

Writings of Composers and Critics of the Russian Avant-garde

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Introductory Remarks

Research on early Soviet music history has revealed a conflict among a number of musical associations. The salient associations among them were the Association of Contemporary Music (ASM) and the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM), which propagated the music they liked. In the 1970s, several Western researchers revealed the situation of the conflict at that time (Schwarz 1972, Gojowy 1980), although they provided misleading facts because of a lack of information and political bias that generally characterized the early years of the Cold War era. Fortunately, when Perestroika reforms progressed in the 1980s, archives in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) opened to the public, which, in turn, propelled the research on early Soviet music history; studies became more factually accurate, thanks to the availability of many documents and rich information (Edmunds 2000, Nelson 2004, Vlasova 2010). These studies have examined policies of the musical associations and their members, including composers, critics, and musicologists. However, they have not addressed how the associations' journals served as political platforms by publishing their

policies on music and how such publications contributed to the conflict in the early Soviet musical life. Moreover, despite such literatures being written by key persons of that time, the greater part of them have not yet been studied thoroughly.

In this presentation, in the first phase of the research on these writings, I examine the writings of Russian composers and critics that were published in the journals of the two associations, namely, the ASM and the RAPM, from 1923 to 1924, when their activity virtually started, with a focus on the associations' political attitude at the time. These two associations were the only ones that could publish their own musical journals in the early 1920s. I begin by introducing examples of writings of the composers and critics published in the journals of the ASM, *Contemporary Music* and *Musical Culture*, which actively propagated new music, including music by foreign composers, such as Darius Milhaud, Paul Hindemith, and Henry Cowell, and domestic ones, such as Alexander Scriabin, Nikolay Roslavets, and Nikolay Myaskovsky. Next, for comparison, I present manifestos in the journal of the RAPM. Lastly, I analyze the characteristics of these works in those days by comparing the materials published in the journals of the ASM and the RAPM, taking into consideration the political and social phenomena at the time they were written.

Writings in the Journals of the ASM: *Contemporary Music* and *Musical Culture*

Before analyzing the writings in the journals of the ASM, I present the association and its journals more extensively. The ASM was co-founded in Moscow by composers Nikolay Roslavets (1881–1944) and Nikolay Myaskovsky (1881–1950), critic-composer Leonid Sabaneev (1881-1868), critic Victor Belyaev (1888–1968), and musicologist Pavel Lamm (1882–1951). Its first official journal, *K novim beregam* (*Toward New Shores*), in 1923 was short-lived . In February of the next year, it was replaced by *Sovremennaya muzika* (*Contemporary Music*), which continued until 1929. The ASM also published three issues of the monthly journal *Muzikal'naya kul'tura* (*Musical Culture*) from July 1924. After it stopped publishing *Contemporary Music*, the ASM itself ceased to be active and virtually merged with other associations into the Soyuz Sovetskikh Kompozitorov (Union of Soviet Composers) according to the historic Communist Party Resolution, “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations,” in 1932. In the early Soviet era, certain musical associations, such as the ASM, published official policies, such as manifestos in journals, which were often titled “Zadachi (Tasks).” In this presentation, I present three of such manifestos written by critics and composers in chronological order.

The first manifesto of the ASM was published in the first issue of *Contemporary Music* (February 1924), which was edited by Belyaev, Vladimir Derzhanovsky (1881–1942), and Sabaneev. The journal opened with an article “Contemporary Music” by Sabaneev. He was a composer and musical critic, who had a main interest in contemporary music and composers, such as Scriabin. He was active in the National Institute of Musical Sciences and the ASM, and wrote biographies and well-known memoirs of Scriabin in the 1920s, then went to exile in 1926.

In the ASM’s first manifesto, Sabaneev defined contemporary music as “...not music which is written in the present day... [but] creation which has something new, something convincingly different from the past, whether the new dimension of experiences or the new technical resource” (Sabaneev 1924: 1). For him, “contemporary music is never the creation of yesterday; it is either that of the future or a fresh revival of something older, aesthetically forgotten, or received as the new” (2). He said: “This contemporary music has no unified direction at all... today we will find not only the difference of tastes and evaluation but also a problematic contradiction. Anyway, it is fully natural” (3). Interestingly, in this manifesto, Sabaneev listed the various languages of contemporary music and illustrated the association’s approach as something that seized maximal creative possibilities. More importantly, however, he neither wrote from any political viewpoint that was typical in the early Soviet era nor used

political terms throughout the article; there was no mention of Karl Marx or Vladimir Lenin who presented the ruling ideology of that era. Although the significance of avoidance of political labelling in this article is difficult to understand based only on a single article, it becomes clearer, reading the next article, which was published five months later. The second manifesto included many political opinions of the ASM.

