

The Three Major Shifts in Soviet Music During World War II

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World War II affected all the countries of Europe differently, but the experience of the Soviet Union fluctuated drastically during the war. The various stages of the war affected the Soviet people personally, physically, socially, and culturally. One of the cultural areas that experienced great shifts due to the war was music. Though some musical styles were common throughout the entirety of the war, there were three major phases that divide the music of the Soviet Union around the time of World War II. The first phase was from 1939 to 1941 when the Soviet Union was not at war with Germany. The second period lasted from late 1941 through 1943 and encompassed the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Germans as well as the battle of Stalingrad. The final phase spanned late 1943 through the last two years of the war; this period saw a surge in the capabilities of the Soviet Union due in no small part to feelings of pride engendered by the victory at Stalingrad. These shifts in how the war was affecting the country triggered changes in musical style and practice.

The Soviet Union was relatively new as a political entity at the beginning of World War II. One of the new nation's biggest artistic endeavors was to create a new national style as well as to distance Soviet culture from the previous musical tradition. Though the Soviet Union was composed of several republics and not solely Russia, Soviet culture became subordinate to Russian culture, especially during World War II.¹ Thus, Russian music serves as an indication of what was going on in the rest of the Soviet Union. Following the overthrow of the tsar in 1917, the Soviet Union began to distance itself from anything relating to the old classist, imperialistic system, including music. The need for a distinctly Soviet style continued through the interwar period and the beginning of World War II when heightened nationalist sentiment was prominent around the globe.

One area of music in which this creation of a new national style was particularly prominent was opera. Opera had long been a form of entertainment for the rich, mostly due to the amount of money required to assemble the elaborate staging as

¹ Hans Kohn, "Pan-Slavism and World War II," *The American Political Science Review* 46 (1952), 700.

well as the great number of people needed to perform and work behind the curtains. However, with new Soviet emphasis on the masses as opposed to the elite, the new Soviet musical style was designed to reflect this political shift. Stalin's administration wanted the new operatic style to be positive, to be socialist in content, and to display national musical characteristics.² The Russian-born composer Dmitri Shostakovich had problems with negative public reception of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* even though he was regarded world-wide as a great composer. *Lady Macbeth* was not positive in outlook or supportive of socialism in its content. These factors made the opera reprehensible by Stalin's new musical standards. The presentation of this opera was not a normal example of the aesthetic and style that Soviet composers were attempting to create. However, the opera did serve as an example to Shostakovich's contemporaries of the limitations imposed by the Soviet authorities. In general, a common trend to make an opera fit within the Soviet guidelines of acceptability was the alteration of the libretto as well as the title. A libretto is essentially a compilation of all the text that is sung in an opera; in short, it acts like a script. Composers could take a pre-existing musical work and change the words of the libretto.³ A well-known example is the opera *Ivan Susanin*. This opera was originally written when Russia was still under an autocratic monarchy and was previously known as *A Life for the Tsar*. Since the tsar no longer existed, the title obviously needed to be changed to suit the Soviet regime. The opera was renamed *Ivan Susanin* after the Russian folk hero whose life was the subject of the opera. Though *A Life for the Tsar* and other operas were rewritten in the 1930s, the practice of renovating existing works illustrates what was going on musically in the pre-war period and illuminates the changes triggered by the presence of war in the Soviet Union.

When Germany invaded Russian soil in 1941, the Soviet Union was dragged into a war that Stalin had been actively trying to avoid. The previous musical period had established the beginnings of a unique Soviet style. German aggression added an external stimulus to bolster a new sense of national unity and pride. The music of Russia between 1941 and 1943 began to take on a far more nationalistic approach. A contributing factor to this new surge of nationalism was the way Stalin branded the war to the public. Stalin began to emphasize World War II as "the Great Patriotic War."⁴ This title evoked a great sense of nationalism because it called to the patriotic nature of the Soviet people. This plea to the nationalism of the population was a primary example of how the war was to be displayed to the people through various cultural means. Music was no exception to the growing trend of nationalism in the country. Nationalism in music can be seen in a variety of ways. For vocal music, the easiest way to display nationalism was through the text. For instrumental music, however, more complex processes were necessary to create a nationalistic mood. Often what composers did to achieve a more nationalistic sound had to do with what inspired their writing. Upon choosing a historic figure, a place, or a group of people as a source of

² Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917–1970* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972), 141.

³ Phillip Ross Bullock, "Staging Stalinism: The Search for Soviet Opera in the 1930's," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006), 86.

⁴ Kohn, "Pan-Slavism," 700.

inspiration, composers employed various musical techniques and styles in order to represent their inspiration. This made their music programmatic, or representative of something other than the music itself. Another way in which composers created more nationalistic works was by capturing the sound of the country. In essence, this meant using melodies or parts of folksongs and characteristic sounds, such as dark chords, that the masses could identify as distinctly Russian.

