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Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity Under Lenin and Stalin*

New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2016.

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- 1 The Bolshevik revolution, as the Bolsheviks themselves recognized, could not last forever. For all the rhetoric about transformation, transfiguration, turning points, historic breaks, and the invention of a new world populated by new people, at a certain point a government needed to be formed – or at least reformed from existing bureaucracies. Thus, the ministries of the past were repurposed as commissariats, with “state” institutions replacing “imperial” ones. Culture, too, needed to be remade in the Soviet image. This refashioning, in the realm of music, is the subject of Pauline Fairclough’s patiently researched, carefully organized, and surprisingly (given the volume of detail) absorbing book.
- 2 The task she assigned herself was daunting: a people-centered and people-minded chronicle of musical life from 1917 to 1953 and slightly beyond. (She leaves some the details about the Soviet repackaging of Russian imperial music to Marina Raku, who has published a comparable book on the subject, *Muzykal’naia klassika v mifotvorchestve sovetskoi epokhi/Musical classicism in the mythology of the Soviet epoch*). Fairclough immersed herself in the Moscow and St. Petersburg archives, researched additional UK holdings, and acquired a capacious knowledge of all that has been published, in Russian and English, on the composers, compositions, and institutions under consideration. She is careful to note what she does not know (or what records appear to be lost) and is

restrained in her approach, even when describing the horrors of the purges and the deaths of 1.5 million people during the first winter of the blockade of Leningrad. “How it was possible to gather together a large enough body of people and well enough (relatively speaking) to put on a production of a whole opera [*Carmen*] in a blockaded city is hard to imagine,” she writes, with characteristic understatement (p. 177).

- 3 The book is told from the perspective of cultural officials and bureaucrats, but also – and here was the hardest part to research, Fairclough confesses – from the vantage of listeners who frequented ballet and opera houses, conservatories, clubs and salons, even the concert spaces created on factory floors. (The cover image showing the Tbilisi Philharmonic performing in an electric locomotive workshop is sensational, and I wish there were more like it in the book.) Audience reactions informed official policies more than has been appreciated, Fairclough argues. She also emphasizes the messiness of the effort to canonize the great composers of the past and define a Soviet musical repertoire. In this, she complicates, and in places undercuts, the familiar narrative of Soviet music history, which finds the Association of Modern Music and the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians waging battle during the period known as the cultural revolution. After these organizations were eliminated or “restructured” in 1932, the Union of Soviet Composers under the Committee of Arts Affairs implemented the people-minded aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism. The nationalism of the Soviet phase of the Second World War ceded to stagnation in the final years of Stalin’s rule, after which the effort to press art into the service of a supra-national Soviet citizen collapsed.
- 4 Yet nothing was what it seemed. For one thing, Russian musical programming privileged non-Russian music long after 1917. Concerts in the early 1930s were diversely, excitingly international. For another, the “proletarian” and “avant-garde” musical groups were hardly fellow travellers; church music was not instantly suppressed, nor was folklore instantly embraced by the Bolsheviks. (For folk music to be real, in the socialist realist sense, it needed to be faked.) Audiences chose their favorite works, often without concern for politics, while programmers faced their fears of censorship. As the lists of acceptable and unacceptable works changed, some of the censors were censored. Fairclough’s micro-biography of Nikolai Roslavets illustrates the point: “He worked as a censor at Glaviskusstvo in the 1920s, edited the music workers journal *Rabis* and was bitterly opposed by the musicians who RAPM, who finally managed to have him removed from any professional position in 1930” (p. 235).
- 5 The leading Soviet critics changed their minds (or had them changed) as to what music was incomprehensible and what, properly performed, could bring listeners to tears. The pages on Handel’s Soviet career, and the Chaikovskii revival, are entertainingly counter-intuitive. Ivan Sollertinskii describes Handel’s *Judas Maccabeus* as “a true leader, connected in his blood with the people, embodying the best of their qualities: manliness, valor, moral courage, hatred of oppressors” (p. 122). The exact same words would be used, in a balletic context, to describe another appropriated Soviet hero: the Thracian gladiator Spartacus, leader of a Slave rebellion against the Roman Republic. Of Chaikovskii, Fairclough tells a cautionary tale of political-musical attunement. “Not without reason was his music so alien to the aesthetics of the epoch of Russian modernism,” Boris Asaf’ev claimed in a 1940 publication commemorating the centennial of Chaikovskii’s birth (p. 163). He would not have written that sentence in earlier years; indeed, he would have penned the opposite. Asaf’ev was not alone in

changing ideological stripes along with institutional affiliations and making inconsistent cases for the music that he cared about. Sollertinskii likewise changed his tune as things tightened up, as did all of the critics who contributed to such forgotten, short-lived music periodicals of the later 1920s and early 1930s as *Muzyka i byt'* (Music and Daily Life), *Muzyka i revoliutsiia* (Music and Revolution), *Proletarskii muzykant'* (Proletarian Music), and *Za proletarskie muzykal'nye kadry* (For Proletarian Music Cadres). All were eventually replaced by *Sovetskaia muzyka* (Soviet Music), the official journal of the Union of Soviet Composers.