From the first page of the first issue of *Musical Culture* (July 1, 1924), a manifesto titled “Our Tasks” was printed. Perhaps, its title itself has a more political tone compared with “Contemporary Music.” Although it was an anonymous manifesto, as Raku acknowledged (2014: 18), it is apparent that it was written by a leader of the association; the writer could be a composer, one of the co-founders of the association, *Musical Culture* managing editor Roslavets, critics Belyaev, another critic Boris Asafiev, who was known as Igor Glebov, (1884–1949), Derzhanovsky, Sabaneev, or music theorist Boleslav Yavorsky (1877–1942). This long article enumerates the three tasks the association was encountering. It mentioned the nature of proletariat and proletarian culture, and quoted words of Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky that were agreeable to Lenin.

The manifesto stated: “Our epoch is not yet an epoch of new culture, but only the entrance to it. We must, first of all, take possession, nationally, of the most important elements

of the old culture, to such an extent, at least, as to be able to pave the way for a new culture”

(Anon 1924: 4¹).

Based on these words, the author asserted the importance of old culture and its learning for the newborn Soviet Russia. The author said: “This is, generally, the method to learn the past culture, which will be employed by the proletariat by the time that they are able to establish a firm basis of socialism” (5). The author considered “learning of old culture” as the association’s first task and “this task is an omnidirectional help to the proletariat who are aiming at digesting one of the realms of the world culture, that is, the realm of music” (5). Notably, the author wrote that learning the past culture, arts, and music was a temporary process needed for the new ruling proletariat class, which would build its own culture over the past one in the near future. Therefore, what are the culture, arts, and music of the proletariat?

According to the author of the article, the characteristic of the arts of proletariat is what would be called “the art of a revolution” by people of the future, based on the notion that it would be a newly born idea coming from a revolution, and it would have dynamics reflecting the historical event and class struggles of the Soviet “*Strum und Drank* (bureya i natisk)” epoch. The author wrote further that although the elements of “the art of revolution” had emerge in

¹ This translation is based on “Trotsky on revolutionary art - Columbia University,”

http://www.columbia.edu/~lmp3/mydocs/culture/trotsky_art.htm (accessed May 7, 2018).

music of his age, the second task would be fully “manifesting, being conscious and fixing of these elements in order to define the character and style of [their] music, ‘the music of revolution’ (6).”

The third and last task was to show the proletariat “an always existing tendency toward it [the better, shining and wonderful future], the most wonderful and noble ideal” (7) by their truly socialistic and classless art.

Clearly, there are plenty of political terms mentioned in the second manifesto that were unseen in the first. Examples of these terms are proletariat, socialist, ruling class, and class culture. Additionally, the subsequent article of Sabaneev, who did not use political terms in the first manifesto, followed this example.

Although Sabaneev again titled his article “Contemporary Music” and repeated his definition that contemporary music is “not every music written in the present day... even if it is written by young composers,” his attitude was quite different. In developing his definition of music in this third manifesto, he adopted terms, such as ideology, proletariat, military avant-garde, communist, and Marxist. Here, Sabaneev abolished the previous narrative in his first manifesto and followed suit with the anonymously written second manifesto. The change in his narrative raises the question of why he did it. To examine such change further, let us introduce another viewpoint, that is, the manifestos that were published in the RAPM’s journal.

