

REVIEW ESSAY

## Twilight of the Gods: Saga of Experimental Music in the Late USSR

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Kevin C. Karnes. *Sounds Beyond: Arvo Pärt and the 1970s Soviet Underground*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. xii, 193 pp. Appendix. Notes. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Figures. \$35.00, paper. \$34.99, ebook.

Peter J. Schmelz. *Sonic Overload: Alfred Schnittke, Valentin Silvestrov, and Polystylism in the Late USSR*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xvi, 408 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Figures. Tables. \$99.00, hard bound.

It is one of the greatest ironies of twenty-first-century global popular music that the nations emerging from the former Soviet republics in many ways came to own the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). Politically isolated from participation in the ESC since its founding in 1956 as a response to Soviet military expansion across eastern Europe, the newly independent nations quickly realized the political space that performing at the largest song competition in the world would provide. Throughout the 1990s, nation after nation sought and achieved entry into the ESC, committing themselves to the political and aesthetic economy of the New Europe, not least to the advantages of membership in the European Broadcasting Union and its global media network. During the 2000s, the new national competitors would transform those advantages to rechart the musical landscape of European popular music, opening and extending its sonic spaces far beyond those of the late Soviet Union.

The new national voices of the former Soviet republics found resonance in the New Europe, and victories at Eurovision came in rapid succession. Estonia was the first former republic to claim first place in the Grand Finale of 2001. The winning ensemble, “Tanel Padar, Dave Benton, and 2XL,” drew from many popular music styles, especially Afro-Caribbean dance-hall style, to invite Europeans to the global stage with the upbeat message of “Everybody.” Hosting the ESC in 2002, Estonia would again enjoy success with the third-place finish of Sahlene’s “Runaway.” In 2002, however, it would be Latvia that placed first with its entry, the flamenco-infused “I Wanna,” sung and danced by Marie N, a performer from Latvia’s Russian minority. The next former Soviet republic to rise to success would be Ukraine, its first-place finish coming in 2004, only the second year of Ukrainian participation. Ruslana’s “Diki Tanz!” (Wild Dances) differed from “Everybody” and “I Wanna” for the ways its sonic landscapes were geographically internal rather than external, regionally rather than internationally diverse. The wild dances Ruslana brought to the Eurovision stage were those of the Huzul minority from western Ukraine’s Carpathians, thus both a musical and political gesture in the fraught national divide on the eve of the Orange Revolution.

The Eurovision Song Contest would continue to reward entries from the post-Soviet era in the years following Ukraine’s first victory. Serbia would be victorious in 2007, Russia in 2008.

Azerbaijan would enjoy its moment in the ESC sun in 2011, famously affording the motivation and financial resources to build a spectacular new performance center for the 2012 Eurovision in Baku. Even in the years when they did not capture first place in the Grand Finale, the former republics would compete with consistently strong entries, finishing in the top five in an ESC whose total European entries had since exceeded forty each year.

It would be Ukraine, however, that would most use the Eurovision musically and politically to carve out its position of cultural distinctiveness in post-Soviet eastern Europe. During the nineteen years it competed from 2003 to 2023, Ukraine would be victorious in an increasingly crowded field three times. As with Ruslana's "Wild Dances," Jamala's "1944" in 2016 and Kalush Orchestra's "Stefania" in 2022 used the global musical stage to respond to political and military crisis in Ukraine—"1944" to the Russian annexation of Crimea, "Stefania" to the Russian invasion that had preceded the Grand Finale by less than three months. During the same period, Ukrainian entries would place in the top five eight times, with an additional three top-ten finishes. Ukrainian Eurosongs, moreover, captured attention for other reasons. Whereas performance with English lyrics was advantageous for the international voting that chose the winning entries, Ukraine more frequently employed the Ukrainian language. "Wild Dances" and "Stefania" were both largely in Ukrainian, for example, and "1944" used lyrics in Crimean Tatar for the refrain. In a competition slow to respond to international popular music genres, Ukraine stands out as the most willing to embrace hip-hop, initially with GreenJolly's 2014 "Razom nas bahato" and most recently with Tvorchy's 2023 "Heart of Steel." Ukraine's history in the Eurovision has also been notable for its use of musical excess and spectacle to open spaces for LGBTQ performance (drag in Verka Serduchka's 2007 "Dancing Lasha Tumbai") and resistance to climate change and nuclear disaster (Go\_A' 2021 "Shum"). Mobilizing the music of difference, Ukraine has won a distinctive space on the global musical stage of post-Soviet Eastern Europe.

