

The Golovanov Case in 1928, Poputchiki

Recent Archival Findings

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Abstract—Sergei Vasilenko (1872-1956) has been perceived as a conformist and inconsequential Soviet composer among his colleagues and in post-Soviet Russia. As a result of Vasilenko's formal obedience many facts about him have been either misinterpreted in publications or kept under wraps until recently. Thus, due to the disinformation in the Soviet press, Vasilenko's name has been associated with the fabricated case against the conductor Nikolai Golovanov in 1928. The archival documents reveal Vasilenko's faithful attitude towards Golovanov and his fellow colleague-composers, who along with Vasilenko were called by the RAPMpoputchiki. The analysis and discussion of these subjects rely heavily on unpublished and little-explored materials from the archives in Moscow.

Keywords—“Golovanovshchina”; repertoire policy; Syn solntsa; Sergei Vasilenko; poputchiki

I. INTRODUCTION

Sergei Vasilenko (1872-1956) has been perceived as a conformist and inconsequential Soviet composer among his colleagues and in post-Soviet Russia. However, the unpublished documents reveal Vasilenko to be a decent man and a talented musician, who was forced to keep his true musical writings secret from the public in a drawer of his desk. The 140 Birthday Anniversary of Vasilenko in 2012 went almost unnoticed by the authorities and the public in Russia with only a single concert organised by the conductor Stanislav Kalinin and the Choir of the Moscow Conservatoire on 15 October 2012 at the Rakhmaninov Zal [Hall] of the Moscow Conservatoire. The concert programme listed only some of Vasilenko's choral works. Five years later, the 145 Birthday Anniversary of the composer was marked by a single concert of his vocal music organised by the soloists of the Perm State Opera and Ballet Theatre in the city of Perm on 6 September 2017 [1].

Vasilenko lived through the most rapid, dramatic and brutal political and social changes of Russian and world history, including the First World War, the February and Socialist Revolutions of 1917 that were followed by the Civil and the Great Patriotic Wars. These conflicts, in particular those that overturned the constitutional and civil structure of the country, changing it from Imperial to Bolshevik Russia and then transformed it into the Soviet state, had a major impact on the life of its citizens. In order to survive and continue his professional activities, and to avoid unnecessary political risks, Vasilenko conformed to the Soviet constraints

and abandoned some of his compositional desires and aspirations. The recent findings of the author of this paper help one to comprehend Vasilenko's motivation and efforts to satisfy the official censorship and to compose music that illustrated and fulfilled its socialist ideology. As a result of Vasilenko's formal obedience many facts about him have been either misinterpreted in publications or kept under wraps until recently. Thus, due to the disinformation in the Soviet press, Vasilenko's name has been associated with the fabricated case against the conductor Nikolai Golovanov in 1928. The archival documents reveal Vasilenko's faithful attitude towards Golovanov, of which more below.

II. “THE GOLOVANOVSHCHINA”

One of the typical examples of disinformation and misinterpretation due to the thorough politicization of Soviet society and its media was Vasilenko's association with the Golovanov case. In 1928, the name of Vasilenko publicly appeared in connection with the political repression that led to the dismissal of Nikolai Golovanov (1891-1953), the artistic director and conductor of the Bolshoi Theatre. This fabricated case became known as the ‘Golovanovshchina’ [The Golovanov Case], in which Golovanov was accused of having bourgeois habits and a conservative approach to the new repertoire policy, thus preventing the promotion of young artists [2]. The initial allegation was caused by the inadequate libretto written by Mikhail Gal'perin for Vasilenko's opera Syn solntsa [Son of the Sun] op. 62 that was being staged at the Bolshoi. Mikhail Gal'perin (1882-1944) was a fine journalist, poet, translator and librettist, who was brought up in a Jewish family in Kiev, Ukraine. He actively collaborated on the stage productions of the Bolshoi Theatre, the Malyi [Small] Theatre, the Moscow Theatre of Operetta, the Stanislavskii and Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Academic Music Theatre and others. The libretto ‘Syn solntsa’ illustrated the freedom fighters in China, a subject that highlighted the revolutionary concept. It correlated closely with the official Soviet policy of replacing the old tsarist repertoire with newly created operatic works, which aimed to illustrate the needs of the proletariat and reinforce the socialist course of the Party that possessed absolute validity [3].

