

9 Operetta in Russia and the USSR

ANASTASIA BELINA

This chapter will give a brief overview of the history of operetta in Russia, starting with performances and reception of German and French operettas from the eighteenth to the twentieth century and surveying home-grown Soviet operetta – a subject that is still waiting to be fully explored by researchers and writers on music.

‘Everyone flocks to see this disgusting thing’

Operetta was big business in tsarist Russia, and later in the Soviet Union.¹ The first theatre built after a European model appeared during the reign of Peter the Great in 1723, when visiting German and French theatre troupes gave performances of comedies.² Until 1882, there was a state monopoly on theatres in Russia, but when it was abolished, private theatres and entertainment enterprises flourished. There was a proliferation of theatres, and, although drama, tragedy and opera were popular, operetta had its own huge audience, hungry for laughter and light-hearted fun. Imperial Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century was just as mad about operetta as the rest of Europe. The tastes of the bourgeoisie and nobility were very much European; they read European newspapers and magazines and knew about all the latest developments in European culture. Russian theatre artists were often in contact with their western European counterparts, and the public always appreciated foreign plays and the work of foreigners as much as that of Russians.³ Artists and composers from Europe were traditionally made welcome in Russia. It was no different for Johann Strauss (1825–99), who paid several visits to the country between 1856 and 1886. Ironically, in 1930, together with Shostakovich’s *The Nose* and Third Symphony, a waltz by Strauss was also banned.⁴

Ever since Offenbach’s *Orphée aux enfers* was staged at the Mikhailovsky Theatre by a French court theatre troupe in 1859, the composer and his works became all the rage, although Russian equivalents of *opéra comique* and vaudeville already existed. Some notable examples include performances at the Aleksandinsky Theatre in St Petersburg of P. Karatigin’s *Pervoye iyulya v Petergofe* (First of July in Peterhoff) in 1839, P. Grigoriev’s *Makar Grigorievich Gubin* and D. Lensky’s *Lev Gurich*

Sinichkin in 1840, Grigoriev's *Tsiryul'nik na Peskakh i parikmakher s Nevskogo* (Barber from Peski and Hairdresser from Nevsky) in 1848 and N. Kulikov's *Bednaya devushka* (Poor Maiden) in 1850.⁵

During the reign of Tsar Nikolai I, there was an entertainment centre called 'Establishment of Artificial Mineral Waters', where concerts of light music were given from 1834 until 1876. Its owner was the entrepreneur Ivan Isler, who found this enterprise so lucrative that he decided to build a summer theatre in the late 1850s, where he presented excerpts from operettas in the evening programmes. This proved hugely popular, and others followed suit by opening their own summer theatres and *cafés chantants*; among these were the famous *Villa Borghese*, operating in 1855–65, and *Eldorado*, 1867–1913, which was even described by Saltykov-Shchedrin in his 1883 satirical novel *Sovremennaya idiliya* (A Contemporary Idyll).⁶

In 1870 a new Theatre Bouffe opened in St Petersburg, where world-famous operetta stars were engaged to present excerpts from operettas and one-act operettas. The first appearance in St Petersburg of the French operetta diva Hortense Schneider (1833–1920) was so eagerly awaited that tickets were sold out a month early, and two weeks before the performances all flower shops were emptied.⁷ She would perform *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* on 10 December 1871, with the whole of the city's *beau monde* in attendance. Her visit paved the way for many Parisian operetta stars' visits throughout the 1870s.

Operetta audiences were already diverse in the early nineteenth century, and, as the urban population grew with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, support for operetta increased.⁸ But not everyone shared positive feelings about operetta, which had suffered from being downgraded to a less artistically valuable, vulgar and, later in the Soviet Union, even 'pornographic' genre. A number of Russian writers, for example, voiced their dislike of operetta: Tolstoy's Vronsky, in *Anna Karenina*, compared an unsatisfactory situation he felt himself to be in with an operetta plot,⁹ and several of Chekhov's short stories reference operetta. In fact, Chekhov's early plays were influenced by operetta: he was thirteen when he saw *La belle Hélène* and was impressed by its approach to satire.¹⁰ A famous actor, Alexander Sumbatov-Iuzhin wrote a play *A Celebrity's Husband*, where an operetta diva is persuaded to become an opera singer instead.¹¹

The last director of the Imperial Theatres, Vladimir Telyakovsky, left a number of diary entries showing his utter disgust with the genre which, much to his dismay, he could not eradicate from the theatres. He even used the derogatory term *operetka*, or little operetta, and often mused at the fact that the whole imperial family supported it. Telyakovsky's diary gives

a good insight into operettas given in the Imperial Theatres, their stars and their patrons, as well as the level of performances and quality of productions.

