan University. Most importantly, she encouraged me to remain in the field of musicology, and related to all aspects of my work with enthusiasm and respect. Bathia also taught me many conventions of Western academic norms, on which I will presently elaborate. And, then, there was Uri Sharvit, who hired me to join his project: "The Role of Music in Immigrant Communities in the Epoch of Mass Communication." Later, Edwin Seroussi invited me to participate in his project "Popular Music and National Culture in Israel." And, finally, I began working in the Archive of Israeli Music (Tel Aviv University) with Yohanan Ron. All three fields greatly widened the scope of my knowledge in the field of ethnomusicology, enriched my interest in social anthropology, and provided me with multicultural experiences.

At the same time, as I began to feel more like an insider among Western colleagues, all kinds of new information and experiences began to flood my mind. These seven hard years ended when I received a generous letter of recommendation from Richard Taruskin. This letter did not help me receive a secure position, but it boosted my self-confidence. I started to write again—and in English. New topics appeared one after another; I attended many international conferences abroad and finally, by 2003, I felt that the Israeli musicological community had accepted me.

Adena:
Do you think that your growing personal feelings of belonging resulted from a better understanding of Western musicological traditions?

Marina:
Yes, I invested great efforts into educating myself regarding these traditions. I often sat in the library and relentlessly read whatever attracted my attention.

Adena:
Looking back, can you explain some of the main differences that you found between Russian and Western musicology at that time?

Marina:
I often ask myself this question, and yet have not reached a decisive answer. I think that one difference relates more to style than to essence. Thus, for example, there is the question of how to document sources. At that time, Western musicologists were very careful to document all their sources. Today, Russian musicologists are also strict in this regard, but in earlier years, they were less so—like Western scholars too. Also, there were differences regarding the scope of the research and the general approach. This difference was actually characteristic of American versus European traditions. Russian tradition was modeled on pre-World War II French and German schools. Both of these schools focused on developing broad themes of research, as is evident from the fourth academic degree that is offered to scholars who have completed their PhD in these countries.

Adena:
Were you awarded a fourth degree?

Marina:
Yes. In 1984, I wrote my work pertaining to the *opus magnum* of the Russian period: "The Russian Choral Concerto of the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century: Problems of Stylistic Evolution," which I defended in 1989 (my PhD was in 1973). This degree is not offered in Western universities of the American tradition. In Germany, it is referred to as Dr. Habil(itation); in Russia as Doctor of

Science; in the UK as Higher Doctorate; and in France as Doctorat d'État. Candidates for this degree must have published at least one substantial monograph and several articles that significantly contribute to a specific field. The dissertation is reviewed by the highest state committee and is publicly defended. The process is long and complex, and can be compared to being granted a status of full professor in the American and Israeli systems of academic promotion.

Another difference is that contemporary Western convention uses a classic rhetorical rule: a writer begins by stating a thesis, and then proceeds to defend it. Russian scholars guide their readers to a main thesis, which unfolds gradually, and emerges only close to the end.

Adena:
When you arrived in the West, your research focused on eighteenth-century Russian Music. How long were you involved in developing this topic?

Marina:
This book (*Eighteenth-Century Russian Music* [Aldershot–Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006]) is the culmination of thirty-five years of studying eighteenth-century Russian music. In many respects, living in the West liberated my thinking, which, while living in Russia, was overshadowed by Russian scholars of previous generations. Being an outsider enabled me to think more freely.

Adena:
So, in this sense, you feel that being an outsider enabled you to write your book? Do you feel that it is an outgrowth of your work in your earlier books, written in Russian?

Marina:
In my earlier research (MA, PhD, and Habilitation), I focused on the genre of religious music, a field that had been very much neglected. I also wrote two monographs on its leading practitioners, Italian-trained composers Dmitry Bortniansky (1752-1825) and Maxim Berezovsky (c. 1740-1777). These studies constituted a substantial part of eighteenth-century Russian music, but were not sufficient for a general survey. Thus, my work in Israel drew on the earlier materials, but added much more. In developing this work, my Russian and Ukrainian colleagues (Anna Porfirieva, Pavel Serbin, Sofia Filstein, Michail Stepanenko) helped me update the material. It was crucial for me to find a concept for the book, and then to choose the most relevant materials, design the structure, and develop a coherent sequence. I did not want a dry account of facts—no matter how fascinating they were—but rather their dynamics, conflicts, interconnectedness; I wanted the narrative to breathe and colorize. I hope that I succeeded in transmitting these feelings.

Adena:
This book has been very well received in the West, and has received positive reviews. How was it received in Russia?

Marina:
To date, the book has not been reviewed in Russia.

Adena:
How can you explain this?

Marina:
I'm not sure. Perhaps because eighteenth-century Russian music studies are in a decline, and perhaps because those who still are familiar with the material would disapprove of my revisions of the official Soviet nationalistic views.

Adena:
Does this trouble you?

Marina:
No, because I believe that, in time, there will be more interest in this field, which remains neglected. The last serious study appeared over three decades ago, in the 1980s, in a ten-volume collection of chapters, of which four volumes are dedicated to the eighteenth century. Meanwhile, there is growing interest in my work. The St. Petersburg publisher Compozitor published my book on the Russian spiritual choral concerto (2006, based on my 1984 Habilitation dissertation), and second editions, revised and extended, of my old Berezovsky (1983, 2nd edn. 2013) and Bortniansky (1979, 2nd edn. currently in print) books. I appreciate this greatly, considering that the publisher doesn't receive grants for foreign authors (which I now am), and musicological books are not commercial.

