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REFERENCES

Rachel S. PLATONOV, ***Singing the Self. Guitar Poetry, Community, and Identity in the Post-Stalin Period***. Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 2012, 271 p.

- 1 Rachel Platonov, a lecturer in Russian Studies at the University of Manchester, has written a bold new treatment of a topic that has so far drawn too little attention from English-language scholarship: guitar poetry, also referred to as bard music. Known as *avtorskaia pesnia* in Russian, guitar music, in Platonov's words, refers to "an acoustic singer-songwriter genre typified by the solo performance of one's own lyrics to relatively simple, unobtrusive melodic accompaniment on the Russian seven-stringed guitar," with "thematic, stylistic, and lexical diversity and an unpolished manner of performance" (p. 3). In *Singing the Self*, Platonov provides an analysis of bard music's meaning to and impact on bards and their audiences, seeing guitar poetry "not just as a song genre but also as a sociocultural phenomenon, a medium through which Soviet young people across several generations articulated thoughts, opinions, and identities; recognized and interacted with like-minded individuals; and formed communities that were never entirely within, yet also never entirely outside of, the Soviet *kollektiv* (collective)" (p. 4). She relies on a source base of memoirs, official publications, published interviews, and interviews she herself conducted with bards themselves and members of the "guitar poetry movement," a term she uses to refer to members of amateur song clubs that provided the main social venues for enthusiasts of guitar poetry.
- 2 Platonov begins her work by setting guitar poetry within its broader historical and social context. She sees the roots of bard songs in traditional genres such as classic romances, Gypsy-style songs, ballads, and cruel romances, as well as newer forms such as comical song parodies; surprisingly, she does not acknowledge the importance of World War II guitar-based folklore on guitar poetry. Individual singer-songwriters

among student and intelligentsia circles began to write what would become known as bard songs from the 1950s, and by the late 1950s, guitar poetry became a prominent phenomenon among well-educated urbanites in central Soviet cities, with this genre spreading far and wide across the USSR by the early 1960s. From the first, the Soviet cultural apparatus expressed a hesitant and ambiguous attitude toward guitar poetry. The authorities hoped to use this genre as a means of positively impacting youth, but felt wary of the potential for the creation of alternative identities and communities inherent in the emphasis on individualism, sincerity, and private life in bard songs. Consequently, the distribution of this music occurred primarily through non-state channels: the songs of well-known guitar poetry performers spread primarily through the medium of individual copying of songs via tape recorders, a practice known as *magnitizdat*, and through amateurs performing such songs in small-scale, intimate settings. The 1960s-80s witnessed a series of shifts in official policy toward guitar poetry, with a combination of efforts to co-opt the aspects of this music deemed worthwhile and to suppress those perceived as anti-Soviet, with only the perestroika allowing widescale freedom for guitar poetry.

- 3 In the second chapter, Platonov lays out her primary analytical tool for investigating bard music: marginality theory. She rejects the traditional equation of guitar poetry with opposition to the Soviet regime, and instead argues that this genre is better understood as a marginal form located in between the explicitly prescribed and proscribed, one that “enabled a broad cross-section of Soviet society to generate independent interpretations of its identities, interests, and needs” (p. 46). Guitar poetry, she argues, used spaces, hobbies, and genres promoted by the state to create modes of being and modes of interaction that “in fact ‘the state could never fully control,’ forming individual identities and communities of belonging at some variance with those promoted by the Soviet officialdom (p. 51).
- 4 The rest of the book applies this approach to the guitar poetry movement. Chapter 3 considers several bard celebrities, examining how they sought to create an atmosphere of sincere, direct interaction with the audience as a means of establishing close-knit communities. The next chapter considers how members of the guitar poetry movement engaged with this music, focusing on clubs of amateur songs. Guitar poetry with explicitly socially critical overtones is treated in chapter 5, with a focus on drunkenness and the Gulag. Chapter 6 considers what Platonov terms “covert marginality,” where she seeks to move beyond the broad notion that “guitar poetry was political by default because the majority of its songs were apolitical” and explore the political implications of guitar poetry in a more nuanced fashion (p. 128). The last chapter examines the way bards adopted traditional genres into their oeuvre, which the author argues made it easier for bards to parody Soviet values and Soviet everyday life.
- 5 While Platonov criticizes the use of binaries in analyzing Soviet culture, her study occasionally steers close to doing so, for instance in her analysis of “covert marginality.” She posits that guitar poetry grew in popularity because it “treated precisely the kinds of ‘insignificant’ themes that were denigrated and ignored in official culture,” such as the theme of the “little man” and of everyday life (p. 131). By emphasizing the supposedly “insignificant,” bard songs “constitute[d] small, personal insurrections against Soviet ideology and against the mass culture through it was promoted” (p. 128). Platonov’s claim is weakened by extensive evidence of official

cultural production during the post-Stalin years dealing with everyday life and individual people. This occurred in films such as “The Cranes are Flying” (1957) and “Moscow Does not Believe in Tears” (1980), in popular songs by Edita P’ekha, Sofiia Rotaru, Alla Pugacheva, and Valerii Leont’ev, and in a multitude of other official cultural settings; even under Stalin, films such as “Volga-Volga” (1938) and the mass songs by Leonid Utesov and others explored the everyday, although to a lesser extent than after 1953. Problematically, Platonov postulates that during the post-Stalin years, “the tenets of socialist realism continued to shape literary and artistic production” (p. 129). This statement ignores the many successes by liberally-oriented cultural producers to move beyond the Stalinist heritage. To provide evidence for her points, the author takes official songs about Moscow and about love from the 1930s and 1940s and contrasts them to the bard songs of the 1960s-80s, a highly questionable tactic: why not compare guitar poetry to the songs of prominent post-Stalin artists?

- 6 Surprisingly, Platonov does not use any archival sources, resulting in an incomplete perspective. The author generally portrays the “officialdom” as a cohesive entity, failing to pay sufficient attention to the significance of diverse outlooks within the Soviet bureaucracy. Tapping archival sources would have permitted her to overcome this binary depiction, and provide a much clearer picture of the complicated and multifaceted engagement of Soviet bureaucrats with guitar poetry. This issue is compounded by Platonov’s occasionally uncritical reading of her extant source base. For instance, when she describes clubs of amateur song, which were hosted in state-sponsored venues, she repeats the sentiments of guitar music enthusiasts that “clubs’ activities were continually monitored, but as often as not the authorities neither helped nor hindered their development” (p. 94). My own work on amateur music and club activities in the post-Stalin years, which draws both on archives and interviews I conducted, illustrates the widescale efforts by some liberally-inclined Komsomol and cultural officials to establish, promote, and defend progressive and daring musical forms, including bard songs.
- 7 Finally, Platonov’s account would have had more analytical heft if she paid greater attention to the evolution of the social, political, and cultural context in the Soviet Union in the post-Stalin years. The winding course of the Cold War certainly impacted bard music. So did the popularity of jazz and its gradual replacement as the music of choice among youth in the late 1960s. The appearance and widespread appeal of Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles deserves note.
- 8 My criticisms should not detract from reader attention to this thought-provoking and high-quality book. Platonov deserves praise for helping revise our understanding of bard music in the Soviet Union, especially in shaping individual identities, forming communities, and promoting the values of sincerity. The book constitutes required reading for anyone interested in the post-Stalin Soviet Union, in music, in popular culture, and in individual and group identity formation.