Even the famous Russian bass Shalyapin was not immune to the charms of operetta. He agreed to appear in Planquette's *Les cloches de Corneville*, a hugely popular operetta in Russia at the time, and, although he grumbled at first about having to do it, he grew to like it so much that he even asked Telyakovsky if more performances could be arranged. The performance on 31 January 1904 brought a 'phenomenal sum of 15000' roubles but, for Telyakovsky, it was only due to Shalyapin, who sang wonderfully, but too good 'for operetka' that contained much vulgarity and lacked elegance.¹² Later, this operetta was given in the USSR in a new version by V. Inber and V. Zak at the theatre of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. The new version was made because it was believed that the original text was of poor literary quality and that the story needed 'new heroes, new motifs, and new situations'. So, the Soviet writers introduced 'a group of persecuted, poor, but pure and morally unblemished actors' instead of the original characters: marquises, ladies and missing heirs.¹³

But some cultural figures did not see anything strange in working with operetta. Stanislavsky, for example, successfully directed Sullivan's *Mikado* in 1887 in Moscow, and when he teamed up with Nemirovich-Danchenko, he produced Suppé's *Donna Juanita*, the most popular operetta of the Viennese school on Russian stages at the time. Both Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko actively promoted operetta, whether European or Soviet. Another famous Russian theatre producer Theodore Komisarjevsky collaborated on the production of Suppé's *Die schöne Galathea*, Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*, and a number of one-act musical plays in 'The Gay Theatre' with N. Evreinov.¹⁴

It is a little-known fact that one of Russia's greatest novelists Ivan Turgenev (1818–83) wrote librettos in French for operettas set to music by Pauline Viardot. The most popular of these, *Le dernier sorcier*, orchestrated by Eduard Lassen (possibly with assistance by Liszt) was performed in Weimar in 1869 and in Karlsruhe and Baden-Baden in 1870.¹⁵ Even Alexander Borodin and César Cui, the members of the Mighty Handful, tried their hand at the composition of several lighter works.¹⁶

From the second half of the nineteenth century, the works by German and French composers dominated Russian operetta stages, with the most popular composers being Suppé, Offenbach, Planquette, Hervé and Lecocq. Most of their operettas were performed in St Petersburg's Aleksandrinsky Theatre, but they were also shown in private and summer theatres, many of which remained active even for a few years after the Revolution.¹⁷

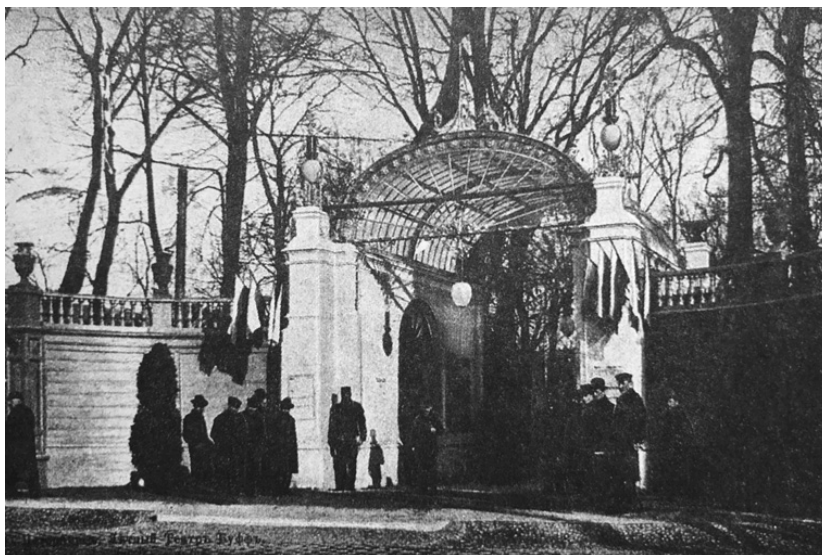


Figure 9.1 Entrance to the Theatre Bouffe, 1909

One pre-Revolutionary summer theatre called Theatre Bouffe deserves a special mention for its popularity and quality of performances. It was established by the entrepreneur P. Tumpakov in 1901, who engaged excellent singers, chorus and orchestra. One of the stars in his theatre was Wiktorja Kawecka, the ‘nightingale of Warsaw’, who was one of the most popular operetta divas in Poland at the time.¹⁸ Among operettas given in the Theatre Bouffe were Planquette’s *Les cloches de Corneville*, Offenbach’s *La belle Hélène*, Hervé’s *Mam’zelle Nitouche*, Suppé’s *Boccaccio*, Audran’s *La mascotte* and many others. But the theatre’s most enduring legacy lies in the fact that it hosted the Russian premieres of Lehár’s *Der Graf von Luxemburg* and *Die lustige Witwe*.¹⁹

As can be gathered from even a brief survey of the entertainment scene in pre-Revolutionary Russia, urban popular culture was cosmopolitan. It was also daring: a Moscow Farce Theatre presented *Sarah Wants a Negro* and *Don’t Walk about in the Nude*.²⁰ Sex, ‘foreignism’ and all references to decadence and bourgeois culture were banned after the Revolution.

