



## **Modernism Rampant: Shostakovich and Mosolov**

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### **Bolshevism and Modernism**

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 affected the arts profoundly. Artists identified more closely with the old regime emigrated in many cases, or suffered a loss in status, clearing the way for younger artists to advance their careers. During the first post-revolutionary years, culture was given solid financial support, since the Bolsheviks saw it as an essential means for the education of the masses and the transformation of their mindset. The more radical artistic movements were the first winners of this reshuffle, but these were movements in poetry, theatre and the visual arts. The music of the early 20s saw some experimentation, but there were no composers remotely comparable to Malevich, Lissitzky, Chagall, Filonov, Mayakovsky or Meyerhold. These artists claimed to be enacting a revolution in their respective arts, and in their rhetoric, they often aligned themselves with the political and social revolution unfolding in the Soviet Union. Musicians caught up with this a little belatedly.

### **NEP and Foreign Imports (1923-1927)**

Composers in the Soviet Union benefited from the temporary relaxation of economic rules under NEP (New Economic Policy), which permitted small-scale private enterprise and re-opened international trade. This allowed Soviet composers to familiarise themselves with the latest European scores, and many Western composers even came to visit the Soviet Union. Leningrad's Bolshoi and Maly opera houses became international leaders in productions of modernist works, most prominently Berg's *Wozzeck* and Ernest Krenek's *Der Sprung über den Schatten* and *Jonny Spielt Auf*. Both Mosolov and Shostakovich sought out all the Western scores as soon as they arrived, and it is hardly surprising that their experimental periods started simultaneously, in 1926.

### **Who Was Alexander Mosolov?**

Mosolov was born in 1900; his mother was an opera singer at the Bolshoi Theatre and his stepfather a successful painter who ran his own painting school in Moscow. He received an excellent education, was fluent in German and French, and in his childhood, he accompanied his family on visits to Berlin, Paris and London. At the age of 18, he left home to join the Red Army, and it was only at the age of 21 that he decided to study music professionally. After some private lessons with Reinhold Glière, he entered Moscow Conservatoire to study under Nikolai Myaskovsky. Within four years, he was considered a fully-fledged composer and soon began to earn his notoriety. No less than Nikolai Bukharin singled Mosolov out for criticism in an article of 1925 ("he is too alien to our Soviet reality to be assimilated to it"), although Bukharin had never actually heard any of Mosolov's music but simply read someone else's account of it. Bukharin at that point was a leading ally of

Stalin (he would be removed from the Politburo in 1929 and demoted, then tried and executed in 1938). Mosolov also became a favourite whipping-boy for the so-called “proletarian composers”, who regularly expressed their disdain for his modernist experiments such as the song cycles “Four Newspaper Advertisements” and “Three Children’s Songs”. They could tolerate neither his hooliganistic brand of modernist irony nor his extreme naturalism (one of the songs features a child asking to go to the toilet, for example).

## The “Revolutionary” Concert of 1927

Among the celebrations marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution was a symphony concert organised by the Association for Contemporary Music, which was then at the peak of its influence. Shostakovich and Mosolov stood out from their contemporaries: Shostakovich was represented in the concert by his Second Symphony (“To October”), and Mosolov by his “Iron Foundry”. Both these experimental pieces employed the latest modernist devices in service of revolutionary themes and contributed innovations of their own. Shostakovich’s symphony depicted the progress from a dark pre-revolutionary past, through struggle, towards victory (the chorus blaring out a rather clumsy text that Shostakovich himself despised). Mosolov’s portrayal of an iron foundry was billed as part of a suite from the ballet *Steel* that reflected the contemporary drive for rapid industrialisation. However, while Shostakovich’s symphony established his credentials as a properly Soviet composer, Mosolov’s piece was soon denounced by the “proletarian composers” who claimed the piece presented the bourgeois cult of the machine rather than the (alleged) joy of socialist, humanised labour. On the international stage, however, the “Foundry” became a hit and was even recorded on disc in the early 1930s.