In a private conversation, Golovanov expressed his liking for the music but dissatisfaction with the poor content of the libretto which needed alterations. This confidential exchange

of views leaked out and was deliberately used by the administration, the Mestkom (Local Committee), the Komsomol and communist party bureaus of the Bolshoi as one of the grounds for a dossier against Golovanov, who purportedly made anti-Semitic remarks. These alleged remarks were referred to Gal'perin, the author of the libretto. The harsh campaign in the press expanded so rapidly that it drew the attention of Stalin [4].

The archive of Vasilenko has a draft of his letter dated 27 March 1928 to the Mestkom of the Bolshoi Theatre, in which Vasilenko tried to defend his unjustly accused former student and colleague Golovanov [5]. It is worth quoting Vasilenko's unpublished letter at length, because he explained the true circumstances that surrounded the plot:

I categorically deny a report that Nikolai Golovanov said the phrases that were ascribed to him during the public discussion of my opera *Syn solntsa* in my flat on 18 March 1928, because such a discussion did not take place.

During our personal talk Golovanov expressed his negative view so abruptly that made me very anxious, to the extent that I am in no condition to cope with it yet.

The reasons behind this anxiety I cannot conceal anymore. In my opinion, the administration in charge of the repertoire at the GABT [6] demonstrates a negative attitude to my major works. My ballets *Iosif Prekrasnyi* and *Lola* are removed from the repertoire. Golovanov is my friend and former student, whose opinion is very precious to me; he stunned me with his statement that the libretto serves no purpose. This could have been a new cause to cease the production of my work and I naturally shared this opinion with my librettist, Mikhail Gal'perin, in a private conversation.

I declare that one cannot make public conclusions from private conversations and initiate proceedings. This is totally unacceptable... [7]

Needless to say, none of Vasilenko's points of explanation were taken into account. His line of defence was turned against him too in a series of articles in the Soviet press. Thus, in an article called 'Dirizher — anti-semit. Trebuem vmeshatel'stva prokuratury' [The Conductor is an Anti-Semite. We Demand the Involvement of the Prosecutor's Office] published by a newspaper *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, Vasilenko was described as an accuser, an unfair label that stayed with him for life. This article had no individual author but the resolution of the official censorship and state secret protection organ officially abbreviated as Glavlit, Glavnoe upravlenie po delam literatury i izdatel'stv [the Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs under the People's Commissariat of Education of the RSFSR] [8]. As a result of this choreographed campaign, Nikolai Golovanov was sacked from his job, though he was re-employed again in 1930. He lost his post again in 1936, but was re-employed and then was fired for the last time in 1953.

Vasilenko's struggle to please the repertoire committee by writing an ideologically suitable opera and, thus, demonstrate his loyalty to the regime resulted in the

production of his work *Syn solntsa* in May 1929 and in 1934 at the Bolshoi Theatre. Vasilenko's major works mentioned in his letter above, his ballet *Iosif Prekrasnyi* (Josef the Handsome) op. 50 was staged in March 1925 and in 1929 and *Lola* op. 52 only in June 1943 and in 1950 [9]. The latter was staged in close collaboration with Anatolii Lunacharskii, which very likely was an undisclosed contributing factor for its removal from the repertoire, of which more below. However, Vasilenko paid a high personal price for this seeming success. It ruined his close friendship with Golovanov, though Vasilenko was his backer [10], and among his colleagues Vasilenko was perceived as a doctrinaire composer, who was better to be avoided personally whenever possible [11]. Perhaps in hope that one day wisdom and integrity would prevail, Vasilenko kept all these negative articles along with his statement among his private documents. Moreover, the unpublished recollections of his friend and colleague Nikolai Zriakovskii contain Vasilenko's comment made in private in the early 1950s that the anti-Semite charges against Golovanov were pure allegations [12]. Today all these documents served their purpose and help one to uncover the unknown side of Vasilenko's assumed association with this story of the purges.

