

Russian Horn-Players in London

Notes on the History of a Daring Enterprise

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Abstract—The article is dedicated to the problems of Russian Horn Music and the first musical tour of Russian Horn-Players in Europe and Great Britain. The article analyzes the role of Alexander Mihajlovich Gedeonov in the organization of this musical tour. The article considers several concerts Russian Horn music in London and Scotland and public reaction on it. The subjects of special consideration are the programs of concerts of Russian Horn Music in London. In the article we also analyze also the reasons for the failure of the concerts by Russian Horn Players in England. The study revealed that the first musical tour of Russian Horn-Players in Europe and Great Britain has a lot of common with the Russian music tour of D.A. Agrenev-Slavyansky with his "Slavic choir" and S. Dyagilev's "Russian Seasons".

Keywords—*Russian Horn Music; Russian Horn-Players; first musical tour; Alexander Mihajlovich Gedeonov; the programs of concerts of Russian Horn Music in London*

I. INTRODUCTION

Horn orchestras in Russia arose in the middle of the 18th century, almost by accident, at the whim of idle noblemen. But, over the course of several decades, they went from being merely an impressive source fun for the few, to a fascinating trend which captured the imagination of the entire public, and subsequently, to a much lesser role at the periphery of the artistic interests of the generation.

By the end of the 1820s, horn orchestras were no longer a fashionable novelty. Instead, they became a burden, which the owners of once-famous musical troupes could not wait to lift from their shoulders.

Well-coordinated ensembles were disbanded. Serfs who were members of such bands were put on the market individually or in groups, and, under new owners, very rarely retained their roles as dedicated musicians.

Only those who were sold for service in the Imperial Theatres, or who managed to retrain and became an "ordinary" instrumentalist, could count themselves comparatively lucky. But such stories were few and far between.

In this context, A.M. Gedeonov's move to revive the art of Russian horns and create a horn orchestra was a bold and unexpected one. But before we talk about his idea and what

it brought about, let me say a few words about Mr. Gedeonov himself.

II. ALEXANDER MIKHAILOVICH GEDEONOV AND HIS MUSICAL PROJECT

Alexander Mikhailovich Gedeonov, whom most people know as the director of the Imperial Theaters, was a State Counselor and Cavalier of several orders. We pick up his story when he is merely a retired officer, a veteran of the Napoleonic wars, retired "due to his wounds" and settled in Moscow, in a rather modest bureaucratic position.

But his soul demanded joy. He was selflessly devoted to art and became a keen promoter of theatrical and music enterprises. In 1830, during the fight against the cholera epidemic that seized the city, Gedeonov took control of the epidemic situation in one of the Moscow districts, and found himself almost at the epicentre of the struggle to save Muscovites from the disease.

And, surprisingly, it was at this time, in the midst of the fight against cholera, that he made a desperately daring deal to create a Russian horn orchestra. In theory, he could have done this by purchasing horn players from noble serf-owners.

But in the early 1830s, Gedeonov was clearly a poor man. In all likelihood, he decided to hire horn-players, taking on all the hard work related to setting up the orchestra and deciding on its future musical fate.

On September 5, 1830, Gedeonov signed an official document, under to which he, together with a companion, Ivan Utermark, entered into business relations with a number of musicians. The purposes of this relationship were:

- to improve the skills of horn-players,
- to train people with a talent for playing the horn,
- to set up a horn orchestra,
- to develop a repertoire for this orchestra
- and to supervise the activities of the ensemble.

Mr. Gedeonov also took on the responsibility for monitoring the behaviour of musicians and their financial situation.

The contract had a lot more additional clauses, but these were the most important ones.

I would like to stress that the contents of this contract have remained unknown until quite recently; and that this document is extremely interesting as an example of one of the first contracts between Russian philanthropists and hired musicians.

From the text of the document, it follows that the contract was concluded for 23 months with a possible extension.

