

Benjamin Britten in the Music Culture of the Soviet Union in the 1960s (to the 100th Anniversary of the Composer's Birth)

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Abstract

The period of the 1960-s was difficult and controversial. Former allies of the anti-Hitler coalition turned to be on different sides of the acute ideological struggle which nearly led to the world war. Tremendous work was carried by artists, musicians who united disparate peoples into the community calling for the universal values. The central place in such the sphere of music belongs to one of the greatest composers of the 20th century, Benjamin Britten. Together with the Soviet musicians he pushed the world back from the sharp ideological confrontation.

Keywords: B.Britten, P.Pears, USSR, M.Rostropovich, G.Vishnevskaya, D.Shostakovich, symphonic and chamber music.

The events unfolding in the world, which had survived the most destructive war in the history of human civilization, were dramatic and characterised by multi-vector directions of their development.

The countries that joined the anti-Hitler coalition in the 40s, in the 60s were experiencing the peak of their ideological hostility, teetering on the verge of unleashing the third world war. At the same time, the Soviet Union, headed the unpredictable and highly controversial leader Nikita Khrushchev, pursued a policy of flirtations with liberalism in an attempt to overcome the cult of personality of Joseph Stalin and remove the notorious “Iron Curtain”, which for decades had protected the USSR from Western influence. Announcing to the world about building of communism in the Soviet Union, Khrushchev, trying to achieve military superiority over capitalism, was taking great efforts to find ideological grounds to prove the superiority of the Soviet system. The main role in this process was to be played by Soviet science and arts. Khrushchev’s main political slogan “to catch up and overtake America” pushed him to expand cultural contacts where Soviet artists had to prove their superiority. According to the USSR leadership, it was to be based on the new conception of “ideological education” which was very developed in the country.

It is also worth mentioning that in the world threatened by huge military arsenal ready to explode at any minute, it is people of art who became ambassadors of peace.

The 1960s are characterized by an unprecedented flourishing of national musical cultures that presented the humanity with the masterpieces of Zoltan Kodaly in Hungary, Carl Orff and Paul Hindemith in Germany, Pancho Vladigerov in Bulgaria, Grazyna Bacewicz and Witold Lutoslawski in Poland, Igor Stravinsky and Samuel Barber in the United States, in France, Olivier Messiaen and others. The considerable role in the music culture in the second half of the 20th century was played by the outstanding English composer Benjamin Britten.

In the Soviet Union at that time there was a whole cohort of world famous composers, among whom we can name Dmitry Shostakovich, Aram Khachaturian, Tikhon Khrennikov, Georgy Sviridov and deceased in 1953, Sergei Prokofiev. Among world class performance the brightest were violinists David Oistrakh and Leonid Kogan, pianist Sviatoslav Richter and Emil Gillels, cellists Mstislav Rostropovich and Daniil Shafran, singer Galina Vishnevskaya, Zara Dolukhanova etc.

Now when the pages reveal the true history of culture and the fate of its leaders, especially in the Soviet Union we should pay tribute to its heroes, as the testament of the famous Czech antifascist writer Julius Fucik, that "there should not be nameless heroes" has not lost its significance. In the 1960s B. Britten was deservedly called the great English composer who had given back to Britain the title of a musical power which the country used to have in the days of Henry Purcell (1659-1695).

Britten's favourite place was Aldeburgh on the East coast of England. It was at the Alder burgh festival where B. Britten developed long-term friendship with the prominent Soviet artists Mstislav Rostropovich and Galina Vishnevskaya. For the first time they met at the Edinburgh Festival on 7 September 1960, when in the presence of M. Rostropovich D. Shostakovich brilliantly performed his Concerto for Cello and Orchestra. This is a truly historic acquaintance grew into a longstanding friendship and creative collaboration. Impressed by Rostropovich's performance, Benjamin Britten immediately began working on a cello sonata, which was performed for the first time on 4 July 1961 at the Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh. The success of the concert surpassed all expectations and opened the most fruitful "instrumental period" in the work of Britten, who only for the great Soviet cellist wrote a symphony and three suites. They were brilliantly performed by Rostropovich in the USSR and abroad.

The result of the friendly and creative communication of the great musicians was the performance of the Haydn concerto in C major, found and edited by Rostropovich, with the cadence of Britten. The performance was given by Rostropovich at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1964, and then recorded for the Dessa Company in Oxford Church along with the cello symphony. The famous cellist, Rostropovich's pupil, Elizabeth Wilson (Wilson 2011, p.266), recalling the stories of her teacher about the festival in Aldeburgh, wrote that there was a surprisingly homely atmosphere and a special spirit, "where the best artists were free to play music and enjoy the fellowship." This festival produced such a great impression on Rostropovich, who was at that time at the zenith of his fame and influence in the USSR, that he made a great effort to organize such festivals at home. Finally, he managed to do it, promoting the works of Britten's in Russia, where his music was not known.

