

The St. Petersburg Classic School: Myth or Reality?

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces into scholarly use the concept of the St. Petersburg classic school, uniting the creative legacy of three luminaries of classical music from the 20th century — Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich. The russkost' as the fundamental basis of the St. Petersburg classic school is rooted in the phenomenon of acquired beauty, psychologically enriched tone painting, and intellectualized lyricism. Keywords: Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, St. Petersburg classic school, russkost'.

Introduction

In music history, the word “school” is most often used to denote the process of musical composition within the framework of a particular national (or regional) culture or its identification with a specific cultural and historical center (for example, the Notre Dame school, the Franco-Flemish school, the Mannheim school, and others). Much less frequently, “school” is understood to mean a specific period in the history of music, marked by the artistic achievements, epochal in significance, of a group of composers connected by their affinity with a single territorial and cultural tradition. In this case, the noun “school” is modified by the adjective “classic,” indicating the extremely high level of mastery achieved by those belonging to that school. As of the present, the only school to be recognized as qualifying for the status of “classic” is the Viennese School, spanning from the second half of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century, represented by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.

Comparable in significance (in terms of the culture of its own era), although never awarded the label “classic,” was the Second Viennese School of the first half of the 20th century, associated with the work of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. In the history of

Russian musical culture, we must differentiate between two interconnected, but far from synonymous, phenomena: The St. Petersburg school of composition, developed over more than two centuries; and the St. Petersburg “classic” school of the 20th century as its highest, culminating stage, dating to the period of the 1910s to 1970s. That period saw the flourishing of the creative work of three men currently recognized as true 20th century musical Classics: Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, and Dmitry Shostakovich. Today, at the middle of the second decade of the third millennium, we are quite justified in asserting that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Russian music on the European scale was acclaimed as one young national school with a very promising future.

Later, in the art of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, it reached, if you will, Olympian status, and started to be accepted as one of the key phenomena in the history of music culture worldwide. In proposing to introduce the concept of a 20th-century St. Petersburg classic school into the music-history lexicon, we assert that it was this school, and no other, that was essentially the second ever classic school after the Viennese School of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Within the study of music in Russia, a persistent tendency has arisen, based on two starting principles: — the recognition of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich as brilliant 20th-century Russian composers who, each in his own way, exerted a profound influence over global music processes; and — the striving to identify, first and foremost, the uniqueness of their artistic individuality, musical styles and creative methods — ways in which they resembled no one else — and to highlight those differences.

One example can be found in the monograph by Levon Akopyan, Dmitri Shostakovich: Towards a phenomenology of his creative work. In an analogy to the famous passage from Stravinsky’s *Dialogues and A Diary*, in which the latter ironically compares himself to Schoenberg, Akopyan contrasts the artistic distinctions between Prokofiev and Shostakovich in the form of a list of conceptually antithetical propositions. Some of those are included below. Prokofiev Shostakovich Stylistically mostly homogenous — Inclined to stylistic heterogeneity Primarily homophonic — Primarily polyphonic “Art of imagination” — “Art of reliving” References to other musical material rare — Other musical material used very widely “Aristocratic” approach — “Simplistic” approach Major keys dominate — Minor keys dominate “Regularly accentual” rhythms dominate — “Quantitative” rhythms dominate In using the term “St. Petersburg classic school,” we are attempting, on the contrary, to identify the traits common to the music of all three of these Russian “Olympians.” These traits, we believe, are intuitively recognized and, moreover, accepted as almost axiomatic, practically by every Russian musician. We want to emphasize, however, that up until now, they have never been formulated as a distinct terminological concept.

The phenomenon of the 20th-century St. Petersburg classic school originated in the artistic and esthetic legacy of the “Silver Age,” (The term “Silver Age” applies in the Russian culture to the last decade of 19th century and first two or three decades of the 20th century) primarily related to the peak achievements of 19th-century Russian culture. No less important a role in the establishment of that school was played by the set of ideas

known as the Petersburg Myth, the accumulated mental images, and artistic and esthetic notions, with which the atmosphere in and around St. Petersburg was imbued at the turn of the 20th century, when the city was one of the largest megapolises in Europe. Without attempting a comprehensive justification of whether the concept of the “Silver Age” can be applied to music (that topic has already been examined in detail in a monograph by Tamara Levaya, *Early Twentieth-Century Russian Music in the Artistic Context of the Epoch*), we will turn our attention to one extremely important circumstance common to the establishment of both the Vienna and the St. Petersburg classic schools and which, moreover, was a vital precondition for them to arise and for their self-sufficiency.

