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Ian Pace, ‘Why cancel Tchaikovsky?’, *London Review of Books*, 10 March 2022

Ian Pace | Why cancel Tchaikovsky? · LRB 10 March 2022

The conductor Valery Gergiev, a known ally of Vladimir Putin, who appeared in one of his election campaign videos, has had concerts and contracts cancelled with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Vienna and Munich Philharmonic Orchestras, La Scala Opera House, Milan, the Edinburgh Festival, the Verbier Festival, and more. The soprano Anna Netrebko, facing the prospect of similar prohibitions, has cancelloed all performances until further notice. She has spoken most admiringly of Putin, and posed with the flag of pro-Russian Ukrainian separatists.

The Royal Opera House and the Met have cancelled appearances from the Bolshoi and Mariinsky Ballets. Piano competitions in Dublin and Calgary have refused to accept Russian competitors. The amateur Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra have withdrawn a Tchaikovsky concert including the *1812 Overture*. The Swiss Théâtre Orchestre of Bienne Soleure have cancelled its remaining performances of Tchaikovsky’s opera *Mazeppa*.

Some Russian musicians, including pianists Evgeny Kissin and Alexander Melnikov, conductors Vasily Petrenko and Semyon Bychkov, and soprano Natalia Pschenitschnikova, have spoken out very publicly against the war. They do not face cancellations. At the same time there has been much activity on the part of musicians to lionise music and musicians who can be categorised as Ukrainian rather than Russian, difficult though it may be in some cases to make a clear distinction.

Russian and Ukrainian music and performers have played a major part in Western classical musical life since the professionalisation of Russian musical life in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, and the absence at least of a Russian component would be felt very deeply. Yet this type of development is not necessarily a wholly new or unique phenomenon which was mirrored in musical responses to other major historical and political events, not only involving Russia or the Soviet Union.

There’s nothing new about the enlisting of music and musicians to political causes. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, the centenary of Beethoven’s birth, his music was presented in Germany as embodying purity, health, strength and moral soundness, in contrast with the alleged moral decline, debilitated health and decadence of French culture.

From the other side, following the outbreak of World War One, Debussy wrote to a pupil that ‘we are going to pay dearly for the right to dislike the music of Richard Strauss and Schoenberg’ and that ‘French art needs to take revenge quite as seriously as the French army does!’ He began to call himself *musician français* and developed a new musical idiom rooted in ideals of antiquity and classicism, further away from Germanic music (especially that of Wagner) than previously.

During the Second World War, British pianist Myra Hess gave regular concerts in the National Gallery in London, even at the height of the Blitz, many focusing on the Austro-German music, including Beethoven.

At the end of the war, however, the situation had become more complicated again. German composers, conductors and performers including Richard Strauss, Hans Pfitzner, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Eugene Jochum, Walter Gieseking and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf found themselves under intense suspicion and their ability to perform limited. Denazification was applied inconsistently: Gieseking for a while could perform in the French Zone but not the British or American ones; Carl Orff found himself unable to work in Munich, but permitted in Stuttgart, where on of the local theatre and music officers was one of his former students – both cities were under US administration.

Less suspicion fell on compromised citizens of other nations, such as the Romanian conductor George Georgescu or pianist Dinu Lipatti, who had undertaken concert tours of areas occupied by Nazi Germany, or the Japanese conductor Hidemaro Konoye, who regularly conducted the Berlin Philharmonic and even recorded the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* with them. Many key firgues involved in the development of new music in Germany after 1945 were also presumed to belong to a realm apart from Nazism such as Werner Meyer-Eppler, the phoneticist, physicist, proponent of electronic music teacher of Stockhausen. But Meyer-Eppler had been a prominent figure in the *Nationalsozialistische Fliegerkorps*, and one of a group of 100 specially selected elite scientists working on major military programmes during the last year of the war. The British occupiers to forbid him from working in his university in Bonn. Only by reinventing himself as a different type of scholar, looking at phonetics and speech synthesis (without which the whole history of *elektronische Musik* might have worked out very differently), could Meyer-Eppler exploit loopholes in denazification law and eventually return to a full university position.

