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Bolshoi Theater Director Valery Gergiev and the Path of Power

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Valery Gergiev being congratulated on his 70th birthday by his main fan, Vladimir Putin. **Denis Grishkin / Moskva News Agency**

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The long-awaited induction of Valery Gergiev, head of the St Petersburg Mariinsky Theater, as director of the Bolshoi Theater is good reason to reassess his body of work. Perhaps more importantly, it's a good time to look at his career achievements, in particular, his position in the Russian power structures. Today this is almost unimaginable anywhere in the world but in Russia. The only parallel lies in the past.

Portrait of a retired hero

On Nov. 22, Vladimir Urin, the director of the Bolshoi Theater, was still denying rumors of his imminent resignation, but not even two weeks later, his fate was decided.

Actually, his fate was decided immediately after the war in Ukraine began, when Urin signed a letter by a group of Russian cultural figures on Feb. 26, 2022, calling for a halt to the "special military operation." On March 25, President Putin suggested to Gergiev that he consider creating a joint directorate for the Bolshoi and Mariinsky Theaters based on the model of the Directorate of the Imperial Theaters before the 1917 Revolution. The strange thing is that Putin waited a year and a half to make this official.

Urin was a very talented theater director. He took over the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theater and in 15 years raised it to unprecedented heights, attracting new performers and instituting a new repertory, and creating international festivals to build up the reputation of the theater. In his 10 years as the head of the Bolshoi, he achieved a great deal. One need only mention "Lohengrin," made in collaboration with the Metropolitan Opera, and Handel's "Alcina," a production transferred to the New Stage from the festival in Aix-en-Provence. These were collaborations with Russian performers, a kind of cooperation that became commonplace at the Bolshoi.

Then the war stopped everything. Anyone who could leave, left, and the dearth of performers and pressure from above forced Urin to hustle hard to keep things going. For the last year and a half, Urin ran between raindrops, making dubious compromises and removing from the playbills the names of authors now out of favor. One of those names was Kirill Serebrennikov, whom Urin had asked to direct the ballet "Nureyev."

It was clear that Urin's era at the Bolshoi was coming to an end. Of all the theater directors who signed the anti-war letter, only Yevgeny Mironov has remained in his position. And nothing can help the Bolshoi now — people sympathize with the theater more than with Urin, who they think ought to be happy that it wasn't worse. The theater might have had to tour occupied territories.

Portrait of a vassal

In 1972 Gergiev was lucky to become a student of the great teacher Ilya Musin. In 1977, after graduating from the Leningrad Conservatory, he joined the Kirov Theater (which would eventually get its old name back and become the Mariinsky again) as assistant principal conductor. A year later he conducted "War and Peace," and 10 years later, he took up the post of principal conductor of the Mariinsky Theater. He was 35 years old.

In the same year he took up the conductor's baton of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. While still principal conductor in St. Petersburg, he led the Dutch orchestra from 1995-2008, which garnered him Dutch citizenship. The question of how a foreign passport holder was allowed to hold a federal post in Russia has a simple answer: exactly in the same way that Gergiev has been allowed since at least 2017 not to publicly declare his multi-billion-dollar fortune. Anything is possible in a state that is governed not by law, but by unwritten rules. The head of state adjusts the law to these rules, and the vassal takes the example from his lord.

It is not surprising that Gergiev can get away with all this in Russia, where even worse atrocities have become the norm of life.

"*Art is always both a mirror and the symptom that reveals the diagnosis. The oddity is is that the West ignored for decades the other side of the celebrated conductor's activities — not musical, but socio-political — and allowed him to de facto legitimize Putin's power abroad.*"

It's understandable that Westerners excused Gergiev's concert in Tskhinvali in 2008 after Russia's attack on Georgia. Gergiev comes from Ossetia, where Tskhinvali is the capital city. Besides, the West ignored that war too, giving Putin carte blanche to violate further borders.

Gergiev then publicly supported the annexation of Crimea. On March 11, 2014, the conductor signed an appeal by cultural figures of the Russian Federation in support of Russia's foreign policy and Vladimir Putin in Ukraine. There was a small protest before a concert in Washington, D.C. in 2017, but he told Voice of America that he had signed nothing of the kind — although his name is still there, #97.

After Crimea, Gergiev conducted the London Symphony Orchestra until 2015. Although there was a bit of fuss, he continued to be chief conductor of the Munich Philharmonic. That only ended on March 1, 2022, when Gergiev refused to publicly condemn the war against Ukraine. Then the Elbe Philharmonic in Hamburg and the Bavarian Opera refused his services, and concerts were canceled by Carnegie Hall, the Vienna Philharmonic and La Scala in Milan.

