



2010

The Struggle to Create Soviet Opera

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Grinberg, Miriam (2010) "The Struggle to Create Soviet Opera," *The Gettysburg Historical Journal*: Vol. 9 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj/vol9/iss1/7>

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Abstract

It is opera, and opera alone that brings you close to the people, that endears your music to the real public and makes your names popular not only with individual small circles but, under favourable conditions, with the whole people. – Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, premier composer of symphonies, ballets, and operas in Imperial Russia in the mid- to late 1800s.

Tchaikovsky made this remark while living under a tsarist regime, but the pervasive, democratic, and uniting qualities of opera that he so vividly described appealed to an entirely different party: the Bolsheviks. Rather than discard the “bourgeois” remains of the Russian empire, the newly-anointed Soviet Union and its first leader, Vladimir Lenin, kept in place many artistic institutions such as opera theaters. However, it was not until Joseph Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union from about 1925 to 1953, seized the reins of power that any attempt was made to control the artistic content of opera. Realizing, as Tchaikovsky had many years earlier, that the populist nature of opera could more effectively spread cultural and political propaganda to the masses, Stalin embarked on a massive Soviet opera experiment that would last from 1936 until his death. In this experiment, Stalin used opera to both further enhance his growing cult of personality and to attempt to throw off remaining Western influences on Soviet musical development. Despite his best efforts, the brutality and repression of Stalin’s reign had the effect of crushing promising new composers while propping up banal and obedient musicians whose operas have long since been forgotten. Instead of the massive cultural movement he desired, Stalin’s operatic experiment failed to deliver even on its most basic promise: the birth of Soviet opera.

Keywords

opera, Soviet Union, cultural and political propaganda, Joseph Stalin

The Struggle to Create Soviet Opera

Miriam B. Grinberg

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Tchaikovsky made this remark while living under a tsarist regime, but the pervasive, democratic, and unifying qualities of opera that he so vividly described appealed to an entirely different party: the Bolsheviks. Rather than discard the “bourgeois” remains of the Russian empire, the newly-anointed Soviet Union and its first leader, Vladimir Lenin, kept in place many artistic institutions such as opera theaters. However, it was not until Joseph Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union from about 1925 to 1953, seized the reins of power that any attempt was made to control the artistic content of opera. Realizing, as Tchaikovsky had many years earlier, that the populist nature of opera could more effectively spread cultural and political propaganda to the masses, Stalin embarked on a massive Soviet opera experiment that would last from 1936 until his death. In this experiment, Stalin used opera to both further enhance his growing cult of personality and to attempt to throw off remaining Western influences on Soviet musical development. Despite his best efforts, the brutality and repression of Stalin’s reign had the effect of crushing promising new composers while propping up banal and obedient musicians whose operas have long since been forgotten. Instead of the massive cultural movement he desired, Stalin’s operatic experiment failed to deliver even on its most basic promise: the birth of Soviet opera.

Opera in Russia had already cultivated a strong pedigree before Stalin began his grand project. Catherine the Great, a huge proponent of the arts, became the greatest patron of opera in Russia in the late 1700s, bringing Italian and German opera companies to perform in St. Petersburg and Moscow in such places as the newly-constructed Bolshoi Theatre.² However, during her reign and for most of the 1800s, only privileged and wealthy members of the upper

¹ Lyudmila Polyakova, *Soviet Music*, trans. Xenia Danko (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 99-100.

² Ruth Bereson, *The Operatic State* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 121.

class financially supported the opera and were the only people who could attend it.³ Only with the reign of Alexander III was the Bolshoi opened to the public for the first time in 1880, by which time composers like Tchaikovsky, Alexander Borodin, and Modest Mussorgsky had made a deep impression on Russian operatic music.⁴

With such an elite and exclusive heritage in Russian history, it seemed strange for the Bolsheviks *not* to discard opera completely once they took power with the 1917 Russian Revolution. Even Lenin regarded the Bolshoi as a “piece of pure landlord culture,” remarking that the opera house had a “pompous court style” to it.⁵ However, as early as October 22, 1917, the Bolsheviks took control of the Bolshoi and Maryinsky (in Petrograd) theatres and placed them under the control of the Theatre Division of the People’s Commissariat of Public Education (NARKOMPROS).⁶ The Bolshoi itself became a “focal point” for special events and meetings of the Communist Party after 1919, reaffirming its importance as a cultural and historical landmark.⁷ Furthermore, despite his own personal aversion to the arts, Lenin appointed a musician, Anatoly Lunacharsky, as first Commissar of Enlightenment.⁸ In contrast to Lenin, Lunacharsky perceived opera as offering “a more civilized and controllable form of celebration, leading to a ‘noble’ intoxication that arose from mental engagement rather than chemical [alcoholic] stimulus.”⁹ His idea of “noble intoxication,” coupled with his conviction that opera was superior to spoken theatre in being able to synthesize the arts of sight and sound, convinced Lenin to give Lunacharsky free reign over NARKOMPROS during the period of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the early 1920s.¹⁰

