

Soviet Émigrés and the Introduction of Twentieth-century Russian Music in British Symphony Orchestras' Programmes

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Abstract—Twentieth-century Russian music, such as Prokofiev's and Shostakovich's works, has become a core repertoire for British orchestras. Canonisation of this repertoire mostly occurred during the Cold War with exiled or touring Soviet musicians and conductors. This paper explores how the cultural persona built on Soviet musicians by the press and concert programmes facilitated the stable canonisation of twentieth-century Russian music in Britain. The first generation of émigrés, including Rostropovich, gained symbolic capital from the tensed geopolitical world situation and therefore power of influence to introduce new music in British orchestras' programmes. Primary symbolic capital passed through the following generations of Russian musicians secured a strong place for Shostakovich and Prokofiev on the British musical scene up to today's performances.

Keywords—*symphony orchestras; orchestral canon; twentieth-century Russian music; Shostakovich; Prokofiev; Rostropovich; Gergiev*

I. INTRODUCTION

Concert reviews suggest that a cultural identity was created around these personalities and audiences would expect specific performances from Russian musicians. This recent Prom concert review in the Times in 2017 shows the persistence of these cultural expectations:

'Will Valery Gergiev ever come on stage looking neat and cool, with a floral baton, ready to conduct a wide-ranging programme of Rameau, Brahms and Dame Ethel Smyth? Maybe when pigs fly. But Tuesday's packed Prom audience wasn't complaining at all. Wild man Gergiev and the London Symphony Orchestra gave them just what they came for: Russian music, nervous fury, crackling tension, fluttering fingers' [12].

Several studies on various concert societies reveal that this phenomenon around Russian musicians largely predates the Cold War. The history of Ernest Newman's Proms testifies of the 'exotic appeal' of Russian music in the 1890s, with composers such as Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov, Arensky, Cui and Mussorgsky [13]. According to Taruskin, a 'Russomania' was growing for decades in

England and America, starting in the 1880s with the spread of literature such as Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's novels and continuing in music with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and their "industrial-strength export campaign" [14].

II. SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AND POWER OF INFLUENCE

The concept of 'symbolic capital' elaborated by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu partly explains the impact of Russian exiled musicians canonising twentieth-century Russian music in Western programmes. Economic, cultural, educational and social capitals, when perceived through a system of classification or division become symbolic capital [15]. Kremp already proved the impact of symbolic capital on orchestra programming with the case of innovations as 'musical directors endowed with high levels of symbolic capital are more likely to see their innovations last' [16]. The case of Russian émigrés complements Kremp's study on innovation in American orchestras. Kremp restates, based on Bourdieu's work, that 'field theory has emphasized the role of past and present struggles over the appropriation of economic and symbolic profits among artists and art organizations in explaining their "position-takings", i.e. their propensity to promote different types of art and different conceptions of what art is (Bourdieu 1993)' [17]. In this respect, symbolic capital is not equally distributed among all musical directors and conductors. Press coverage suggests that some Soviet musicians gained symbolic capital from their political struggles. This symbolic capital raised their power of influence and helped engraining their new programming choices in the habits of the orchestras they conducted.

Newspapers of the West cultivated the image of Soviet musicians as epitomes of freedom in a repressive society, which grew their symbolic capital and power of influence. Articles about pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy's decision to stay in London, even if the Soviet government authorised him to live in the West in 1963, exemplify the tone of the newspapers of the time. The Guardian relates in an 'exclusive interview' how Ashkenazy did not 'feel safe in returning to Russia', after 'he and his wife, he said, were kept in Moscow against their will for some weeks "in a state of acute anxiety

and distress". The journalist emphasises Ashkenazy's revelations, contradicting the Soviet authorities' claim that he could freely cross borders [18]. Conductor Kiril Kondrashin's application for asylum in the Netherlands in 1978, conductor Maxim Shostakovich 'escape to freedom' helped by West German police in 1981 constitute other striking examples of significant press coverage [19]. On the brink of the collapse of the Soviet Union, British newspapers emphatically related cellist Mstislav Rostropovich's actions. The Sunday Times described him as one of the 'best-sung heroes of what history may term the August revolution', after he came to take part in Boris Yeltsin's coup in 1991, 'joining the resistance inside the Russian parliament' [20].

