

Russia and the West: Irrationalism in Music and Beyond — Creative Thought of Alexander Ivashkin

Olga Tabachnikova

University of Central Lancashire

Preston, UK

E-mail: otabachnikova@uclan.ac.uk

Abstract—The paper engages with the ideas of the prominent musician and musical scholar Alexander Ivashkin (1948-2014), whose chapter on Irrationalism in Russian music forms part of the collective volume *Facets of Russian Irrationalism between Art and Life: Mystery inside Enigma* edited by Olga Tabachnikova (Brill-Rodopi, 2016). We address Russian and Western European conceptions and manifestations of irrationalism in art, and highlight methodological challenges which this topic presents. A possible correlation between artistic creativity and political liberties is discussed, drawing on Ivashkin's earlier publications. This leads to a broader discussion of Russia vis-à-vis Western Europe in the framework of artistic differences and cultural constants. Using Ivashkin's philosophical premonitions concerning the invasion of Russian arts in Western culture, we argue that alongside some potentially destructive tendencies of this phenomenon, there are also highly inspiring and meaningful features to it.

Keywords—Russia; Western Europe; Irrationalism; culture; arts; music; Alexander Ivashkin

I. INTRODUCTION

Russian philosophical thought has been traditionally preoccupied by Russia's relations with Western Europe, which display a combination of rivalry and apprenticeship. The continuing debates around Russian cultural distinctiveness imply, in particular, exploration of distinguishing features of Russian arts, including music. For some these distinctions are imaginary and artificial, for others — they are not only real, but substantial to the point of having to be reckoned with.

In any event, these are fascinating topics for study, with which the author significantly engaged. As a result, in 2016, a collective volume under my editorship came out with Brill-Rodopi, entitled *Facets of Russian Irrationalism between Art and Life: Mystery inside Enigma*. It is homage to Alexander Ivashkin (1948-2014), prominent Russian cellist, writer, academic and conductor, and includes his chapter "*Symbols, Metaphors and Irrationalities in Twentieth-Century Music*". A year earlier my monograph was published (with Bloomsbury Academic) — *Russian Irrationalism from Pushkin to Brodsky: Seven Essays in Literature and Thought*. Both books stem from a research project the author worked on for a number of years. What is not, however, public

knowledge is that the inspiration for choosing this topic of Russian irrationalism came to me from reading Alexander Ivashkin's article of 1992 in *The Musical Quarterly*: "*The Paradox of Russian Non-Liberty*".

What struck me in his paper above all was a sudden understanding of a certain universality of art, of Russian cultural invariants, if you like, — for what he described about music in the Russian context was already familiar to me from literature. His paper made me rethink Western and Russian cultural differences (as well as their common roots and patterns) in very general, philosophical terms, and it is then that the issue of Russian irrationalism dawned on me and became crystallized in my mind.

Arguably, it can be traced in philosophy, theology and the arts (most notably literature) as taking shape in the protopope Avvakum's autobiography in the seventeenth century and the teachings of Grigorii Skovoroda a century later; developing into Fedor Dostoevsky's messianic irrationalism, Lev Shestov's critique of speculative philosophy and, through various modernist and post-modernist intellectual and cultural movements, evolving to the present day. The history of Russian irrationalism and its socio-cultural impact on the life of the country and the outside world is still significantly under-researched. Yet, it appears essential, in particular, for understanding contemporary Russian society and its development, with all the implications of this for the West.¹ My work on the subject was an attempt to bridge the gap.

In the sequel, the author tries to engage with Alexander Ivashkin's ideas, drawn both from the above article and from his chapter in the volume dedicated to his memory, by

¹ While being extremely fruitful in the last two hundred years in the fields of philosophy, theology and the arts, Russian irrationalism can also be regarded as having given rise to such ugly extremes as militant nationalism on the one hand, and backward anti-scientific beliefs on the other. In contemporary Russia both reached a level where urgent measures were required. Thus, for example, the First Sceptics' Congress (an international symposium) took place in Moscow in October 2001, organized by the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow State university and Russian Humanist Society 'against anti-science, charlatanism, and irrationalism in Russia'; similarly a conference 'Future of Russia under the Threat of Fascism' gathered in Moscow in May 2006 with more than 150 representatives of different NGOs, youth associations, democratic political parties, independent anti-fascist groups, ethnic associations, experts, journalists and cultural figures taking part.

making connections with both of my aforementioned books on the theme of Russian irrationalism.