## Shostakovich’s Opera *The Nose*

Among the many artistic experiments of the 1920s, *The Nose* stands out as a piece that has stood the test of time, even though it disappeared from view for four decades. The opera is based on a story by Nikolai Gogol in an absurdist vein (who, in turn, drew upon ETA Hoffmann’s supernatural tales), and Shostakovich adds his thorough knowledge of contemporary Western scores together with his experience working in the modernist theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold. Meyerhold was a great pioneer of anti-realist theatre. The suspension of disbelief was itself suspended, and his productions included topical updates, audience participation, dance and acrobatics, commedia dell’arte and circus. Shostakovich worked as a pianist in Meyerhold’s theatre, and became something of a protégé of the director, even staying over at his home. The theatrical hi-jinks in *The Nose* were influenced by Meyerhold’s production of another Gogol story, *The Government Inspector*. There was no question of Shostakovich imposing absurdity on the Gogol original, since the story revolves around a nose that mysteriously disappears from the face its owner, only to be seen as a gentleman strolling about town, and somehow even gaining a higher social status than its owner. It is one thing to entertain a hazy vision of these events while reading a story, but quite another to present them on stage.

The whole opera is a series of musico-theatrical shocks and surprises, and to this end, Shostakovich not only uses all the Western modernist resources he had studied but breaks new ground. Consider, for example, the four-minute-long entr’acte written for unpitched percussion only, which relies on a combination of various rhythms not so much to fascinate the listener with their complex reaction, but rather to create an impression of riotous misbehaviour. Or there is the Octet of the Janitors, each dictating his own short ad to be placed in a newspaper, but syllable by syllable in the form of an atonal 8-part canon, which deliberately renders the texts meaningless for the listener, leaving only a phonetic residue. Many of these surprises are parodic distortions of familiar operatic devices, such as, for example, virtuosic melismatic singing (which we encounter in the part of the Nose), or

operatic recitatives, which are modified by misplaced stresses.

## The Dire Years of RAPM Rule (1929-1932)

1929 is an important landmark: it is the year in which Stalin consolidated his personal power, and the year when regulation of culture began in earnest. However, during the 1929-32 period, it was not yet the state, but the “proletarian art” organisations that imposed ideological control on culture, and in music, the organisation in question was the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM). This was a particularly harsh climate in which not only modernist music, but even Western and Russian classics were considered unacceptable (with a very few exceptions, such as Beethoven, Schubert, and Musorgsky). Mosolov’s music almost disappeared from the concert platform during these years; performances were not even granted to the works in which he tried to take up the ideological slogans of the day (such as his Anti-Religious Symphonic Poem or *The Arrival of Tractors in the Village*, or his opera *The Dam*). Shostakovich also suffered: he was accused of peddling bourgeois entertainment music by orchestrating the foxtrot “Tea for Two” and was also ridiculed for the (supposed) modernist excesses of his opera *The Nose*.

I consider it a political error on my part to have given the conductor Malko permission to perform my arrangement of the Tahiti Trot, since this is actually a number from my ballet *The Golden Age*, and if it is performed outside of its proper context (which would demonstrate the composer’s attitude to this material), it can create the mistaken impression that I am a proponent of the ‘light genre’. Three months ago, I sent word to Malko, who is abroad, telling him that I now withdrew permission. [Shostakovich, writing for *Proletarian Musician*]

And indeed, ‘it is totally beyond me’, what interest or instruction the students, or the metal and textile workers who populate the opera boxes could draw from watching crowds of people rushing across the stage for several hours looking for ... a lost nose. Our theatre demands spectacles that are ideological and socially significant.

...

In this opera, Shostakovich has undoubtedly moved away from the mainstream of Soviet art. If he does not recognise the falsity of his path, if he fails to comprehend the live reality that is ‘under his nose’, his artistic work will unavoidably find itself in a cul-de-sac.

[from Daniil Zhitomirsky’s critique of *The Nose* published in *Proletarian Musician*, 1929]

## Mosolov: The Aftermath

We will have ample opportunity to follow Shostakovich’s career in later lectures, so let us now focus on Mosolov’s tragic fate. In March 1932, with considerable daring, he addressed a letter of complaint to Stalin himself, detailing how RAPM had been persecuting him (as an artist). In conclusion, he delivers a kind of ultimatum to Stalin: that he should either call off the hounds of RAPM or let Mosolov leave the country to pursue his career elsewhere:

I am neither published nor performed, I feel myself to be persecuted and entirely disenfranchised as a musician. I don’t know what to do, but I can’t work in such conditions.

The letter became well-known in Moscow’s musical circles, and some of Mosolov’s colleagues even

believed that it was instrumental in the disbandment of RAPM by Stalin a month later, in April 1932. We now know, however, that RAPM's fate had been sealed a few months earlier, when Stalin decided that its literary counterpart, RAPP, was dragging down the quality of Soviet literature.