Manifestos of the RAPM in *Musical Virgin Soil*

Here, I show two manifestos in the RAPM's single important journal, *Muzikal'naya nov'* (*Musical Virgin Soil*), and consider its impact on the writings of the ASM. The RAPM was founded in June 1923 by composers-teachers Lev Shul'gin (1890–1968) and David Chernomordikov (1869–1947) and musicologist Aleksey Sergeev (1889–1958). All three were employees of the Agitational Department of the State Press's Music Section. In the beginning, the RAPM was a small association that helped achieve the tasks of the Agitational Department and aimed to satisfy "the demands of mass, amateur musical activities" (Edmunds 2000: 67). In the end of 1924, young members of the association carried out reforms, which caused the main members, including Shul'gin and Sergeev, to leave. Lev Lebedinsky (1904–92) became the new leader; the RAPM gradually grew; and in the latter of 1920s, it became a device of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to manipulate the musical world in the early Soviet Russia. Its prominent members in 1925 achieved high-ranking posts in the Union of Soviet Composers.² In 1923, the year of its foundation, the RAPM started publishing its monthly journal *Musical Virgin Soil* using funds from the Agitational Department. In this journal, manifestos of the association were at times published; however, almost all these manifestos

² See Vlasova 2010.

have not been examined.³ Here, I present two of these manifestos; the first one was published in the first issue of *Musical Virgin Soil* in October 1923, and the second was published in the sixth-seventh issue (a combined issue) in 1924.

The first manifesto of the RAPM, titled “Nashi zadachi (Our Tasks),” was much simpler than the second. After praising the political success of the USSR, an anonymous author insisted that there is a routine only in the domain of music that contained conservative nature, and called for the musicians to unite in their proletarian platform (Anon. 1923: 5–6). Generally, there were several political terms, such as the great October Revolution and Marxist. However, these terms were used only stereotypically.

Interestingly, the second manifesto, which was published in the middle of 1924 (possibly in March or April⁴), demonstrated the radical political change of the organization that, perhaps, resulted in the parting of a few of its former leaders. In the article titled “Forthcoming

³ An exception is the last manifesto published in 1929. See Edmunds 2000 (for some reason, he does not count the articles in 1924 as manifestos of the RAPM; one of which is presented in my presentation).

⁴ This combined issue did not indicate publication date. However, it was possibly published in March or April 1924, because the former issue, No. 5, was published on February 29, 1924, and the advertisement of the journal in the No. 6–7 stated that “the journal appears once a month.”

Tasks (A Leading Article),” Chernomordikov, the only founder who stayed after the reform of 1924, declared the association’s formal decision on the dependency of the journal on the RAPM,⁵ which was based on Revolutionary Marxism and dictatorship of the proletariat. Next, he referred to the manifesto in the first issue of the journal, and criticized the journal for “[not fulfilling...] the expression of the political line” of the RAPM (Chernomordikov 1924: 3). In the end of the manifesto, the author swore allegiance of the journal to the RAPM, an example of *Pravda*, which was the official newspaper of the Soviet Union.

The Influence of Soviet Politics on the Writings of the Two Association

Comparing the manifestos of the two associations, I show a relationship of the two associations and the influence of the Soviet politics on them. Reviewing them mainly from their political stance, a chronology of the emergence of a political viewpoint is showed in Fig. 1.

⁵ In the article, the association was called the “VAPM,” but it is the same association as the RAPM.

