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Unbeknownst Spirituality: The Sacred Music of Late Soviet Composers

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Abstract

Church music has never been associated with the works of Soviet composers throughout the history of the USSR. As is commonly known, religion was relegated there, and the development of church ritual and music in the localities was not observed. Yet, in the last decade of Soviet history, in the 1980s, the authorities, still not encouraging, no longer prohibited the composition of religious (liturgical, paraliturgical, or any other spiritual) music. Since there were no rules in the USSR as to writing church music, the few composers who dared to work with sacred texts had to choose between a traditional or avant-garde approach to the subject, depending on personal aesthetic preferences. The group associated with the first of the above approaches lists Georgy Sviridov, Alfred Schnittke, and Arvo Pärt. The second approach is primarily represented by Sofia Gubaidulina. The article analyses several examples of the religious music of the above composers against relevant historical and sociocultural backgrounds, while at the same time shedding light on the uniqueness of the personality and worldview of each composer. The main discussion is preceded by a discussion of the special place of church music in the practice of Russian composers over the past three centuries, the challenges of church music in the 20th century (in the world) and other historical facts. Being rather a brief summary, emphasizing the socio-cultural aspect and the general typological approach to the subject, this material, without claiming to be complete, can serve as an introduction to the topic.

Keywords

Atheistic ideology, Church music, Soviet composers, Sviridov, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Pärt

Introduction

The twentieth century was not particularly favorable for composers wishing to write church music. By the end of the nineteenth century, liturgical music in the Western Church was already seriously affecting the length of the church service, sometimes transforming the liturgical service into a kind of concert, in which there was no room for the spoken (unsung) word. When the Vatican became aware of this problem, Pope Pius X issued an instruction on November 22, 1903 clearly stating that "the more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes."[1] The implication of this gesture was that the Catholic Church no longer encouraged composers to write new compositions of liturgical content if they were not based on medieval (or reminiscent of medieval) melodies. Ten years later, the situation already seemed as if "the essence of high Mass is not the music but the deacon and subdeacon."[2] In other words, in the

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[1] *Tra Le Sollecitudini*, Instruction on Sacred Music by Pope Pius X, 22 November 1903, accessed January 22, 2019, https://adoremus.org/1903/11/22/tra-le-sollecitudini.

[2] Adrian Fortesque, "Mass, Ceremony of the," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, eds. Charles G. Herbermann et al. (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913), vol. 9, 799.

early twentieth century, the Catholic Church became so critical of music that it was ready to give it up rather than let music determine the ceremony. As a result, the rich volume of Christian music of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries gradually moved to the concert halls, and was performed by secular singers, choirs, and musicians.[3]

On the other hand, the connection between living composers and church musical practices (mainly in the Protestant and Anglican/Episcopal churches) continued in search of the proper path. The language of musical modernism could not have been appropriate. As Clarke notes, "twentieth-century 'art-music' idioms are not generally understood or liked in church congregations. It is doubtful that congregations would ever try to sing atonal hymn tunes."[4] Yet, as noted in the introduction to a hymnal of the late 1930s: "[e]ach generation, with its problems and outlook, must ever seek ways of expressing its ideas and aspirations."[5] The preface to a later collection of hymns is even more specific: "Young people especially wish to sing hymns cast in the style of the twentieth century."[6] This clearly refers to the pop–rock music of that period.[7]

All this has little to do with the church music practices of twentieth-century Russia. Historically, Maxim Berezovsky (1745–1777) and Dmitry Bortniansky (1751–1825) first introduced the Western musical style of the Classical period into Russian sacred music in the late eighteenth century in unaccompanied choral works of paraliturgical content.[8] However, these did not become part of public Orthodox worship. Unlike the Western Church, where "art music" with spiritual content had always been part of the ministry, the Russian church authorities never recognized Western-style church music, especially instrumental music. The October Revolution in Russia (1917) led to a split among national composers, dividing them into those who remained in their homeland and those who emigrated to the West. The creativity of the latter group includes individual works associated with sacred-related themes, such as Rachmaninoff's *Vespers* and *Bells*, Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, or several works by Alexander Grechaninov (1864–1956), written in both Orthodox and Western styles. At the same time, over the entire seventy-year history of the USSR, church music was never associated with the work of Soviet composers. As is commonly known, religions and their institutions were relegated there, and the development of church ritual and music was not observed.

The questions we will try to answer can be formulated as follows: did sacred music written by professional composers exist in the USSR, and, if so, what is its character, features, and does it belong to a certain tradition? To answer these questions, we first provide the necessary information about atheistic ideology, church life, music management, and cultural doctrine in the USSR.[9]

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[3] This sequence of events was first discussed (from such a perspective) in: Alexander Rosenblatt, "Christian Music in Israel: A Religious, Cultural, and Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 16 (2019): 76–77, https://www2.biu.ac.il/hu/mu/min-ad/.

[4] Frederick R. C. Clarke, "Some musical aspects of The Hymn Book, 1971," in *Sing Out the Glad News: Hymn Tunes in Canada* [Proceedings of the conference held in Toronto February 7 and 8, 1986], ed. John Beckwith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 153.

[5] *The Book of Common Praise* [The Hymn Book of the Church of England in Canada], (Toronto: Humphrey Milford, 1938), iii.

[6] *The Hymn Book* [The Hymn Book of the Anglican Church of Canada and United Church of Canada], (Toronto: Southam-Murray, 1971), iv.