Operetta in 1917–1929

Operetta did not immediately find favour in post-Revolutionary Russia because it was seen as a remnant of decadent and bourgeois entertainment. At first, performances of European operettas were given with newly adapted storylines, changed characters, places and situations, and new ways of

moralizing and preaching of the Soviet doctrine were forced into the familiar stories. Some were lauded for their ‘democratic elements in the libretto’ as, for example, Millöcker’s *Der Bettelstudent*, with a new libretto by N. Erdman and M. Ulitsky, which showed ‘the struggle of freedom-loving Polish people for its liberation’.²¹ It is ironic, given the fact that historically Russia was only too eager to appropriate Polish territories without any regard for the feelings of their inhabitants. Even *Die Fledermaus* had to find more resonance with the new order, and its libretto was adapted by the writers B. Mass and M. Chervinsky to make it ‘more contemporary, imbue it with real literary gravitas, and to emphasize its social meaning’.²²

In the autumn of 1919, the Operetta Theatre opened in Moscow, where it presented Kálmán’s *Der Kleine König* as *Revolutionsionerka* (The Revolutionary Woman). Despite a heavily reworked libretto, inspired by the abdication of King Manuel of Portugal in 1910, it was received sceptically by the authorities, who ‘doubted whether such frothy entertainment was appropriate for the times, since every open theatre meant an extravagant consumption of heat and electricity in a period of extreme scarcity’.²³

One of the most, if not the most, popular operettas in Russia was (and remains so today) Kálmán’s *Die Csárdásfürstin*, or *Silva* (1915). Of course, for its performances in 1917, revolutionary spirit had to be reflected in the new libretto: the writers Mikhailov and Tolmachev made *Silva* a native of the island of Kotlin near Kronstadt (Gulf of Finland). A descendant of Baltic sailors, she achieved success only thanks to her talent and determination: she had to be a positive role model for young Soviet women.²⁴

During the period of Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP), 1921–9, which saw a temporary return to old attitudes and approaches to entrepreneurship and business, European operetta was as popular and as lucrative as it was before the Revolution. There was even a tour of ‘Negro-Operetta’: an American jazz band, led by Sam Wooding, engaged by an NEP entrepreneur for a show ‘The Chocolate Kiddies’ in Moscow in 1926. Shostakovich gushed about seeing the show in a letter to a friend: ‘Their jazz band is a real discovery of America for a musician.’ It seems that he equally liked the good-looking women who danced in the performances.²⁵ Only three years later, this kind of entertainment would be unthinkable: with the end of NEP came tighter controls and eventually strictly prescriptive socialist realism.

Laughter Therapy for the Masses

With the new class of citizens in the new country, new content to fill established and popular forms was no longer enough: fresh forms and ideals were needed. For Bolshevics, culture had a purpose: it had to be for

the masses, and it had to be strictly controlled in order to be effective as a propaganda tool. The first attempts to revolutionize culture for Soviet citizens brought no desired results: they were not interested in 'factory concerts with machine sonatas or "ballets" whose dancers were dressed as flying lizards'.²⁶ Contrary to the hopes of the new Soviet elite, theatre did not prove to be popular, either, during the first few years after the Revolution, because the new proletarian class did not find the complex artistic language of the artform easy to understand.²⁷

Even before socialist realism became the only official way forward for creative artists in the Soviet Union, the members of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) were preoccupied with 'ensuring that workers were being properly supplied with suitable music and not dancing to foxtrots and tangos'. Multiple meetings were held where the future of Soviet music and 'foxtrotism' were discussed. At one such meeting in 1930, there was a proposal to exclude those composers who wrote 'foxtrot and gipsy music' from the Union of Composers. One of the 'foxtrotters' replied that no one could possibly know what the policy on foxtrot will be tomorrow, to everyone's laughter. Another went even further, by arguing that many of the RAPM composers were not immune to the charms of the popular dances and operetta 'pornography': one 'accidentally' arranged some foxtrots, and the other set a Soviet text to music that was 'nothing more than a cancan'.²⁸

It quickly became obvious that, if culture were to be used for political propaganda, it still had to be entertaining. The people continued to enjoy popular and light songs and dances. This is why operetta proved a good fit: it was popular, its music was memorable, it was entertaining and easily adaptable. In fact, it was a perfectly suitable chalice into which the ideals of socialist realism would be poured from the end of the 1930s until Stalin's death in 1953. Socialist realism became a single style that upheld clear ideological context and strictly controlled all spheres of life in the country. It promoted revolutionary struggle for freedom, elimination of class enemies, heroism, triumph of duty, patriotism, purity of character, morality and dedication to building a new life.