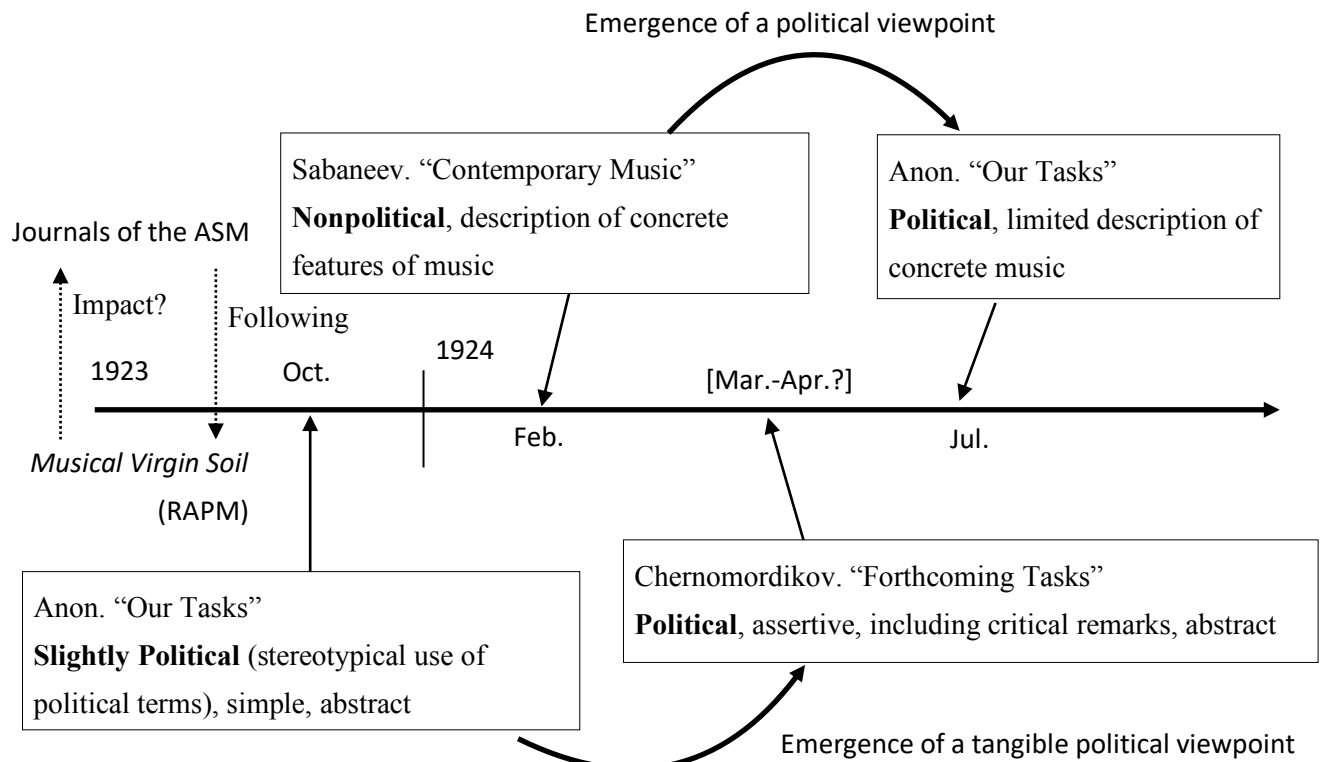


Fig. 1: A Chronology of the Manifestos of the RAPM vis a vis the ASM

Of four articles, "Our Tasks" in *Musical Virgin Soil* was first published. It contained political words, but they were used only stereotypically. Sabaneev's article in the first issue of *Musical Culture* contained no political words, and was mostly concerned with "contemporary music" and its requirements. The third article, "Forthcoming," by Chernomordikov in the journal of the RAPM was similar to the first article, but asserted more politically and radically. As we observed earlier, the fourth article by a member of the ASM adopted the political terminologies, which were never seen in Sabaneev's manifesto.

Based on these findings, it appears that the second manifestos of both associations were concerned with politics, by adopting political terminologies or displaying their own political platforms. Moreover, from a chronological viewpoint, the manifestos in the journals of the ASM followed the style of the RAPM's *Musical Virgin Soil*. Perhaps, the latter influenced the former. When looking at the social background in the Soviet era, an interesting relationship emerges.

In the first weeks of 1924, the Red Professors' Faction was organized in Moscow Conservatory to unite all "revolutionary-minded" teachers. Its founding fathers included Nikolay Sherman, a representative of the Soviet Communist Party to the conservatory's board. The Faction denounced "the prevalence of an 'art for art's sake' mentality" and led the faculty purge in 1924, 1925, and 1929 (Nelson 2004: 163, Vlasova 2010: 24–28). In this fashion, the Party's policies on music penetrated gradually and at times became a regulation. Within this context, it is indicated that both the ASM and the RAPM thought that they must include more political viewpoints and presented their positions in their manifestos in detail, when the Party's power over and policies on music were apparently consolidated in the beginning of 1924. The precedence of the RAPM over the ASM can be explained by the fact that the RAPM and the monthly *Musical Virgin Soil* was supported directly by the State Press, an organ of the state. Meanwhile, the ASM was only an association by volunteer musicians, although it had been

approved by the official People's Commissar. Therefore, the RAPM was more sensitive to political problems than the ASM was, and it made the immediate reform only after a year of its foundation.

Concluding Remarks

In this study, the manifestos of the associations from 1923 to 1924 showed the relationship among the ASM and the RAPM, and suggested the influence of politics of the Communist Party in the early Soviet period.

My future work will involve further examination of the manifestos and articles published in the journals during the 1920s. Moreover, I will examine the relationship between the associations and authors of articles, policies shown in articles, and the authors' musical work, if they are composers.

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