[7] This entire context is discussed in more detail in Alexander Rosenblatt, "Musical Cultures in the National Hymnbooks of the 1990s," *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 14 (2018), 25, https://www2.biu.ac.il/hu/mu/min-ad/.

[8] See Marina Ritzarev (Rytsareva). *Dukhovny kontsert v Rossii vtoroy poloviny XVIII veka* [Spiritual concert in Russia in the second half of the XVIII century]. (Saint-Petersburg: Kompozitor, 2006).

Concise Information on the Ideology and Church Life in the USSR

Over the more than seventy-year history of the Soviet Union, there have been periods when the Soviet authorities persecuted religions, including Christianity, to various degrees, depending on state interests. The Soviet leadership consistently advocated control, suppression and, ultimately, the eradication of religious beliefs, actively encouraging the spread of Marxist–Leninist atheism in the USSR. Although most religions have never officially been banned, the state advocated the elimination of religion and, to achieve this goal, it officially declared religious beliefs to be superstitious and backward. Many churches, synagogues, and mosques were destroyed or turned into museums of atheism (a striking example of which, until recently, was the Kazan Cathedral of St. Petersburg). While some religious leaders, devoted to the regime, continued to minister and to represent religious "tolerance" of the regime, many others were mocked, persecuted, imprisoned, and executed. The Communist Party flooded schools and the media with an anti-religious system of beliefs called "scientific atheism," with its own rituals and commitments. However, religious beliefs and customs continued among the majority of the population[10] in the domestic and private spheres, as well as in those public places that the state allowed to exist, thus admitting its inability to eradicate religion.

In fact, the Soviet regime never officially outlawed religious beliefs. Moreover, various Soviet constitutions have always guaranteed the right to believe. Being rather a hypocrisy, this greatly helped the state to use the church during the war to encourage patriotism. However, since the Marxist ideology, as interpreted by Lenin and his successors, viewed religion as an obstacle to building a Communist society, the consistent destruction of all religions (and their replacement by atheism) became a fundamentally important ideological goal of the Soviet state. Lenin's "Decree on Separation of Church and State," issued on January 23, 1918,[11] determined the conditions for the relationship between the state, church, and education system. The decree was in effect until 1990, when it was replaced by the new Law of the Russian Federation "On Freedom of Religion."

The decree was of historical importance for the implementation of the idea of equality between various groups of the population of the young Soviet republic by preventing discrimination on religious grounds. On the other hand, it handed over almost unlimited rule and legislation into the hands of the Communist regime. Religion, its institutions and employees were the first victims of this situation. For seven decades, depending on state needs, various tactics were used to suppress, persecute, diminish, and sometimes allow (under control) the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in Soviet life. However, after Stalin's death, only a few documents relating to the published resolutions of the Central Committee (of CPSU) give us an idea of how religion was treated at that time.[12] Soviet leaders after Stalin were not consistent in their attitude toward the Orthodox Church. In general, they refrained from the tactics of direct repression, although they did try to introduce the internal security services (KGB) into the ranks of the clergy. Only in the late 1980s, under the leadership of M. Gorbachev, did new political and social freedoms lead to the return of most of the church buildings to the Church. This marked a new approach to religion on the part of the state, which decided that the best thing it could do was simply to minimize the "harmful effects" of religion.[13]

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[9] N. Gulyanitskaya who explores the continuity of the styles of sacred music of Russian composers throughout the 20th century (Nataliya Gulyanitskaya. *Poetika muzykal'noy kompozitsii. Teoreticheskiye aspekty russkoy dukhovnoy muzyki XX veka* [Poetics of musical composition. Theoretical aspects of Russian sacred music of the XX century], (Moscow: Yazyki Slavyanskoy Kul'tury, 2002), [in Russian]) ignores the sociocultural context of Soviet Russia, concentrating only on the stylistic components of the analyzed works. At the same time, as can be assumed from the quoted in the book letter by Tchaikovsky who could not distinguish between the musical genres of the Orthodox Church (p. 29), the gap between church musical practice and the practice of the Russian musical school of composition was already outlined by the middle of the 19th century.

[10] Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 1 (March 2004): 35–50.

[11] The original text in Russian is posted on the website of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, accessed October 10, 2020, https://constitution.garant.ru/history/act1600-1918/5325/. English translation of the Decree is given in https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/events/revolution/documents/1918/02/5.htm with reference to James Bunyan and Harold H. Fisher, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1918: Documents and Materials*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1934), 590–591.

During the Soviet period, church life was not completely eliminated in villages and small, even large cities of the USSR. One or two churches have always been active and served their small congregations. In large cities, the majority of the parishioners were old people who once came from the countryside to the city to work, and who either stayed there or moved to live with their children at an advanced age. Such persons were allowed to come to church without restrictions.[14] At the same time, anyone with social status, other than a housekeeper or a pensioner, could not even think about attending church, because public consciousness had developed a norm for treating religion over the decades as something connected with the past or with backward views. Moreover, if you were noticed attending church, this could directly lead to expulsion from the Komsomol,[15] not to mention the Communist Party, which, in turn, meant that you lost your career. However, in small towns, church attendance, even by school teachers, was not punishable – although it was not recommended.