Soviet operetta had to be funny, light, entertaining and promote the themes of social mobility through the Soviet system but at the same time ask serious questions and moralize. In other words, fun was allowed, but it was strictly prescribed: it had to be ordered and moral. Its tunes had to be melodious and memorable, and its songs had to be based on traditional folk elements. The characters had to appeal to the masses and be strong, self-controlled and idealistic but also fun-loving and brave.

Several genres of Soviet operetta developed: heroic, dramatic, *kolkhoz* and song operetta, to name a few. Song operetta, for example, focussed on

folk-like or folksong-inspired song as a major building block of the entire structure, and *kolkhoz* operetta romanticized life in a collective farm (*kolkhoz*), colouring it with the positive, optimistic hues of socialist realism. Heroic women drivers of tractors and combine harvesters in these operettas were based on real-life women and their stories that represented examples of Soviet upward social mobility. One such woman, Praskovya Angelina (1913–59), was the highest achiever in her tractor team. When she decided to marry, her team was thrown into a state of panic about loss of productivity. This and other similar stories gave birth to a multitude of plays, novels, operettas and films.²⁹

Soviet operettas often focussed on stories from the Revolution and World War II. Many operettas simply featured optimistic young people who achieve their goals in the face of adversity; mostly, these goals included working in Siberia, building new cities or gaining education. There was a drive to promote traditionally male-dominated jobs to women: combine harvesting, engineering, navigating at sea, building and so on. All featured at least one couple in love who overcome their difficulties and end up together; one or two unsavoury characters who are either spies or informants; characters who start on erroneous paths only to be shown the righteous Soviet way and heroic, strong, stable characters who inspire others to follow the happy Soviet life.

No one did more to develop Soviet operetta than Isaak Dunayevsky (1900–55). He composed the first Soviet operetta, *Zhenikhi* (The Suitors, 1927), set in a provincial town during the NEP period, where a host of greedy suitors were chasing a rich widow. Dunayevsky had a real gift for melody, which was a highly prized commodity in the country where socialist realism was the guiding star. His works reflected the official spirit of the time: optimism, enthusiasm, Soviet pride, friendship, bravery, patriotism, the joys of collective farming, support for the Red Army and fighting the Germans in World War II. He wrote a number of quintessential Soviet songs that are still well known in today's Russia. Having held a series of high-level administrative posts, Dunayevsky received a number of prestigious Soviet prizes and awards. Among his operettas are *Nozhi* (Knives, 1928), which showed the positive characteristics of Soviet youth; *Polyarnye strasti* (Polar Passions, 1929), whose heroine is a young Inuit girl, who runs away from her kulak father to go to Moscow to study at a university. Other works promote Soviet optimism even in their titles: *Zolotaya dolina* (Golden Valley, 1937); *Dorogi k schast'yu* (Roads to Happiness, 1941) and *Vol'niy veter* (The Free Wind, 1947). His last two operettas were *Sin klouna* (Clown's Son, 1950) and *Belaya akatsiya* (White Acacia, 1955). He also composed songs, film scores, music for theatre and ballets.

From 1929 to 1941 Dunayevsky was the music director of a variety theatre, the Leningrad Music Hall, where he worked with another would-be iconic figure in Russian entertainment, the singer Leonid Utyosov (1895–1982) and his instrumental ensemble. Together, they Sovietized American jazz, which was attacked in 1928 by Gorky who identified it with homosexuality, drugs and decadent eroticism. Utyosov's jazz orchestra massively contributed to bringing back the previously outlawed dances, among them the infamous foxtrot and the Boston waltz. When Dunayevsky created the film score for *Vesyoliye rebyata* (Jolly Fellows, 1934), where Utyosov had a prominent role, both were catapulted to country-wide success.

