

## REVIEW ESSAY

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***Virtuosi Abroad: Soviet Music and Imperial Competition during the Early Cold War, 1945–1958.*** By Kiril Tomoff. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. xi, 271. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00, hard bound.

Filmed in shadow and sleet, *The Iron Curtain* (20th Century Fox, 1948) dramatizes the true-life defection of Igor Gouzenko, a cryptologist working for the Soviet embassy in Ottawa. That he and his wife are the only Russian characters in the film who speak without Russian accents tells us something about their destiny. Gouzenko (as played by Dana Andrews) comes to believe, over the course of 90 minutes, that the Soviet government is a greater menace to world peace than the nuclear-bomb-making imperial fascists of the west. Dead-eyed fellow staffers at the embassy influence his fateful decision, but he also has the future of his wife and infant son to consider. The soundtrack of the film, which features music by four Soviet composers—Dmitrii Shostakovich first and foremost—attracts the attention of historian Kiril Tomoff in his new book *Virtuosi Abroad: Soviet Music and Imperial Competition during the Early Cold War*. Tomoff also documents the campaign by VOKS (the All-Union Society of Cultural Ties Abroad), in concert with high-ranking Soviet officials, to have *The Iron Curtain* pulled from American and European theaters. The effort failed in the United States but succeeded in France, after the music—used without permission—was placed under copyright by the publisher Chant du Monde. Thus marked the beginning, in Tomoff’s telling, of a “copyright strategy” (37) that eventually left “the intellectual property rights of Soviet composers in the hands of a French publisher for perpetuity” (39). An alliterative exaggeration, perhaps? My understanding, from my experience with the estate of Sergei Prokofiev, is that foreign publishers were not granted terms of more than a decade (renewable) by the Soviet copyright bureau VAAP, which came into being in 1973. After the demise of the USSR, terms had to be renegotiated between publishers and estates.

Shostakovich did not participate in the international intrigue surrounding the Gouzenko biopic, one of the first and most subtle of the “Red Scare” films produced by Hollywood, although Tomoff notes that a “brief protest” (37) about the purloined score was published in the Soviet government newspaper *Izvestiia*. It stands to reason that Shostakovich was at least consulted about the copyright infringement suit that bears his name, “Shostakovich v. Twentieth-Century Fox Film Corp.,” as opposed to simply reading about it in the newspaper. And clearly the preeminent Soviet composer would have been displeased, even concerned, to discover his music had been used to accompany an anti-Soviet film. I doubt his editor or ghostwriter at *Izvestiia* had to twist his arm to publish the complaint on his behalf. (The archival file that I consulted in Moscow reveals a great effort to have the protest translated into different languages and distributed worldwide.)

Tomoff does not identify the music used in *The Iron Curtain*, but the score comprises a provocative mix: the “Lullaby” from Aram Khachaturian’s popular Soviet ballet *Gayane*; fragments of Sergei Prokofiev’s Symphony No. 5 and Nikolai Miaskovsky’s Symphony No. 21; excerpts from Shostakovich’s First,

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Fifth, and Sixth Symphonies; plus Harry Warren's song "You'll Never Know," which had previously, in another film, earned Warren an Academy Award. Nor does Tomoff go into much detail about music anywhere else in his book. The author is a professional historian but not, it seems, a trained musician, and some of his technical descriptions (of a fugue, for example) miss the mark. Shostakovich's Op. 87 comprises 24 Preludes and Fugues, not "hree" of them (126); and the correct title for Prokofiev's 1915–17 piano cycle is *Visions fugitives*, not "Fugitives and Visions" (126).