Lunacharsky’s installment not only allowed for a wider measure of musical experimentation, but for governmental attempts to rework the *libretti* (scripts) of Western operas until they were deemed appropriate for the Soviet public. Such reworkings included changing Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca* into *Struggle for the Commune* and Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *Les*

³ William Kozlenko, “Soviet Music and Musicians,” *The Musical Quarterly* 23 (1937): 296.

⁴ Bereson, *The Operatic State*, 124.

⁵ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 12.

⁶ Bereson, *The Operatic State*, 120.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸ Harlow Robinson, “Born That Way: Stalin’s tyrannical taste spelled bad news for opera in the U.S.S.R.,” *Opera News* 55 (1991): 23.

⁹ Marina Frolova-Walker, “The Soviet opera project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. *Ivan Susanin*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006): 188.

¹⁰ Bereson, *The Operatic State*, 120.

Huguenots into *The Decembrists*.¹¹ These attempts were largely unsuccessful, in part because Soviet audiences were already familiar with the original libretti and found the “improved” Soviet versions hard to swallow.¹² Furthermore, in major opera houses across the Soviet Union, classical and Romantic-era works remained permanent fixtures in the Soviet musical landscape.¹³ In fact, Soviet musicologists such as Boris Asafiev went so far as to suggest that “[a]cquaintance with the best examples of Western music will help the development of Soviet music, will liberate it from the amateurishness and speculation about ‘revolutionism,’ will lead towards the exploration of new forms and new means of musical expression.”¹⁴

The contradictory presence of bourgeois Western music in a proletarian state was not lost on outside observers, one commenting that “‘Tsarism has survived’” after visiting an opera house in the Soviet Union in 1929.¹⁵ Such remarks were evidence of the growing problem that opera posed as a force of the bourgeoisie after the death of Lenin in 1924, and Stalin, his successor, was eager to rectify that problem.¹⁶ He began his program of “reform” by removing Lunacharsky from his commissar post in 1929,¹⁷ and by 1932, Stalin issued a resolution entitled “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations,” destroying the recently-created Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) and putting in its place the Union of Soviet Composers (USC).¹⁸ The USC was charged with responsibilities ranging from musical composition and education to mass propaganda and concert production.¹⁹ Likewise, musical commissions were made in the USC, with opera commissions reaping rewards ranging from five to eight thousand rubles—the most of any of the musical categories.²⁰ This consolidation of power gave the state greater leeway in directly controlling the actions of theatre directors, composers, musicians, and anyone else involved in the production of an opera.

It was not until Stalin began his “Great Terror” in the mid-1930s that serious steps were taken to completely centralize the oversight and management of operatic life in Russia. One such

¹¹ Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia: 1917-1970* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1972), 64.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Heinz Unger, *Hammer Sickle and Baton: The Soviet Memoirs of a Musician* (London: The Cresset Press Ltd., 1939), 65-66.

¹⁴ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Robinson, “Born That Way,” 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ W. H. Kerridge, “The Union of Soviet Composers,” *The Musical Times* 75 (1934): 1073.

²⁰ Kerridge, “The Union of Soviet Composers,” 1074.