II. RUSSIAN AND WESTERN EUROPEAN CONCEPTIONS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF IRRATIONALISM IN ART

There are methodological difficulties arising right at the start, to do with the very definition of the concept of irrationalism. Formally speaking, irrationalism must be a stance which denies or restricts the role of reason in cognition in favor of the intuitive appreciation of the universe; and the extent of the role which reason plays can be (apparently at our discretion) scaled up or down, to avoid the result becoming all-inclusive or too restrictive. Yet, whether our focus is on a national culture or on an individual mind, a place within those for both rationalist and irrationalist modes of perception and existence is, most likely, not a discrete combination, but an inseparable blend. Thus, Chekhov, for instance, has a clear "understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the rational and irrational. Chekhov's characters, when they act rationally from their own point of view, continually perform deeds which are completely irrational from other people's viewpoints" [1]. As a result, there are "...mutual transitions of the meaningful into meaningless and back again...", when "initially rational intentions" lead to an irrational outcome [2]. This suggests, in particular, a certain relativity of the concept of irrationalism, its dependence on our vantage point, as well as, most probably, a cultural dependence too. It is indeed clearly multifaceted, and one can talk about irrationalism in a variety of terms, including philosophical, cultural, social and religious, and ranging to such manifestations of irrationalism as a semiotics of individual behavior, and, generally, a particular mind-set.

Although the principal rise of the irrationalist trend in world history can be measured from the time of the Enlightenment, as a radical reaction against it, the origins of the irrationalist approach to the world in the form of mysticism, intuition, instinct and so forth are evident from the time of antiquity, together with a continuous wrestling of two opposing traditions. Whether we talk, along the lines of Nietzsche, of the elemental and passionate Dionysian tradition as opposed to the Apollonian principle of classical ordered beauty, or, following Erich Auerbach (as Ivashkin does in his chapter), divide culture into two fundamental branches – arising either from the symbolism of the Old Testament or the ratio-based ancient Greek philosophy; or, like Lev Shestov, radically confront reason and faith, as epitomised by Athens and Jerusalem respectively, or consider Aristotelian versus Platonic philosophical heritages, or any further variations of a rationalist and irrationalist variety, there is little doubt that both constitute an intrinsic part of human history and human nature itself. Furthermore, emotion-driven romanticism in contrast to order-based classicism does not necessarily represent irrationalism in its pure form and is distinct from idealism, just as realism can be disjointed from rationalism. Faith and reason, mind and soul, ethics and aesthetics do not inevitably mean a rationalist-irrationalist dichotomy, yet it is at their border that

the painful conflict seems to live, hence the continuous strivings to polarise them.

The aim of my work thus was to distil and analyse manifestations of the irrational in Russian arts, literature and thought, bearing in mind the elusive nature of our understanding of the concept as such.

In his article Alexander Ivashkin says, that, in contrast to the Russian conception, the Western "conception of art is different — to them art is a game, an entertainment, a competition of rational forces. Russian music is much more irrational [...] A work of Russian art is a confession. [...] Everything is extreme, sometimes shocking, strange. We treat music as something more than just music. [...] The Russian style is, first of all, a metaphysical one" [3].