It is fair to assume that Mr. Gedeonov took on such commitments because he was driven by an over-arching idea. It would appear that it went beyond simply hiring horn-players and organising an orchestra. He was looking to create an ensemble which could generate profit through its performances. Mr. Gedeonov had good reasons for high expectations: the numbers in the orchestra were quite sufficient (about 40 people in total); and it appeared quite complete in its musical composition. Most musicians had enough experience. And on top of all that, his was not a pioneering enterprise. Similar ensembles had been created in Russia before. But Mr. Gedeonov went further than his compatriots.

He believed in the artistic potential of horn music and decided to organize a foreign tour for Russian horn-players. In my view, this explains one of the conditions of the contract, - which stated that all musicians had to be prepared to perform overseas.

But it soon became clear that Mr. Gedeonov, as a government official with a certain social status, could not personally accompany the performers abroad, even though he initiated their foreign performances.

To travel alongside his newly-formed band, he had to either resign, abandoning any career prospects, or arrange a long-term vacation. Neither of these seems to have been acceptable. So the team found itself under the leadership of Mr. Gedeonov's companion.

In autumn of 1830 the group of Russian horn-players crossed the Russian border.

III. THE ENGLISH DEBUT OF RUSSIAN MUSICIANS AND THOMAS WALSH

It has been shown before that the orchestra began its foreign tour on Polish lands, and then performed with considerable success in various German cities, lingered in Hamburg, and only then travelled to England [1].

The English debut of Russian musicians took place at "Argyll Rooms" (New Argyll Rooms), which, at the time, was one the most fashionable establishments in London.

There were several concert halls in the "Argyll Rooms", all different in their décor, their acoustics, and their size. It is not clear in which of those concert halls Russian musicians first performed. But, judging by later developments, that performance was a success. Performances of Russian horn-players at the "Argyll Rooms" became a daily occurrence and attracted great interest of the public. One of the audience

magnets was the fact that the orchestra performed a number of Russian songs in English. These songs were arranged by Thomas Walsh (1781-1848) — a publisher, musician, and teacher, who was very well-known in London's musical circles of the time. It is not known how and when the Russian horn-players established contacts with Mr. Walsh, but it is possible that Mr. Walsh's involvement in the activities of the Royal Harmonic Institution played a role here. The Institution was connected with the "Argyll Rooms" by a multitude of multidirectional threads.

It was located in the same building; it collaborated with the managers of "Argyll Rooms"; and it was directly involved in the concerts which took place there. The Institution supported, among other things, the activities of the English Philharmonic Society. It provided advertising for visiting guest performers and opera groups. Thomas Walsh was one of the owners of the Royal Harmonic Institution, so, naturally, he found himself directly involved in its work.

Thomas Walsh was quick to understand the peculiarities of horn music and arranged a number of pieces for the ensemble. These were a success with the London public. Reports on the concerts of the Russian Horn Orchestra described such performances as an "extraordinary success." And it seems that this was not too far from the truth.

Such "extraordinary" success at the "Argyll Rooms" did its job. Members of the highest classes of the British aristocracy became interested in the art of Russian horn-players and expressed a desire to hear the ensemble's performances.

IV. THE CONCERTS IN ST. JAMES'S PALACE AND THEIR PATRONS

On December 14, 1830 the band performed in St. James's Palace, a residence of the English kings. It is possible that their performance was attended by King William IV of England, his spouse, Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen, who had recently ascended the throne, as well as other members Royal court. This was immediately reported in *The Tatler* [2].

Performing at Royal courts was one of the traditions of horn music as such. Horn players had long been involved in ceremonies in palaces and parks. Their music accompanied diplomatic receptions, theatrical performances and balls given in Russia by, or for, reigning monarchs. But the performance in St. James's Palace, before the King of England, was an extraordinary event. This was the first time that an independent foreign ensemble performed in a Royal palace, in front of an audience of aristocrats of the highest social standing.

Even more impressive is that fact that some of the performers could have been serfs themselves, - or direct heirs of serfs. It is also possible that some of the players were recruited from the middle and working classed, - craftsmen and simple town folk. These were representatives of the lowest classes of the Russian society.