It is interesting to refer to Britten's operas, which became incredibly popular in Europe and America, and later in the USSR. This is how the famous musical figure of Russia, Solomon Volkov (Volkov 2007, p.478 – 479), described his impression from Britten's opera, "In 1964 in Leningrad Benjamin Britten pushed our imagination by showing some of his operas, including his chamber masterpiece" Turn of the Screw "by Henry James which amazed us with its psychological subtlety." As the author notes later, this event became in many ways a turning point for the young musicians - students of the Leningrad Conservatoire.

Open borders policy played an important role in the exchange of musicians in the West and the USSR. For example, the London Festival in 1964 was attended by the conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky. During Shakespeare's celebrations he was attracted by Britten's opera "A Midsummer Night's Dream" which made him an ardent promoter of Britten's opera creation. In the leading music magazine "Soviet Music", he devoted his interesting articles to the English composer. Rozhdestvensky (1964, p.88-89) also published excerpts from Britten's letter, where he shares his thoughts about the musical embodiment of the works of Shakespeare, concluding that "only a genius is able to pay tribute to Shakespeare through music." This reflected a deep admiration the composer had for Shakespeare and the desire to learn and to learn from him, trying to understand music through his images.

So Britten maintained the active interest showed by Soviet musicians to Shakespeare works. In turn, due to the purposeful activity of the best Soviet artists promoting the music of Britten, several visits of the British composer to the USSR were made possible. Since 1963, he came in 1964, 1971. Each of these visits was a truly historic event in music and even the political life of the Soviet Union.

During his visit to the Soviet Union as early as in 1964, when the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra performed his Symphony for Cello, Britten gave an interview to the magazine "Soviet Music" (Aphonina, 1964, p.129-130), which highlighted the Rostropovich, saying, "This is an incredible man! Downright unfair that one person is able to do so many different things and, moreover, and in an excellent way". Indeed, the incredible energy of the great cellist allowed organizing a unique event - the festival "Days of Benjamin Britten's" that took place in Armenia. It was the first detailed presentation of many of the composer's works which was attended by Symphony Orchestra of Armenia, the author himself, his permanent singer Peter Pears, the singer Galina Vishnevskaya, Mstislav Rostropovich, string quartet named after Sergei Prokofiev and a Master of Arts from Armenia.

We would like to refer to these almost forgotten pages of Britten's dialogues with Soviet musician as it was a significant major breakthrough of the "iron curtain" consequences and it also coincided with the "Caribbean crisis" in relations between the USSR and the USA. In this regard, two weeks of the festival of British music in the USSR in 1964 was the result of tremendous work of musicians from both sides who were able to rise above ideological differences to show a great desire to promote the best examples of world music.

As Benjamin Britten noted back in an interview in 1963 (Aphonina, 6 1963, p.100-103), "Russian and British people have long existing friendship and sympathy, and you should not make judgments about English people only based on things they publish in our newspapers. We feel a great respect for Soviet art; Soviet artists and performances have become an integral part of our musical life. We would like you to know our art." After more than half of a century these words are still relevant.

As a reviewer E. Oganessian wrote of the festival (Oganessian, 1964, p.109-111), "Five days lasted the festival, five days in a hot, almost empty city of Yerevan, and during those five days the Philharmonic and the Union of Composers halls were full of people, conquered by Britten's generous music."

We cannot reflect all the delights of the reviewer about the concerts, but the following is the example of deepest gratitude of the listeners: the composer was given a five-thousand-year-old amphora, a picture of the great Armenian painter Martiros Saryan, a bust of Britten, made by one of the young sculptors along with the wishes from a great number of people to continue such meetings in the future. They also signed an agreement with the Armenian Opera and Ballet Theatre about production of Britten's "Rape of Lucretia."

A new creative impetus for Britten's work was his acquaintance, and then a deep creative friendship with Galina Vishnevskaya – a famous Soviet singer, the wife of M. Rostropovich.

In her famous book *Vishnevskaya* (Vishnevskaya 1993) devotes many pages to their touching, and at times dramatic friendship. Through all his life, she carried a deep respect for Britten, whom she first met at the Aldeburgh Festival in the summer of 1961. Vishnevskaya expressed first impressions in the following words, "I think everyone who had the privilege to know this fascinating man, must feel the simplicity and naturalness when talking to him."

It is interesting to note that the myth about the alleged British callousness and snobbery, is broken by the Soviet musicologist L. Hackel (1967, p.112) when he writes about the remarkable English pianist John Ogdon, "The general public was impressed by the good-natured look of the pianist as well as his, apparently, his good-natured style of play free of aggressiveness, not enslaving anybody's will and heart ...".