One of the most famous Russian musician émigré remains the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. Before focussing on Rostropovich's programming choices, it is crucial to understand how he grew his symbolic capital and gained symbolic power that allowed his choices to be more impactful in long-term programming trends. Cello soloist and conductor, famous artistic director of the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) in Washington, Rostropovich was a significant figure within the political context of the Cold War. His support of Aleksandr Soljenitsin made him lose his Soviet citizenship in 1978. With heavy press coverage of his direction of the NSO during the Cold War, he gained the image of the 'genial Russian émigré adopted by the United States and who 'embodie[d] the Russian tradition'. As a conductor and cellist, his performances of Shostakovich and Prokofiev became his fingerprint and his symbolic capital never stopped growing until his death.

Browsing American press articles of the time reveals how Rostropovich and other musicians in his situation became a political issue during the Cold war. The United States was trying to shape an image of a country of rights and freedom, especially after the upheaval of the Korean War. These Soviet émigrés were the perfect occasion to sit their position as home of freedom. Rostropovich's case became quickly a national affair as the U.S. government through the State Department spokesman, Hodding Carter, charged the Soviet Union with violating international law in stripping their dissident of their citizenship [21].

Press articles cultivated the image of Rostropovich as a Soviet refugee on the Western side of the world. This type of communication started in the American press and spread around the West. For example, in 1981, Robert M. Andrews published in the Associated Press (Washington) an article entitled 'Exiled Soviet conductor sees new patriotism in Americans' where he presented the next outdoor concert played by the NSO conducted by Rostropovich for the U.S. national day, the 4th July. Later on, in 1988, the Sydney Morning Herald entitled a press conference given by the musician, 'How the West has changed Slava' [22]. The New York Times sees the cellist as an americanised 'political symbol' [23]. These newspaper articles oriented the discourse and the expectations of the audiences. Rostropovich was indeed a Soviet refugee, but media and the musical world created a myth around him and other Russian exiled artists. He became the personification of the underlying cultural war between the Cold War belligerents.

This whole context led into the hyper-politicisation of the cellist and conductor. Press coverage of this affair and the Cold War in general built a myth around him. The aura he gained as a musician, but also as a political figure, placed Rostropovich as one of the greatest influencers of the time. Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Rostropovich continued to grow influence. For example, he became a founding member of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations [24]. His implication in such powerful worldwide organisations next to some of the most influential political figures of the time, such as Nelson Mandela and Mary Robinson, High Commissioner for Human Rights of the Office of the United Nations, made his musical impact even stronger [25].

III. FIRST GENERATION AND PRIMARY SYMBOLIC CAPITAL: ROSTROPOVICH'S MUSICAL IMPACT

Rostropovich had a deep influence on British orchestral canon, because of the frequency of his British musical projects and of the type of repertoire he chose to play. Rostropovich performed more with British than with French orchestras for example, with 182 concerts with the LSO, against 58 with the Paris Orchestra (OP). His attachment to British orchestras can be seen in his choice to do his first recording as conductor with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, with Tchaikovsky's *Six Symphonies* and his choice of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra to premiere Lutoslawski's *Cello Concerto* he commissioned.

From the beginning of his career as cellist, Rostropovich was renowned as the advocate of 'modern music' and Russian music. Numerous pieces were dedicated to him such as Prokofiev's *Symphony Concerto*, Shostakovich's *Cello Concertos* no.1 and no.2 and Britten's *Symphony for cello and Orchestra*. In the 1960s, his debut with both the LSO (1961) and the OP (1966), Rostropovich integrated new musical works. He included contemporary repertoire earlier in his concerts in London than in Paris with the world premiere of Khatchaturian's *Concerto Rhapsody* (21st December 1962) and the London premieres of Khrennikov's, Boris Tchaikovsky's, Miaskovsky's and Sauguet's *Cello Concertos* in 1965. Moreover, Rostropovich's second concert with the LSO in 1962 featured Shostakovich's *Cello Concerto* no. 1, composed very recently in 1959.