Here we mean the multilayered nature of the artistic environment, which manifested itself in the dynamic connections laid down one atop the other during an era of a whole array of varying esthetic and stylistic phenomena. In the case of the St. Petersburg classic school, those included late romanticism, symbolism, impressionism, urbanism, neoclassicism, and cubo-futurism. Each one of those phenomena was not only received as the preeminent European experience to date, but was also reworked and enriched by the Russian masters of the time. That meant that within the Russian “Silver Age,” a unique breeding ground was built up, rich in artistic potential, which nurtured the growth of the titanic figures of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. The set of mythology around Petersburg is of utmost significance for the St. Petersburg classic school. That importance stems from the unique role St. Petersburg played (and continues to play) in Russian politics and culture.

Among the enormous number of publications on the topic, we will single out the chapter “The Symbolism of St. Petersburg” from Yuriy Lotman’s book *The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, and also Vladimir Toporov’s study *The Petersburg Text*. Those authors believe that the main aspects of the Petersburg Myth took shape in the second half of the 19th century. It came together as an agglomeration of legendary, mythological, and sometimes mystical notions common in different strata of Russian society, all about the city on the Neva, and took the form of a whole corpus of literary, poetic, and musical texts, and works of visual art, which all in one way or another touched upon the theme of the unique role the “Venice of the North” played in Russia’s cultural history. At the heart of the Petersburg Myth lie several binary oppositions, which bear the mark of the history of the city’s emergence, and also reflect the development of its urban infrastructure, its relationship with the surrounding natural environment, and its role in Russia’s polity and political life in general. The most significant of these oppositions are the following: man-made versus natural; power (political) versus the people; European versus Russian; and center versus periphery.

The “man-made/natural” opposition is based in the contradictions between Peter the Great’s idea to build a new capital in the northwest corner of Russia, envisioned along the lines of the biggest Western European capitals of the time, and the extremely unfortunate choice of location on the swampy islands at the mouth of the Neva river. This choice resulted in the constant threat that St. Petersburg would simply sink, and life there was made even more difficult by the harsh climate. The “power/people” opposition

reflects the tragic story of the almost miraculous speed with which the new Russian capital city was built, at the expense of colossal human losses. The “European/Russian” opposition is based on the contrast between the focus on European lifestyle standards in the city on the Neva and the patriarchal realities in the rest of Russia. Finally, the “center/periphery” opposition emphasizes the differences in the architectural look and the social status of the residents of Nevsky Prospect and the architectural complexes adjacent to it, on the one hand, and Vasilevsky Island, the Petrograd side, Kolomna, and other, outer districts of the city on the other hand. Each of the objective binary oppositions listed here gave rise to its own subjective equivalents in the cultural consciousness of Russian society in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

For instance, when the “man-made/natural” opposition was applied to St. Petersburg, Lotman says, it manifested itself in the unique role that unreality and theatricality play in that city. These features transformed life in St. Petersburg into theatre, with a stage (the city center) and backstage areas (the city’s periphery), actors (the court, high society, the intellectual and artistic elite) and spectators (every other stratum of society) [4, 287–289]. Naturally, Petersburg’s theatricality penetrated deeply into the very foundation of creative thinking for the artists who would become the St. Petersburg Classics. After all, they all walked the same streets, prospects, squares and suburban (man-made) parks of Tsarskoe Selo, Pavlovsk Park (a creation of the Italian theatrical set designer Pietro Gonzaga), and Oranienbaum (Stravinsky’s home town), and they visited the same theatres and concert halls. Petersburg-style theatricality also served as the basis for the high relative weight given to opera and ballet in their works. The objective binary oppositions and their subjective equivalents have turned out to be specifically Russian (or Petersburgian) variations of what are commonly called the eternal themes of art. They defined the mode in which the St. Petersburg Classics saw the world, sketched out the circle of themes and images in their creative work, and influenced their interpretation of the universal philosophical and esthetic ideas of European culture.