Obviously, such a performance had to be very well prepared. Even if we were to assume that the performance at "Argyll Rooms" were triumphantly successful, even if we accept that the talk about unique instrumental mastery of Russian horn-players spread through London like wildfire and attracted the attention of various sectors of society, - even with these assumptions, such direct to the royal family contradicted all diplomatic and canonical rules.

So who was the patron of this performance?

It is difficult to name specific names. It can only be assumed that forces from both the Russian and English sides were involved. It is also highly likely that Mr. Gedeonov himself was involved: he maintained relationships and acquaintances which he had built up during his involvement with diplomatic and military circles at the time of the Napoleonic wars.

In all likelihood, the horn-players found themselves in the Palace owing to the patronage of both British public figures and Russian diplomats.

The musicians did their patrons proud. The performance in front of the Royal court received the highest approval and support.

V. LARGE PUBLIC PERFORMANCES: PROGRAMS, PUBLIC REACTIONS AND THE REASONS OF THEM

In all likelihood, this success gave an impetus to the beginning of large public performances of the Russian horn orchestra in London. The first such concert took place on December 23, 1830, at the Opera Rooms [3]

The press reported its programme as follows:

Part 1:

- F. Boaldier. The overture to the opera "Calife de Bagdat" ("The Caliph of Baghdad") is performed by a horn orchestra;
- Russian melody with variations - performed by a horn orchestra;
- Russian song with accompaniment - performed by a singer.

Part 2:

- V.-A. Mozart Overture "Die Entführung aus dem Serail" ("Abduction from the Seraglio") - performed by a horn orchestra;
- Russian melody with variations - performed on wooden horns;
- Russian melody with accompaniment - performed by a singer.

- J. Miller. Polonaise - performed by the horn orchestra

Part 3:

- Russian melody with variations - performed on wooden horns;

- Russian song with accompaniment - performed by a singer
- J. Miller. Andante and Rondo - performed by the horn orchestra [4].

The London press quickly responded to the concert. A correspondent described how the stage was set up, how the instruments themselves worked, explained the way in which the orchestra was conducted, and, of course, extolled the virtues of the virtuosic mastery of the ensemble.

The review covered not only the aesthetics of the concert, but also the ethics of the performance.

There were several good reasons for this. One of them was mentioned by the author himself.

The London public first discovered the phenomenon of Russian horn music several years earlier, when, in 1824, when a piece referring to it appeared in *The Harmonicon*. It was a letter addressed to William Ayrton, publisher of *The Harmonicon* [5].

It is hard to say whether Mr. Gedeonov knew about this piece when he was sending his ensemble to England. But the article seriously hurt his enterprise.

The author of the article, a former musician of the Russian horn orchestra only known as Mr. Kulov, who miraculously landed in London, described the monotonous nature of his work. He explained in details how, for several decades, he played the same note, - F#, - with no diversity, no chance to develop as a musician. Kulov wrote about how his attempts to master other instruments came up against the owner's fierce opposition, and only escaping from Russia allowed the performer to breathe a breath of freedom.

However, upon his arrival in London, Kulov was in no hurry to prove himself as a performer capable of going beyond horn music. This went against the message of the article, of course. But Kulov found it more expedient to exploit his former skills.

He remained a "musician of one note," and used the magazine to invite the English public to a concert, which he - the living F#, - had put together along with some of his other horn-player colleagues, all escapees from Russia. Strictly speaking, that invitation was the whole point of the article.

It carried an honest warning that "the performance may not be too interesting," because musicians can "play only four notes". Kulov rightly assumed that the public interest would be primarily driven by the "unusual 'nature of performances", and by a desire to show "sympathy for the poor serfs who until recently were labouring in the hardest of conditions" [6].

It is not known whether the concert, - aimed at awakening sympathy to the musicians, - ever took place. It is also not known whether this "Letter of the Russian horn-player" actually ever existed, - if, indeed, a horn-player by the name of Kulov ever existed himself. To this day, British researchers express doubts about the authenticity of the piece.