Rostropovich's influence on the canonisation of modern Russian music in British orchestras' repertoire was amplified when he started conducting on a more regular basis. As a conductor of the LSO, three quarters of all the pieces Rostropovich performed were from Russian composers such as Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Schnittke. Shostakovich composed more than one third of all the pieces he conducted with the LSO. Rostropovich clearly conducted Shostakovich more than any other conductor. Another third of his repertoire was constituted by the music of Prokofiev and Tchaikovsky together. Almost every concert he was involved in included a piece from one of the two composers, with the exception of a few cello concertos he performed such as Dvorak's concerto. Half of the remaining non-Russian quarter of Rostropovich's repertoire was music by Britten.

Rostropovich and other Soviet émigrés succeeded in canonising modern Russian music in Britain as Shostakovich's and Prokofiev's music was already part of British programmes from the early 1960s. The trend was not only to be noticed in London but also in other parts of Britain. In Scotland, Alexander Gibson performed Shostakovich's *First Symphony* for the first time with the Scottish National Orchestra the same year it was performed by the LSO in 1969. Furthermore, Shostakovich's *Ninth Symphony* was performed in Scotland by Bryden Thomson in 1971, sixteen years earlier than its first LSO performance.

Moreover, Rostropovich's taste for celebrations had an impact on the longevity of his programming choices. The sociological implication of a celebration generates cumulative symbolic capital. In 1965, the LSO organised a 'Rostropovich festival' showcasing no less than 31 cello concertante works performed by Rostropovich. These celebrations influenced the repertoire of the orchestra and helped to embed Russian modern music deeper in the canon. Such events include the concert series 'Rostropovich 60th birthday celebrations', as the festivals 'Shostakovich music from the Flames' in 1988, 'Schnittke A Celebration' in 1990, 'Sergei Prokofiev the centenary Festival' in 1991 and 'Shostakovich 1906-1975' in 1998. The volume of the works of Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Schnittke rose drastically with these festivals and celebrations. More importantly, the corpus of works played from these composers was diversified. For example, Shostakovich's *Third Symphony* has only been played three times by the LSO, all conducted by Rostropovich during these festivals [26]. Similarly, Shostakovich's *Second Symphony* has only been performed by Rostropovich during these concert series. Moreover, Rostropovich introduced the *Eleventh* and the *Fourteenth Symphony* to the LSO repertoire. These two works have been performed regularly then, which show how crucial the implant of modern Russian music was at the time.

The persistence of Rostropovich's canonisation of modern Russian music in British programmes can be seen as an application of Bourdieu's transmission of symbolic capital and power from the older generation of Cold War émigrés to younger Russian conductors. In Bourdieu's framework, symbolic capital and symbolic power can be passed. I argue that the first generation of musicians exiled from Soviet Union, who supported composers such as Shostakovich and Prokofiev, partly transmitted their symbolic capital (including fame) to the following post-war generations. Russian music stayed in the orchestral canons after the death of Rostropovich and the first generation of Soviet exiled musicians. Russian modern music continued to be regularly performed in Britain, such as by the LSO with the appointment of Valery Gergiev as principal conductor in 2006.

IV. NEWER GENERATION AND TRANSMITTED SYMBOLIC CAPITAL: GERGIEV'S PERSISTING PERSONA

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the political context around modern Russian music changed. Before 1992, the Cold war atmosphere surrounded Soviet music composed during this period. Audiences could contextualise

Shostakovich's Leningrad Symphony with news from the other side of the Iron curtain and stories of Soviet exiled artists. After the end of the Cold War, the socio-political situation that saw the creation of this music disappeared.

Concert notes suggest that this repertoire was progressively detached from contemporary political issues and became a mythicized representation of Cold War years. This phenomenon seems to be amplified by the rising proportion of concertgoers born without memories of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s Shostakovich (1906-1975) and Prokofiev (1891-1953) were no longer contemporary composers. In 1970, this repertoire had been new, unknown and politicised. In 2010, Shostakovich is part of the international orchestral canon.