step was renaming the Maryinsky Theatre the Kirov Theatre in honor of the former head of the Leningrad Communist Party whose assassination had prompted Stalin's purges.²¹ Another was Stalin's vicious crusade against Dmitri Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which premiered at the Maly (Small) Theatre in Leningrad on January 22, 1934.²² A pseudo-erotic satire criticizing merchant life during the 1840s, *Lady Macbeth* follows the story of Ekaterina Izmailova, a sophisticated woman who is driven to murder both by her own ambition and by the constraints of society.²³ After its premiere, critical and public praise were lauded on the 30-year-old Shostakovich, and *Lady Macbeth* was performed all over the Soviet Union before Stalin himself finally attended a performance at the Bolshoi Theatre two years later.²⁴ Unlike the adoring Soviet masses, however, Stalin was not impressed; some reports claim that Stalin muttered "trash" before promptly walking out halfway through the performance.²⁵ Shortly after this unequivocal rejection of the opera by Stalin, an article appeared in *Pravda*, a state-run propaganda journal, which condemned *Lady Macbeth*: "Shostakovich's opera enjoys great success with the bourgeois audiences abroad. Is it because its fidgety, shrieking, neurotic music tickles the depraved tastes of the bourgeoisie?"²⁶ Following this affair, Shostakovich's work was labeled "poison and forbidden" by the state, and the composer himself stated of the aftermath, "I was no longer the master of my life, my past was crossed out, my work, my abilities, turned out to be worthless to everyone."²⁷

To combat the possibility of any opera like *Lady Macbeth* being produced in the future, Stalin organized a meeting of the State Committee for Artistic Affairs (KDI) shortly after the publishing of the original *Pravda* condemnation of Shostakovich's work. In this meeting, members of the USC were invited to the Kremlin to discuss a new "Soviet opera" project.²⁸ This project would involve the creation of entirely new operas based on state-approved libretti that focused on either "revolutionary" heroes—Emilian Pugachev, Spartacus, or the Decembrists, or

²¹ Bereson, *The Operatic State*, 126.

²² Jörg Von Uthman, "The Show Must Not Go On: How censors tried to protect us from 'dangerous' operas," *Opera News* 69 (2005): 24.

²³ Stanley D. Krebs, *Soviet Composers and the Development of Soviet Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), 191.

²⁴ Von Uthman, "The Show Must Not Go On," 24.

²⁵ Unger, *Hammer Sickle and Baton*, 221-222.

²⁶ Nicolas Slonimsky, "The Changing Style of Soviet Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 3 (1950): 240.

²⁷ Robinson, "Born That Way," 24.

²⁸ Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet opera project," 182.

on recent historical events such as the Russian Revolution and Civil War.²⁹ A strict dogma was also applied to the music, and composers were told to “glorify the achievements of the Soviet people; give a positive picture of the Soviet citizen in his relations with his fellowmen under the Soviet regime; subscribe to a contemporary ‘programme’; be bright, optimistic, straightforward and comprehensible; above all, have a ‘mass’ basis and draw its inspiration from the people and their folk-music.”³⁰ Aspects of production, from set design to vocal score, were likewise monitored by the KDI,³¹ especially in national “treasures” like the Bolshoi Theatre, where Stalin had just witnessed *Lady Macbeth*.

Problems in undertaking such a massive initiative quickly arose, not the least of which was the unwillingness of many opera houses to work with untrained composers and librettists on the uncertain enterprise of Soviet opera.³² Professional opera singers avoided the project as well, using their influence “to ensure that they would never have to appear in Soviet operas.”³³ Despite these difficulties, one opera managed not only to succeed, but also to win a stamp of approval from Stalin himself: *Quiet Flows the Don (Tikhii Don)* by the young composer Ivan Dzerzhinsky. Based on a state-approved, Socialist realist novel by Mikhail Sholokhov, the opera follows the lives of a Don Cossack family before, during and after World War I.³⁴ Dzerzhinsky interweaved popular folk songs throughout the music and unknowingly created a new genre: the “song opera,” which expressed “revolutionary ideas [. . .] by means of melodic elements borrowed from popular songs, in perfect keeping with the content.”³⁵ Although it was not as sophisticated in plot or musical composition as its predecessor, *Lady Macbeth*, *Quiet Flows the Don* was proclaimed the model for other Soviet operas to emulate, and Dzerzhinsky was quickly commissioned by the state to compose another opera.³⁶ The original director of the opera, Samuil Samosud, was likewise promoted to the directorship of the Bolshoi Theatre—this despite the fact that he had been involved in staging *Lady Macbeth* in Leningrad.³⁷

²⁹ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 66.

³⁰ Cecil Parrott, “Music in the Soviet Union,” *The Musical Times* 100 (1959): 14.

³¹ Frolova-Walker, “The Soviet opera project,” 194.

³² *Ibid.*, 214.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Krebs, *Soviet Composers*, 52.

³⁵ Danko, *Soviet Music*, 106.