Music Management and Soviet Cultural Doctrine

Soon after the October Revolution, Russian artists, writers, and musicians were faced with the need to develop a personal and artistic position in relation to the new Soviet ideology. For many, this was not an issue, given the long tradition of "critical realism" and "revolutionary spirit" that characterized Russian art and music (for example, Scriabin) in previous decades. However, it was music that played an important role in Communist ideological propaganda: the mass song became one of the main genres associated with Soviet music, at least from the 1930s to the 1950s. This point requires further clarification. Not only were the majority of Soviet mass songs written by composers of Jewish origin,[16] for whom Christian themes were insufficiently familiar and were not included in the creative agenda, the topic of composing music related to religious service was not on the general agenda of the state. The authorities interfered more and more in the composers' work, including the choice of genres and musical language.

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[12] John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3.

[13] Dimitry V. Pospielovsky, *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory, and Practice, and the Believer* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987), vol. 1, 121.

[14] This follows from childhood memories of the author who grew up in Soviet Russia in the 1960s: The housekeeper in his family was an Orthodox Christian who regularly went to church either with a housekeeper from the family of another Jewish professor or with a retired neighbor.

[15] Contraction for *Kommunisticheskiy Soyuz Molodyozhi* [Young Communist League], the youth division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The organization was disbanded in 1991.

[16] Marina Ritzarev, "Conceptualizing the Vernacular in Music," in *Garment and Core. Jews and Their Musical Experiences*, eds. Eitan Avitsur, Marina Ritzarev, and Edwin Seroussi (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012), 37.

Until the mid-1930s, however, the pioneering atmosphere of Soviet music and theater was still daring. Young Shostakovich experimented with atonality and ironized in the genres of opera and ballet, collaborating with such prominent personalities as the poet V. Mayakovsky and theatrical director V. Meyerhold. Prokofiev, who lived in the West from the 1920s to the mid-1930s and tired of competing with Rachmaninov and Stravinsky in the category of "contemporary Russian composer," was considering a return to his homeland.[17] This was on the cards up until January 1936, when Stalin attended a performance of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. The next day, *Pravda*, the central organ of the Soviet press, published an unsigned editorial "Sumbur vmesto muzyki" ("Muddle Instead of Music"), which was the first blow to be publicly delivered to a Soviet musician by Stalin's criticism. The article prompted Shostakovich to remove his new Fourth Symphony from rehearsals, and to think about changing his musical language. Many of composer's acquaintances, with whom he worked or merely talked, disappeared into the dungeons of the Stalinist secret police (NKVD). The composer's son Maxim Shostakovich claims that once, after visiting the Soviet military leader M. Tukhachevsky, who favored the young composer and tried to promote him as best as he could, Shostakovich was summoned to the Leningrad department of the NKVD and asked to remember if Tukhachevsky had discussed the plan for Stalin's assassination with the guests. Shostakovich denied any such knowledge, and was summoned the following day to continue the interrogation. He was miraculously saved by the fact that the investigator himself was arrested the following morning.[18] Tukhachevsky and Meyerhold were executed in 1937 and 1940, respectively.

The second wave of Stalin's criticism of writers and composers came in 1948, when the Decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU "On the Opera The Great Friendship by Vano Muradeli" was issued, in which the leading Soviet composers Shostakovich and Prokofiev were declared "formalists." Shostakovich, who proved to be very productive during the World War II years and, it would seem, regained the favor of the authorities and gradually returned to the elements of the musical language characteristic of his early style, pretended to accept criticism and was forced to speak out publicly in order to survive:

> No matter how hard it is for me to hear the condemnation of my music, and even more so the condemnation of it by the Central Committee, I know that the party is right, that the party wishes me good and that I have to look for and find concrete creative ways that would lead me to Soviet realistic art. I understand that this is not an easy path for me, that it's not so easy for me to start writing in a new way. [...] But I can't help but look for these new ways, because I am a Soviet artist, I was brought up in a Soviet country, I have to seek and want to find a way to the heart of the people.[19]

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[17] Alexander Rosenblatt, "Reflecting on Peter and the Wolf: Fantasy or Prophecy," *Sociology Study* 9, no. 2 (2019), 56–57.

[18] *Shostakovich v vospominaniyakh syna Maksima, docheri Galiny i protoiyereya Mikhaila Ardova* [Shostakovich in the memories of the son Maxim, daughter Galina, and archpriest Mikhail Ardov], (Moscow: Zakharov, 2003), 59. [In Russian]

[19] *First All-Union Congress of Soviet Composers*, Verbatim report (Moscow: Union of Soviet Composers, 1948), 343. [in Russian]. Musicologist M. Sabinina recalls how Shostakovich later spoke about this speech on the basis of a piece of paper slipped to him: "I climbed out onto the podium, began to read aloud the nonsense concocted by someone. I read, humiliated myself – just like a clown, […] like a cardboard doll on a string!" (Marina Sabinina. *Zarisovki raznykh let* [Sketches from different years], *Muzykal'naya Akademiya* 1 (2003), 25. [In Russian]

Soon after the publication of the Decree, Shostakovich was fired from the Leningrad and Moscow Conservatories.[20]

The Soviet cultural doctrine, according to which artists, writers, and composers had to adhere to the party line in their creative work, was developed by the ideologist Andrei Zhdanov, then secretary of the CPSU Central Committee. This policy was carried out directly from 1945 to 1948, up until Zhdanov's death, but its echoes were felt for another ten years. The British philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who hosted Shostakovich during his time at Oxford in 1958, where the composer was awarded an honorary doctorate, later shared the impression the composer made on him in one of his personal letters: "[…] what an extraordinary effect censorship and prison has on creative genius. It limits it, but deepens it."[21]