But until then, no one reacted to Gergiev's statements, his support for Putin's policies, or his repeated appearances as the president's confidant. The West as a whole was not particularly disturbed by what was happening in Russia, so why on earth would they care about the musical side of things? They looked the other way. Residents in the beautiful city of Weimar did not notice Buchenwald in their neighborhood either.

Dictatorship as a springboard

It's that dictatorship — the Third Reich and its musical hero Herbert von Karajan — that comes to mind when thinking about Gergiev's rise. Gergiev and von Karajan are linked not only by talent, but by their rapid career rise, unscrupulousness, ambition, and impeccable self-promotion.

As a student Gergiev won the International Conductors' Competition founded by Karajan. In many interviews he recalled how he was introduced to Karajan and listened to a concert of the Berlin Philharmonic sitting behind the drums.

Of all his interviews, the most revealing is in the movie "Solomon Volkov. Dialogues with Valery Gergiev," filmed for the conductor's 65th birthday by Channel One of Russian TV.

In the film as Gergiev says admiring words about Karajan, he mentions that in Germany the famous conductor is nicknamed Generalmusikdirektor. Gergiev says it like a joke, but it was a real position, and not one that flatters Karajan.

It's a good time to remember who Karajan was, especially who he was under Nazism.

Herbert von Karajan did not have the status of Germany's chief conductor under Hitler, but he was one of the faces of the regime. Born in 1908 in Salzburg, a descendant of rich and noble Greek immigrants, he managed to join the Nazi party twice to help along his career. The first

time was on April 8, 1933, in Salzburg, and the second time was in 1935 in Aachen, where he received a new membership card number (3430914) and the position of Generalmusikdirektor, the youngest in German history.

Karajan was easily overlooked in the company of musical giants, as long as the giants were around. But Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer, both Jewish, were forced to emigrate. Erich Kleiber left in protest against the discriminatory policies of the Reich. Of the great masters, only Wilhelm Furtwängler, the leader of the Berlin Philharmonic, remained. He was German and did not think leaving the country was appropriate.

Furtwängler tried to justify himself after the war, saying that he hadn't known what was happening. But in fact he didn't conduct at Nazi congresses, and Hitler joked that there wasn't a single Jew in Germany that he didn't try to petition for.

But Karajan did conduct orchestras wearing a Nazi uniform and began his concerts with the anthem of the Third Reich. He was called "Das Wunder Karajan" and was admired for individual successes —"Tristan und Isolde" at the Staatsoper in Berlin and recordings on Deutsche Grammophon.

After the war Karajan made many recordings, especially in the UK, and was so active and popular it seemed as if he did not need forgiveness. But in the 1950s, when he went on an American tour with the Berlin Orchestra, there were protests of his concerts and Eugene Ormandy refused to shake hands with him. But during Karajan's lifetime almost no one publicly raised the subject of his Nazi past.

There were also protests at Gergiev's last concerts abroad. America protested Gergiev's views, even though they were nothing new, just as Karajan's views had not changed. Times were different and people responded differently to them, but the goal was the same. "There is no crime I would not commit in order to realize all my abilities," Karajan used to say. Gergiev's work reflects the same principle.

Karajan made more than 800 recordings in his lifetime, including four recordings of the complete Beethoven cycle, which no one else has done. Why not? He is the only person to become lifetime leader of the Berlin Philharmonic. As part of the Salzburg Festival, he organized the Easter Festival, which is also the name of a festival Gergiev initiated in 2002. But Karajan was not always late the way Gergiev is. Karajan did not think that there were 48 hours in a day and that he could do everything. He did not direct on so many stages, did not spend eternity on trains, ships and planes, did not give 130 concerts and performances a year.

Karajan did not drop his standards, which is usually inevitable when doing so much. His competitiveness was reflected in another way: Karajan was a yogi, swimmer, skier, yachtsman, collector of sports cars and had a sports plane, a couple of villas, and a wife who'd been a model for Christian Dior before she met him. Another era, other appetites, but at that time they were impressive. The main thing is that Karajan managed to push through to the top, to get rid of his shameful past, which is a kind of success.

For 35 years, until the end of his life, Herbert von Karajan led the Berlin Philharmonic orchestra.

For 35 years Gergiev has led the Mariinsky Theater. But it’s not over for him; now he has another theater. He is 70, which is not old for a conductor. And he is once again at the beginning of a journey that may prove to be a long one for him and for both theaters. In the current situation, it seems unlikely that anything good will come of it.

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