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Elizabeth Wilson Chronicles the Miraculous Life of Maria Yudina

"Playing with Fire: The Story of Maria Yudina, Pianist in Stalin's Russia."

By Howard Amos

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Author Elizabeth Wilson **Courtesy of author**

The virtuoso Soviet pianist Maria Yudina was a survivor. Despite Orthodox religious beliefs, her tendency to give readings of banned poets as concert encores, regular petitioning on the behalf of political prisoners and her promotion of the avant-garde music frowned on by the authorities, she was never arrested or imprisoned.

Often dressed in a black sack dress and, on one occasion, giving a concert in her bare feet, Yudina was an eccentric on the Soviet music scene until her death in 1970.

As musician and writer Elizabeth Wilson makes clear in her biography, "Playing with Fire,"

most of Yudina's friends, acquaintances and intellectual fellow-travellers were not so lucky.

Philosopher and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, an intellectual confidante, spent many years in exile; theologian and polymath Pavel Florensky, who taught her much about religion, was executed in 1937; and dozens of other relatives and friends were arrested or spent long stints in the Gulag.

"Playing with Fire" is a chronology of Yudina's life that narrates in rich detail her concert schedule, jobs and traveling.

Wilson, who trained as a cellist in Moscow and whose father served as U.K. ambassador to the Soviet Union in the 1960s, details Yudina's childhood in tsarist Russia in the town of Nevel, now in Russia's Pskov region, her musical education in St. Petersburg, her embrace of Orthodoxy and her rise to become one of the most acclaimed pianists in the Soviet Union.

And she dispels popular myths about Yudina, not least the story – apparently invented by composer Dmitry Shostakovich – that Stalin was so entranced by a Yudina performance that he requested a recording of what had been a live performance.

Yudina was not only a pianist, however. In Wilson's telling she is something of a polymath, taking part in the philosophical circles led by Bakhtin, engaging in literary criticism with poet Boris Pasternak, dabbling in architecture and devoted to exploring Christian teachings.

Apart from periods when Yudina fell out of favor with the Soviet authorities, she kept up a relentless performance schedule, giving hundreds of concerts and spellbinding audiences in Moscow, Leningrad and other Soviet cities.

But she was only allowed to travel abroad twice in her lifetime, once to Poland and once to East Germany, which meant she remained largely unknown in the West.

Wilson does not give a simple explanation for why Yudina remained relatively untouched by the Soviet system — she managed to outlive Stalin by almost 20 years. Perhaps it had something to do with her musical abilities; perhaps her patriotic contributions during the Second World War; perhaps her opposition was seen as harmless eccentricity; perhaps it was just luck.

"Her very survival through the metaphorical trials of fire and water had been a continuous drama," writes Wilson, "if not a miracle."

From the Introduction

Playing with fire – *con fuoco* – these words characterize the life and interpretative style of the great Russian pianist Maria Veniaminovna Yudina. Risk-taking was inherent to her, not for its own sake, but as a result of her unshakeable artistic and moral convictions in the face of external circumstances of extreme difficulty. Her actions reflected her belief that human creativity stems from the divine, as epitomized in the words of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev quoted above.

Coming from an educated, agnostic Jewish family living in a small town in the Pale of Settlement, Yudina's move to St Petersburg/Petrograd in her early teens saw her pursuing her

studies within the heady artistic milieu of Russia's most culturally advanced city. It was against the background of Revolution and social change that she took her place amongst the country's foremost musicians and humanist thinkers.

Yudina was much more than an outstandingly gifted musician and concert pianist. Mikhail Bakhtin, one of Russia's foremost philosophers, whose circle she joined aged eighteen, recognized her abilities as a philosopher, and Boris Pasternak appreciated Yudina as one of his most discerning readers. Father Pavel Florensky, Russia's great spiritual leader and polymath, befriended her and pointed her towards submission of her rebellious spirit. Already at the age of seventeen she declared that she would dedicate her life to Music: 'Art is my Vocation as a way to God.'

A convert to Orthodox Christianity at the age of nineteen, she saw her life as a service to others. Achieving Good was an imperative, and she fearlessly interceded for those friends and colleagues who were arrested and persecuted in the 1920s and 1930s, when the Orthodox Church was under assault and the intelligentsia under threat of extermination. She travelled to the 'Gulag' camps, took messages to and from incarcerated priests, sent parcels and money to 'the unfortunate', to use Dostoevsky's term.

Thrown out of three teaching institutions for her religious beliefs, Yudina was also periodically banned from the concert stage, not least for propagating contemporary music. During the Second World War, she was at the height of her fame, broadcasting and playing concerts for the military and the ordinary citizen, at the front, in hospitals, and in besieged Leningrad. She lived impecuniously, never owned a piano, let alone any furniture, and lived all her life in debt. She died in 1970, shortly after her seventy-first birthday. Her very survival through the metaphorical trials of fire and water had been a continuous drama, if not a miracle.

As a musician Yudina earned her place in performance history as a friend and trusted interpreter of the great composers of her time, from Hindemith and Prokofiev to Shostakovich and Stravinsky. She was the person who more than anyone else persuaded Stravinsky to return to Russia to celebrate his eightieth birthday. In the last years of her life she preferred to play contemporary music exclusively, to be in touch with the future. Yudina's rare communicative power was put at the service of modern music. Her idiosyncratic interpretations were often based on a form of narrative illuminated by concrete imagery, and by the spirit, if not the letter, of the score.