III. POPUTCHIKI

The Soviet press was kept under strict control of the state and was thoroughly politicised as it was the most natural and powerful way to spread propaganda among readers. The rigorous campaign against 'poputchiki' ['fellow travellers'], the slogan that was used to describe those who accepted the Revolution, but were not active participants, circulated in the Soviet press from 18 June 1925 after a resolution of the Party's Central Committee 'O politike partii v oblasti khudozhestvennoi literatury' [On the Policy of the Party in the Field of Belles-lettres]. This policy was designed to target literature, but in practice was also interpreted as a guideline in the field of music [13]. The meticulous *chistki* ['cleansing', purges] among musicians, who were judged by their social origins and contributions to revolutionary values, were initiated by the Soviet authorities through the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM), which by then effectively controlled Soviet musical life. RAPM, the *Rossiiskaia assotsiatsia proletarskikh muzykantov*, was founded in Moscow in 1923 and disbanded by the Party decree on 23 April 1932. RAPM strove for the ideological monopoly in music and considered its members the only representatives of the true proletariat. However, peasant roots did not help the composer Nikolai Roslavets to escape the repression of the RAPM [14]. The words of the music-critic Vladimir Blium in an article 'Protiv psevdoproletarskikh techenii v muzyke' [Against Pseudo-Proletarian Movements in Music] published in the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva* [Evening Moscow] dated 10 October 1930 became typical of the time.

[...] Where is the heap of the qualified music poputchiki that make the Soviet musical culture of today — Vasilenko, Miaskovskii, Ippolitov-Ivanov, Shostakovich, Gliere, Krein and others? Why are they not here? They are not here,

because they are terrorised by the group of musicians that call themselves ‘proletarian musicians’... [15]

Vladimir Ivanovich Blium (1877-1941) was a harsh music and theatre critic, the political editor of the music-theatre section of the Glavrepertkom that determined the state repertoire policy. Glavrepertkom is an abbreviation of Glavnyi komitetpo kontroliu za zrelishchami i reperturom [Chief Committee for the Inspection of Entertainments and Repertoire], in which Nikolai Roslavets led the music department [16]. Blium’s article was written for the general public and, therefore, he preferred to use informal proletarian vocabulary such as the ‘tolshcha’ [the heap of people] instead of being in accord with conventional formal rhetoric, for example ‘a presence’.

Vasilenko did neither leave any official justificatory testimonials in attempting to defend his name nor his colleagues. Besides, the association of his name with the Golovanov case that occurred only two years earlier taught him that any such attempts would be useless if not damaging for all. Thus, Vasilenko’s published memoirs of 1948 and 1979 contain his contradictory views on Roslavets’ music language but without going into any ideological polemics. Vasilenko was tongue-tied — the fate of those who fell from official favour and suffered from orchestrated prejudicial ideological accusations, from which there was no escape for anyone.

The growth of the absolute authority of Iosif Stalin brought the time of despair that led to the purges. Gradually, Lenin’s ‘Old Guard’, who played a key role in the Socialist Revolution of 1917, were either arrested or ‘promoted’ to prestigious but ineffectual positions. Thus, Anatolii Lunacharskii, a great admirer of Vasilenko’s ballets was dismissed from his post as chief of the Central Research Committee in 1933 and sent away from the capital and its political conflicts and controversy. The liberal approach and a certain tolerance towards various cultural matters he had maintained during his term of office came to an end. Vasilenko became personally acquainted with Lunacharskii in April 1926. Lunacharskii deeply admired Vasilenko’s ballet Iosif Prekrasnyi [Joseph the Handsome] op. 50, 1925, and offered the plot for Vasilenko’s next ballet Lola op. 52, 1926, which was staged under his close patronage. Reasonably, Vasilenko included neither this information nor the fact that they became good acquaintances in his books of memoirs and his article about Lunacharskii remained unpublished [17].