- 6 Court and church composers of the decadent West managed to maintain pride of place in the Soviet concert hall thanks to the political and ideological implications of their life and work. Bach was a Lutheran as opposed to a Catholic, and a victim of religious circumstances. Mozart ended up in a pauper's grave, and Schubert was, in his time, a "new democratic citizen and appealed to the new kind of listener" (p. 33). Mahler and Richard Strauss had a harder time finding official acceptance; however, the Commissar of Enlightenment (aka Minister of Culture) in the 1920s, Anatolii Lunacharskii, thought it important to program Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* for the Bolshoi Theater concert in Lenin's memory.
- 7 Fairclough is right to discern a dark side to Lunacharskii's cultural leadership: He was perhaps more liberal than Platon Kerzhentsev, head of the Committee on Arts Affairs in the later 1930s, but he could not countenance challenges to his authority. Most of his job involved holding on to his job, and he had difficult decisions to make about Russia's tsarist musical heritage. The classics were unreliable; politically, they could not be trusted. The problem vexed him and his successors. What was to be done, for example, with Glinka's opera *A life for the Tsar*? The libretto had to be rewritten, and Fairclough reveals that Mikhail Bulgakov was involved in making the text politically correct.
- 8 And what about the white émigrés—those who left Russia for good, like Rachmaninoff, and those whom the government expected back, like Prokofiev? Fairclough provides plenty of details in the text, supplemented by generous endnotes. (Just as the main text is dedicated to the history of Soviet music from 1917-53, so too the endnotes document the history of Soviet musicology.) She describes the rewriting of libretti, chronicles the appropriation of imperial music for a Soviet context, and quotes from the trend-setters who firmly believed that music attached to odious pro-tsarist texts existed above and apart from them.
- 9 Of the émigrés, Fairclough lingers on Rachmaninoff, who was harshly denounced at a 1931 All-Russian Conference on Amateur Art in Moscow. The conference report, reproduced on pages 89-90, called for a total Rachmaninoff ban. Music, however, had nothing to do with the indictment; rather, and as Richard Taruskin has noted, the ban was payback for Rachmaninoff's anti-Soviet statements in the American press. Rachmaninoff was "rehabilitated" in the Soviet musical world after his unexpected death in 1943, as Fairclough explains. Concerts were organized, books and articles published. A Soviet critic reassessed Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony of 1908 as a kind of historical stocktaking—an effort, in music, to think about the whole of Russian history from the advent of Orthodox religion, through the feudalism of ancient Rus', the folk fare, the admixture of peoples west, east, south, and north, including all of the grief and the fear. "We can define its main central theme," Iurii Keldysh wrote, "as the theme of the Motherland, Russia, in the broad sense of the word."

- 10 Keldysh was one of the survivors. He saw it all, knew everyone, made friends and enemies and friends again. The Soviet musical world was paradoxically small and wide. Fairclough doesn't forget anyone, even as she moves from the microcosm of petty jealousies and intrigues to the macrocosm of international affairs. She is perhaps strongest in describing international exchanges: To mark Ribbentrop's visit to Moscow in 1939, Stalin instructed the Bolshoi to stage Wagner's *Die Walküre*, for example. She describes the cultural diplomacy between the Soviets and British, French, and Americans, along with the nightmarish crackdown on the cultural exchange organizations (chiefly VOKS) that made it impossible for conductors, performers, and scores to move back and forth between the USSR and the West.
- 11 The merits of *Classics for the Masses* are obvious, and my copy twice disappeared into the hands of graduate students interested in reading something responsible about 20th-century East-West musical contacts. The book is indispensable for those seeking to understand the Sovietization of classical music and the classicalization of Soviet music. But the book also challenges the rhetoric of the Cold War. The USSR was cut off from Western Europe and the United States after the Second World War, and Soviet musicians lost contact with former peers. Fairclough is to be applauded, heartily, for reminding us of the ties.
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AUTHORS

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Simon Morrison is Professor of Music and Slavic Languages and Literatures at Princeton University. His most recent book is *Bolshoi Confidential* (Norton, 2016). He has written extensively on Prokofiev, among other Russian Soviet composers, and he has long been involved in ballet restoration projects based on archival research conducted in Russia, France, and the United States.