Not only composers, but musicologists too were persecuted for their analysis of tonality in the works of disgraced composers, for scientific, and uncritical attitudes to Western, and in particular American music – either simply for their origin, or in the context of political repression against their parents. For example, music theorist A. Dolzhansky, who published an article on the modal foundations of Shostakovich's works in 1947, was fired from the Leningrad Conservatory a year later for refusing to condemn Shostakovich, who was then sharply criticized.[22]

V. Konen, one of the leading Soviet musicologists, a specialist in Western music, was the daughter of a Communist of Jewish origin from Baku, who emigrated with his family to the United States. Ten years later he returned with his family to the Soviet Union, and was then executed. Konen was persecuted by every possible means because of her origins in an "enemy of the people" family and her knowledge of American music. Richard Taruskin recently shared the story of Valentina Konen, who was his mother's closest friend in New York for ten years.[23]

This whole atmosphere of enthusiasm, fear, praise, and repression meant that Soviet composers did not want to write music associated with church and religion, at least until the late 1970s. So, what happened next, in the last decade of the Soviet era?

Findings: Spiritual Works of Late Soviet Composers

Throughout the 1980s, Soviet authorities did not yet encourage, but no longer prohibited the composition of religious (liturgical, paraliturgical, or any other sacred) music. Since there was no guidance as to the writing of church music, the few composers who had the courage to pursue sacred texts had to choose between a traditional or an avant-garde approach to the subject, depending on personal aesthetic preferences and perception of the subject. The group associated with the first of the above approaches includes Georgy Sviridov (1915–98), Alfred Schnittke (1934–98), and Arvo Pärt (b. 1935). The second approach is primarily represented by Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931).

Below is an overview of several examples of sacred music by the aforementioned composers, preceded by biographical references to each of them and other useful information.

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[20] Alexander Rosenblatt, "Red Insight: Socio-Tonal Battles of Dmitri Shostakovich," *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 17 (2020): 81, https://www2.biu.ac.il/hu/mu/min-ad/.

[21] Isaiah Berlin, *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960*, eds. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (London: Pimlico, 2011), 640.

[22] Rosenblatt, "Red Insight," 85, fn. 27.

[23] Richard Taruskin, "Found in translation," *Min-Ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 16 (2019), 22-23, https://www2.biu.ac.il/hu/mu/min-ad/.

Being rather a blueprint for possible future case studies, this section, however, sheds light on the uniqueness of personality and worldview of each of these composers.

Georgy Sviridov. *Chants and Prayers*

Georgy Sviridov (1915–98) was born in a small town in the Kursk province (Russian Empire), in the family of a postal worker and a teacher. His mother sang in local church choir, and the boy attended church as a child,[24] which led to his future interest in vocal and choral music, and, in the last years of his life, church melodies. Being one of the most distinctive Russian composers of the twentieth century, Sviridov created his own unique style, which combined the spirit of folk and instrumental melodies of his native land with the language of a professional composer, who studied with Dmitry Shostakovich. Sviridov's relationship with his great teacher was, however, far from cloudless. He even dropped out of the conservatory in his final year, after Shostakovich criticized his Six Songs to the words of A. Prokofiev. Communication between the composers resumed only after several years.[25]

In his mature years, Sviridov deliberately chose the path of songwriting, since, in his opinion, "the voice alone is the instrument given by God."[26] According to Kholopova, "Georgy Sviridov represents a kind of 'Russian Orff,' who has found himself in the deliberate simplification of the modern musical language. … [T]he impulse for his music comes from the sonority of measured rhythms inherent in verses."[27] Sviridov remained respected and appreciated among Soviet composers and listeners, held high posts in the Union of Composers of the USSR, although after the aforementioned 1948 Resolution on Muradeli's Opera *The Great Friendship*, he was for some time surrounded by an information vacuum, because the main target of that resolution was his teacher – Shostakovich. Not being a dissident, avant-gardist, or in any other way annoying to the authorities (and therefore drawing scant attention on the part of the Western press during the Iron Curtain era), Sviridov remains little known to scholars and listeners in the West. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* dedicated only three hundred words to him, and only a handful of books in English make reference to the composer – and these references are made mainly for comparison with other Soviet composers.[28]

Sviridov, who began as a composer in 1935 with a vocal cycle to verses by Pushkin, devoted his entire life to finding a balance between the soundscape of the Russian hinterland and modern urban trends. While Shostakovich, who was ten years older, is associated mainly with the 1930s and '40s, Sviridov is perceived as a composer of the 1950s and '60s, primarily through a song cycle to the poems by Burns and his instrumental suite *Time, Forward!*, a fragment of which for decades served as an introduction to the *Vremya* (*Time*) evening news program of the Central Television of the USSR. While Sviridov wrote in a style that largely followed the tonal patterns of his teacher during World War II, all his post-war compositions gradually moved toward minimalism, modality, and a clear commitment to national roots. The later vocal cycles, *Petersburg Songs* and *Petersburg*, both set to the Blok's poems, while generally more complex in musical language than the earlier works, are nevertheless possessed with unmistakably recognizable features of the composer's palette: the bell-ringing effect in the piano part, the modality of the vocal part, and the minimalism of the harmonic means.

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[24] Sviridov's biography on *24SMI* [in Russian], accessed October 3, 2020, https://24smi.org/celebrity/3791-georgii-sviridov.html.

