

POPULAR MUSIC IN THE USSR: PROBLEMS AND OPINIONS

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[155] The questions being discussed at this conference have a great deal of topicality in the artistic life of the Soviet Union. There also the question of the musical life of young people is much talked about, as is the complicated subject of beat music. However, the problems of popular music in the Soviet Union are somewhat different to those in western countries. The term 'pop music' itself often has a negative ring in our country. This is because it is frequently associated with the phenomenon of the commercial exploitation of leisure, or because this area of artistic activity merely becomes a commodity that is bought and sold (or because it is used as a demagogical means of manipulating the social aspirations of the public at large). In our scientific and critical tradition we prefer to use the expression 'popular musical genres' rather than 'pop'. This includes everything from choral music to modern variety and to what we call 'vocal-instrumental beat ensembles'.

In all the different genres that come under this heading there is a common factor: the musicians are not commercially exploitable because their interests are in performing, what they want to perform, and not what the market dictates. The French *variété* composer Joe Dassein said (in a conversation with the Soviet songwriter Jan Frenkel):

You are a lucky man. You're outside business. But I'm caught up in the whirlpool. I work in the music industry and I can no longer write what I want. You're not tied to any agent whose most important concerns are with income and profitability.

Soviet popular music has the whole population of the USSR for its audience — tens of millions of listeners who actively follow all the changes in the musical repertoire. In the Soviet Union there are more than 75 million TV sets and as many radios, and more than 150,000 full-size projectors. Recording studios produce hundreds of millions of records each year. The most professional groups, the most competent choirs, dance groups and variety performers work for the State Philharmonic organisation. They are employed on a permanent basis and one of the group is [156] made a professional manager. Our best loved singers and songwriters receive various kinds of honorary titles and prizes (for example, the Russian singer Ludmila Zykina or the well-known soloist from Moldavia, Sofia Rotava). The well-known writers are also full members of the Union of Soviet Composers.

The love of singing — and moreover of singing songs expressing love for one's country — is not a new tradition in the Soviet Union. Its roots can be seen in the revolutionary and democratic movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, and it is most clearly seen after the October Revolution of 1917. All genres of popular music in the Soviet Union — for example, brass bands, variety, jazz — are in one way or another connected to the song tradition, because of the fact that singing is always involved. The stylistic range of Soviet songs is extremely wide, embracing for example patriotic hymns and heroic marching songs, sports songs for young people, dramatic solo ballads, lyric romances and light-hearted 'miniatures'. All these are performed as modern up-tempo numbers, The melodic quality of Soviet popular music often touches on the folklore of the Soviet republics — Belorussia, Ukraine, Moldavia, Georgia, Armenia, Estonia...

The popular music idiom is also influenced by those of other nationalities., e.g. the German *Kampflied*, the French *chanson*, American jazz. It should be underlined that rock and beat are not a necessary attribute of Soviet popular song, but are to be found only when they can be woven in with national song traditions. We should perhaps also mention the question of proportions between Soviet popular genres and the music of 'western mass culture'. It is common knowledge that many sociologists, and even artists themselves, have expressed negative evaluations of popular culture, calling it counter-culture which has appeared in an age when artistic values are technically reproduced.

The spread of mass cultures has been treated by writers, both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, as a result of the standardisation of modern life and as a means of depriving the individual of his own personality. It is well known that the writer Theodor W. Adorno studied the mechanisms of mass culture; he very acutely perceived the phenomenon as being one of the most dangerous means of ideologically poisoning the people, Armed with powerful techniques, musical mass culture has, according to Adorno, been able to form obedient and uniform-thinking citizens, who are totally under the ideological influence of monopoly-capitalist society. We are by no means in complete agreement with Adorno's methodology, which condemns all artists of the western entertainment industry and is blind to any of the healthy aspects that are part of the people's democratic tradition, or express protest against the capitalist system. Instead of pointing to alternatives, Adorno escapes into elitism and avant-gardism, far removed from the wants and needs of the people. Unfortunately he saw no alternative, but rather than the sort of mass culture which alienates people from the complex problems of modern life we [157] propose an opposite one, one which has sufficient artistic and ethical worth to be able to encourage good feelings and creative values in ordinary people — in Lenin's words, 'to sow in them an artist'. This music must be celebratory and have a spiritual quality, must be free of the conveyor-belt mentality and the dulling effect of narcotics, The functions of these celebratory and spiritual qualities should not be merely to provide people with relaxation after a day's work — there should be cultural and ideological effects too. It is at this point that there is a clear divergence in the development of popular music in the two opposing socio-systems, In capitalist society popular music has a tendency to result in spiritual impoverishment, in the levelling out of the individual's artistic values and in a complete severing from the true values of historical art. In place of the values inherent in the music of the past, popular music in capitalist society offers an illusory, fleeting moment of pleasure, and it is this fleeting moment that becomes the commodity. In a society free from class exploitation, on the other hand, and in which mass culture is not dependant on commercialism, this art (i.e. popular music) has other aims and functions, to wit: to enrich the cultural, aesthetic and spiritual life of each individual - this is the musical antimony in Soviet aesthetics.