The post-Soviet era of eastern European participation in the Eurovision Song Contest might seem, at first glance, distantly removed from the late-Soviet classical music worlds of the avant-garde composers of the two books under review in this essay. At a much deeper level, however, the Eurosongs of the twenty-first century mirror, even echo, the new sonic worlds opened by Arvo Pärt (bn. 1935), Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998), and Valentin Silvestrov (bn. 1937), the primary subjects of these outstanding and important books by Kevin C. Karnes and Peter J. Schmelz. Listening to post-Soviet popular music, we hear many of what Karnes calls "aftersounds" from the experimental music of the 1970s. The clash and contradiction of musical styles through over-the-top performance exemplified what Schmelz calls "sonic overload," now for a new generation.

The similarities of the aesthetic and cultural work from the two periods of Soviet and post-Soviet music history are more striking than what otherwise might seem superficial differences. The 1970s Soviet underground Karnes explores in *Sounds Beyond* is primarily that of Estonia and Latvia, also the earliest victors in the Eurovision. Both the sounds and aftersounds were constituted of differences, aesthetic and cultural, and these, in turn, depended in a tolerance for new performers and new publics. Ethnic minorities—Afro-Caribbean, Russian-Latvian, and Huzul-Ukrainian—joined the global avant-garde to overload the sonic spaces of post-Soviet popular music. In the 1970s, it was popular music also, infused with the experimental practices of African-American music, which found its way into the discographies of the Soviet underground, providing a sonic language for the common ground of the "sounds beyond" of radical forms of co-creation. Polystylism as a path toward those forms has been no less critical for east European Eurovision success than for the emergence of new experimental musical styles before and after the dissolution of the USSR. That new music, sonically overloaded, sounds and resounds the east European histories documented with the greatest detail and sensitivity in these two books.

Both Karnes and Schmelz rely extensively on metaphors of space to chart the histories of the late-Soviet avant-garde in music. Both musicologists signal the metaphorical role of space in their titles, and they do so paradoxically. A "sound beyond" happens outside a

contained and bounded musical culture; “sonic overload,” too, evokes an overabundance of music that is no longer containable. The two spatial metaphors complement each other, but they also differ, especially in the ways they chart the musical practices that fill the historical spaces specific to each book. Karnes focuses primarily on a decade of radical change, enacted largely in the Baltic republics of Estonia and Latvia, though never isolated from the forces of musical and political officialdom elsewhere in the USSR. The spaces that opened for the 1970s musical avant-garde, therefore, were internal, taking place in late-Soviet society in another spatial metaphor, “underground.” The space in which Schmelz asks the reader to experience sonic overload is external, penetrating spaces arguably accessible to many different publics. The space of sonic overload is not one of too little, but rather of too much music and its unchecked diversity. Whereas the underground of *Sounds Beyond* is contained within the decade of the 1970s and largely dissipates, in Karnes’s account, after that brief history, Schmelz locates the emergence of musical polystylism within the historical *longue durée* of the Soviet Union, from at least the 1960s through the Thaw and perestroika into the 1990s. When reading the two books together, it becomes very clear that their internal and external spatial metaphors belong together and cohere as a much more comprehensive history, in which the music and musicians of the late-Soviet and post-Soviet worlds forge independent and innovative voices that deserve our attention as we seek to understand twenty-first-century cultural history in Russia and the former Soviet Republics.

The spatial metaphors of the late Soviet avant-garde congeal around a generational history that Karnes and Schmelz approach prosopographically. Composers are the primary in the formation of the 1970s avant-garde, which they cohabit with performers, recording experts, writers and artists in neighboring fields, and both new and old forms of mediation to reach diverse publics. The central actor in *Sounds Beyond* is Arvo Pärt, the most distinguished Estonian composer of the past half-century. In *Sonic Overload* Alfred Schnittke and Valentin Silvestrov play the leading roles. There is no need to claim that Schnittke was the most distinguished Russian composer of the late twentieth century, but his specific contribution to elevating polystylism to predominant position in Russian music was enormously important. During the past three decades Silvestrov has increasingly occupied a position as the most internationally recognized composer of Ukraine, transforming his previous roles in the Soviet compositional world to one of *éminence grise* of modern Ukraine.