[25] According to Sviridov's biography on *Soundtimes.Ru* [in Russian], accessed October 3, 2020, https://soundtimes.ru/muzykalnaya-shkatulka/velikie-kompozitory/georgij-sviridov.

[26] Sviridov on *24SMI*.

[27] Valentina Kholopova, "The labyrinths of Roman Ledenyov's creative work." In *Underground Music from the Former USSR*, ed. Valeria Tsenova, trans. Romela Kohanovskaya. (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 134.

[28] Ibid. See also: Daniel Elphick, *Music Behind the Iron Curtain. Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), which speaks, in particular, of the close relationship between M. Weinberg and G. Sviridov (p. 180).

Chants and Prayers is an unaccompanied cycle for mixed choir dated 1990. Work on the cycle began in 1985 and continued until 1997, when the last author's edition was released and the final order of the parts was approved by the composer. This cycle, like no other work by Sviridov, directly corresponds to his childhood memories of the melodies that his mother used to sing in the church choir, and which the Communist regime failed to erase from the memory of this Russian composer. The performance of *Chants and Prayers* sometimes includes *The Bride*, a song from the *Petersburg* cycle, in which the bell-ringing of the piano and the verbal image of the Virgin joining the funeral procession complement the spiritual part of the story of the bride following the groom's coffin. The inclusion of a song to Blok's verses, accompanied by piano, gives the effect of a concert performance to the cycle, which is otherwise perceived purely as church music.

Alfred Schnittke. *Requiem*

Alfred Schnittke (1934–98) was one of the most notorious Soviet composers of the post-war period. He headed the list of Soviet avant-garde composers (A. Schnittke – S. Gubaidulina – E. Denisov), who were his associates. Schnittke was not ignored by Western critics, if only because he was constantly criticized by the Soviet cultural authorities. The Soviet composers who were his contemporaries held different attitudes toward Schnittke's work. Sviridov's view was wholly negative with regard to Schnittke's music, while Shostakovich and Shchedrin spoke quite positively about him.

In general, Schnittke is a rather unique personality in the Russian-Soviet context. And to a large extent, the point here is that all his life the composer was engaged in the search for his own national, cultural, and then religious identity. Alfred Schnittke was born in Engels, the then capital of the Volga–German Autonomous Republic (part of Russian Federation in 1917–41). The father of the future composer was a German-born Jew, and the paternal grandparents were from Riga, which was then part of the Russian Empire. Soon after World War I, they left for Germany, and (having retained Russian citizenship) returned to Russia ten years later – first to Moscow, and then to Engels. Schnittke's mother came from those German families who had moved to Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great. According to the composer, the ethnic issue was not on the agenda in the USSR until 1941, and religion had been abolished, so mixed-heritage families were quite common at that time.[29]

With the outbreak of war, the situation began to change. At the everyday level, anti-Semitism resumed, and at the state level, the expulsion of Germans from the city of Engels began. The composer's father, who had been born in Germany, managed to prove his Jewish descent, and the family remained in the city. Moreover, the father succeeded in entering the ranks of the Soviet Army, which was not at all easy for a person born in Germany. After the war, the family lived for two years in Vienna, where Alfred's father worked as a correspondent for a Soviet newspaper. Alfred Schnittke was then twelve years old. The time spent in Vienna determined the cultural and musical priorities of the future composer:

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[29] Hereinafter, the biographical information and interpretation by the composer of certain events in his life is based on Aleksandr Ivashkin. *Besedy s Al'fredom Shnitke* [Conversations with Alfred Schnittke] (Moscow: Kul'tura, 1994) [in Russian], Electronic edition, accessed December 4, 2020. http://yanko.lib.ru/books/music/shnitke_ivashkin_besedu.html#_Toc18304350.

> … I think that the gustatory guideline that my stay in Vienna gave me in total was more correct than the one that was here in Russia. That landmark was Classic, maybe a little Romantic, but no further than Schubert. I remember that it was a little embarrassing for me to listen to Chopin: it seemed that it was something artificial and mannered. The Vienna landmark may not be entirely correct, but it is the cleanest.[30]

The return to the Soviet Union once again raised questions of identity that had receded during Schnittke's stay in Vienna: whether to consider himself a German or a Jew. At the age of sixteen, on receiving a passport, Alfred decided to register as a Jew[31] because, according to him, he considered it shameful to cover up his Jewishness by registering as a German. From that time on, the issues of national identity and cultural affiliation remained with the composer until his last days. If in Russia he had perceived himself more as a German, then in Germany, to where he moved in the last years of his life, he felt differently: in the eyes of the Germans he already was a "Russian composer," which, obviously, was too general for a person whose self-perception based on the nuances of cultural identity. Following the death of his mother, questions of religious self-determination were added to the issues of cultural and national self-determination. This was reflected in the composer's work. Thus, in 1983, he wrote the Fourth Symphony, which was the embodiment of a grandiose plan that united religions. Schnittke used musical means to describe the principle of One God, incorporating the intonations of Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Synagogue singing into the music. A year later, in 1984, he wrote *Three Sacred Hymns for Choir* (following Orthodox prayer). And yet, Schnittke's most conceptually and artistically consistent work relating to the sacred theme was the Requiem, written several years earlier.

Completed in 1975, *Requiem* demonstrates the composer's advent to polystylism, in which features of different stylistic *periods* are bizarrely combined and mixed.