³⁶ Frolova-Walker, “The Soviet opera project,” 192.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

Another product of Stalin's Soviet opera project was not originally a Soviet opera at all: Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*. The opera's libretto had previously been reworked and the title changed to *Hammer and Sickle* during the 1920s, but a more focused attempt to transform the story of the opera was not undertaken until 1937.³⁸ Changing the title to *Ivan Susanin*, all references to the tsar were eliminated from the libretto and the ending scene, which had originally been the coronation of the tsar, was instead changed to the triumph of the Russian peasant leader Ivan Susanin over Polish agents trying to infiltrate the country.³⁹ This story was particularly relevant at the time of its premiere in 1939, a time of growing antagonism between Poland and the Soviet Union preceding the Second World War, and consequently served as a "patriotic spectacle" for Soviet audiences.⁴⁰ According to the account of a citizen who attended the premiere, at which Stalin and top Party officials were also present,

Before the Epilogue, the Government [including Stalin] moved from its usual box into the large central box formerly reserved for the Tsar, and watched the rest of the opera from there. When the audience noticed this, they began to clap, and continued clapping throughout the musical interlude that precedes the epilogue. When the curtain [calls began] [. . .], [the applause] grew ever louder until it became a tumultuous ovation. The Government was applauding the cast, the cast was applauding the Government, and the audience was applauding both.⁴¹

The effect of performing in this popular, Stalinist take on Glinka was not lost on professional opera singers either, and basses competed for the chance to play the role of Susanin onstage, realizing the many special state favors they could receive from doing so.⁴²

Save for the triumphs of *Quiet Flows the Don* and *Ivan Susanin*, the success stories of Stalin's opera project numbered few and far between. Even Dzerzhinsky, the wunderkind of Soviet opera, failed to capture the public's and the Party's interest with his second opera, *Virgin Soil Upturned*. Although it had nearly the same origins as its predecessor—a basis in a Socialist realist novel, melodies based on popular folk songs, etc.—Dzerzhinsky had become arrogant with fame, and despite high expectations and a huge production budget allotted by the state, the

³⁸ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 29.

³⁹ Slonimsky, "The Changing Style," 249.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Anatoly Smelyansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead? Mikhail Bulgakov at the Moscow Art Theatre*, trans. Arch Tait (London: Methuen Drama, 1993), 304-305; quoted in Marina Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet opera project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. *Ivan Susanin*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006): 207.

⁴² Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet opera project," 209.

opera was a disappointment.⁴³ His first opera had also produced many imitators, all of whom had been lambasted by Soviet music critics and none of whom had come close to replicating Dzerzhinsky's success.⁴⁴ The failure to produce an original Soviet opera after *Quiet Flows the Don* continued into the World War II period, when production of Soviet operas went into steep decline. The "Great Fatherland War" called not only for a "full-blooded revival of Russian nationalism,"⁴⁵ but also a revival of Russian classical music—in other words, the works of "bourgeois" composers such as Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Borodin were widely performed, all in an effort to inspire patriotism.⁴⁶

This rejuvenated patriotism was also displayed by famous opera performers from the Bolshoi, who performed for soldiers of the Red Army on the frontlines and donated their personal savings to the war effort.⁴⁷ Even when the Bolshoi and Maryinsky Theatres were hit by German bombs and mortar shells in the early years of the war, they were restored at record speed and even gained new additions by the end of 1944.⁴⁸ These theatres and their performers were so symbolically and physically important to the Soviet state that, on May 5, 1945 (also known as Victory Day), a concert was held on the steps of the Reichstag featuring famous Bolshoi opera singers.⁴⁹ Through this concert, the Soviets put on "a display of might and of dominance, military, artistic and cultural, and therefore political."⁵⁰

In the post-World War II period, the wartime reversion to emulating classical Russian composers did not end; rather, the goal of the postwar period was to create "new 'Soviet musical classics'" using those same Romantic-era composers as paragons to which new composers should aspire.⁵¹ Clearly, Stalin's Soviet opera project was on the wane in this environment, though not without one notable exception: Georgian composer Vano Muradeli's 1947 opera *Great Friendship*. Written for the thirtieth anniversary of the October Revolution, the opera traced the revolution as it occurred in the Caucasus amongst Russians, Cossacks, and various

⁴³ Krebs, *Soviet Composers*, 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁵ Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet opera project," 200.

⁴⁶ Slonimsky, "The Changing Style," 249.