The composers opening new spaces in late Soviet musical culture were not isolated figures, working in seclusion and without recognition. The experimental creativity in which they engaged required that they find partners willing to explore new sounds and ideas with them. These partners moved within and between the official and unofficial spaces, interacting in a community of the avant-garde that was animated by mobility. The Latvian virtuoso violinist, Gidon Kremer (bn. 1947), exemplifies the ways in which the movement between musical spaces was crucial to sustaining the experimentation of the avant-garde. Upon studying in Moscow and establishing an international career performing from the classical traditions of European art music in the 1960s and early 1970s, Kremer began to interact extensively with the avant-garde composers of the mid- and late 1970s. His willingness to perform experimental works by Pärt and Schnittke was notable, especially because of his willingness to provide a sort of performance workshop for experimentation, premiering early, sometimes provisional, draft manuscripts, and then following them through various stages toward completion. The evolution of Schnittke’s polystylism and Pärt’s tintinnabuli music bears striking witness to Kremer’s considerable contributions as a performer. Kremer also opened a conduit to establishment ensembles, such as the Philharmonic orchestras of the Estonian SSR and Latvian SSR. Gidon Kremer’s influence on the music of the 1970s Soviet underground proved to be lasting, paradoxically so upon his immigration to Germany in 1981, where continued to open possibilities for experimental composers with concerts and contracts with major recording labels such as ECM, whose recordings of Pärt and Silvestrov, especially, are today classics.

To understand the creation of new spaces for a Soviet avant-garde or underground, it is critical to dispel several assumptions about the broader public music culture of the USSR

in the years preceding 1991. Musical life across eastern Europe was by no means impoverished during this period. Musical ensembles for almost every conceivable genre flourished at the official level, from folk music troupes to symphony orchestras. Urban centers and rural peripheries supported music education, with conservatories and academic training in universities and academies of science. Composers and performers alike enjoyed opportunities in the public sphere. Composing music for film and stage provided ample possibilities. Alfred Schnittke and Arvo Pärt both composed for films, and Schnittke was known for music he created for cartoons. Many musicians were able to perform internationally, in eastern Europe and the west. Music competitions on the international scale proliferated, affording exchange across geographic and stylistic borders. National media networks often shaped such competitions so they would seemingly parallel the cultural production of the west, for example, the east European version of the ESC, the Intervision Song Contest. I do not mean to suggest that this extensive musical life permitted unlimited stylistic freedom. Official approval was required for most creative work and performance, and censorship was a pervasive reality that necessitated constant negotiation. Such restrictions notwithstanding, many areas of musical life were able to thrive. The major figures in *Sounds Beyond* and *Sonic Overload* were all beneficiaries of the advantages offered by the rich musical life of the late USSR. Not least among those advantages was the opening to the alternative musical spaces they created, which are the subjects of the two books under review.

In Kevin Karnes's history of the 1970s Baltic Soviet underground, no space plays a more critical role than the Riga Polytechnic Institute (RPI) student club discotheque, and no individual plays a more central role in transforming that space than Hardijs Lediņš (1955–2004). Located in the sanctuary of a former Anglican church in Riga, the RPI disco might seem an unusual and unlikely space for the avant-garde of a new generation of composers and musicians. The RPI student club was a social and cultural organization that lay outside of Soviet musical officialdom, and its members therefore could circumvent the need for sanction from the composers' unions in the Baltic republics or other forms of public censorship. When it initially moved its activities to the church in 1974, the RPI student club recognized the potential for a cultural space beyond political and artistic strictures, where new possibilities for creativity and agency, radical and avant-garde, could come into being.

A musician and writer, and above all an entrepreneur, Lediņš skillfully seized upon the ways in which a discotheque could realize such potential. The RPI student club both was and was not a discotheque in the traditional North American and European sense of the 1970s. Most evenings contained two distinct parts. The second half resembled discos in the west, with dancing to recorded music, much of it from western rock and jazz artists, especially those inclined to improvisation and experimentation. As DJ Lediņš often choreographed the evening from a desk with audio playback equipment. The evening opened, however, with a speaker, again often Lediņš, providing short lectures about the different styles and repertoires that influenced the avant-garde scene and experimental underground. The lectures and presentations that opened a disco evening, thus opened the RPI student club as a space for new music. New ideas and sounds were introduced, and performers and audiences together engaged with them through a process of co-creation.