The style of the former Russian serf was too sophisticated; the text itself, - too "perfect"; the arguments offered in support of the author's position, - too impeccable.

But in any case, the so-called "Letter of the F#" played its role. Even if it did not awaken an overwhelming curiosity about the Russian horn music, it remained, for years, a reference point upon which the English public based its reaction to this musical tradition.

The sincere sympathy for horn-players, each of whom was doomed to being nothing more than a mere cog in a vast musical machine, was strengthened a hundredfold by the circumstances of the time.

Again and again, London critics returned to their views about how meaningless, how hostile to art and society as a whole were the principles of performance adopted in a horn orchestra. The Harmonicon remained especially irreconcilable.

It steadfastly developed the subject raised in Kulov's letter and elevated it to the level of a serious social generalization.

"The bare idea of devoting so many fellow-creatures to the drilling necessary to the acquirement of this clock-work regularity, could have been only by one, who had but to will and be obeyed; and the disheartening drudgery of learning the art, would have been submitted to only by those who were habituated to consider the commands of their superiors the sole law of their actions. Accordingly, it is in Russia that we find this instrumental invented, and that at a period, when the ancient hereditary tyranny of its princes and nobles was as yet unsoftened by their barbaric admiration of the arts and civilization of more favored countries" [7].

Such attitude to the art of horn-players came to Russian guest performers as an unpleasant surprise.

Expectations that the public would appreciate the unusual nature of performances as a purely musical phenomenon failed. It was becoming more and more obvious that the art of the Russian horn, still relevant in palace chambers and fashionable clubs, looked dubious to those who frequented public concerts. Audiences carried an engrained internal resistance to everything that showed a person capable of free will, - as a cog in a mechanism.

It would be unfair to say that the Russian horn "choir" did not attract the attention of Londoners at all. But this attention was akin to the curious attention of idle gapers. The orchestra itself was seen by the listeners not so much as an independent creative team, but as a musical trick, which left a bitter "aftertaste".

London performances of the horn ensemble failed to attract big crowds. Even the premiere saw no more than 150 people [8]. Moreover, the organizers set ticket prices too high; and thrifty Londoners were not willing to spend half a guinea in order to personally witness something that the newspapers described as a "degradation of free art" [9].

It seems that the London concerts, then, did not generate a profit for their promoters. But the contract had more time to run. So, the musicians carried on with their travels.

VI. PUBLIC PERFORMANCES IN SCOTLAND

After leaving London, they went to Scotland, where the art of horn players was met with greater enthusiasm and interest.

The Scottish public reacted to the mechanical nature of the ensemble's performance better than London's concert-goers did. They saw something relatable to their national culture in the Russian horn music; they noted similarities with traditional Scottish timbres and, above all, with the art of the bagpipes. The public in Scotland became genuinely interested in the Russian musical phenomenon.

An example is the fascination which Catherine Hogarth, the future spouse of Charles Dickens, expressed when she heard the musicians in November 1831. She described the performance of 25 musicians, each of whom played two horns, as producing an effect similar to the full-bodied sound of the organ [10].

Another Scotsman, Sir John Graham Dellyel, stated - with quite some conviction - that controversial articles about the Russian horn orchestra carried "a large dose of prejudice, bias" [11]. From his point of view, "if a blind listener were present at the concert of Russian horns, he could confuse the sound of the horns with the organ; he could have exclaimed, "What a wonderful organ!" [12].

As a specialist in the Scottish culture; and, in particular, in the Scottish musical culture in particular, Dellyel emphasized the kinship of Russian horn music with the art of Scottish folk performers. His response to the performances of Russian horn-players said that the orchestra "performed delightfully the best works of contemporary composers"; and added that the performance itself was "pleasant and impressive"[13].

It is not known how long the Russian horn players remained in Scotland.