IV. CONCLUSION

It was a lucky escape for Vasilenko. Certainly, Vasilenko was well-known as the organiser of the ‘Istoricheskie Obshchedostupnye Kontserty’ [Historic Public Concerts, commonly called the Historic Concerts] in Moscow in 1907-1917 that popularised and introduced classical music in chronological sequence among the financially insecure and deprived audiences of students, teachers and workers. These philanthropic activities won the loyalty of the general public and appealed to the Soviet authorities, but the composer’s professional status and musical fulfilment of the

Party ideology were of critical importance. Thus, the subjects that interested him were considered suspect: Joseph from the Bible’s book of Genesis and ‘ancient’ music, with its natural absorption of spirituality and the troubadours’ idealised model of love. It was the same a decade or so later with the themes of his viola pieces of 1950s; their pastoral dreams and fantasies influenced by Symbolism and the Silver Age aesthetic. Such ideas contravened the limitations of Soviet ‘Socialist Realism’ and were not officially tolerated in atheist Soviet society. Besides, Vasilenko had not only been stung by the acerbic press, but was detained by the VCheKa in the Butyrskaya prison in Moscow, which after 1917 housed political prisoners many of whom were arrested and shot without trial. VCheKa (usually called Cheka) is an abbreviation of the Vserossiiskaia Chrezvychainaia Komissia (All Russian Emergency Commission), the first Soviet security organisation, the predecessor of the KGB with unlimited powers. It was founded by Lenin’s decree in December 1917 in order to combat counterrevolution and sabotage. Vasilenko’s archive has a certificate dated 7 November 1918 that confirms that ‘according to the order of the Cheka N1094 a citizen Vasilenko was released from custody’ [18]. This incident that could have ended dreadfully has not been mentioned in any of Vasilenko’s publications. Today, it gives one a clue why in the commentary to the 25 Anniversary Concert of Vasilenko’s professional activities in 1927 he, who before the revolution led a very active social and professional life, was unexpectedly described as ‘an extremely shy and unsociable composer’, whose music was rarely performed [19]. This was Vasilenko’s temporary defence of his inability to carve out a niche in Soviet society and its music industry.

Most important of all, Vasilenko was a cautious man and, heeding his own and his colleagues’ warnings, turned his attention away from objectionable subjects. With the earlier works therefore under wraps, Vasilenko turned instead to topics that were politically approved by the Soviet state: stories of the Russian heroic past and present, folk traditions, and folk instruments including the balalaika. One may say that he essentially followed the advice given to him by Lunacharskii in the late 1920s: ‘I advise you to take plots from Russian fairy tales. The censorship should be less picky.’ [20] Fortunately, Vasilenko was interested in themes that did chime with the regime. For instance, the Russian composers of the second half of the nineteenth century favoured by Stalin — Tchaikovskii and Rimskii-Korsakov in particular — were also his heroes. In different phases of his compositional career he was influenced by Russian folklore and history, and Middle Eastern and oriental subjects (Japanese, Indian and Chinese ones among them) — an outlook which coincided with the nationalist emphasis in Communist ideology, which concealed its true nature behind the affirmation of the national music of Russia and other nations of the Soviet republics. Among Vasilenko’s major works based on the national music of the Soviet republics were the first national Uzbek operas *Buran* [The Snow Storm] op. 98, 1938, and *Velikii kanal* [The Grand Canal] op. 99, 1939, composed together with his former student and a fellow composer Mukhtar Ashrafi.

Vasilenko's search for a niche within the culture of Soviet music forced him to keep his true musical writings secret from the public in a drawer of his desk. Anatolii Aleksandrov justly ranked Vasilenko among his contemporaries:

[...] Vasilenko is a model of a composer, who steadily and tirelessly pursued his beliefs. The dominant rulers of the Moscow musical circles replaced one another, whilst Sergei Nikiforovich kept following and enhancing his own line ... [21]

Indeed, political systems and their leaders come and go, but the cultural and historical legacy of Russia, to which Vasilenko was faithful throughout his life, remains the most valuable possession of its people, because it maintains their intellectual national identity of today and, thus, forms a precious part of world heritage for its future generations. The recent access to unpublished documents and collections in Russian libraries and archives help one to uncover the unknown of the Soviet past and bring back to light and share the best achievements of its representatives. The findings about Sergei Vasilenko and his music are an important step in this process that enriches one's knowledge of this epoch and its distinctive musical legacy.

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