Perhaps the most important musical work to come out of the Soviet Union during World War II was Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony*. The inspiration for the symphony was the city of Leningrad.⁵ Since 1941, a siege by German forces had confined the people of Leningrad to the city. The *Seventh* was a programmatic work meant to represent not only the city but also a hopeful end to the siege. The piece features a prominent snare drum part to give it a more militaristic texture. Brass and percussion sections within a group are commonly used to represent more militaristic styles because they are instruments played in military contexts more frequently than woodwinds or strings. Examples of this technique include bugle calls as well as snare and bass drums used for marching purposes within military groups. In addition to having several motives⁶ that give a sense of militarism, Shostakovich's *Seventh* ends in a profoundly important manner. Shostakovich elected to conclude the *Seventh* with prominent usage of brass instruments. The bright, assertive tones of the brass instruments convey to the listener a sense of hope that Leningrad and, in a broader context, the Soviet Union will prevail in the face of Germanic aggression. Though the piece itself is important in demonstrating a shift in Russian music, the public reception of the piece was even more profound. The *Seventh Symphony* gave the Russian people something to rally behind. It became a "fact of political and social importance, and an impulse to struggle and victory."⁷

The final musical shift during World War II in the Soviet Union occurred after the battle of Stalingrad. Stalingrad marked a key reversal of German fortunes and provided evidence that the Red Army was capable of defeating the Germans. By the end of the war, Soviet soldiers were fighting the Germans on German soil and the Soviet people could be extremely proud of their nation and its soldiers. However, it is easy to forget that those who were experiencing the war in 1944 and 1945 had no idea that it would end in 1945. What people did know was that the Soviet Union had lost a large number of troops during the war. Hope still existed that the Soviets would defeat the Germans, but people were becoming more aware of the cost of winning the war. A schism became prevalent in the artistic community between confidence that the Soviet Union would be victorious and despair that even a victory would come with too high a price.

In the music world, the difference in views regarding the outcome of the war can best be seen through a comparison of the last two major symphonic works that came out of the war years in the Soviet Union: Shostakovich's *Eighth Symphony* and Prokofiev's *Fifth Symphony*. Shostakovich's *Eighth* is an example of a darker work written

⁵ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 178.

⁶ A motive is a grouping of notes that comprise a portion of a musical theme within a work, such as the famous first four notes of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*.

⁷ K. Pavlov, *Vsesoyuznoye Obschestvo Kulturnoi Svyazi s Zagranitsoi*, nos. 7/7 (1942), 49.

during the war years. Prokofiev, another world-renowned Russian composer, contemporaneously created a work that was significantly livelier. Though these two pieces were written at roughly the same time, they convey distinctly different moods. One of the techniques the composers used to establish these moods was the selection of key signatures.⁸ Shostakovich's symphony was written in the key of C minor. Throughout the movements,⁹ the mood is heavy and dark due to the inclusion of minor keys. Prokofiev's symphony, on the other hand, is written in B-flat major and ends triumphantly. A variety of other differences mark the two works, but the difference in keys is one of the most apparent expressions of contrasting somber and prideful views on the war, translated into grandiose musical settings by the composers.



The Concert Ensemble of Kirov Theatre performers, 1942. The group performed on the northwest front from late January to mid-April 1942, giving over eighty concerts. Source: Mariinsky Theatre, “The War Years,” <https://www.mariinsky.ru/en/about/ww2/1942>

Though the formal and elevated music of classical symphonies comprised a majority of what was being broadcast over radios to the public, another genre began to

⁸ Key signatures are the written manifestations of what key a musical piece is written in, or the tonality based on which notes are supposed to be played. At the most basic level, keys are divided into major and minor. Major keys are often associated with happiness and other positive emotions whereas minor keys are frequently associated with sadness and other negative emotional states.

⁹ Movements are sections within a symphony that vary in tempo, or the speed at which they are performed.

emerge in popularity among the masses.¹⁰ Symphonies and orchestras were important mediums for people to experience music, but of equal importance was a musical genre that enabled the masses to enjoy the music and even perform the music. Throughout the entire course of the war, a large number of popular songs were created. The songs dealt with all aspects of the war, from the front lines to the home front. This content made the songs enjoyable to both soldiers on the front lines and people who were not fighting on the fronts. Some songs were newly composed, and others had lyrics set to pre-existing Russian folk tunes such as “Volga Boatmen.”¹¹ The practice of setting new words to existing tunes meant that practically anyone could create a song. These war songs were popular not only because the content appealed to the masses but also because musically unsophisticated amateurs could create them.