Although acknowledged as one of the founding fathers of Soviet operetta along with Dunayevsky, little can be found about Nikolay Strelnikov (1888–1939) in existing literature. One of his first works, *Chyorniy amulet* (The Black Amulet, 1928), was an ill-fated attempt to politicize operetta. It was an anti-capitalist story about 'a plutocrat in a donkey mask who hands out wads of money to half-naked women'. But the moral of the story was lost on the audiences who rather enjoyed the 'flesh more than the sarcasm – and the critics panned it'.³⁰ He did better with his next operetta, *Kholopka* (Servant, 1929). Although *Kholopka* was criticized for its archaic language and its jazzy rhythms, it remained popular because of its story, which depicted serfdom, oppression and inequality. Strelnikov did not manage to avoid criticism with his next operetta, *Sertdse poeta* (Poet's Heart, 1934), where his music was derided for its jazz influences.

Boris Aleksandrov (1905–94) deserves a mention because he was praised for being the first to put 'real' people – partisans, women, children, soldiers of the Red Army – in his successful operetta *Svad'ba v Malinovke* (Wedding in Malinovka, 1937). Now a Soviet classic, it was lauded for replacing 'decaying and decadent' Viennese characters with 'bold, colourful, realistic characters' in a story about an attempted forced wedding of a Bolshevik woman, with a grand finale featuring a hydroelectric power and radio station.³¹ In 1967 it was turned into an even more successful film, once again praised for its good balance of entertainment and moralizing. In fact, Soviet operetta influenced the development of Soviet film, especially the genre of musical comedy. Many of these early musical comedies became classics, such as the *Vesyoliye rebyata* (1934) and *Volga-Volga* (1938), which was reputedly Stalin's favourite film.

Operettas set in satellite socialist republics were also written, such as Rauf Gadzhiev's *Perekryostok* (The Crossroads), set in 1919–20 in Baku. It has an eclectic collection of characters: a graduate from Petersburg University; young and old inhabitants of the city; a couple in love; a singer in a *café chantant*; an English translator, Brown; Abdulla, who

suddenly comes into a lot of money, and a hairdresser, Gaston. His real name is Gurgén, but he demands to be addressed as Gaston because it 'sounds like Europe' and Gurgén 'sounds like village'. He is obsessed with Europe, and his salon is called Atrada (Pleasure), but he comes to see the errors of his ways and turns patriotic, renaming his salon Krasnaya Atrada (Red Pleasure) and demanding to be called Gurgén, because Gaston 'sounds like Europe, and Europe is not on'.

But behind this mask of optimism and belief in a bright future operetta was concealing something more sinister:

The horrors of collectivization, the great famine, the recurring waves of purge and killings, the vast network of slave and death camps were not only totally absent from popular culture; their possibility was culturally denied by visions of rural prosperity, urban harmony and a success, and a new dawn of freedom. A web of fantasy and a giant political coverup deflected dissatisfaction of the masses against alleged enemies of the people. Fantasists ascribed all achievements to the great leader and all failings to saboteurs, traitors, and spies. Agricultural shortfalls were hidden behind paintings, operettas, and movies about *kolkhoz* feasts with tables groaning under food and wine.³²

Laughter therapy for the masses did the trick, at least until Stalin held the country in his steel grip, and never did it prove to be more needed than during the World War II years, when it was a welcome distraction for the citizens of the war-torn USSR. European and Soviet operettas shared the stage.

Perhaps these performances had the most effect in blockaded Leningrad, where they helped those who managed to make it to the theatre to forget about their hunger and stop thinking about death, which ravaged the city with increasing viciousness every day. Often, these performances were given during air raids, and the audiences were told to stay close to the walls. Normally, the secondary arias and duets were cut out, but the splendour of staging and costumes remained. Theatres were unheated, and the actors were so thin that some had to hide their dystrophy underneath thick padded winter coats, on top of which they then wore their costumes. Leningrad audiences heard Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*; Friml's *The Firefly* (given as *Sailor's Love*); Kálmán's *Silva, La bayadère, Gräfin Maritza* – 'all Viennese elegance and evening dress and gipsy romance'; Leo Fall's *Die Dollarprinzessin* and a number of others, including those by Soviet composers.³³

But operetta singers, like many other citizens of the city, were dying of hunger and disease or being killed during air raids. Adjustments were made to deal with the shrinking theatre group: cuts were made, and various instruments were left out from the scores. Still, the Theatre of Musical Comedy (Muzkom) was doing good business in Leningrad. There was

huge demand for tickets, and those who could not buy them on the black market, stood for hours in the queue from as early as 6 a.m. The performances were at 10.30 a.m. and 4 p.m. Those who went to the later ones, found that it helped them forget about hunger.³⁴

Elsewhere in the USSR, during World War II, Soviet operetta theatres staged patriotic operettas: Aleksandrov's *Devushka iz Barceloni* (A Girl from Barcelona, 1942), Shcherbachev's *Tabachniy kapitan* (Tobacco Captain, 1942) and Vitlin's *Raskinulos' morye shiroko* (The Wide Sea, 1942; adapted by G. Sviridov in 1943). A new Theatre of Small Operetta was formed in Kronstadt to perform aboard the ships, and actors, singers and musicians were sent to the front to perform light music to the soldiers. These performances often included numbers from both European and home-grown operettas.