For reasons that are not fully known, Mosolov reaped little benefit from this momentous change of policy on music. Little is known about this period of his life beyond the broadest outlines: he undertook several trips to Central Asia, collecting folk songs there (he had already taken an interest in this music before RAPM's persecution, and he retained the interest for the rest of his life). The songs he collected then appeared in his compositions, as in his Second Piano Concerto which uses Kirghiz themes. The year of the Great Purge finds him working on a commissioned oratorio "A Turkmen Song about Stalin". In this dangerous period, when any accusation or denunciation was likely to result in arrest, Mosolov was accused of drunk-and-disorderly behaviour by one of the central newspapers (*Izvestiya*, Sept 1937). This prompted his expulsion from the Union of Soviet composers. Then the tragic chronology ran like this:

4 November 1937 – arrested

23 December 1937 – sentenced to eight years in the camps for "counter-revolutionary propaganda" and sent to the Volga Camp to fell trees

25 August 1938 – granted early release, but not permitted to reside in any of the major cities for the next five years (later this restriction was also lifted, and he was reinstated in the Composers' Union)

Mosolov was fortunate to be released during a very short period of reversal, when Stalin curtailed the powers of the GPU chief Yezhov (who was himself soon to be arrested and blamed for the mass arrests of 1937-38). The intercessions of Mosolov's teachers, Glière and Myaskovsky, also could have played a role. Nevertheless, Mosolov emerged from the labour camp a broken man. His Concerto for Harp and Orchestra, premiered in 1939, was received well, as was his song for Stalin's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, but he never re-established himself as a figure of any importance, and preferred to coast along writing very straightforward arrangements of folk music. When one of these arrangements was discussed by the Stalin Prize Committee for a possible award, a blatant lack of originality was the reason for rejection, although some sympathy was expressed for his plight: "He is too scared to add even an extra note". Shostakovich, who was on the Committee at the time, did quite the opposite: he used the occasion to denigrate Mosolov, his main modernist rival of the 20s, as a man who was never capable of composing anything worthwhile.

## Appendix I: Fragment from the text of the Anti-Religious Symphonic Poem:

На обнаглевшее шипенье	To the brazen hissing
Святых отцов из Ватикана	Of the Vatican holy fathers
Ответим перевыполнением	Let's respond by overfulfilling
Решающего промфинплана.	Our unbending five-year plan
Не все звенеть	Enough of ringing
В колокольную медь	Church bells

Ее пора

Let's melt the brass

Перелить в трактора.

To make tractors

**Appendix II: Mosolov's letter to Stalin (as preserved in Mosolov's archive)** published by Inna Barsova (see reference below), translated by Jonathan Walker and Marina Frolova-Walker

I, the composer Mosolov, A.V. (a graduate of Moscow Conservatoire in 1925 under Myaskovsky), am forced to address you a request: to clarify my position here in the USSR, to evaluation the situation, and to help me in my troubles. In order to make my letter as clear and concise as possible, I will divide it into three sections:

- 1) My position on the musical front in the USSR
- 2) My position abroad
- 3) Conclusions.

During the past three years (since 1929), I have not been able to get anything published; since 1928, my works have gradually stopped being performed, and from 1930 to 31, not a single work of mine was performed, neither a mass song nor any large-scale symphonic or stage works. Gradually, every single musical institution of Moscow (the Radio Centre, the State Administration for Music, Theatre and Circus, the Soviet Philharmonic Society, State Publishers, individual theatres), started running scared from my "notorious" name, and they have stopped communicating with me, either excusing themselves because they have no work for me, or claiming that my music is "harmful". For example, I used to work at the Radio, heading the team in charge of music and sound effects. In the spring of 1931, when they decided to hire some comrades from VAPM [the new, all-Union name for RAPM], they decided that they had to fire me, because it was embarrassing for them to employ such a musical "counterrevolutionary" as myself.

Here is a further example of untoward behaviour from a state institution, the Leningrad State Theatre. I composed a huge stage work, *The Dam*, in 5 acts; the subject for this opera is the construction of an electric power station in a distant region of the USSR. The Artistic-Political Council approved the music, and everything was ready for work on the production to begin. But then a new director (Comrade Buchstein) was appointed; the work on the opera stalled; a public audition of Act I was held, where Comrade Kilchevsky spoke (he is from the Leningrad Proletarian Musicians), and also Comrade Buchstein. Their demagogical critique of the opera led to its failure. Most interestingly, work on the staging had ceased a month and a half before this audition, so neither the singers nor the orchestra nor the conductor managed to convey even 50% of the musical content. The criticism was related only to Act I; they didn't know the rest of the opera and weren't interested in finding out. The worker comrades from the Putilov Factory present at the meeting were quite right: they said that they didn't understand anything, because it was obvious that performance was slapdash, and as they said, "you need to do the thing properly first and then you can discuss it". I myself could hardly understand anything.