The involvement of the masses was a characteristic that fit Soviet ideology, and so these songs were freely performed both on the home front and the frontlines. Soviet music became more about appealing to the masses and inspiring national pride among listeners. One of the greatest musical outlets for combining nationalism with mass appeal was film. Film, though heavily reliant on dialogue and physical action, requires a soundtrack, often a musical film score, to prevent moments of pure silence, create moods, and enhance scenes dramatically. In this medium, nationalism could be conveyed through what was going on in the film visually as well as through the music occurring during the film. A film score, though musical, is different than musical compositions such as symphonies, being created to accompany a film and not necessarily to stand alone as a separate musical entity. However, this integration of music and film did not prevent some composers from composing in a manner due to the thematic content that enabled their film scores to be performed without any visual accompaniment. The composer who created some of the greatest musical scores for film was Sergei Prokofiev. His most famous works include the music for *Lieutenant Kije* and *Alexander Nevsky* during the interwar years and *Ivan the Terrible*, finished, musically, in 1945.¹² These films have one thing in common: they are all based on historical Russian figures. This feature parallels the nationalist trend in music.

With wartime conditions as harsh as they were, it is a testament to the power of music that it managed to thrive. The Soviet government took measures to protect artistic interests during World War II. Several important musicians and composers were evacuated from cities closer to the front and moved to the Caucasus and later to the interior.¹³ Additionally, the Soviet government ensured fiscal stability for composers and offered incentives in the form of the “Stalin Prizes”—awards in rubles for musical works, among other artistic creations.¹⁴ By offering monetary incentives with the prizes, the Soviet government was actively promoting musical activity in the war years, thus providing an environment for music to be created and performed even though the

¹⁰ Richard Stites, “Song of Russia,” *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 103.

¹¹ Stites, “Song of Russia,” 103.

¹² Douglas W. Galle, “The Prokofiev-Einstein Collaboration: ‘Nevsky’ and ‘Ivan’ Revisited,” *Cinema Journal* 17 (1978), 15.

¹³ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 175-6.

¹⁴ Nicolas Slonimsky, “Soviet Music and Musicians,” *Slavonic and East European Review. American Series* 3 (1944), 15.

country was rife with struggle brought on by the war. It is also important to note that a new official anthem was created for the Soviet Union in 1944, named *Hymn of the Bolshevik Party*.¹⁵ The creation of a national anthem was one of the best applications for music during the war. The new anthem served as a unifying force for the multitudes and as a catalyst for increasing patriotism and nationalism, a common purpose for any national anthem.

With so many on the front lines, it might be expected that musical events on the home front did not draw large numbers of people, yet on a single day in 1942 a total of sixteen thousand citizens of Moscow and elsewhere went to sixteen different concerts across the Soviet Union.¹⁶ War did not stop music from existing; if anything, it gave music subject matter that spanned all walks of life. In short, war united people in a common goal, and music expressed the emotions of war to thousands of people.



The Leningrad Symphony rehearses in besieged Leningrad under the direction of Karl Eliasberg, 1942. Source: Oroszok, “Leningrad Szimfonia,” <http://oroszok.reblog.hu/leningrad-szimfonia>

Though public engagement is vital to the support of music, none of the Soviet musical achievements during World War II would have been possible if not for the dedication of the musicians. The musicians of the Leningrad Radio Symphony displayed exceptional perseverance in one of the most famous stories of a premiere in music history. They performed Shostakovich’s *Leningrad* Symphony in Leningrad while the city was besieged by German forces from 1941 to 1944. The group met in freezing Russian temperatures to rehearse, braving the ongoing battle in the city to come to rehearsal so that the symphony dedicated to Leningrad could be performed. Musicians

¹⁵ Slonimsky, “Music and Musicians,” 18.

¹⁶ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 176.

throughout the Soviet Union had to face harsh conditions, yet they still strove to perform to the best of their ability so that the music they were playing would not be diminished in quality. They were playing not only for the sake of playing music, but also for those who braved the conditions to come and hear them and to show pride in their country.

World War II brought about tumultuous shifts in daily life for the people of the Soviet Union, and these shifts had parallels in the musical community. The war years brought about the creation of a national musical style for the Soviet Union, and some composers were eager to exercise their craft in the new style to support their nation in war, while others used music to criticize it. Music has been and always will be a reactionary force to contemporary events and is a powerful indicator of public sentiment. The war songs of the masses both showed and created public support for the war. Classical music genres revealed the views of the artistic community, both positive and negative, toward the war in its various stages. Overall, music became an outlet through which the Soviet peoples could unite. It evoked pride and inspired hope, often without having to use a single word. The changes in musical styles during World War II indicate the changes in the Soviet population's attitudes, and, more importantly, how they responded to the changes brought on by the war.

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