This 'therapy' was even used in the Gulag system and the cities near the labour camps both during and after the war. By the 1940s, the cities that stood at the centre of the larger camp complexes – Magadan, Vorkuta, Norilsk, Ukhta – were large, bustling places, with shops, theatres and parks.³⁵ Evgeniya Ginzburg wrote in her memoir *Within the Whirlwind* that when she returned to the city of Magadan, built by the prisoners in the 1940s, she saw a poster, announcing that in the House of Culture there was to be a performance of *Die Dollarprinzessin*.³⁶ Soviet commentators took swipes at operettic sufferings, at the sadness of suddenly impoverished nobility or the rich, revelling in asking: what is the big deal?³⁷

After the war, Soviet operetta continued its optimistic march. One of the leading operetta composers in the USSR was Yuri Milyutin (1903–68), who wrote operettas about the lives of ordinary people, depicted with direct and memorable musical language firmly rooted in folksong. Like Dunayevsky, he received a number of coveted Soviet awards for his work. Among his operettas are *Zhizn' aktyora* (An Actor's Life, 1940), *Devichiy perepolokh* (A Girls' Alarm, 1944), *Bespokoynoye schast'ye* (Uneasy Happiness, 1947); *Trembita* (1949), *Pervaya lyubov'* (First Love, 1950), *Lyubushka* (1952), *Potseluy Chaniti* (Chanita's Kiss, 1956), *Fonari-fonariki* (Lanterns, Lamps, 1958), *Tsirk zazhigayet ogni* (The Circus Lights Go On, 1960), *Anyutini glazki* (Forget-Me-Not, 1964), *Obruchal'niye kol'tsa* (The Engagement Rings, 1968) and *Tikhaya semeyka* (A Quiet Little Family, 1968). His *Tsirk zazhigayet ogni* is about a character who left his homeland and only realized what a terrible mistake he had made when it was too late – a suitable topic for promotion of the joys of living in the Soviet Union.

Perhaps the best testament to the validity of operetta in the Soviet Union is the fact that one of the most influential musical figures (but not

the most talented) also tried his hand in the genre. A divisive figure, Tikhon Khrennikov (1913–2007) studied composition with Vissarion Shebalin and piano with Heinrich Neuhaus. Having found favour with the Communist Party for his optimistic and accessible music, combined with a clear and lyrical style, he was catapulted to power: in 1948 he was appointed Secretary of the Union of Composers. Suddenly in the most powerful musical office and in charge of ensuring that the rules of socialist realism remained the primary guidance of Soviet composers, he had to reprimand and punish those who did not comply. Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Myaskovsky did not escape his judgement. Highly decorated with Soviet prizes, in 1974 he was elected as a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Khrennikov held his post for forty-three years and would have held it longer, had it not been for the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Recently, more evidence has begun to emerge about Khrennikov's milder side and his attempts to save and protect his fellow composers thanks to his high position. His output includes a number of comic operas and two operettas which are closer to European operetta than one might expect. *Sto chertey i odna devushka* (A Hundred Devils and One Girl, 1963) and *Belaya noch'* (White Night, 1967) show 'little development in their anachronistic formula of sentimental waltzes and other standard dance and song forms, their varied repetition of a limited amount of original material and their repertory of stock comic clichés'.³⁸

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906–75) and Dmitry Kabalevsky (1904–87) also dabbled in operetta but managed only three completed works between them. If at first Shostakovich looked down on operetta, he learnt to like it when his close friend Ivan Sollertinsky opened his eyes to its charms, stating: 'Before that I thought it strange for a serious musician to like the music of Johann Strauss or Offenbach. Sollertinsky helped me to get rid of this snobbish approach to art. And now I like music of all genres, as long as it is real music.'³⁹

The period between 1928 and 1936 saw a proliferation of Shostakovich's waltzes, polkas and galops, with a distinctly Offenbachian flavour and showing the influence of Lehár, Johann Strauss and other operetta composers. If one listens carefully, one may hear in the theme of 'invasion' in Shostakovich's 'Leningrad' Symphony the opening rhythms of 'Da geh' ich zu Maxim' from *Die lustige Witwe*, which may have also been a private family reference: Shostakovich and his son Maxim often listened to operettas at home.