Obviously this does not mean there are no exceptions in both capitalist and socialist countries. We should not forget the artistic shortcomings and bad taste, the overuse of clichés which one finds in the mass music of the Soviet Union and which are often strongly criticised. Neither should we forget that in the commercially produced popular music of the West there are achievements that are based on democratic folk traditions, and that these are strengthened by the talents of the individual artists, by the personal aura of these artists, and also sometimes by their personal progressiveness.

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I would like to turn now to discuss in greater detail the destiny of beat music in our country. This music is very widespread. During the last ten to fifteen years a lot of beat groups have appeared. We call them *VIA*s — Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles. According to imprecise data, during the 1970s we had about 66,000 such ensembles. They were mainly small electric guitar groups, and inevitably they performed vocal numbers with lyric texts, and their line-up usually consisted of two or three guitars and electric organ, plus sometimes drums, trumpet and folk instruments (such as the folk flute). Since playing the electric guitar, at least in the beginning, does not require such an advanced technique as do other instruments this kind of ensemble became very popular among young people. The power of the amplifiers gave the small sound of the guitar a much greater volume, which also influenced the listening public.

[158] In a short time our *VIA*s developed their instrumental technique and their repertoire, and rapidly became popular. Examples of musicians who did so are the singers Alla Pugachova and Alexander Gradski, and the songwriter David Tuchmanov, Hundreds of thousands of ensembles were playing in the style of foreign groups, e.g. The Beatles, while a few were developing their own idiom. The best of the latter were to be found not only in Moscow but also in Byelorussia, in Georgia, in the Urals, in Moldavia and in the Ukraine. The most talented of these musicians were able to break through standard rock idioms into completely unexpected areas on the basis of their own national musical traditions. For example:

- Belorussia — Piesniary
- Russia — Ariel (from Cheliabinsk)
- Ukraine — Chervona Ruta
- Georgia — Iveria

Piesniary's line-up, in addition to electric guitars, consists of traditional folk instruments such as cimbalon, pipe and hurdy-gurdy. Their repertoire consists of White Russian folk songs, sometimes with lyrics by national classical poets, presented in the form of a multimedia synthesis using slides, lighting, theatrical effects and costumes. Their lyrics describe such things as heroes of the partisan movement or everyday life in Byelorussia.

In Moscow a new ensemble has come to the fore, led by the poet and guitarist Andrei Makarevich. Here, to the usual rhythm of a rock 'n' roll group are added some new characteristics such as poetic freshness in the lyrics of the ballad, in which the ethical problems which preoccupy young people are put in an interesting way: problems of personal civilian responsibility, duty and conscience, choice of vocation.

Many famous artists in our country have acknowledged the undoubted success of the best *VIA*s, their ability to resolve complex artistic tasks by clear, irresistibly impressive methods. The composer Alexandra Pakhmutova has said how she values in their art their 'sportsmanship in expression, their optimism and youth'.

Andrei Petrov, chairman of the Leningrad organisation of composers, wrote:

We, Soviet musicians, cannot but be excited by the fact that a direct contact with millions of people through beat music gives us the possibility of spreading political and social ideas.

At the same time they soon understood the serious imperfections of this musical movement — its conditioning by fashion, the sicknesses of dilettantism and of the superficial imitation of poor foreign examples. Already by the second half of the 1970s people had begun to talk about the exhaustion of disappointing clichés inherent in the music of VIAs, and about the fact that a fascinating fashion had not lived very long — that the 'boom had ended'. Hence the more adaptable VIAs, having [159] an original artistic potential and talented leaders, have tried to change, to renew their art and to tear themselves away from imitation. The methods involved in this interior change are completely different. They are determined by the inherent openness of form of beat music, by its ability to assimilate different artistic influences from without. Here one also notices the already mentioned influence of folklore, the love of high poetry, and attempts to find new instrumental combinations.

Now I would like to discuss each one of these tendencies in more detail.