> Since in the Soviet Union all that had to do with religion was a taboo subject, he had to rely on his intuition without plunging deeply into the tradition. Thus his sacred compositions are unusual to the point of uniqueness. For example his Requiem has a very unconventional set of instruments: organ, piano, bass guitar, percussion. Nevertheless this is authentic Christian music.[32]

The main impetus for writing the Requiem was the death of the composer's mother. At first, the composer's thoughts were directed toward writing instrumental funeral music that would complement his piano quintet. However, receiving a commission from one of the Moscow theaters to compose music for the "invisible mass for the dead," the composer chose in favor of the Requiem. The dark hues of the work, which created an atmosphere of anticipation of a catastrophe, coincided with Schnittke's personal mood and finally determined the concept of the composition.

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[30] Ibid. Hereinafter, translation from Russian sources is mine, unless otherwise indicated – A.R.

[31] Since about the mid-1920s, the column "Nationality" appeared in Soviet passports (internal identity cards of citizens of the USSR), which mandatorily indicated the *ethnic* origin of a person. In the case of different ethnic origins of the parents, either of the two could be chosen. Once made, this choice could no longer be changed – A.R.

[32] English annotation for the Program of concert held on 6 November 2019 in Moscow, at De Boni Arte Charitable Foundation, accessed December 4, 2020, https://artbene.ru/en/concert/06-11-2019/.

> According to the church canon, the mass for the dead is based on two cornerstone postulates – “eternal rest” (Requiem aeternam) and “eternal light” (Lux perpetua), endowing the human being with hope for salvation after the Last Judgment and at life after mortal life. The composer placed the semantic accents in an original manner, omitting stanzas (from the Introit) and entire movements (Lux aeterna, Libera me) dealing with the ideas of “eternal light.” All with the more force the latter asserts itself, following the apocalyptic pictures of the section of “Dies irae” (The Day of Wrath), in the culmination section of the 13th movement, “Credo” (The Creed). As it is well known, according to the church canon, this text does not form a part of the service for the dead, but Schnitke felt it extremely important to assert the Christian postulate of the “faith in one God,” in His Trinitarian essence, “in the Lord Jesus Christ, God from God, Light from Light…” (Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine).[33]

Being the first work of its kind composed in the USSR, Schnittke’s *Requiem* became a landmark and a kind of forerunner of the sacred works written by Soviet composers in the following decade.

Sofia Gubaidulina. *St. John Passion*

Composers like Gubaidulina provoke mutually exclusive comments. Some might say, “These avant-garde musicians have driven the final nail into the coffin of academic music, so pop music has spread all over the world.” Others: “They breathed new life into music, making many sounds, connections between which have yet to be found.”[34] And this does not prevent Gubaidulina’s music to be performed very often all over the world. Nor does it prevent the audience from leaving these concerts just as often...

The composer Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931), one of the most controversial figures in Soviet music, spent her childhood and adolescence in Kazan, the capital of the Tatar Autonomous Republic, part of the Russian Federation. As the daughter of a surveyor engineer and a housewife mother, her childhood was a hungry one in pre-war Central Russia. The music school, the Kazan Conservatory, was her main joy, to be followed by the Moscow State Conservatory, where the future composer studied with a whole constellation of celebrities, including composers Y. Shaporin, N. Peiko, and pianist Y. Zak. In 1963, she completed her postgraduate studies in composition with V. Shebalin. Shostakovich, who was present at the performance of her First Symphony, wished her to go her own “wrong” way. Positioning herself as a Tatar–Russian composer (not so much because of the place of her birth, but rather the ethnic heritage of her parents: her father was Tatar, her mother Russian), Gubaidulina found herself in a much better position than, say, Schnittke, whose ethnicity through both parents was “problematic” in the Soviet Union at that time. Gubaidulina’s paternal grandfather was an *Imam* (a Muslim clergyman), whereas both her parents were atheists (like the vast majority of the Soviet people regardless of their heritage). The composer herself claims to be a profoundly spiritual person, who does not however follow strict religious guidelines in life or works. “I understand the word ‘religion’ in its direct meaning: as *re-ligio* (re-legato), that is, a restoration of *legato* between me (my soul) and God,” she says.[35] Combinations of folk instruments (first of all, the *bayan* – a Russian accordion), the influence of electronic sounds, and finally, a passion for percussion – this is the most general palette of Gubaidulina's soundscape. Through the special meaning she assigns to percussion, the composer observes "the unique feature of percussion instruments: they let one go inside the sound, discovering the mystery of sound."[36]

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[33] Evgenia Krivitskaya, *Alfred Schnittke. Requiem*, English annotation for the CD-brochure (Moscow: Moscow Conservatory, 2014).

[34] Yan Smirnitskiy, “Svekol’nyy blyuz” [Beetroot blues], *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 16 February, 2007 [in Russian], accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.mk.ru/editions/daily/article/2007/02/16/158327-svekolnyiy-blyuz.html.

[35] Vera Lukomsky, “'The Eucharist in my fantasy': Interview with Sofia Gubaidulina”, *Tempo* New Series, no. 206 (Sept. 1998): 33.

The composer has received many prestigious international awards, as well as honorary titles from leading universities in Europe and the United States. However, she never worked for a salary and never wrote music for the authorities of her native country. She was and remains an example of a freedom-loving artist who prefers a half-starved life to that of an artist living on commissions, especially those tendered by people in power. Nevertheless, having been commissioned by the International Bach Academy in Stuttgart to write St. John Passion on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Bach's death, the composer found it impossible to refuse such a flattering offer. What were the creative assets of Gubaidulina's works on sacred, specifically Christian, themes? There were five such works, all written between 1978 and 1990: *De profundis* and *Et expecto* for bayan, *Seven Last Words* for cello, bayan, and strings, *Offertorium* for violin and orchestra, and *Hallelujah* for choir, orchestra, organ, counter-tenor, and color projectors.