I would like to bring to your attention the sorry story of my piece "The Iron Foundry". Today, it has been declared harmful and counter-revolutionary, because, they say, it does not reflect the idea that a human being is in charge of a machine. But I was not pursuing that goal. My piece is subtitled "The Music of Machines". Some people just hear the noise that machines make – I heard music in that. I represented this in a symphonic fragment. The piece was very successful: before it was declared harmful, I was thanked for it by representatives of Komsomol organisations (The Kukhmisterov Club). Because of this success, copies of the score sold out in 1930, but the State Music Publishers refused to make a second print run. This coincided with rising demand for the

piece abroad. Things became very tense: The Music Publishers threatened to destroy the engraved plates. The Vienna publisher Universal Edition offered to print the piece. Finally, with the help of our representative in Vienna, the Department of Cultural Exchange sent a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and from there it was sent to the State Publishers, then to the State Music Publishers, and only at that point was the decision taken to allow the printing of “The Iron Foundry” for export purposes. It was only in November 1931 when scores of the piece became available in the USSR again. In the appendix to this letter, you can read excerpts from Comrade Korev’s article about the piece.

I will continue. After the first performance of “The Iron Foundry” (on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Revolution), Comrade Pelshe said at a meeting of the State Political Education department that this music “is not only Soviet, but even proletarian”. But how far it is from being “proletarian” to being a “class enemy”! By the way, I should mention that in the provinces, “The Iron Foundry” has been performed an enormous number of times. Conductor Stolyarov alone (of the Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre) has played it 56 times! It was played by the [conductorless] Persimfans Orchestra, and also under the conductors Saradzhev, Scheidler, Kubatsky (of the Bolshoi), Sibrav, Ginzburg, Khaikin, Zhukov, Gauk, Dranishnikov, Malko, and others.

But now no one programmes “The Iron Foundry” anymore, imagining that it is banned. The same kind of “failure” was the fate of my other recent works, “The Year 1924” (in memory of Lenin), the Antireligious Symphony, the ballet “The Four Moscows”, etc. Whatever I write, it’s all rejected and is neither published nor even performed. As you can see, I’m not able to express anything through music now – I’ve been branded a “counter-revolutionary” and a “class enemy”, and that’s the end of the matter.

Being in this way a kind of musical persona non grata (лишенец), I have been deprived of all opportunity to participate in the musical construction of the USSR, and I don’t know what to do. I am not at all an un-Soviet person (I joined the Red Guard in 1918; then served in the Secretariat of Comrade Lander in 1918, personally visited Lenin on a mandate from Lander; and in 1919 joined the Red Army), so I want to take active part in our [Soviet] life, I want to work and compose music, but I am not given the chance: my name, having often been mentioned in the journal *Proletarian Musician*, has become a symbol of something anti-Soviet, something pertaining to the class enemy. Am I really such an inveterate class enemy, so strong as to be impervious to the influence of the glory of our socialist construction? (see an article by Koval in the same appendix). Could it be that the 2000 workers who stood up and demanded that “The Iron Foundry” be encored during a concert in Vienna (the Workers’ Concerts), made such a grave ideological error?! Even if the work isn’t perfect, could it belong “to the class enemy” in its totality?!

RAPM has never treated me with the necessary care. They never gave me any instructions on how I should work, or on how I should reform myself. Having placed me on the same level as Khait, the author of Gypsy songs, RAPM ceased all communication with me. Denouncing me publicly as a “class enemy”, they have made no attempt whatsoever to help me change (if indeed there any need to change at all). The comrades who rejected my work (the theatres, the Radio, the Music Publishers) were either members of RAPM or acted under RAPM’s guidance. Even if I had made some mistakes, even if I had written works that weren’t ideologically clear, don’t I need to know how to make them better?! Yet comrades from RAPM maliciously still castigate my works from 1926 (such as the Children’s Scene) today, in 1932. They have no idea about my more recent works (1930-32). They have no interest in them because obviously I am the “class enemy”.