⁴⁷ Bereson, *The Operatic State*, 127.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet opera project," 210.

ethnic minorities.⁵² Like many failed Soviet operas before it, *Great Friendship* was mercilessly torn apart by music critics, who hurled criticisms at it ranging from a “defective, anti-artistic work, with not a single memorable melody” to “confusing and discordant, full of continuous dissonances and ear-splitting combinations of sounds.”⁵³ In addition, the Central Committee complained that Muradeli’s libretto portrayed Russians as “monolithic reactionaries” while the Lezgins, an ethnic minority, were depicted as “heroic revolutionaries.”⁵⁴

To the Stalinist state, such “falsities” in the libretto could not be overlooked. By February 1948 Andrei Zhdanov, the party boss of Leningrad and close advisor to Stalin, had sent numerous, lengthy reports to Stalin on the miserable state of Soviet opera.⁵⁵ Later that same year, the Party’s Central Committee, with the input of Stalin himself, released the resolution “On the Opera *Great Friendship* by Muradeli.”⁵⁶ This resolution stated bluntly that Muradeli’s libretto was historically inaccurate in its depiction of Georgian and Ossetian hostility to the Russians during the revolution; that Muradeli made insufficient use of folk melodies to distinguish the various ethnic groups; and that he did not properly convey the “beauty” and “clarity” of the classical Russian musical form.⁵⁷ In addition, the resolution castigated the “formalism” and modernist tendencies of composers like Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev:

In the pursuit of mistakenly understood innovation, they [the composers] have lost contact in their music with the needs and artistic taste of the Soviet people, formed a narrow circle of specialists and musical gourmards, lowered the high social role and narrowed the significance of music, confining it to the satisfaction of the perverted tastes of esthetic individualists.⁵⁸

Sufficiently warned by this resolution, these same composers that had continuously been persecuted by the Soviet regime were compelled to send a collective letter to Stalin promising to

⁵² Laura J. Olson, *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 64.

⁵³ Slonimsky, “The Changing Style,” 251.

⁵⁴ Kiril Tomoff, *Creative Union: The Professional Organization of Soviet Composers, 1939-1953* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 130-131.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵⁶ Olson, *Performing Russia*, 64.

⁵⁷ Andrey Olkhovsky, *Music Under the Soviets: The Agony of an Art* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1955), 280-281, and Olson, *Performing Russia*, 64.

⁵⁸ “O opera ‘Velikaya Druzhba’ V. Muradeli, Postanovleniye TsK VKP (b) ot 10 fevralya 1948 g.,” *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 1 (1948): 3-8; quoted in Andrey Olkhovsky, *Music Under the Soviets: The Agony of an Art* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1955), 280.

compose “vivid realistic music that reflects the life and the struggles of the Soviet people.”⁵⁹ Shostakovich himself issued this remarkable statement following the resolution: “I know that the Party is right; I know that the Party shows its solicitude for Soviet music and for me as a Soviet composer.”⁶⁰

In the aftermath of the musical purge of 1948, few other Soviet composers dared to produce a Soviet opera for fear that they should suffer the same fate as Muradeli. Muradeli’s fiasco, in fact, effectively put an end to Stalin’s Soviet opera project; with the exception of Yuri Shaporin’s 1951 opera *The Decembrists*, the movement to create a new and exceptional genre of opera in the Soviet Union was completely abandoned after Stalin’s death in 1953.⁶¹ Despite the perceived successes of Dzerzhinsky’s *Quiet Flows the Don* and *Ivan Susanin*, most of the artistic control over opera productions at the height of the Soviet opera project was placed in the hands of ignorant and incompetent Party officials who had prevented promising composers from seeing productions through to completion.⁶² In Shostakovich’s case, Stalin’s methodically planned annihilation of *Lady Macbeth* scared him off composing operas for the rest of his career.⁶³ The Soviet Union’s mid-war reversion to the tenets of classical Russian music was the nail in the coffin for the Soviet opera project, though it did not signal the diminishment of Stalin’s cult of personality. In fact, this cult only grew in the post-World War II period, as did his methods of spreading effective cultural propaganda by other means. Although this project failed to rally the Soviet masses in the way that Stalin hoped it would, it nonetheless stands out in the history of the Soviet Union as an intriguing facet of the tortured, hostile, yet fascinating relationship between the state and the musical arts

⁵⁹ Slonimsky, “The Changing Style,” 253.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶¹ Krebs, *Soviet Composers*, 177.

⁶² Robinson, “Born That Way,” 24.

⁶³ Harlow Robinson, “The Case of the Three Russians: Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich,” *Opera Quarterly* 6 (1989): 71.