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The Audience for Classical Music in the USSR: The Government as Mentor

SOTSIOLOGIIA I MUZYKAL'NAIA KUL'TURA. By *Arnol'd Naumovich Sokhor*. Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1975. 202 pp. 59 kopecks.

MUZYKA I SLUSHATEL': OPYT SOTSIOLOGICHESKOGO ISSLEDOVANIIA. By *Vladimir Samoilovich Tsukerman*. Moscow: "Muzyka," 1972. 204 pp. 71 kopecks.

"Net li u Vas lishnego bileta?" ("Don't you have an extra ticket?") is a plea commonly heard at the entrance to concerts of classical music in the Soviet Union. Combined with the renown of many Soviet classical composers and performing artists, this Soviet craving for "serious" music helps preserve many Westerners' views that government support of the arts is desirable in order to maintain and broaden the audience for classical music. The government's financial assistance to costly opera companies, symphony orchestras, and conservatories and its encouragement of the public's interest in music is often considered in the West to be a way in which musical life can be developed along artistic, noncommercial lines and the audience enlarged. In spite of much Western criticism of Soviet governmental interference in cultural life, the notion that the Soviet government's support of the arts has created a vast and knowledgeable audience for classical music in the USSR has gone unchallenged.

To what extent has governmental support of music in fact created such an audience in the Soviet Union? Until recently, discussion of this question could of necessity be only impressionistic and inconclusive, but, within the general renaissance of sociological research in the USSR during the past two decades, there has also been a development of the sociology of music, and the studies that have been carried out to date do offer some tentative answers. The books under review are the two most important works thus far dealing with Soviet sociology of music. The study by the late Arnol'd Sokhor (1924-77) represents the best Soviet theoretical work in the field. Vladimir Tsukerman's monograph is a major empirical study of Soviet music audiences.

Sokhor attempts to give a history of the sociology of music in Russia, to justify the need for such a sociological study, and to develop a typology of music audiences. (His systematization and categorization of terminology in the sociology of music has generally met with appreciation in the West.) Regarding government propagandizing of classical music, he endorses the effectiveness of governmental activity in this area and contrasts capitalism and socialism on this point. He writes that under capitalism "the highest cultural values in many cases are fenced off by commercial barriers (high prices for tickets, phonograph records, and so forth) from mass audiences, are excluded from mass radio and television programs." Under socialism, however, art is "freed from the paths of commercialization. The interests of society and artistic interests per se correspond entirely in our country. Therefore there is every possibility in

socialist society to make musical culture a source of real, actual values of the highest sort, access to which is completely open to all members of society" (p. 122).

Such theoretical statements are subject to empirical verification, and it is in this connection that Tsukerman's study is of interest. Based on research conducted by the Urals Scientific Center of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Tsukerman's book reports the results of a questionnaire survey of a stratified random sample of the populations of two major industrial centers, Sverdlovsk and Cheliabinsk, in March–April of 1967, together with several audience surveys conducted in 1970. Two of Tsukerman's topics are especially relevant to Sokhor's position regarding the effectiveness of governmental participation in musical culture, namely, the relation of the general educational level of the Soviet population to its level of musical culture and the effect of Soviet mass media on the population's tastes in music.

The official view has generally been that the rise in the educational level of the Soviet population will lead automatically to a rise in its cultural level. Lenin believed that the provision of education to the mass of the population would create a foundation for cultural interests (see the discussion in Lev N. Kogan and Viktor P. Polianichko, *Molodoi rabochii i kultura* [Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1975], p. 36). The Urals researchers found, on the contrary, that there has been a widening rift between the population's growing educational level and the prevalence of musical comprehension: "It would be . . . incorrect to think that the growth of general culture of the working masses that has occurred in our country by itself will also take care of the problem of raising the level of their musical culture. . . . on the whole the evaluation of serious genres of music even by representatives of the intelligentsia is still so low that we can speak of a serious lag in the level of musical culture behind that of general education, even of an ever-growing rift between them" (p. 90). Over three-fourths of the tenth-grade students surveyed said that symphonic and chamber music was incomprehensible to them and that they did not know how to listen to it (p. 166). The vast majority of these respondents had completed the music education classes available in grades 1–8 of ordinary secondary schools, but those who had not studied music outside of school had very little knowledge of music: 86.4 percent of the latter group was illiterate when it came to reading music, 97 percent did not know how to sing from written music, and fully 100 percent did not know how to play a musical instrument (p. 161).