Yudina's large discography includes many recordings from live concerts, where the technical quality of recording is often sub-standard. Nevertheless it was through her recordings that she started gaining recognition in the West in the early 1980s, reinforced by legendary stories, filtering through from Soviet Russia. The most famous of these told of her recording Mozart's A major concerto K.488 in one night at Stalin's specific request. This story has stuck firmly in the popular imagination, although there has been no confirmation of its veracity. For instance, recently it was used at the beginning of Armando Iannucci's film The Death of Stalin (2017), and in both Italy and France books with titles naming Yudina as 'the pianist beloved of Stalin' have appeared. I have examined the story more closely, and deal with it in a separate Appendix, preferring not to include it in the body of a biography based on verified facts. I for one have always been sceptical. In Russia this legend has acquired more fantastical aspects,

with the claims of a certain Johann the Blessed that Yudina was his spiritual spouse and a secret nun named Seraphima, and that she was awarded the Stalin Prize, claims which can be safely ignored. I myself first heard of Yudina in Moscow when I was a student in Rostropovich's class at the Moscow Conservatoire in the second half of the 1960s. To musicians she was renowned for her distinctive performances and profound readings of Bach, Mussorgsky's Pictures from an Exhibition, Stravinsky's piano works, and Beethoven's late piano sonatas, the 'Hammerklavier' and Op. 111 in particular. I heard various legendary stories about her eccentricities: she slept in her coffin (untrue), she slept in her bath (partially true, in her first Moscow apartment she slept on top of boards placed over the bathtub), she was a nun (untrue), she was Stalin's favourite pianist (as already mentioned, probably a legend).

Unfortunately, I never heard her play, although I came to Moscow six years before she died. However, Yudina was then undergoing a period of disgrace, and public performances were few and far between. I bought her recordings, and was duly impressed. I bitterly regret not having attended the lectures she gave at the Conservatoire on Romanticism in 1966, although I might not have understood her wide-ranging philosophical references or her quotations from Russian poetry and much else. If I had met her, I would probably have been intimidated by her formidable prophet-like figure, even if, as friends insisted, she had the kindest of hearts.

My wish to write about Maria Yudina goes back to the mid-1980s, when the graphic designer and photographer David King approached me. David, known for his remarkable collection of historical journals, graphic cartoons and photos relating to the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union (the collection is now in Tate Modern), had developed an enormous enthusiasm for Yudina and her recordings. 'Listen, we have to do a book on her,' he said. I was trained as a cellist and had a good knowledge of Russian, but I had never written anything in my life. Obviously David had in mind one of his marvellously designed books where images spoke louder than words. We set off on a couple of research trips to Moscow and Leningrad, where we met the guardians of Yudina's heritage, her biographer Anatoli Kuznetsov, one of her favourite students and disciple, Marina Drozdova, and her first cousin's son, Yasha Nazarov. They were wonderfully helpful and friendly, and arranged for us to meet others connected to Yudina, including her cousin, the conductor Gavriil Yudin.

The more I learned about Yudina, the less ready I felt to write about her, not least because I was determined to show her life against the background of her times. I could have coped with the musical side, but I felt inadequate describing the context to the extraordinary events of her life, the intellectual and religious movements of the 1920s, her meetings with towering personalities from many walks of life, as well as the underground life of ordinary people during Stalinism, with its overlapping horrors – arrests, repressions, prisons and camps. Nevertheless I started the research process, and contacted people such as Robert Craft, Boris Filippov, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, interviewed others like Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, Nikolai Karetnikov and Edison Denisov, and got to know Pierre Suvchinsky's widow in Paris. I commissioned an article on Yudina's pianism from Susan Bradshaw, and in 1988 made a radio programme for Radio 4, and the following year actively participated in a series of programmes for Radio France, devised by Nadine Dubourvieux and Marc Floriot.

In 1990 I moved to Italy and started writing about music and musicians. Yudina was laid aside, and some twenty-five years passed before I felt ready to return to the project. I contacted David King in December 2015, just as he was packing up his collection to go to the Tate

Modern. He still had the Yudina photos. We agreed to find a way to do the book together. Sadly it was not to be – he died some five months later.

In the intervening years an incredible amount of material about Yudina had been published in Russia, volumes of her own writings and reminiscences, the memoirs of others, and seven large volumes of correspondence between her and her many friends. I started writing this book about six years ago. During September and October 2019, with the support of the Oleg Prokofiev Trust, I spent some five weeks in the archives in St Petersburg and Moscow.

While in Moscow I learnt that my colleagues Marina Drozdova and the pianist Alexei Lubimov were compiling a new anthology of Yudina materials for publication in Russia. They had also tracked down and issued many more of her recordings. The largest part of their discoveries were unpublished letters, written by Yudina to various correspondents; I am glad to say that some material I found in the archives were added to this anthology. In addition, our French colleague living in Germany, Jean-Pierre Collot, had discovered in Paris's Bibliothèque Nationale a cache of unpublished letters written by Yudina to Pierre Suvchinsky. This resulted in his impressive publication in 2020 of the complete correspondence between Yudina and Suvchinsky and other connected figures.

To my good fortune we were able to unite many of our research efforts, sharing new material and indulging in much discussion. Our aims have in fact been different, since notwithstanding the immense amount of published volumes on Yudina, a conventional chronological biography is lacking, leaving a glaring gap which I hope here to have filled. To share knowledge with such eminent colleagues made the process of writing the biography an unusual pleasure, taking away the solitary aspect of writing – which, due to the Covid pandemic, was even more solitary than usual.

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"Playing with Fire" has been shortlisted for the 2022 Pushkin House Book Prize.

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