The RPI disco attracted artists and intellectuals from across the Soviet Union, especially from the Baltic republics. Composers such as Arvo Pärt could bring new works to the student club knowing that there would be performers willing to take the risks that would empower a new Baltic sound. It was through performances at the RPI disco, for example, that Pärt could find the musical resources and aesthetic freedom to make the transition from an earlier style marked by complexity and secularity to the radical starkness and deep religiosity of his tinnabuli music. RPI disco programs mixed and combined repertoires in totally untraditional ways: medieval music might appear on the same program as folk music, rock, jazz, and experimental chamber music. Karnes makes the case for the importance of discotheques in the 1970s through detailed analysis of individual works, especially those composed by Pärt, which coalesce as the prosopography of the 1970s underground. The proliferation of discos during

the 1970s was itself testament to the growing presence of a new generation of composers and performers at a moment of remarkable creative efflorescence. At the height of that moment in 1978, Karnes estimates, there were as many as fifty discos in Riga alone. For the three composers who are the primary subjects of this essay, however, that moment, too, would pass.

Kevin Karnes and Peter Schmelz are both eminent musicologists, and they bring their analytical approaches to bear on music as well as cultural history. The spaces of the avant-garde coalesced especially around two musical styles in the 1970s, both of which were realized as movements that embodied the transformation of cultural life at the time. The first of these musical styles, Arvo Pärt's tintinnabuli music (Latin, "little bells"), was more personal, even intimate; a sonic path associated most specifically with Pärt. Tintinnabuli music was not a style in and of itself, but rather a use of diverse musical materials to achieve a new end. Pärt's earliest compositions reflected the compositional techniques of the twentieth-century modernists, especially the atonal and twelve-tone methods of the Austro-German tradition and the aleatoric music of North America. By the early 1970s, Pärt felt compelled to move away from his earlier dissonant style, and to do so for both musical and personal reasons, especially his embrace of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. He conceived of tintinnabuli music as a broad field of techniques, which could be adapted to different genres of instrumental and vocal music and which would open up the spaces of spiritual contemplation in music. His use of spatial reference could be explicit (evoking the spiritual transcendence afforded by contemplation of the iconostasis at the altar of an Orthodox church), or it could be implicit (assigning pitches to the letters of the mass text in *Missa syllabica*). In all its sonic diversity Pärt's tintinnabuli music would become one of the most influential musical styles worldwide by the 1980s.

As its name implies, polystylism (Russian, *polistilistika*) is not one musical style but many. Most closely associated with Alfred Schnittke, who introduced the term for music in the 1970s, polystylism expanded during the final decades to include musical practices across many genres. As an avant-garde music, polystylism is notable for the ways composers turn to the past, combining melody and structure from previous moments in music history. Schnittke's *Concerto Grosso no. 1* is one of the earliest works to incorporate polystylistic techniques fully. Composed during a period of experimentation from 1976 to 1977 at the request of violinists Gidon Kremer and Tatiana Gritenko, the orchestral work takes the form of a Baroque concerto grosso, with its use of different instrumental sections in concerted conversation with the full ensemble. Baroque aspects of style are maintained in the forms of specific movements (toccata and recitativo). Popular and classical sounds intersect throughout the movements. Past and present form counterpoint and sonic dissonance, for example, in the use of both the Baroque harpsichord and the prepared piano of twentieth-century modernism. Polystylism, as signaled by Schnittke's *Concerto Grosso*, would be notable beyond the 1970s not because of what it was, but because of what it had the potential to become in late Soviet music culture.

The history of the late Soviet avant-garde chronicled in *Sonic Overload* and *Sounds Beyond* is itself bounded in the two books. Whereas Peter Schmelz and Kevin Karnes documented the foundational moment of their histories with details, biographical and aesthetic, about the three primary actors, they arrive at ending moments more tentatively, as if historical closure remains open or incomplete, resonating as "aftersounds" in Karnes's formulation. The question that emerges in the final chapters has larger implications about history, particularly about where or whether it reaches the boundaries beyond which there may be new beginnings. With such efflorescence of the late Soviet avant-garde, we query, how does experimental music find space in the post-Soviet musical world of eastern Europe?

Returning to the major figures of these two books, we find some answers to that question, but they confuse as much as they convince. By the beginning of the 1970s, most of these figures were seeking spaces for creative work outside the Soviet Union. Pärt and Kremer established themselves in Germany. Schnittke, too, would make his way to Germany at the end of his career. Silvestrov followed a path of internal musical exile, turning more fully to the music of the past to make the music of the future in Kyiv. That future, too, would come to

have uncertain limits when the brutal reality of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine made it necessary for Silvestrov to find refuge, also in Germany.

We may ask too much of histories of specific moments and periods of musical change, even when radical, also to presage the future, not least our own moment in that future. By focusing on composers and performers whose musical lives extended long beyond the moment they so dramatically transformed, Karnes and Schmelz do not so much ask too much of the past as they resound it for new spaces in the history of the present, where the music of the late Soviet avant-garde has achieved a global presence.