A number of unfinished or unrealized operetta ideas include *Bol'shaya molniya* (The Great Lightning, 1932); *Nergo*, the contract for which he was allegedly forced to drop and *Dvenadtsat' stul'yev* (The Twelve Chairs), after Il'f and Petrov's eponymous satirical novel set during the NEP.⁴⁰ He was

also presented with libretti which he discarded and which later became successful operettas by Sviridov, *Ogon'ki* (Lights), and Shcherbachev, *Tabachniy kapitan* (Tobacco Captain).⁴¹

Shostakovich's one and only completed operetta is *Moskva, Cheryomushki*, premiered in 1959. A fun, sparkling, humorous work with a wonderful score, it delivers a great night at the theatre. However, it did not always find resonance with Soviet commentators: one of them chided it for failing to find the 'real meaning' and for focussing on elements that are 'not important for Soviet people, especially in the period of building enthusiasm'.⁴² Even Kurt Gänzl's *The Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre* does not mention it, and Richard Traubner in his *Operetta: A Theatrical History* mentions Shostakovich's name in passing on the last page, without naming his operetta.

Like Shostakovich, Dmitry Kabalevsky (1904–87) tried his luck with operetta. A student of Catoire and Myaskovsky at the Moscow Conservatory, he became a key figure in the Union of Soviet Composers and did much to promote music education for children. His two operettas are *Vesna poyot* (Spring Sings, 1957) and *Syostri* (Sisters, 1967). *Vesna poyot* remains his more popular work, featuring young Moscow architects who are passionate about building palaces of culture in Siberia, an informant called Ptichkin (a little bird), two successful and two failed love stories, a journalist, an ultra-stylish daughter of a corrupt bureaucrat and a woman who tries to look younger than her years 'with an extensive biography'. It is surprising that a composer who had done so much for music education did not write an operetta for children, especially when it was so highly prized.

Towards the mid-1960s, operetta had proved itself to be a useful component in the socialist realism artistic arsenal. When, in the 1970s, the Party issued a special decree which encouraged artistic figures to pay heightened attention to the aesthetic education of the young generation, a number of works like that already existed. Composers who had already achieved success with operettas for adults wrote a number of children's works, which include S. Tulikov's *Barankin, bud' chelovekom* (Barankin, Be a Decent Man, 1964), S. Zaslavsky's fairy-tale operetta *Ne bey devchonok* (Don't Beat the Girls, 1975), A. Eshpay's *Malish i Karlson* (The Junior and Karlson, 1968) after a story by Astrid Lindgren, S. Banevich's *Priklyucheniya Toma Soyera* (Adventures of Tom Sawyer, 1971), G. Portnov's *Druz'ya v pereplete* (Friends in Trouble, 1966) among many others. All these composers focussed on well-known stories and characters. There was also a call for operetta for teenagers, which would look towards revolutionary themes, but only very few, if any, works were written, and these are not known today.⁴³

Operetta remained popular in the Soviet Union and its range was impressive. Richard Traubner wrote in 1983 that if ‘one spent two weeks in Moscow, one might catch Suppé’s *Donna Juanita*, Offenbach’s *La Périchole*, Friml’s *Rose-Marie*, Kálmán’s *Csárdásfürstin*, and Loewe’s *My Fair Lady*, along with *The White Acacia* and a few more current things’.⁴⁴ Today, both European and Soviet-and-Russian operettas remain in the repertory, and even a brief glance at the Moscow Operetta Theatre seasons reveals a rich array of operettas and musicals, Russian, European and American.