Among the best-known ensembles the melodies, rhythms, timbres, decorative attributes, poetic lyrics and subjects, adopted from the national folklore of the people of the USSR, are used to greater and greater extents. If you take into account that the Soviet Union is a fraternal community of tens of nationalities, united in fifteen union republics and twenty autonomous republics, then it is easy to imagine what the possibilities of their popular arts are. The fusion of specific popular elements with methods of beat music gives — if it is done with the necessary taste and tact — unsuspected artistic discoveries.

No less noteworthy is the fact that many ensembles like to use classical and modern poetry — texts with intellectual depth and a remarkable and wise understanding of reality. Thus we have songs after Shakespeare and Burns, Tsvetaeva and Pasternak, Rasul Gamzatov and Bella Akhmadulina, Thus also we find many performances of musicals and other theatrical shows, based on interesting poetic subjects (for example, the show *Song about Fate*, which used texts by the Belorussian classical poet Janka Kunala performed by the ensemble Piesniary, or the rock opera about the popular leader of the eighteenth century Emilian Pugachov by the Ural ensemble Ariel). Recently the well-known poet Andrei Voznesenski began to work in this area of art when he collaborated with the composer A. Rybnikov on the rock musical *Junona and Avos*, performed in one of the Moscow theatres.

Of course not all these productions reach a standard of musical perfection worthy of the chosen classical lyrics. But the fact of the growth in interest in real high poetry itself — after all the home-made, do-it-yourself products that come nowhere near the best quality — attests to the way artistic requirements have grown among young people, Individual authors' attempts to assimilate into beat music artistic elements of earlier musical styles, and in particular the intonation of 18th century baroque music, bear witness to this same growth.

Another tendency, observable in a few VIAs, has led to the revival of virtuoso instrumental skills, something which is unfortunately lost in the overwhelming majority of rock ensembles, The simple scheme of standard guitar accompaniments and the one-sided adulation of the vocal principle supersede the skills of the master improvisers of jazz. In an attempt to make up for these losses, a few beat ensembles have turned back to the rich possibilities of jazz, in order to try to synthesise them [160] with some of the more attractive elements of electric

guitar rock. Thus, in the ensemble Arsenal, led by Alexei Kozlov, one can hear virtuoso playing by trumpets and saxophones, forming an unexpected interaction between rock music and the enduring qualities of jazz, with neither of them willing to yield to the other. The practice of recent years has also confirmed something else: the universal fashion of rock music with its deafening dictatorship of decibels and monotony of rhythm grew tiring for many listeners and gave rise to counter movements. It became clear that the attempt to give these forms of music-making an unjustified 'monopoly' in modern music, to canonise them as the only valid form of self-expression for young people, is not a true reflection of the situation. Practice has proved that young people's tastes are many-sided, and the idea of 'youth culture', as a counterbalance to the basic artistic culture of the people was shown to be ephemeral. Today the teenagers of yesterday, of the 1950s and 1960s, who went into ecstasies over their idols, have grown up and tomorrow can part company with the tastes of up and coming generations, A flirtation with youth, a naive worshipping of their spontaneous enthusiasm, occurred more often in the past than it does today, but in any case each time life has overturned the special pretensions in the idea of 'youth culture' and shown them to be short-lived fads.

Gilbert Chesterton wrote about this as far back as the beginning of the century, calling it 'a pitiful admiration for the youth'. The fashionable rumours that youth is always right are pitiful sentiments', said the English satirist, warning against slavish enthusiasm for youth's rebellious excesses. Such appeals are equally relevant at this moment, when a large number of young people and older people prefer doubtful transient pleasures to the real pleasures of artistic understanding. In connection with this we are particularly pleased with the progressive forms of making popular music that resist the one-sided cult of noisy mechanical rock music.

At this point I should like to point out that in Moscow and in many of the capitals of the republics youth choirs have been started, performing old popular songs in authentic folkloristic surroundings. Pioneers of this movement were the Moscow student choir of Dmitri Pokrovski and the Georgian choir Gordel, Pokrovski's choir sings *a capella*, without any composer's arrangements, and without amplifiers and boring guitar accompaniments. As a rule its repertoire, choral texture and manner of performance reproduce the real folkloristic style carefully, based on close cooperation with the villagers, lovers of traditional song. The choir adapts from old popular masters the most valuable things that are inherent in the folklore of these peoples and which have little by little been forgotten under the impact of contemporary popular music. The Pokrovski ensemble also incorporates instrumental solos on old Russian popular instruments — zhaleika, psaltery and horn. Performances by this choir in Moscow and in the surrounding districts had an unexpectedly great [161] success, especially among young people. Similar choirs have appeared in many provincial towns in Russia and even in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. One of these Lithuanian ensembles gives performances in the open air, using the characteristic Lithuanian countryside for its backcloth. The Estonian ensembles carefully reproduce the national costumes and use dramatised forms of the traditional ways of making music. Other collectives cultivate different provincial dialects and particular regional manners that are still to be found in the people's daily life. Thus the Pokrovski choir specialises in performing songs about everyday life and historical songs about the Don Cossacks from the southern regions of Russia. Most such collectives originate at universities or conservatories, and an important part of their audience is recruited from among the intellectual layers of student society. This is that part of the audience which the sociologists call 'the outstripping group'. I am delighted to see that the number of such listeners is growing noticeably.