As the author mentioned earlier, this can be easily generalised to other forms of Russian art. Indeed, while in Western Europe culture (including philosophy, theology and especially the arts) was respectively an academic discipline and an intellectual game, for Russians it became a substitute for life itself, with all the seriousness (almost fatefulness) that this implied. That is to say that although Russians borrowed culture (such as literature and philosophy in the early nineteenth century on a large scale) from the West, they substantially "amended" it, enriched with their own meaning and approach, which has often regarded art as being larger than life. Russians thus, as it were, deconstructed Western syntactical order to reassemble it in a more impressionist fashion, turning it into a personal confession [4]. The resulting product would then be consumed in the West, where it was both admired and feared.²

The author discusses this in both books, thus referring back to Alexander Ivashkin's ideas and his description of Russian art as above all confessional. Ivashkin also raises a number of other issues which can be easily extended beyond music — such as the divine or supernatural origin of artistic inspiration (when someone or something dictates from above, and an artist becomes no more than a conductor of divine grace); of metaphysical always accompanying and foreshadowing the physical in Russian art; and also — of an unusual daring inherent in it, an almost savage fearlessness. This echoes with Lev Shestov's words about (relatively young) Russian literature: "We wanted to re-examine everything, restate everything. I won't deny that our courage is drawn from our quite uncultured confidence in our own powers" [5]. Behind this inappropriate daring, Shestov argues, there lies "a lingering belief in the possibility of a final triumph over 'evil'. [...] In the strength of this belief Russian writer goes forth to meet his enemy — he does not hide from him" [6].

² For example, André Gide's impression of Dostoevsky's reception in the West was that he is feared for his 'chaotic', 'Slavic' element, and yet Gide himself was a great admirer of the Russian novelist seeing in him an author so 'Russian in the strictest sense of the word and withal so universally European' (André Gide, *Dostoevsky*, London: Penguin Books, 1967, p.171).

III. INTERPLAY BETWEEN ARTISTIC CREATIVITY AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN RUSSIAN AND WESTERN CONTEXTS

The main idea of Alexander Ivashkin's paper on Russian non-liberty, which apparently gave the paper its name, is that artistic creativity and political freedom, at least in Russia, are inversely proportional. "It is paradoxical", he writes, "that music was more profound and interesting in an atmosphere of harsh political pressure and social discomfort than today, when Russians have the freedom to travel, to bargain, and to sell. In other words, less freedom, more creativity; more freedom, less creativity. Russian art does not flourish under conditions of total freedom; it is (and was) usually more productive in an atmosphere of social and political contradictions" [7].

It is hard to argue either for or against this thesis, because the changes in Russian society brought about not only the political freedom, but also a different economic order. The huge existential laboratory — our Soviet society — where every day presented a test for our conscience, turned into another testing ground, with very different pitfalls and different temptations. Thus a newly acquired freedom Ivashkin is talking about, brought with it, as a Trojan horse, a new economic reality with a cunning striving for comfort, a hedonist worldview which, apparently, conceal a real danger for an artistic mind. As Fazil Iskander once said through the mouth of his hero "for a poet, artistic ability implies some adversity in life, as if a certain law of preservation of energy is at work here" [8]. However, one has to discern between outer and inner adversity, for although it may well be that one is conducive of the other, but the inner torment can be intrinsically inherent in a person, regardless of the most favourable external circumstances. After all, human life is tragic by definition, at least due to its finiteness. Moreover, as Heine famously said, "if the world cracks, the crack goes right through the heart of a poet". This rings true, but at the same time one seems to be born as an individual with a certain degree of inner poetry, susceptibility to it, — yet, there are, surely, times and societies which are generally more conducive of it, or not. Russian cultural consciousness is distinctive in its aesthetic striving, as well as the tradition of profound discontent with the world order. Hence the untranslatable — and by now hackneyed — Russian concepts of *toska* and *dusha*.

Perhaps, one of the historical reasons for the diverging attitudes to culture in Russia and Western Europe is a different locus of cultural production — traditionally in the West, universities were places for arts and literature, whereas in Russia these were monasteries. As Dmitrii Likhachev writes, "if the culture of Western Europe predominantly was a university culture — with all the specific features of university tolerance of other cultures past and present, Russian culture, from the fourteenth century and up to the beginning of the eighteenth, was one of monastic literacy and a monastic type of economic structure" [9].