Notes

1. The quotation heading this section is taken from Valdimir Telyakovsky, *Dnevnik direktora Imperatorskikh teatrov 1903–1906* [Diaries of the Director of the Imperial Theatres] (St Petersburg: Artist. Rezhissyor. Teatr, 2006), 678.
2. Felix Lourie, *Peterburg: Istoriya i kul'tyra v tablitsakh. 1703–1917, XVIII–XX veka* [Petersburg: History and Culture in Tables. 1703–1917, 18th–20th centuries] (St Petersburg: Zolotoy Vek and Diamant, 2000), 23.
3. Theodore Komisarjevsky, *Myself and the Theatre* (London: William Heinemann Limited, 1929), 28.
4. Marina Frolova-Walker and Jonathan Walker. *Music and Soviet Power 1917–1932* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 268–9.
5. Lourie, *Peterburg*, 79, 85.
6. *Ibid.*, 89, 97.
7. See Kurt Gänzl’s ‘Schneider, Hortense [Catherine]’ in *The Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), 1278–9. See also Moisey Yankovsky, *Operetta: Voznikoveniye i razvitie zhanra na Zapade i v SSSR* [Operetta: development of the genre in the West and in the USSR] (Leningrad and Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1937), 216–17.
8. Murray Frame. ‘The Early Reception of Operetta in Russian, 1860s–1870s’, *European History Quarterly*, 42 no. 1 (2012): 29–49, at 36.
9. This remark was also included in the film *Anna Karenina* (2012) by Tom Stoppard and Joe Wright.
10. See Rosamund Bartlett’s blog entry ‘Early Chekhov’, www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/blog/early-chekhov (accessed 3 Sept. 2018).
11. Frame, ‘The Early Reception of Operetta in Russian’, 43.
12. Telyakovsky, *Dnevnik direktora*, 149–52.
13. Lidiya Zhukova, *V mire operetti* [In the world of operetta] (Moscow: Znaniye, 1976), 17.
14. Komisarjevsky, *Myself and the Theatre*, 91.
15. April Fitzlyon, ‘Turgenev, Ivan Sergeevich’ in *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/abstract/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000028600?rsk=T4ctT3&result=1 (accessed 3 Sept. 2018).
16. The Mighty Handful was a group of Russian composers who were united by one idea: to create authentically Russian music by using folksong and folklore as a basis for their compositions. Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 432.
17. One of these artistic cabarets, *Prival komediantov* (Refuge of comedians) (1916–19), was founded by V. Meyerhold and his colleagues. See Lourie, *Peterburg*, 137.
18. For more on Wiktoria Kawecka, see Chapter 15 on operetta in Warsaw in the present *Companion*.
19. A colourful description of this Theatre Bouffe can be found in a book written by two St Petersburg dwellers, who recorded their memories of life in the city before the arrival of Communist regime: Dmitri Zasosov and Vladimir Pizin, *Iz zhizni Peterburga 1890–1910-h godov. Zapiski ochevidtsev* [From Petersburg’s life of 1890s–1910s. Notes of the witnesses] (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1991).

20. Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 21.
21. Zhukova, *V mire operetti*, 21–2.
22. *Ibid.*, 28.
23. Frolova-Walker and Walker, *Music and Soviet Power*, 25.
24. For more information on the history of this operetta in Russia, see Zoltàn Imre, 'Operetta Beyond Borders: The Different Versions of *Die Csárdásfürstin* in Europe and the United States (1915–1921)', *Studies in Musical Theatre*, 7, no. 2 (2013): 175–205.
25. Sergey Sapozhnikov, *Moy Shostakovich: Ocherki iz publitsisticheskoy syuiti 'Na pereput'ye mne yavilis'* [My Shostakovich: Essays from a journalistic suite 'I saw on the crossroads'] (Moscow: Artisticheskoye obshchestvo 'Assamblei iskusstv', 2006), 81.
26. Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, 39.
27. Tatiana Chistova, 'Tendentsii razvitiya operetti v sovetskoy kul'ture' [Tendencies of development in Soviet operetta], unpublished PhD dissertation, Moscow City Pedagogical University, 2012. <http://cheloveknauka.com/tendentsii-razvitiya-operetty-v-sovetskoy-kulture> (accessed 28 Aug. 2018).
28. Frolova-Walker and Walker, *Music and Soviet Power*, 262–3, 287–9.
29. Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, 71.
30. *Ibid.*, 81.
31. Zhukova, *V mire operetti*, 42.
32. Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, 95.
33. Brian Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony* (London: Quercus, 2013), 148.
34. *Ibid.*, 387.
35. Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 249.
36. *Ibid.*, 201.
37. Zhukova, *V mire operetti*, 34.
38. Valentina Rubcova, 'Khrennikov, Tikhon Nikolayevich' in *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.14980> (accessed 3 Sept. 2018) .
39. M. Yakovlev (ed.), *Dmitry Shostakovich a vremeni i o sebe: 1926–1975* [Dmitry Shostakovich about his time and himself: 1926–1975] (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1980), 195.
40. *Ibid.*, 75.
41. Dmitry Shostakovich, *Pis'ma k Sollertinskomu* [Letters to Sollertinsky] (St Petersburg: Kompozitor, 2006), 226–7, Letter to Sollertinsky dated 4 January 1942.
42. Zhukova, *V mire operetti*, 68–9.
43. *Ibid.*, 99–100.
44. Traubner, *Operetta*, 433.

Recommended Reading

- Frame, Murray. 'The Early Reception of Operetta in Russian, 1860s–1870s', *European History Quarterly*, 42, no. 1 (2012): 29–49.
- Stites, Richard. *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.