Another pole of artistic counter-movement in the mass music of our day is the solo song of a romantic lyric character, mostly with excellent classical and modern lyrics. The particular character of the performance of these songs — confidential, intimate, tender, based on a soft, expressive enunciation of the poetic words — impresses many people, recalling the tradition of Russian song culture. With their tender singing and quiet accompaniment these songs are in stark contrast to the noisy, nervous, dynamically overcharged structure of beat music.

Closely related to these quiet and deep-thinking lyrics, 'walking', as Johannes Becher put it 'on the feet of a dove,' there is the art of the talented modern bards who also form an active artistic group. They are not a new phenomenon — the style arose in our country more than two decades ago — but at the moment it is enjoying a new wave of public recognition. I'm referring to the non-professional creators of modern songs who perform the roles of composer, poet and singer, accompanying themselves on the guitar. The names of these talented bards - the poet Bulat Okhudzhava, the actor Vladimir Vysocki, the graphic artist Yevgeni Bachurni - won universal fame. Their songs, as performed by the composers themselves, are being disseminated on thousands of discs, and the best songs attract people by the freshness of their poetic voice, their wit and the liveliness of their subjects, as well as by their special musical feeling.

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I should also mention some farther musical styles which are popular among young people. For example there are the ever-increasing discotheques with their many-sided repertoires, there are the numerous attempts to organise theatre performances in a beat style, there are the international festivals of political songs, always received with great enthusiasm, in Sochi, Novosibirsk, Riga, Toljatti, etc. At [162] these youth festivals there are usually performances by choirs and ensembles of various nationalities, including guests from foreign countries and foreign students studying at Soviet universities. Their repertoire mainly consists of songs — be they Russian, German, Cuban, Chilean, Vietnamese, Italian — calling for peace and détente, for friendship among peoples and international solidarity. One of these festivals, in Novosibirsk, was held in the open air in the presence of thousands of onlookers; the young people sang, danced and kindled festive fires, on which they burned enormous scarecrows, symbolising lies and inhumanity, war psychosis and despotism.

Such are a few of the vocal experiments of recent years, showing the richness and variety of musical interests among a large audience that is far from being dominated by the superficially attractive clichés of beat music and modern pop hits.

Finally, I should like to touch on the role of Soviet musicology in the study and development of popular musical genres. In recent years the interest of musicologists in these artistic fields has grown considerably. Books and pamphlets have appeared examining the problems of the genres and the art of the best known practitioners. Theses for musicology degrees have been written and defended, devoted to various aspects of the history and theory of mass and variety songs. There is, for example, the book by Vladimir Zak, *On the Melodies of People's Songs*, and the study by Larissa Alexeeva, based on experiments in which different interpretations of variety songs were acoustically tested. I should also like to mention the special works published by the Soviet Publishing House, e.g. *Pop Music: Views and Opinions* and the pamphlet by Vladimir Yashkin *Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles* (Moscow, 1980).

Particularly interesting are the attempts by a group of Moscow socio-musicologists E. Alexeev, G. Golovinski and others, to study the musical tastes of modern young people with the aid of oral tests and so-called 'sound questionnaires'. One of these texts, made on 2,000 young Muscovites — workers, officials, students — has provided the opportunity to explain the extremely complex picture of differentiation in musical interests in accordance with the differences in age, social standing and level of education. From the general prevalence of more popular genres over more academic ones it becomes clear how crucial the dynamics of the positive changes in musical taste are to measuring the cultural and spiritual growth of each young citizen. This method of oral investigation is very interesting. It is based on listening to and evaluating a few fragments of music, from rock songs and old Russian traditional items to Beethoven and Rachmaninov symphonies or the complex chamber music of Webern. Conclusions concerning musical preferences drawn from this sociological study give us the opportunity to draw up a series of rules which are important to policy-making in repertoire and to practical areas of mass education in music.