It was also the culture where personalities prevailed over a system, since the latter has been continuously flawed. As Iskander beautifully put it, "a Russian person is strong in his

ethical striving, but weak in obeying the ethical laws. A mighty ethical striving perhaps results from a horror of encountering the ethical lawlessness. What are the results of all this? These are great literature and feeble statehood" [10]. In this lack of lawful space, a random and unpredictable element in life flourished, contributing to its irrationalism. In the book *Zamechatelnye Chudaki i Originally (Wonderfully Weird and Original Persons)*, written in the first half of the 19th century and published by Aleksei Suvorin in 1898, its author, M. I. Pyliaev, says, "Being personally weird is a consequence of randomness of life, and the more such randomness reigns in a society which is still inhomogeneous, the more weird personalities it produces" [11]. But "weird" can mean both negative and positive, and national heroes are also "weird" in comparison with the mediocre. Thus, the other side of the coin is that the role of an individual *tour-de-force* (*podvig*) in Russian cultural history has been undeniably remarkable, and Russian literature is famous for being one of the most conscience-oriented (*samaja sovestlivaja*) in the world. And, in a way, the paradox of Russian non-liberty described by Ivashkin can be juxtaposed to a paradox of Western law-abiding societies, where the legal strictures encroach upon human ability to exercise one's own judgement based on one's own conscience and understanding of good and evil. As Iskander asks through the mouth of his hero, "Is it not the case that an infinite development of legislation leads to a gradual atrophy of conscience? [...] If law becomes the dominant pathos of life, then conscience fades away. However, no matter how advanced laws can become, there have always been and will be occasions in life when one must behave in accordance with one's conscience. But how can one behave in accordance with one's conscience if it has faded away? And it has faded away precisely because laws have developed well, and people have got used to restricting themselves only by law?" [12]. A similar stance was expressed by Ivan Il'in: "Law is an external order of life. However, if this external order is detached from the inner states of human spirit, if it is not created and accepted by them or does not grow from their maturity and their autonomy, then it degenerates, withers, abases a human being, and, when disintegrating, it destroys spiritual life" [13].

By contrast, Russian lawlessness (which thus magnified the role of conscience (*sovest'*)) produced devotees (*podvizhniki*). Thus Sergei Averintsev, when singling out a number of invariants of the traditional Russian consciousness, names, among the important distinguishing factors, Russian ascetic tradition — a seemingly fruitless, weird striving for a spiritual *tour-de-force*, virtually for sainthood, but without using such lofty rhetoric. From any materialistic, positivist, pragmatic point of view such a striving certainly looks irrational and enigmatic. Averintsev refers [14] to the memoirs of the well-known Russian liturgist N. D. Uspensky, who recalls the events of his youth when his famous teacher "Aleksei Afanasievich Dmitrievsky, deprived during the Soviet times of any means for existence and basically starving to death, was spending his last strength and last days of his life for passing on his knowledge, completely selflessly, to the then youngster Uspensky, and was touchingly and almost comically angry if there happened to

be even the slightest break in their lessons — for there was so much to teach in so little time" [15]. This is, Averintsev exclaims, what our scholarly continuity, our teaching and apprenticeship are like. "It's not only that the teacher is performing his exploit (*podvig*), giving it the efforts which could be used for his own survival. It is also the fact that the student, who is still very much a child, is fully aware that the difficult hours spent next to his stern teacher do not promise anything in terms of his practical life, except the threat of persecution. However, knowing this, he still goes to the lessons. And Russian culture, the culture of Saint Stephen of Perm, continues through him its stubborn life, resisting the institutional order, as a blade of grass, growing through asphalt" [16].

To this individual voluntary martyrdom Averintsev cautiously juxtaposes an institutional order more characteristic of the cultural history of Western Europe. He sees the essence of Russian culture as concealed in a certain degree of prevalence of a personal exploit, as in the example above, over all the corporate and institutional. Acknowledging an obvious presence of both modes of cultural organisation in both Russia and the West, Averintsev stresses a relative unevenness of this presence, its differing measure. He concludes that, by contrast to the cultures of the West, in Russia "the role of a personal, that is to a certain extent solitary, 'isolated', enthusiastic striving, which does not fit into any given institutional-corporate context, is obviously large" [17].