Currently, I am writing a large stage work for the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the October Revolution (together with the poet V. Lugovskoy); I am writing this because I want to – I must compose. But I know it’s to no avail: I will write it, RAPM will denounce it, the rest will run scared, and that’s that. The same thing will happen to my Second Piano Concerto and my songs (I am due to play the Concerto in April in the concerts of the Soviet Philharmonia, and the songs would be performed

there as well). But I cannot be sure that SoPhil, influenced by RAPM and their adherents, will not once again take my works off the programme. As it happens, the songs are the result of my trip to Kirghizia (which I was contracted to make) in autumn 1931. I've collected around 100 Kirghiz songs there. I've had enquiries about them from abroad – Kirghizia is currently one of the most culturally backward republics of our Union, and I've been asked to send a report about that to Vienna, etc. But here in the USSR, no one is interested in my work. In the summer I have to go to Kirghizia again, for a longer period, to continue my research into Kirghiz music.

In order to create, I need a normal environment. How can I compose merry, lively music, when RAPM is doing all it can, short of giving me a Saturday flogging?<sup>1</sup>

To summarize the first section of my letter. I am not being published or performed, I feel persecuted, wiped out professionally. I don't know what to do, but I cannot work under these conditions any longer.

2) International recognition. In 1927 I signed a contract with Universal Edition for the publication of my works (this is the publisher in Vienna that collaborates with the [Soviet] State Music Publishers).

In 1927, my string quartet was chosen for performance at the International Music Festival in Frankfurt-am-Main (I attach the press cuttings). In 1930, "The Iron Foundry" was chosen for performance at the Liège Music Festival (press cuttings attached). In 1929, I composed the opera *The Hero* for the Baden-Baden festival; it is still played in different German cities and broadcast on radio. In 1931 and 32, my First Piano Concerto was performed in Vienna (by Steiermann) and in London (I haven't received the press yet). My quartet was performed in Leipzig and then in many other places (press cuttings attached). "The Iron Foundry" has been played in almost every European and American capital (Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Philadelphia, Rome, Madrid, Lisbon, Warsaw, New York). Conductors: R. Baton, Ritelberg, Strasser, Scherchen, Stokowski, and others. In 1930, I was sent a contract to play my First Piano Concerto in Berlin, but I only learnt about this *ex post facto*, when Comrade Kerve told me that a reply had already been sent stating that I am unable to come. The Vienna publisher demands my scores and asks me about my performances in the USSR. I can't really tell them about my "success" over here! This is what my current international situation is like.

3) Conclusions.

Here, in the USSR, I am not being given the opportunity to work and compose music. I have been enduring persecution since 1926. I don't want to wait any longer. I ought to compose and be performed! I ought to test my works before a mass audience, and let them fail, but then I will know in what direction I should move and how I need to reform. Let me fail, but before the mass listener – I don't want to be nailed shut inside a RAPM coffin.

I am valued abroad (press cuttings and quotations from letters attached) and I am performed there (although they criticize me there for being a "Bolshevik"). My work is of interest over there.

Thus, I request:

- 1) Either persuade RAPM and their underlings to cease my persecution, which has been going on for a whole year, and give me the opportunity to work in the USSR;

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<sup>1</sup> Mosolov is referring here to serfdom in Russia, before its abolition in 1861; various cruel practices (real, exaggerated or fictitious) had become proverbial, such as this alleged tradition of Saturday floggings.

- 2) Or give me the opportunity to leave the country, so that I can be more useful to the USSR while abroad, since here I am rejected, persecuted, and prevented from revealing my abilities and testing myself.

A.V. Mosolov, March 1932

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## Resources and Further Reading

Elena Pol'diaeva, "Aleksandr Mosolov: O sud'be i tvorchestve",  
[http://newmuz.narod.ru/st/Mos\\_Pold01.html](http://newmuz.narod.ru/st/Mos_Pold01.html)

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Larry Sitsky, *Music of the Repressed Russian Avant-garde, 1900-1929* (Praeger Publishers, 199).

Levon Hakobian, "The Nose and the Fourteenth Symphony: An Affinity of Opposites", *Shostakovich and His World*, ed. by Laurel E. Fay (Princeton, 2005), 163-82.

Marina Frolova-Walker, "Russian Opera: Between Modernism and Romanticism", *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, ed. by M. Cooke (2005), 181-96.

Vladimir Orlov, "Shostakovich and Soviet Eros: Forbidden Fruit in the Realm of communal Communism", *Contemplating Shostakovich: Life, Music, and Film*, ed. by Andrew Kirkman and Alexander Ivashkin (Routledge, 2016).

Marina Frolova-Walker and Jonathan Walker, *Music and Soviet Power, 1917-32* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), paperback 2017.