In comparison with other megapolises of that time, St. Petersburg, at the turn of the 20th century, had one unique property: the combination within the city’s borders (i. e., in close proximity) of both a rapidly developing capitalist industrial sector and a national artistic culture that was ascending to its heyday. Despite the periodic and at times acute explosions of social antagonism between the two major components of society in St. Petersburg — the cultural center and the industrial periphery — ordinarily, everyday life in the city was grounded in their cooperation and convergence. One consequence of that cooperation was the rapid development of all cultural institutions. A good portion of Petersburg society constantly cultivated an interest in everything new, and the very latest cultural innovations arrived here from every corner of the world. For example, Prokofiev, in a diary entry dated February 13, 1911, mentions that he had performed Schoenberg’s piano pieces at an Evening of Contemporary Music (he does not mention the opus, but judging from the description, he played pieces from op. 11, completed in 1909). The high levels of spiritual energy which infused the informational atmosphere in St. Petersburg, and the way in which it became an arena for vital historical

events, prompts us to state that the Venice of the North, as a modern megapolis, defined the innovative and also the classic essence of the creative feats of these three St. Petersburg masters.

Serving as the very foundation of the St. Petersburg classic school is its *russkost'*, or essential Russian-ness. Having inherited this quality from their great predecessors, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich went on to enrich it with new, inimitable features. Thanks to them, *russkost'* came to be one of the most important features of 20th-century music. The *russkost'* of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich stems from a special mode in which they saw the world, a mode more or less inherent to each one of these composers. We define this mode as an archetypal perception of reality as a multipolar, multilayered, multicultural continuum with features that are constantly changing. By the end of the 19th century, Russia had united within its national borders large numbers of different ethnic groups, sometimes quite dissimilar. The Eurasian foundation of the Russian mentality as a whole, and its specific St. Petersburg variety, went farther than any other factor in shaping the natural, arising from an basic cognitive impulses polyphony in the artistic perception of the world. In 19th-century Russian art, this type of perception materialized in Russian music about the Orient, in the dual worlds of Rimsky-Korsakov (the real world and the fairytale world), in Borodin's imagery (some of it Russian, some of it Eastern), and in the experience of several European cultures (Polish, Spanish, Italian, French, and Austro-Germanic) as worlds existing in parallel.

We want to specifically emphasize that this dual- or multi-world concept in Russian music differed significantly from the Romantic dual worlds of the 19th century. For the Romantics, a departure into the other world was almost always of equal weight, conceptually, with a return to the point of origin. For Russian artists, though, a constant presence in the parallel, multilayered world, and as a result of this an organic growth into other cultures, was a natural form of creative existence. In actual creative practice, the perception of reality as a multipolar, multicultural continuum was expressed in profoundly individual ways by each of the St. Petersburg Classics. For Stravinsky, it was in the dialogic basis of the artistic method; for Prokofiev, it took the form of an inimitable, esthetically selfcontained world of imagery; and for Shostakovich, it was expressed as the conflicting parallelism of two worlds, the external and the internal. The esthetic nature of the *russkost'* of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich is rooted in the phenomenon of acquired beauty. In the work of the St. Petersburg Classics, moments that could be defined as the result of serendipity or sudden inspiration are extremely rare.

This means that the beauty of their work arises not from wonder at its super-organic, "divine" nature, but rather out of a sort of respectful admiration for its inordinate (and also "divine") level of mastery. This is undoubtedly the classic feature of 20th-century music. The artistic impression made by the music of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich is essentially two-layered: — the first layer, perceived under the surface, impresses the listener with the colossal volume of work that has been done to select, organize, and interpret the initial musical material (a virtuosic command of the art form);

— the uppermost, second layer astounds the listener with the elegance, perfection, and acquired (man-made) beauty of the end result (the heights of artistic mastery). Immediately the parallel with Petersburg itself is evident, in which the beauty of its architectural concepts and the geometric perfection of its planning is especially striking against the background of a natural landscape that absolutely does not correspond with it.

Only during the short weeks of the white nights does the man-made beauty of the city come together with a unique natural phenomenon into a unified, triumphant accord. The rest of the time, the dreariness of the swampy areas surrounding the city, and the drastic temperature swings (covering a span of 60 degrees Celsius over the course of the year), can only produce boundless respect for the enormous volume of building work that was completed despite the environmental circumstances. But in Italy, for example, everything is different. There, the habitat built by human beings is perceived as an obvious extension of the natural world, and it approaches the beauty of that world and is comparable with it. Thus, in a notional yearly developmental cycle of the Russian music works of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich could be identified as an equivalent of the white nights: times of unqualified triumph of Russian musical genius, harmoniously uniting within them the highest standards of the art and mastery! The most important feature of the *ruskost'* of the St. Petersburg Classics, rooted in the depths of the theatricality of their artistic thinking, turns out to be a quality of musical imagery they all hold in common, one that can be defined as psychologically enriched tone painting.

