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Russian New Music Gets a Reboot

Russian Music 2.0 showcases the contemporary musicscene

By Alexander Feinberg

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Dmitry Susoyev's piece "Don't Whistle, Masha!" **Alexandra Muravyova**

A man dressed in all black mimes scrambled Brodsky verses while a cellist rakes her instrument with plastic wedges...thundering drum beats are inspired by the latest protests in Belarus... musicians in virtual reality goggles clatter on mechanical typewriters.

These are just some of the images and sounds that the audience at "Russian Music 2.0" was treated to last month as part of the fifteenth annual Territory Festival in Moscow.

Featuring short works by eight mostly young composers, this concert gave a good overview of the Russian contemporary academic music scene at the moment. The short pieces were commissioned from composers selected by an international jury to be played by a small ensemble. One of the jury members and a well-known composer based in Berlin, Sergej Newski, told The Moscow Times, "We wanted to present various composers who could show the face of Russian music." The Aksenov Family Foundation, a Moscow-based private

foundation supporting the arts, then provided the funding to allow the composers to create their pieces.

The battle for funds

This is not how new music is usually created in Russia. Normally new works are funded by the state, which can be both a blessing and a curse. "Of course," Newski said, "we don't have aesthetic or political pressure on contemporary music because contemporary music is very far from politics, by its nature. But the fact that there is an attempt to funnel all the cultural funds through the state alone, it's a scary tendency. It's good that private sources of funding have appeared, where we can rely on experts who say 'we think these people are good, we will support them', and you get serious results."

Darya Zvezdina, one of the composers whose work, "Angel," was performed in "Russian Music 2.0," expressed both frustration and gratitude that the state has so far played a relatively small role: glad that they haven't interfered, sad that the lack of funding translates into small audiences. "Since there's no support, there is a critically low percent of interested listeners, and therefore, commissions," she said.

Mark Buloshnikov, another composer whose work was performed in the concert, complained that commissions aren't often even paid. "In Russia," he told The Moscow Times, "there is a practice making an 'order.' When a soloist or ensemble has a project for a concert, they invite one or several composers to write something. There is no financial compensation. Composers are supposed to be satisfied that their pieces are being performed."

This does not make life easy for composers living in Russia. "Many composers seek other sources of income," he said. "You're lucky if it's something connected with music. I am fortunate to be a senior teacher at a conservatory. But you can't make a living in Russia just composing music."

Adding insult to injury, this year's pandemic has put artists in an even more vulnerable position. "[The virus] raises questions about our future," Buloshnikov said. "It's not at all clear, for example, what's going to happen to theaters and orchestras if this pandemic drags on."

Private funding to the rescue

Given all of these problems, private funding from the Aksenov Family Foundation was a small hallelujah moment for the industry. "This is the first case in Russian history when a big private foundation has given systematic support for contemporary music for young composers," Newski said. Buloshnikov added that it "allowed each composer to do what he can and receive adequate compensation. This is really important."

The funding also allowed composers to pursue avenues that aren't always available to them in Russia. "European contemporary music is very technological." Newski explained. "It is dependent on the availability of technology and multimedia. Russian music in the last eight years has moved away from this, not because Russian music isn't interested, but because the technology and financing are limited. If we give the composer [Alexei] Susoyev the opportunity to do whatever he wants, he will strap VR [virtual reality] goggles to the

musicians."

This is exactly what Susoyev did for "Russian Music 2.0." In his piece, "Don't Whistle, Masha!" three performers in VR-goggles sit at a table surrounded by musicians playing haunting music while threateningly whispering at Masha not to whistle.

"Russian Music 2.0" is planned to be an annual event for at least the next three years, and, with private funding, the project aims to "lay the ground for an ecosystem of new academic music in Russia, at the same time offering composers opportunities to develop and nurture their talent," according to Dmitry Aksenov, founder of the Aksenov Family Foundation. He believes that Russia is on the cusp of a paradigm shift in the way the arts are funded. "Private initiatives will inevitably come to the field of contemporary culture," he claimed. "People first need to make money, and then they can ask 'what for?' People now have money and time and a desire to help society."

But Aksenov cautions that all the funding eggs shouldn't be in one basket. In the U.S., where the lion's share of funding for the arts comes from private donations, the Americans for the Arts Foundation found that 66% of organizations are concerned about reduced philanthropic giving this year. Aksenov noted that, "in Europe, the government continues to provide funding. It's important to balance state and private funding."

Russia, despite the challenges, is still home to a lot of exciting activity in the field, Newski said. "I've worked in Russia for the last 15 years," Newski explained, "and over that time the context has changed completely several times. But lately the artistic sphere has become richer. The state-run institutions are trying to support contemporary music. There is a competition for composers. There's a huge off-stage. There's the traditional stage. It's a really complicated mix. Parallel to our concert there was the Festival of Contemporary Music at the Gnessin Academy. There was the "Avanti" competition [for composers]. Moscow has almost as rich a schedule of contemporary music as Berlin. The public is going to learn from this and understand more and more."

You can watch the full concert below on the Aksenov Family Foundation's Youtube channel.

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