St. John Passion (2000) and, later, *St. John Easter* (2002) create a complete cycle lasting together about three hours, being performed by some two hundred singers and musicians. In advance of the premiere of the entire St. John cycle in Hamburg in March 2002, Gubaidulina provided the following commentary to *Sikorski Magazine* regarding this work:

> While working on the "Passion" I had to separate thoughts of the Resurrection from the actual "Passion." However, I sensed that the narration of Jesus's earthly life path must in no case be allowed to end with a "solution of the dramatic conflict;" after such a dramatic process, there could only be one thing – a sign from the Day of Judgement. This meant an extreme dissonance, a kind of cry or scream. And following this final scream, only one thing was possible – silence. There is no continuation and there can be no continuation: "It is finished."[37]

Some critics note that the minor second dominates throughout the Passion, associated with "sighs and groans of pain in Western music for centuries."[38] Interestingly, this effect is achieved due to the feeling that the minor second is simultaneously the I and II degrees of the Phrygian mode (especially in the bass part of storytelling, preserved in the pure style of church recitation) and the V and VI degrees of the minor key (in other vocal parts and in the orchestra). The style of this work can be defined as a unique combination of Russian Orthodox worship (the text is pronounced and sung in Russian) with German expressionism. One of the comments (2021) to the performance of this piece on *YouTube* states that "[t]he singers are singing as if they were present at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ." Extremely tense from beginning to end, Gubaidulina's *St. John Passion* is not easy to listen to – like all the composer's other works.

Arvo Pärt. *My Heart's in the Highlands*

The figure of Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) stands somewhat apart from other Soviet composers. The point not even being that he was born in Estonia during the period of the republic's official independence from Soviet Russia, but that he never adhered to the doctrines and compositional practices adopted in the USSR. Not having had time to truly declare himself an avant-garde composer, he was immediately subjected to sharp criticism by the then chairman of the Union of Soviet Composers, Tikhon Khrennikov, for using serialism in *Nekrolog* (*Obituary*) for the orchestra (1960). Pärt then switched to new stylistic solutions, combining avant-garde techniques with Bach's quotes, using a collage method. This period ended with the creation of *Credo* (1968), which caused a scandal in the Politburo of the Communist Party of Estonia, followed by the dismissal of several employees of the Estonian Philharmonic organization, who permitted the performance of this work without approval by the Union of Estonian Composers.[39] The composer retrospectively explains the concept behind the method used in *Credo* in the following way:

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[36] Ibid.

[37] *Sikorski News Archive*, March 2002, accessed July 9, 2021, https://www.sikorski.de/3028/en/sofia_gubaidulina_passion_and_resurrection_of_jesus_christ.html.

[38] *Wise Music Classical*, accessed July 9, 2021, https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/24106/St-John-Passion-Johannes-Passion--Sofia-Gubaidulina/.

> 'I wanted to put together the two worlds of love and hate. [...] I knew what kind of music I would write for hate, and I did it. But for love, I was not able to do it.' That was what drew him to the idea of borrowing Bach's theme and incorporating it into a collage.[40]

After the premiere of *Credo*, all official commissions for compositions ceased, and Pärt did not write music for about eight years. During this period, he studied the musical heritage of the Catholic Church, mainly Gregorian chants, and also delved into religion, converting to Orthodoxy (the composer was born into a Lutheran family). Returning to composition, Pärt appeared in the completely different guise of a spiritual minimalist, whose style was woven from an expanded tonality with clearly audible triads, adorned with soft side-tones and relying on repetitive rhythm patterns. This is the style with which the music of Pärt, who meanwhile has become the most performed of the living (classical) composers,[41] is associated. In 1980, the composer and his spouse Nora left Estonia and settled in Berlin. In 1992, after Estonia withdrew from the Soviet Union and became independent again, the Pärts returned home.

About three dozen of Pärt's works, directly related to the Christian canonical–liturgical tradition, were written over four decades, from 1977 to the end of the 2010s. They can be attributed to various streams within the Christian tradition (they differ in language, the degree of "canonicity," and performers makeup), but all these works, be it *De profundis* (1980), *Berliner Messe* (1990), *2 Slawische Psalmen* (1997), or *Littlemore Tractus* (2001), are united by Pärt's unique and recognizable style, which the composer himself calls *tintinnabuli*, referring to small church bells with characteristic side-tones. The composer believes that "if the human has conflict in his soul and with everything, then [the] system of 12-tone music is exactly good for this. But if you have no more conflict with people, with the world, with God, then it is not necessary."[42]

My Heart's in the Highlands for countertenor and organ (2000), to the words by Robert Burns (1759–96), was written for (and dedicated to) the countertenor David James on the occasion of his 50th birthday. Burns's lyrics are conveyed in syllabic singing – each line of the text on a single note. The organ part gives each note of the vocal part a new harmonious color that hardly allows you to feel that the vocal part is actually a static monotonous recitation. Over the course of an eight-minute piece, the voice gradually rises, starting from F, after a few lines it jumps to A-flat, then to C, and again descends through A-flat to F. All the other sixteen songs based on these verses, found by the author of this article on the YouTube, are stylized like a Scottish folk song. Only this one, written by a postmodern minimalist composer with experience in writing church music, sounds like a spirit soaring in the heights.