Tomoff's broader concern is the ideological motivation behind Soviet cultural exchanges from 1945 to 1958. He focuses on conflicts surrounding the nature and content of these tours, which involved representatives of VOKS, the NKVD/KGB, the NKID/Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Central Committee and the Politburo, along with pro-Soviet sympathizers in the west like the impresario Sol Hurok. That VOKS was engaged in low-level espionage goes unmentioned, and of the thousands of documents in the VOKS fond at the State Archive of the Russian Federation, Tomoff has accessed only a handful for his book—presumably with the help of Galina Kuznetsova, who deals with research inquiries from foreigners at the archive. Even obtaining this selection must have been a trial, given the limitations placed by the archive on researchers, Russian and otherwise. (The frustrating restrictions, the dim lighting in the reading room, and the antique microfilm readers are described in an entertaining, if bitter, 2015 article by Leonid Maximenkov in *Literaturnaia Rossiia*.) The VOKS materials are important for contextualizing more than just the dissemination of Soviet music. The fond contains information on American composers dating from the Great Depression and the Second World War, and Chinese composers during the Nanjing Decade, the war with Japan, and the first years after the founding of the People's Republic. But much of the massive VOKS holding is a hassle to access. Assuming the intrepid scholar manages to locate the correct file numbers for, say, Hurok, no more than ten folders can be ordered at a time, assuming that those folders are not labeled or relabeled—for inscrutable reasons—off-limits. Given the current political climate, prospects for research are unlikely to improve.

Tomoff took advantage of the resources at the more welcoming Moscow archives, including the Russian State Archive of Social-Political History and, friendliest of all, the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art. The material he gathered chronicles the bureaucratic subterfuge concerning the selection of jurors and repertoires for the international competitions that the Soviet government under Stalin and Khrushchev permitted Soviet musicians to participate in. Sometimes, Tomoff reveals, winners were pre-selected; other times, awards to deserving Soviet musicians were refused, provoking howls of protest, and not just from the Soviets, as Tomoff documents in his discussion of the 1953 Marguerite Long-Jacques Thibaud International Music Competition in Paris.

VOKS was replaced in 1958 by SSOD, the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship. That organization is not mentioned in Tomoff's book, perhaps because, like VOKS itself in the late 1940s, SSOD had little actual decision-making power. Cultural exchange was ideological in concept but financial in practice: it was meant to turn a profit. Stalin left the Soviet budget in a cata-

strophic state: the industrial and military complex were so dilapidated that U.S. spy planes were able to fly unimpeded over Soviet terrain. Soviet virtuoso instrumentalists thus became a product to be exported like silver mined in Transbaikalia or pearls fished from the rivers of the Kola Peninsula. The Ministers of Culture under Khrushchev talked a good game about disseminating Soviet values abroad, but for the Central Committee the point was to bring in much-needed foreign funds. The Cold War thawed to float the bottom line—at least until, under Brezhnev, oil profits rose, leading to a political refreezing, the arms race, and a reprise of hyper-conservatism.

Tomoff takes these points in less cynical, more idealist directions. He stresses that the goal of the Soviets, in the final years under Stalin and early ones under Khrushchev, was highbrow cultural domination. But just as the petro-ruble command economy could not, even when oil prices were high, seriously challenge American and European capitalism, so too Tchaikovsky's and Rachmaninoff's great concertos, Shostakovich's Leningrad Symphony, and Khachaturian's *Spartacus* proved no match for American popular entertainment. Nor, for obvious commercial reasons, could the Soviet violinist David Oistrakh sell more records than the American pianist Van Cliburn, whose fame briefly rivaled that of the Beatles. None of this is news, but there is certainly a story to be told about the efforts by Soviet musicians—on tour, in competitions, and in recording studios—to transform the Russian classics into audience-appealing kitsch.