At the end of 1832, the orchestra re-appeared in continental Europe. There is evidence to suggest that the ensemble performed in Paris. But, despite positive reviews by such prominent music critics as F.-J. Fetis and K. Blas, its success was fairly limited.

The tour of the Russian horn players was becoming an ever more pronounced failure. The team began to disintegrate. Ivan Utermark, Mr. Gedeonov's companion, unable to withstand the trouble, fled to America.

Some musicians "settled" in Europe, and only a few eventually returned to Russia.

VII. CONCLUSION

In summary, then, one could say that the European tour of the Russian horn orchestra, which Mr. Gedeonov had planned in the early 1830s, failed.

However, I believe that, despite all the miscalculations, despite the sorry ending, the tour played a huge role in the history of Russian-British musical ties. It revealed to the English listeners all the beauty and contradictory nature of Russian horn art. It became one of the first attempts to conquer Europe by an independent group of artists, which acted under direct patronage of one of the organizers of the tour.

This was why the social nature of this experiment was so outstandingly original. Its meaning can only be fully understood in the wider context of the Russian musical culture in the first third of the 19th century; and in relation to its heroes, - which were few and far between.

The plan developed by Mr. Gedeonov's, who proved himself as a stubborn and enthusiastic concert promoter — a unique figure in Russia in the first third of the 19th century, also had another peculiarity.

Traditionally, Russian musicians sought the attention of the European public by "fitting in" with its musical requirements. Mr. Gedeonov went against this flow. He tried to bring an obviously non-European product to Europe's musical market. Subconsciously, he, perhaps banked on this tension as a guarantee of success.

At first sight, it would appear that Mr. Gedeonov's intentions were realized. But he failed to take into account the context, - both temporal and geographic. This made his enterprise an obvious failure, and taught him lessons which he undoubtedly took into account in his future work.

He correctly assumed that the art of the horn would give an auditory pleasure by creating wonderful acoustic "voids", by its deep bass notes, and by its majestic polyphony.

But, ultimately, the European public did not enjoy this aesthetics as much as he expected. Europeans had the art of the organ deeply rooted in their subconscious. It dulled their perception of the horn orchestra, it took away the effects of greatness and power which surprised and delighted Russian listeners.

Mr. Gedeonov was right in believing that musicians who had been practicing their skills in the horn orchestra for years could not fail to impress with their skills. But the audiences were struck not by the players' creative skills, but by amusing visual impressions generated by looking at musician who managed to cope, single-handedly, with clumsy instruments.

Europeans of the time – accustomed to virtuoso performances of Paganini and Chopin - saw the essence of public musical performances quite differently.

Mr. Gedeonov right in expecting that the European tour of Russian horns should make a profit. But he was ignorant of the broader context of the European concert scene and unaware of accepted pricing policy. This led to a gradual decrease in the initial fascination with the tour of the Russian horn orchestra, and, ultimately, to its disintegration.

But these were all just partial miscalculations. Mr. Gedeonov's biggest was that the horn orchestra failed to

meet the expectations of the general European public. Whether this was driven by the nature of the horn music itself, - perceived by Europeans as a kind of anachronism, - or, on the contrary, by the inertia of the European public, which failed to appreciate the peculiar beauty of the horn, - that is a question which is far removed from the topic of this article.

However, even considering the mistakes, miscalculations and flaws in Mr. Gedeonov's plan, it is impossible to overstate the significance of its impact.

The history of Russian musical culture only knows two similar projects: the highly successful foreign tour of D.A. Agrenev-Slavyansky with his "Slavic choir"; and the audacious triumph of S. Dyagilev's "Russian Seasons".

There is no need to explain in detail the difference between such initiatives, the impact of their artistic significance and genre specificity.

But the concept was similar across these experiments. Their over-arching drive was – to present to Europeans the alien nature of the world of the Russian musical culture, complete with its magnificently superfluous power and its vivid colours.

Gedeonov appears to have been the first to see was that this idea, this drive, was key to making Russian musicians competitive in Europe.

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