

Alban Berg and Us

Personal Notes

I have decided to write this short autobiographical piece in the hope of illuminating for Western as well as new Russian audiences certain aspects of the intellectual development of an (in my opinion important) group of Russian (Soviet) musicians of my generation.

I was born in 1944 in Kotchmes in the autonomous Republic of the Komis, in the far north of Russia, where in a penal camp my parents served out sentences as “enemies of the people” (Paragraph 58/10). They were freed one year before my birth, and settled close to the Kotchmes camp, living in what they believed to be “continual exile”.

My childhood took place in a tiny village named Predchachtaja (which means “next to the mines”), situated a few kilometres from the town of Vorkouta, from which my parents moved away in 1945. The village comprised of several barracks in the middle of the tundra, close to the mine number two and several zones surrounded by barbed wire. A wretched landscape, marshy and at the same time hilly, not far from a river, covered in summer by moss and small shrubs – a landscape which will haunt me for the rest of my life. In the endless winter everything was white, the snow sometimes even covering our barracks.

Despite the hard day-to-day reality – promiscuity, poverty and the lack of any comforts – I was at that time rather happy. As the “little one” of a family which had over three generations suffered a great deal, I was lovingly protected by my mother, my grandmother and my elder sister. The friends of my parents, most of them also former camp inmates, were very kind towards me and spoiled me. Children were, in this environment, rare.

My life seemed to me completely natural, normal. I had, after all, never known another. Sometimes I was witness to extraordinary acts of cruelty, but the capacity of a child to justify everything is astonishing.

Another life began for me suddenly at the age of 14, when I was fortunate enough to be accepted as a student at the Leningrad Music School. This was the only music college in the Soviet Union which took boarding students. Here, coming into contact with students from the entire country, from the most varied social environments and of the most varied nationalities, I gradually began to understand where I came from and how heavily the burden of my family’s fate weighed on me. At this time the topic of penal camps was still taboo. Newspapers, films, literature and official paintings did not speak of it. Censorship was omnipresent. Everyone was afraid, and personal and familial secrets, great and small, were carefully kept silent, despite the beginning of the political thaw...

Only years later did I understand that the fate of my family was no exception. The country had, over decades, undergone a variety of catastrophes, and the suffering of the people was immense: the camps, the murderous wars, the collectivisation, hard daily life and laborious work in the towns. And this suffering was hardly expressed.

Probably it was in music – the art form most difficult to politically control – that the deep pain of the people gradually came to find expression. Music was omnipresent. From the rural folk song, still in existence,

through to the most varied styles, such as jazz “à la russe”, shy and naive, and the patriotic song, sometimes particularly expressive in spite of terrible lyrics, all the way to classical music – all of these could serve to express what had been “experienced” – and so express part of the deep soul of the country.

From this viewpoint my musical career is not unusual. In Vorkouta, when I was around ten years old, I suddenly felt the need – despite a seemingly rather quiet life – to “free” myself from something. I played endless intuitive improvisations à la Beethoven, without understanding what I was doing and why. But after such “playing” I felt a sense of relief. I had the feeling of freeing myself from a terrible, indescribable fear.

The next stage was Leningrad. Whilst I was making progress in my demanding studies to become a professional musician, I began to gradually understand that “great music” often developed in this way. At that time I thought that the Romantics expressed fragility and deep, sometimes agonising, pain, that Beethoven expressed tragic outrage, and Bach Christian endurance. They became “my friends”, their souls, “kindred” with mine, resonated within me.

Through the years my horizons began to broaden. My “Shostakovich period” began when I was sixteen. I can still see him in front of me, in the wings of the Philharmony, after the performance of one of his works. Thin, deathly pale, nervous, with shaking hands – he was unable to light his cigarette. His music struck me as brilliant.

At seventeen I discovered Mahler and Stravinsky, then Bartok and Honegger. The symphonies of Shostakovich (especially the Tenth, the Fourth and the Sixth), his Violin Concerto, Stravinsky’s “Rites of Spring”, Mahler’s “Kindertotenlieder” (“Songs of the Dead Children”) and his Ninth Symphony, the “Symphonie liturgique” by Honegger, “Trauermusik” (“Music of Mourning”) by Hindemith – all of these formed my musical universe at the age of twenty.

In the mid-1960s the USSR gradually liberalised itself, but the ban on the music of the Vienna School continued. And it is these compositions which began to fascinate me more and more. With great excitement I would gather snippets of information on the subject. “Wozzeck”, “Lulu”, “Moses and Aaron” – these titles held a strange fascination for me. When I would sometimes hear such music (privately, on cassette), it made a rather bewildering impression on me.

The “bomb” struck in 1965 when I bought a Polish recording of Berg’s concerto “A la memoire d’un ange” (“In Memory of an Angel”). This piece of music, which on first hearing seemed to me blurred, imprecise and vague, came more and more to conquer my entire being. It produced in me an almost hypnotised state. I listened to this work over and over again.

Why this overwhelming effect? What is so special about this music? The difference seems to me a crucial one. Shostakovich, Honegger and Bartok speak from our world, expressing the greatness and the horror of the twentieth century, but their message often seems disap-