Such levels of musical knowledge are evidence of a failure of Soviet music education in the general schools, and specialized conservatories and music schools do not seem to have compensated for this deficiency. Soviet representatives to international conferences often cite the broad network of such specialized schools, but "only the most gifted and, more to the point, most well-off children," notes Tsukerman, "can study in conservatories, music schools and groups, since for the most part these forms of study require payment" (p. 165). There are not enough such specialized schools for the population, as he notes on pages 168–69:

In Sverdlovsk with its one million population, there are a total of seven children's music schools that accept, on the average, three hundred persons a year. It is even more difficult to gain admittance to a music secondary school if one takes into account that there are in all three for an oblast' with an overall population of four and a half million persons. Under such conditions it is not always the most gifted children who enter secondary music institutions, for example, in the day division of the Tschaikovsky Music Secondary School the children of workers comprised 32.4 percent, the children of collective-farm workers 0.9 percent, and the children of white-collar workers 66.7 percent of the student body in 1967. It is unlikely that nature so skewed the division of musical gifts among social groups. Rather, the influence of traditions and existing value orientations in a given milieu and sometimes greater material advantages have endowed the children of white-collar workers with particular musical advantages upon entrance

to music schools and secondary schools. This means that secondary music education institutions can fulfill their basic function well—that is, to teach particularly gifted children music—only if music schools become a common phenomenon in the countryside as well as in the city.

It does not seem, therefore, that government sponsorship of music education has been producing a mass audience for serious music in the USSR. This is not to say that American experience in this regard is better, but, rather, that it does not seem that government support of music through the educational system has been particularly effective.

Likewise, government control of the technical means for mass diffusion of music—radio, television, phonograph records, and so forth—does not seem to be very effective in raising the level of the population's musical culture. This finding surprised the Urals researchers. Regarding phonograph records, for example, on page 141 Tsukerman comes to the following conclusion:

A worker has obtained a phonograph. He and his family as previously from time to time listen (whether attentively or not is another matter) to programs of serious music on the radio and television. . . . But gradually they listen now more rarely to these programs . . . since more time is spent by them on playing phonograph records, which as a rule are of popular music. . . . In its chase after commercial success the firm Melodiia releases a countless number of records of a popular entertainment character that are often of low quality as regards music. At the same time some of the most popular classical compositions, including the works of Beethoven, Mozart, Tschaikovsky, and so forth, are far from always obtainable. The practice of stimulating interest in folk and classical music through charging cheaper prices for such records as a practical matter is not working. The survey of the population showed that the respondents collect primarily records of popular, jazz, and dance music.

Tape recorders are generally used to record jazz and popular music, often taken from foreign radio stations (Tsukerman, pp. 97 and 136). If the listener does tune to Soviet radio or television, he is unlikely to hear much serious music since there is no radio station in the USSR devoted primarily to classical music, and what classical music is heard is played over stations that are harder to receive and usually not during prime listening time. Popular music is generally replacing the serious music played on the major stations (Tsukerman, p. 136).

Tsukerman deplores the poor state of mass musical tastes and comes to the conclusion, remarkable given Soviet conventions, that “the chaotic condition in which the propagandizing and diffusion of music in our planned socialist society find themselves contradicts our society's pristine essence.”

Tsukerman claims that surveys carried out in Sverdlovsk and Cheliabinsk reflect the situation in the RSFSR as a whole (pp. 159–60), and more recent discussions in the Soviet press do not contradict his findings. A series of articles in *Sovetskaia kul'tura* in February 1978 reiterate the fact that interest in classical music is low, particularly among youth, and that concerts go unattended. A recent article by the director of Melodiia in *Literaturnaia gazeta* confirms that the vast majority of records issued in the USSR are of popular music and that the demand for classical music that does exist is, for the most part, ignored (P. I. Shabanov, “Firma ‘Melodiia’: Problemy, plany,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, February 1, 1978). Those interested in broadening the audience for classical music in the United States and elsewhere might reconsider their approaches in light of this Soviet experience.