Most of these musicians had definitely been involved in activities which in some sense glorified or propagandised for a genocidal regime. Yet concerns quickly receded, denazification was relaxed, and German conducting in particular would be dominated by men with tainted personal and political histories. The Cold War quickly became a much more charged arena. The propaganda value of music competitions had been apparent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party since Lev Oborin's victory at the first International Frederyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw in 1927. There was a shock when the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958 was won by Texan pianist Van Cliburn, who had studied with Russian exile pianist Rosina Lhévinne in the Juilliard School in New York. Cliburn became a US national hero, receiving a ticker-tape parade for his triumphant return home. The Soviets paid increased attention to their strategy for selecting competitors. The competitions had become not only about the finest performers, but also indicative of which political system was better for nurturing talkent/

Soviet musicians' international travel was carefully limited. Sviatoslav Richter, born in Ukraine, was not allowed to visit the West until 1960, at the age of 45, because his father, of German origin, had been arrested as a suspected spy in Odesa in 1941 and executed. Other pianists such as Maria Yudina, Vladimir Sofronitsky or Samuil Feinberg, were rarely if ever allowed to travel, and became known to Western audiences only through hard-to-obtain recordings made in the Soviet Union. Those who defected to the West, including the pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy or cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, received intense attention as propaganda for the greater

artistic freedom claimed by the West. When Soviet musicians did manage to travel, their concerts were often embroiled with politics. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 there were demonstrations outside a performance by the State Orchestra of the USSR at the Proms in London. A planned British tour by the violinist David Oistrakh in 1971 was cancelled following tit-for-tat explusions of diplomats, journalists and academics by the UK and the Soviet Union. In the late 1980s, musical and ballet events by Soviet artists in San Francisco were met with protests as part of a campaign against the USSR's policies preventing Jewish emigration to Israel.

The state control of music making in Putin's Russia is not on a level with Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. A musician does not automatically 'representi' the country or the regime, though the opportunities for those still resident in Russia to speak out against the government are already very limited and likely to become much more so. Putin's nationalism differs in some respects from that of the 19th-century, when 'Westernisers' and 'Slavophiles' argued about the country's musical future as well and its interactions with the West. But time it cannot be wholly separated from these roots either, including those which informed the musical language of Musorgsky, Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov or to an extent Tchaikovsky, all developing musical idioms of which some aspects came to be culturally constructed as specifically 'Russian', opposed in particular to what were seen as Germanic norms.

During a time of war, it is inevitable and not necessarily inappropriate to limit some cultural interactions with an enemy nation, not least as part of a strategy of isolating an aggressor. If Russians cannot compete in international sporting events, should musical competitions be different? Is it any more unreasonable for some to want at least to postpone a performance of the bombastic and militaristic *1812 Overture*, just as British conductor Mark Elder expressed doubts about conducting the Last Night of the Proms, with all its imperialistic overtones, following the outbreak of the 1991 Gulf War (Elder was promptly replaced)?

Moral and aesthetic considerations cannot be assumed to mirror one another. Too little has been said about the roots of *Geräusch-Musik* (noise music) in the militaristic and extremely misogynistic worldview of Fascist-aligned Italian futurists, in particular Luigi Russolo; this is a vital consideration, but would not wish the whole genre to be dismissed as a result. Conversely, there is no necessary reason to believe 'good' people will produce important art, or that works which explicitly align themselves to some cause which few will dispute - as with countless 9/11 memorial pieces; no doubt more than one lachrymose *Lament for Ukraine* for string orchestra is currently being composed - should automatically be thought to have any wider value.

In the hopeful event of an ultimate ceasefire and Russian withdrawal, what happens to Russian music and musicians then? To 'cancel' them in the long term would be futile and culturally impoverishing; I hope that there will still be further chances to hear performances by Gergiev of music of Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky Rimsky-Korsakov and Prokofiev and others outside of Russia. But we should not harbour the delusion that such music stands above politics in some transcendent realm.

With thanks to my doctoral student Sarah Innes for information relating to Soviet artists visiting the UK.