This also goes some way to elucidate the Russian concept of art as martyrdom, where most sacred, most immortal lines (or, for that matter, scores, or paintings) are, as it were, "written in blood". Will this tradition die out with the advance of capitalist/consumerist values, brought about by the new freedoms, will liberated creativity simply fade away, as Ivashkin warned back in 1992?

"This is the way it was", wrote Sergei Averintsev in his turn more than a decade later, "Now we are told that this will be no more; that the feature of almost sainthood in Russian culture, suspicious for severe adherents of the faith and funny for people without any faith, has forever become the thing of the past. Forever. Well, we shall see about that, if we are still around", he said defiantly, "but we shall not forget to bow down in front of each and every one of the elders, who yesterday alone, secluded, singlehanded, just by the strength of their personality, defended, in the face of fear and indifference, the tradition of Russian ascetics, the tradition of St. Stephen" [18].

Notably, the same — in some sense fatal — problem of the connection between non-liberty and artistic productivity, or, in other words, of art getting distorted under relaxed political conditions, is posed in the aforementioned chapter by Alexander Ivashkin (on irrationality in music) in the aforementioned volume (*Facets of Russian Irrationalism...*) dedicated to his memory.

The volume was conceived as an attempt at a systematic, integral approach, which would treat the subject as a dominant rather than a theme and thus fill the existing gap in scholarship. It therefore launches the study of Russian

irrationalism in philosophy, theology, and the arts — especially in literature — of the last two hundred years, i.e. from the start of the 19th century to the present day, but with some inevitable historical detours further back in time, to a more distant past which invariably conceals the roots of modernity.

While the monograph is a collection of seven essays in literature and thought, discussing Russian language as a source of Russian irrationalism, Russia vis-à-vis Western Europe, Russian literary dreamers, the concept of love in Russian letters, Chekhov and Brodsky as covertly irrationalist writers, and, finally, Russian literary humour, — the volume is broader in scope, comprises twenty three chapters, and is organised in five parts. The first tackles the theme of Russian irrationalism conceptually, as a general historical-cultural phenomenon. The chapters of the first section serve as a point of departure for the rest of the volume in their generalised approach to the theme of Russian irrationalism, providing a critical overview of the subject in different cultural areas. The second and third parts offer a study of individual authors and works of classical Russian literature respectively of the nineteenth century and of the Silver Age, which is traditionally regarded as the pinnacle of Russian irrationalism. The fourth part deals with other art forms such as painting, music, cinema and architecture — and it is here where Alexander Ivashkin's contribution features. The fifth and final part addresses Soviet and post-Soviet Russian literature.

Alexander Ivashkin's chapter is in fact a reprint from the original which appeared in 2009 in *Mimesis, Verità e Fiction* by Cataño, Rafael Jiménez and Yarza, Ignacio (Ed.) (Roma: Edusc, 2009, 69-87.). It focuses on Russian twentieth century music, and reinforces the points made elsewhere in the volume in relation to Russian (and not only Russian) visual arts in that their irrationalism represents a complex blend of logical reasoning and supra-phenomenal intuitive visions. In his discussion of irrationalism in Russian music, Ivashkin places it in the broader context of world culture, revealing the unifying symbolist root of the Old Testament as opposed to the ancient Greek rationalist tradition — the division suggested by Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. This division, in fact, is closely connected to Lev Shestov's idiosyncratic dichotomy of Athens and Jerusalem, reason and faith, which the volume also addresses. Ivashkin traces manifestations of the above irrationalist tradition in the music of both Russian and non-Russian composers of the twentieth century and highlights the striking parallels between them.