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[39] Arthur Lubow, "The Sound of Spirit," *The New York Times*, 15 October 2010, accessed July 9, 2021, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17part-t.html.

[40] Ibid.

[41] According to the website of the *Arvo Pärt Centre*, accessed October 9, 2021, https://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part-is-the-most-performed-living-composer-in-the-world-eighth-year-running/, *Bachtrack*, the database of classical music events, confirms that, as of January 2019, Arvo Pärt is the world's most performed contemporary composer for the eighth consecutive year.

[42] Lubow, "The Sound."

Discussion and Final Thoughts

The findings of this study point to a positive answer to the first of the questions posed earlier in this review: sacred music was indeed being written by Soviet composers in the very last decade of the USSR. Not much, but enough to say yes. Since the assessment of the quality and characteristics of these works, as well as their belonging to a particular tradition, largely depends on the reference point chosen, we will endeavor to be as objective as possible.

The spiritual works of late Soviet composers clearly belong to various forms of Christian music, whether unaccompanied Orthodox singing or Western-style works "in the genre of...." Depending on the circumstances that prompted particular composers to write sacred works, their belonging to ethnic and cultural heritages, and the place in which they grew up, the results turned out to be completely different. Moreover, for some of these creative people, immersion in religion become a part of their lives – as happened with Pärt. Schnittke also tried to find himself in the bosom of religion, but for a man who was born in central Russia to non-religious parents of German and Jewish origin, the Catholic faith was not close enough, and he finally chose an Orthodox priest to confess to. Sviridov, most likely, was inside, or close to religion from childhood, while Gubaidulina, it seems, is still not there, although she has said more than once that she is a Russian Orthodox Christian. Well, Gubaidulina has always been special and different.

In the course of the study, various, often opposing approaches of composers to sacred texts and their "embedding" in musical works were revealed. The variety of means of the musical language included modern compositional techniques such as atonality (which is generally little accepted in the genres of church music), minimalism, neo-modality, and a fusion of the above. The study showed that the *hybridity of means* and the *blurring of canonical boundaries* are typical for the works under consideration.

The gap in religious consciousness in the USSR for at least six decades (that is, for two or three generations) could not help but lead to either the creation of new values or the restoration of original values of the national religion, which had been abandoned for sixty years and then rethought anew (while the Church in the West has already passed through some of these stages and developed a new – corresponding to the era – view of things). Thus, the concept of the latter days was recently mentioned by the composer Vladimir Martynov (b. 1946), who said that "[f]or Christians, any time should be perceived as the last."[43] Pyotr Mamonov (1951–2021), a Russian actor and rock musician, who in his later years plunged into religion, has developed his own concept of a religious worldview, which he shares with his audience in any of his interviews. When one of the interviewers told the story of when the Pope visited Auschwitz, and, at the end of his stay, he raised his eyes to the heavens and asked: "Where have you been, Lord?" Mamonov reacted like this:

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[43] Nikolay Bul'chuk, "Vladimir Martynov: 'Dlya khristian lyuboye vremya dolzhno vosprinimat'sya kak posledneye'" [Vladimir Martynov: For Christians, any time should be perceived as the last]. *Pravoslaviye.Ru*, 18 April 2018 [in Russian], accessed October 7, 2020, https://pravoslavie.ru/112285.html.

> Let me explain that this is the position of the Catholic Church. I belong to the Orthodox Church. On this score, everything is clear to us that this is all we, people, are doing. [...] And if we choose evil, then this whole horror begins. And there is nothing to blame on God.[44]

The twentieth-century composers who came to church music can be apparently divided into two groups: those who were just tired of their own avant-garde and were looking for euphony (among them Penderecki and Pärt). Another group simply preferred to continue with the original harmony inherent in church music, and that was their niche (among them was Healey Willan, a British–Canadian composer, as well as Sviridov, especially in his later period). In each era, some Western composers have written music for a Christian denomination other than the one to which they belonged. Thus, William Bird, being a Catholic, wrote many works for the Church of England. The same with Johann Sebastian Bach, a devout Lutheran, whose greatest work was a musical setting of the Roman Catholic Mass in Latin and some of whose other brilliant works in the genre of cantata can only be loosely associated with the teaching of his own church, such as *Widerstehe doch der Sünde* BWV 54 or *Coffee Cantata* BWV 211. The disclosure of the layer of sacred music of late Soviet composers complements the picture of twentieth-century church music, as well as the general picture of professional music written in genres related to church services or purely concert works on Christian themes.

Although the main purpose of this article was to familiarize the academic audience with the subject of research, significant events in the biographies of composers, as well as related background information about the place and era in which they lived and worked, represent an additional, no less valuable topic. Returning to the broader meaning of this study, we can say that the very attempt to consider art associated with religion in a country that for decades rejected this worldview has additional value, and opens up new research perspectives in sociology, cultural studies, and religious studies, not to mention musicology and art history. The survey of the genres and styles of religious music of late Soviet composers, placed in a sociocultural rather than traditional environment, being the first review of its kind, is aimed at articulating a phenomenon that in itself deserves a more detailed study.

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[44] Mumin Shakirov, "Petr Mamonov: o Boge i vere" [Peter Mamonov: about God and faith], *Radio Svoboda*, 4 December 2006 [In Russian], accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.svoboda.org/a/317199.html.