The dynamics of the human emotional state are built up in Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich by means of the development of musical imagery with a precisely expressed tonepainting foundation (gestural-ductile, onomatopoeic, associative-motor, objective-spatial). In making active use of the image-associative capabilities of human perception, the St. Petersburg Classics take on the freedom of musical expression that is so closely tied to the possibility, originally inherent to it, of its substantive interpretation by the listener. The melodic and intonational base of the *ruskost'* of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich enriched European musical thinking with features primarily related to Russian speech as a unique phenomenon in terms of the connection between intonation and meaning, as well as in phonetics and syntax. We will make special mention of five of its characteristic attributes here: — the role of intonation, so typical of Russian speech patterns, which can sometimes change the very meaning of an utterance (a similarity with Eastern languages); — varying syllabic stress, very often changing the semantic meaning of a word; — the semantic ambiguity of the word itself as the basis for metaphoric utterances; — the free, nearly lax regulation of sentence structure and the broad use of inversion; — the prominent role played by adjectives, lending to speech elements of contemplative-emotional statics.

All of these peculiarities are reflected in Stravinsky's irregularly accented rhythms and variational ostinato technique, in the storytelling nature of Prokofiev's musical development, and in the images of concentrated contemplation in Shostakovich. Another characteristic feature of *ruskost'* among the members of the St. Petersburg classic school is particular to all of them: intellectualized lyricism. The work of Pyotr

Ilyich Tchaikovsky was perceived by Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich as a sort of absolute culmination, the fullest, most logical and complete expression of an essentially lyrical-dramatic view of the world. Using this perception as a basis, the St. Petersburg Classics came to the conclusion that in the new century, lyricism could not rely only on the emotional component of human perception. Therefore, lyrical insights in their work came to organically include elements of intellectual reflection: contemplation, irony, skepticism, sarcasm, and a sense of paradox. The russkost' of the St. Petersburg Classics can be synthesized as a quality that might be defined as multilayered associativity of genre and style.

In interpreting a musical work as a profoundly substantive message to the listener, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich appeal to the type of musical expression that has as its distinguishing characteristic the organic synthesis of all genre or stylistic musical material that was available at the time. The idea that lay at the basis of that approach is extremely simple: everything that makes a sound in the modern world can be used as raw material for the construction of an artistic concept that is multilayered in terms of imagery, one that is individually characteristic and at the same time universally meaningful. That is the way that the Viennese composers Haydn and Mahler worked in their own time. Later, the St. Petersburg Classics started off down that same path. The fact that among all 20th-century composers it is their works that are performed most often is proof of the higher degree to which their synthesis is organic, and of the superior level of their overall mastery.

As examples of references to the so-called “lower” genres, we can mention the following: the use of folklore, including primitive forms of it (the cries of street vendors and the ritual intonements of a wedding ceremony), jazz, and Western dance rhythms from the 1920s and 1930s in Stravinsky; the use of melodies from Russian vernacular folklore of the first thirty years of the 20th century in Shostakovich; and the sharp reliefs, convexity and dynamism, hearkening back to their folklore roots, of the musical imagery in Prokofiev. Common to the methods of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich is the organic use of a set of sounds and styles from European professional music that is individually characteristic for each. That practice lends to their art one very important quality: it is addressed to a quite broad, enlightened audience, encompassing both amateurs and connoisseurs of so-called serious (or classical) music. The members of the St. Petersburg classic school imprinted their work with the most typical (and therefore the most universal) features of the artistic perception of the world of their time (1910s to the 1970s). They significantly updated the expressive means music had at its disposal — melody, harmony, rhythm, orchestration, and form (or more broadly speaking, the means for the temporal development of music).

In their profoundly individual, stylistically unique artistic worlds, we find a clear reflection of the most characteristic features of humankind's 20th-century worldview. Fully apropos of the myths and realities of St. Petersburg, it turns out that the abbreviation formed by the first letters of the last names of these luminaries of the past century, SPS, can just as easily stand for St. Petersburg School. In this article, we have

tried to show the need to add on the explanatory adjective “classic,” and thereby identify the body of work by Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich with the 20th-century St. Petersburg classic school.

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