Starting with Skriabin's theosophical ideas and his use of the so called "mystical chord", he argues further that Shostakovich and some younger Russian composers of the irrationalist variety drew many of their ideas from the mentality of the Silver Age as well as the doctrines of Christian faith. Indeed, as Ivashkin explains, Shostakovich built in particular on Mussorgskii's music inspired by the Old Believers, and the repetitive character of Shostakovich's oeuvre, devoid of direct religious content, nevertheless owes much to Russian religious music with its radical spiritual might. Ivashkin then provides a fascinating historical

analysis of Shostakovich's propensity for regular rhythmical structures and traces the origins of the composer's ritualistic principles, which, curiously, share much with communist rhetoric and Soviet mass-culture, to the so-called Church Azbukas (syllabaries) of the eighteenth century as well as Russian pagan beliefs, fairy tales, rituals and prayers. Notably, this enlightening analysis in the musical-historical sphere is highly resonant of existing studies of Soviet history as mythology.³

From Shostakovich's use of the 'magic number' three, Ivashkin moves on to a more extended engagement with numerology as part of symbolist technique, rooted in number alphabets and cabalistic tradition. This is exemplified by the music of such composers as Alfred Schnittke and Sofia Gubaidulina in their connections to Bach as well as other composers whose musical texts often need to be deciphered. In their use of numbers as symbols and principles of natural proportion, these composers display a blend of strict logic and irrationalist sensibility — the phenomenon occurring not only in the visual arts, as mentioned above, but also in Russian literature, and even more broadly — in the Eurasian mentality, as another chapter demonstrates. Thus part of the common denominator uniting separate studies represented in the volume is that the roots of irrationalism are concealed not only in the mystical, intuitive realm, in pure faith unaccountable to reason, but equally in a belief in some higher universal order which leads us to supernatural, divine spheres.

IV. CONCLUSION

In order to conclude the above discussion, let us turn to Alexander Ivashkin's own conclusion to his chapter. It ends with the suggestion, already familiar to us from his article of 1992, that oppressive historical circumstances were conducive to creativity in Russia, while periods of relative liberties on the contrary diminished its creative impulse. However, he then observes — in a very penetrating way — that the nature of non-liberty is diverse and not restricted to political or social oppression, and suggests that the roots of hidden meanings and metaphoric language initiate from deeper and older cultural and spiritual sources — those situated essentially beyond reason. Furthermore, our acceptance of the absurd and irrational guarantee our spiritual continuity and cultural survival.

On the other hand, as can be argued, it is not rationalism per se which is dangerous for cultural development, but rather its scholastic, shallow, one-dimensional interpretation. Curiously, the (derogatory) association of Western culture with rationalism, typical, for instance, for early Slavophiles, originated in fact in the "pre-Romantic" period of the 18th century in the West itself, and only then was taken for granted by Russian thinkers. "The fundamental epistemological distinction between reason and mind (rassudok/razum, Verstand/Vernunft) of Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling and others got distorted on Russian soil resulting in the identification of rationalism as a phenomenon of general-

cultural character with reasoned cognition" [19], the author of the history of Russian philosophy Vasilii Zenkovsky observed, and pointed to the crucial role of Kant's epistemology in this process, whereby Verstand was a function of purely logical operations, while Vernunft was a source of ideas [20].

It is classical Russian literature, most notably Dostoevsky, that raised the alarm most, by insisting that a narrow rationalism is unable to solve the irrational mystery of human soul. Thus translating existential problems from the moral to psychological sphere (as is characteristic for modernity with its propensity for hedonism and moral relativism), and solving them in a medical way leads humanity to a dead-end: "too comfortable and trouble-free, in a word — too anesthetized, life becomes devoid of significance, and then it is no longer worth living" [21].

This returns us again to Alexander Ivashkin's warning of 1992 to the Western artists: "a new wave of Russian immigration might produce a huge invasion of Russian irrationalism in all the arts. Be sure, it is not so easy to deal with. Be careful." [22] In the light of the above premonitions of dehumanising nature of excessive rationalism and distorted values, the author is tempted to say that Alexander Ivashkin's warning, with all its anxiety, is at the same time highly inspiring. Indeed, it points to the existence of some persistent cultural nucleus of the Russian tradition, which — with all its dangerous, maybe even destructive, irrational character — can also serve as an enchantment against spiritual anesthetisation, and hence — against existential meaninglessness.

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