Shaken by Galina Vishnevskaya's performance, Britten told her that he was going to compose "War Requiem" and the soprano will be written specially for her. For unknown ideological reasons, the Soviet leadership did not let Galina Vishnevskaya go to take part in the premiere of this great composition which took place on 30 May 1962 in Coventry Cathedral. Vishnevskaya managed to sing in this historic work of Britten inspired by her phenomenal singing only in January 1963 in Albrecht Hall, London. In the USSR the "War Requiem" was performed only in 1966.

Joint creative work of B. Britten and G. Vishnevskaya resulted in a number of gramophone records, where the great composer performed as a pianist.

Many years of companionship with Rostropovich and Vishnevskaya opened another facet in the works by Britten - his in-depth interest in Russian culture. Visiting the Soviet Union for the second time he brought a volume of Pushkin's poems with an English translation saying he was going to write a song cycle based on Pushkin's poems in Russian. Britten confirmed his intention visiting Pushkin's house-museum in the village of Michailovka to feel the atmosphere of Pushkin's time. It is in this magical place that Britten played an antique piano and gave the performance of his entire cycle of "Echoes of the Poet" which takes a special place in his work.

According to Galina Vishnevskaya, soon Britten performed the cycle for Shostakovich thus initiating true friendship between the two great composers. Inspired by the friendship, B. Britten dedicated to Shostakovich his opera "The Prodigal Son", and Shostakovich dedicated to Britten his Fourteenth Symphony. Britten showed his interest to Russian culture composing his 3rd Suite for Cello, dedicated to Rostropovich. The Suite is based on the four Russian themes and became one of the highly personal works of Britten written for the brilliant cellist.

According to E. Wilson (2011, 294), Rostropovich decided not to write it down because he believed that “this music lives its own mysterious life beyond time and space.” The premiere took place in Aldeburgh at the end of 1974, when Rostropovich left the Soviet Union. However, communication with the Soviet musicians to Britten in the late 60s and early 70s became dramatic.

When a new Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev came to power in 1964, the whole ideological work was given to the "gray cardinal" of the regime Mikhail Suslov. So, after a brief "thaw" in the Soviet Union, free thinking musicians, writers and composers were severely pursued. Among those were Britten's close friends - Rostropovich, Vishnevskaya, Shostakovich, Richter and others.

It should be noted that Britten was taking enormous effort to somehow protect his Russian friends from an increasing ideological pressure. Thus, despite the order from the Ministry of Culture of the USSR forbidding Rostropovich to perform at the festival "Days of British Music" which was to take place in Moscow and Leningrad in 1971, Britten and the leadership of the orchestra Britten firmly insisted on the participation of the great cellist, or talking about the abolition of the festival. So Britten showed his strong integrity, loyalty to their friendship and decency. The concerts were a great success, and Britten conducted in both concerts, where Richter and Rostropovich played his Piano Concerto and Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, respectively.

At this point, we note that Britten's communication with the great Soviet pianist Svyatoslav Richter deserves very serious consideration. They were introduced to each other by Rostropovich, and Richter noted about it (Monsaingeon 2005, p.95) “I will always be grateful to him because he helped me to meet Benjamin Britten.”

Svyatoslav Richter worked hard to promote the instrumental and opera music of Britten in the Soviet Union. He performed and then recorded Britten's Piano Concerto with Orchestra conducted by the composer in 1971. During the famous December Nights at the Pushkin Museum Richter staged two of the composer's operas «Albert Herring» and «The Turn of the Screw». Subsequently, Richter said (Monsaingeon 2005, p.107), “I am convinced that Britten is one of the most significant composers of the century”. He had this feeling throughout his life, listening to the recordings of the great English composer. In 1987 listening to "Curlew River", he expressed his admiration in the following words (Monsaingeon 2005, p.327), “An amazing work of Britten. I do not know whether all will be able to understand this beauty. Isn't it too subtle and weightless? And, of course, very unusual ...“.

In his diary entries Richter used a lot of subtle expressions of admiration from listening to Britten's works in the records as well as in opera and philharmonic halls in the world. The last diary entry about the music of Britten refers to 1993, when Richter approached his 80th birthday, and his friend and a great composer Benjamin Britten Baron for 17 years had been at peace at the cemetery of the local parish church in Aldeburgh, a place which, thanks to him has become a place of attraction for many famous musicians of the twentieth century including the ones from the Soviet Union.

In a short article it is difficult to describe a huge turnaround in the world public opinion, made by Britten and his Soviet friends. They have become true ambassadors of the peace, the world cultural unity, chanting supreme spirituality and humanity, erasing the absurd ideological boundaries between people of different countries.

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