Adena:
When did you begin to become interested in other fields of research?

Marina:
I started writing about modern music a few months after defending my PhD. I didn't want to become locked into one field. I have articles on contemporary Russian composers, and a monograph on Sergei Slonimsky. My work in the Russian State Library, in the Archive of the Glinka State Central Museum of Musical Culture, and in The Center of Information for Soviet Music also enabled me to develop an understanding of anthropology and music culture.

Adena:
So, you found a connection between your eighteenth- and twentieth-century research? When did you become interested in Tchaikovsky and the nineteenth century?

Marina:
It was in the summer of 2006, at the end of a very intensive academic year, when I taught several courses, supervised several MA and PhD students and was busy proofreading two books. I was teaching a course about Tchaikovsky. I was greatly interested in his Sixth symphony—and in finding arguments against the popular view that this symphony was a "homosexual tragedy." Moreover, I was busy preparing the annual conference of the Israel Musicological Society. My first term as president of the society was coming to an end, and I was busy preparing reforms, and a smooth transfer of bureaucratic-organizational matters to the new committee. All these responsibilities prevented me from sleeping.

Adena:
What happened during these sleepless nights?

Marina:
One very unusual thing that happened was that I heard the crowing of a rooster. It pierced my brain, it was a eureka moment: that the rooster's crowing literally coincided with the main theme of Tchaikovsky's *Sixth.* The crow persistently repeated this motif, and I got up to record it. In a state of extreme excitement, I managed somehow to concentrate and to use an unfamiliar electronic recording device. I am still proud of this recording. Please listen to it (audio example).

Adena:
So what does this mean?

Marina:
These sounds unraveled for me many puzzles of the *Pathétique*.

Adena:
To which puzzles of this symphony are you referring? The symphony's hidden program, its Finale-requiem, or the unusual 5/4 waltz?

Marina:
All of these—and more. What intrigued me most was the ambivalence of its third movement, the Scherzo. Is it just a beautiful and spectacular heroic march? Or is it an image of evil and hostility in the context of the general tragic tone of this symphony? As a representative of St. Petersburg symbolism, I was brought up to search for a subtext.

Adena:
Did you find this subtext?

Marina:
Perhaps, but it is very complex.

Adena:
So, what did this nocturnal crowing of the cock tell you?

Marina:
I came to think that the *Pathétique* must be connected with Jesus's passion. In this sense, I perceived the anxious rooster's crowing as being related to the Russian saying "one's cock has crowed," which is understood as an omen of death or an end of activity.

Adena:
This is a very far-reaching hypothesis. How did you come to this idea?

Marina:
In Russian culture, people sometimes make a connection between Peter's three moments of denial before the rooster's crow and the three crows, which are alarming signs of trouble, according to certain pagan traditions.

Adena:
Do you mean that this was what made you associate the *Sixth* with passion?

Marina:
Exactly. It was a key. Or maybe a thief's jimmy, I don't know. Pure chance or not, this is what led me to my hypothesis. For six years, however, I didn't know what to do with it.

Adena:
What followed?

Marina:
I felt that I needed tools to understand my ideas better. I was fortunate to be able to consult with Esti Sheinberg, who was then in Israel. She accepted my hypothesis, and helped me a great deal in developing this project.

I shared my hypothesis with other colleagues in Israel and in Russia as well. Without their

support and help with materials, I would never have been able to proceed. All these years, I felt like a person who had found a great treasure, but the treasure was too big and too heavy to carry. The person could neither take it with him, nor leave it. He felt chained to it and didn't know what to do.

Adena:
But during these years, you worked on other projects as well?

Marina:
Yes, while never leaving Tchaikovsky, I worked on the new books about Berezovsky and Bortniansky. It helped me immensely. For example, Berezovsky's Liturgy helped me to understand the *Pathétique*'s finale. Indeed, during these years, every book that I read or reviewed, be it on Dostoevsky or on Jewish arts, somehow contributed to a better understanding of Tchaikovsky.

Adena:
I heard that you also translated a book on Bach?

Marina:
Yes, together with Esti Sheinberg. We translated the book of the St. Petersburg scholar Anatoly Milka on Bach's *The Art of Fugue*. This work was very helpful in my thinking on the *Sixth*.

Adena:
Bach helped Tchaikovsky?

Marina:
Yes, Milka's book, in which most of *The Art of Fugue* enigmas are cracked, helped me to understand Bach's symbolism better, and inspired me in my work on the *Sixth*.

Adena:
Did you have additional sources of inspiration?

Marina:
My husband Sergei Abir accepted my hypothesis (which was an encouraging surprise because he is one of the most critical persons I know). This was particularly significant for me, as he was intimately acquainted with the work, and had known its score by heart for all his life.

Adena:
Is this why you dedicated the book to him?

Marina:
For these reasons, and many more. Without his moral support, I would never have completed the book. At one point, in 2012, I was exhausted by my doubts and I felt that I was losing my creative drive. I was about to drop the project. He encouraged me and helped me find the emotional energies to lift the treasure.

Adena:
Why emotional?

Marina:
Everything about this symphony is emotional. These months were a sweet agony, the happiest time in my life. I dreaded the emptiness that would follow when the work would be complete. I tried not

to think about the boldness of the hypothesis, and to put aside my fear of approaching this great symphony. If indeed I hit the target, Tchaikovsky would probably be angry with me for revealing his secret; but then, at last, he would forgive me if I did it tactfully. What gave me strength was the desire, even commitment, to see different books on this masterpiece with alternate approaches on the library shelves.

My beautiful rooster also encouraged me; he sang often that year.

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