Of the musicians, Tomoff dedicates half of a chapter to Sviatoslav Richter, a sublime pianist who championed Prokofiev's mature piano sonatas but was prohibited from travelling outside of the communist bloc until 1960. Tomoff cites persistent concerns within the security apparatus about Richter's lifestyle and family history: he might not behave himself, his prospective handlers determined, and seemed a threat to defect. Tomoff describes in admirably affecting detail Richter's futile efforts to pursue his career in the west, a failure that precipitated the pianist's depression. But he misses the opportunity to discuss how and why Richter privileged Prokofiev's music after the composer was denounced for "formalism" in 1948. And what of his musical background? Richter was trained in the tradition of Heinrich Neuhaus and Emil Gilels, but exceeded them as a sight-reader (for opera singers), commanded a larger repertoire, and possessed thicker hands and greater range. When he finally did get to tour abroad, Richter was remembered (by Steve Wigler) for pulverizing the keys when playing Liszt and Beethoven and teasing more color out of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* at the piano than Ravel could discover in his painterly orchestration.

I learned even less about the technique of the 23-year-old Texan pianist Harvey Lavan "Van" Cliburn, surprise winner of the First International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958. Thanks to his internationally televised triumph at the keyboard, Van Cliburn became a household name on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Surely he at least deserved a biographical sketch? Or perhaps a discussion of the distinctive Russian school of pianism, also relevant in understanding Richter's technique? Tomoff confirms that Minister of Culture Nikolai Mikhailov claimed Van Cliburn "for the Russian piano school, noting that he was trained by Rosina Lhévinne, piano professor at Juilliard and prerevolu-

tionary graduate of the Moscow Conservatory class of Vasilii Safonov” (103). Yet somewhere amidst Tomoff’s description of the deliberations that awarded Van Cliburn his first prize medal, it would have been good to read more details about his training. Tomoff is quick to point out the clichés about “technical brilliance” in pianism contra “individual style” and “interpretive depth” (110), but he avoids explaining whether or how Van Cliburn dismantled them. Is it so true that Soviet musicians were averse to exploring their inner selves in their art? How essential was it, in the 1950s, to project uniform professionalism? Certainly, the illustrious Bolshoi Theater ballerina Maia Plisetskaia, to whom Tomoff dedicates a couple of pages of his book, broke the mold.

The canniest pages in the book concern the choice of repertoire. Tomoff explores the debates among officials who worried about the balance in competitions between Russian/Soviet and European music. These discussions end up being more than just a gauge of national pride; they help to explain a persistent bias, to the present day, in favor of Tchaikovskii’s First Piano Concerto over his less bombastic Second and Third Concertos. Showier pieces grabbed the spotlight at the expense of subtler scores truer to the composer’s aesthetics. It could be argued that Tchaikovskii’s critical reputation suffered as a result of the overemphasis on his flamboyant fare in international competitions along with the tours and recordings that followed them. Thus it might be argued that we (meaning audiences in the west) know the composer best through scores that represent him the least; the Cold War has defined and distorted Tchaikovskii. The First Piano Concerto, likewise Tchaikovskii’s Violin Concerto, was of course calibrated to appeal, but these scores also raise the essential question: does music marketed to the masses as great actually need to be great? The concertos are performed repeatedly, insistently, on the concert circuit to the present day, but they contain passages considered hackneyed even in their original 19th century context. For Soviet musicians programmed to crush their western competition, however, cheap thrills were all-important. Their performances were fantastic but inviting, pretentiously unpretentious.

Tomoff refers several times to the globalization of the Soviet Classical-Romantic sound during this period, but again provides few specifics. He merely describes Oistrakh’s celebrated recordings with orchestras in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York, quoting the musicologist Robert Philip to the effect that ensemble playing tightened and *rubato* intensified as “different schools and national styles became less distinct” (142). Exactly how globalization as a transnational phenomenon relates to—succeeds, emerges, develops from?—the Cold War is introduced as a major theme, but left undeveloped. How might Cold War exchanges between the so-called First and Second Worlds mark something so distinct from the *goûts-réunis* between French and Italian musical styles in the 18th century? What Tomoff’s research reveals is less what musical exchanges between the U.S. and USSR sounded like than what they resounded with: the cultural, political, economic, and even military. The art of music, by its nature, can transcend its context. But only historians can explain what it all meant in the moment.

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