To maintain the recently canonised Russian repertoire, a new generation of conductors had to follow the heritage of the previous generation of Soviet exiled musicians. Younger conductors such as Valery Gergiev, Mikhail Pletnev and Vasily Petrenko continued to develop their musical persona within Russian repertoire. Language of music critics in concert reviews amplified the 'russification' of these conductors. The Ossetian-born conductor Gergiev, who got the direction of the Kirov Theatre in 1988, renamed as Mariinsky, exemplifies this trend [27].

Press article articles on Gergiev testify of the Russian-centred tone of the critics. Moreover, critics seem to keep the political language they used during the Cold War for Rostropovich's generation, such as 'Conductor Valery Gergiev on Putin, power and performance' (Financial Times) and 'Russia's most controversial conductor' (Los Angeles Times). In addition, his Russian nationality is almost systematically emphasised such as 'Valery Gergiev, the Russian Baton' (L'Express) [28]. Press articles and programme notes maintained the strong cultural identity shaped around the first generation of Soviet touring artists for the following generations. As for Russian exiled musicians of the Soviet years, the audience seems to still expect a specific repertoire from Eastern conductors.

Indeed, Gergiev's programmes include a wide proportion of Russian music. From his debut with the LSO in 1988 to 2015, sixty percent of the staggering 920 pieces he played with the London Symphony Orchestra were composed by Russian musicians. Compared with Rostropovich, Gergiev has a more varied repertoire. Even if the comparison between Rostropovich and Gergiev seems straightforward, their concert programmes suggest that the two conductors do not share the same repertoire. Both conductors' programmes also show a difference in their Russian music performances. Rostropovich's programmes with the LSO testify that he conducted Shostakovich more than any other composer, whereas Gergiev's planning shows a preference for Prokofiev. Out of all the 920 pieces Gergiev conducted with the LSO between 1988 and 2015, the proportion of Prokofiev's music (202 pieces) is more than double Shostakovich's music (75 pieces).

As an ambassador of Russian music, Gergiev's debut with the LSO in 1988 features exclusively Russian music including Rachmaninov's *Symphonies*. Later, in the season

2005-2006, he conducted a concert series entitled 'Gergiev's Shostakovich'. Gergiev conducts also many Shostakovich's *Symphonies*; however he programs also a larger variety of pieces from Russian romantic composers as Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov. The 60th birthday concert for Gergiev in 2013 epitomises the close relationship between the conductor and this orchestra from 1988 to the latest seasons. The significant series of Prokofiev's music featuring sixteen works played in fourteen countries in 2008 illustrates Gergiev's support of Russian music [29].

V. CONCLUSION

The integration of twentieth-century music in the British orchestral canon greatly relied on the programming choices of Soviet exiled musicians. Bourdieu's framework of symbolic capital can explain the greater influence of Soviet exiled musicians in programming and keeping alive this repertoire. They acquired symbolic capital within the geopolitical context of the Cold war and therefore had a stronger power of influence than conductors from other nationalities. Not all Russian conductors supported this repertoire and not all supporters of Russian repertoire are Russian-born or trained people. However, programmes of the LSO and RSNO show that a significant proportion of twentieth-century Russian music was initially programmed by Soviet musicians. The first generation of émigrés such as Rostropovich passed their persona and primary symbolic capital to the second generation such as Gergiev.

Almost three decades after the end of the Cold war as contextual genesis of most of Prokofiev's and Shostakovich's works, is the strong persona of the archetypical Russian conductor fading away? The season 2019-2020 of the Liverpool Philharmonic with their musical director 1976-born Vladimir Petrenko suggests that, even if some traits of the persona remain, programmes lean towards more variety. Petrenko does perform a Russian-themed opening of the season with Liadov, Shostakovich and Stravinsky but conducts a wide variety of repertoires including a Mahler cycle. The recent appointment of the 1988-born Maxim Emelyanychev as musical director of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra for the 2019-2020 season exemplifies non-Russian planning. Emelyanychev orientates his performances towards baroque and classical repertoire, performing Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Telemann, Lully, Rameau and Vivaldi, far from the twentieth-century Russian repertoire.

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