

ИСПОЛНИТЕЛЬСКОЕ ИСКУССТВО

PERFORMING ART

DOI 10.24411/2076-4766-2018-10007

L. ATLAS

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION – INTERPRETATION OF SELECTED MUSIC AND THE PERFORMING QUALITIES OF THE PLAYERS

“Not long ago I listened to a performance of a work in the company of the composer. After it had been going on for a few minutes he turned to me and said: ‘it’s murder, isn’t it?’”[5, p. 16].

“Why do we always hear Russian music spoken in terms of its Russianness, rather than simply in terms of music?”[6, p. 95].

Musicologist Marina Frolova-Walker suggests that nineteenth-century Russian critics created myths in accordance with Herderian romantic nationalism, and Soviet musicology canonised them, adding a further layer of mythology prompted by party ideology. “So much critical writing, so many articles, monographs and textbooks of the last 150 years cannot blithely be set aside: they continue to feed programme and liner notes, encouraging and reinforcing audiences’ fond belief in an intrinsic Russianness that mysteriously subsists beneath every note of this perennially popular repertoire” [10, p. 21].

The temptation to take the romantic metaphors in Russian music too literally proves irresistible even among scholars like Alfred Swan. Elaborating on Asafyev’s description of Rachmaninov’s melodies as ‘valley-like’ he writes: “This Russianness derives from the strong influence of the north-central planes which he had imbibed during the summers spent on his grandmothers’ Novgorod estates” [7, p. 172]. Even in works dedicated to the technical aspects of interpreting and performing we can find the following: “As a whole this movement [1st movement of Shostakovich’s Fourteenth String Quartet] could almost be compared to the vast monolithic landscapes of Siberia (which, even if one has never experienced them at first-hand, somehow come clearly to mind

with the help of photographs, combined with willing imagination)” [4, p. 40].

Richard Taruskin in his essay “Some Thoughts on the History and Historiography of Russian Music” points out that the habit of speaking of Russian music in terms of its Russianness has ingrained many prejudices and lazy habits of thought. “It is often taken for granted that everything that happened in Russian music has a direct relationship, positive or negative to the national question . . . this in turn can and often does become a normative criterion: an overtly quotation-al national character is taken as a mark of value or authenticity, and its absence, conversely, as a mark of valuelessness” [8, p. 323–324].

This careless criterion of value sometimes results in extreme opinion, which curiously echoes the repressive arts policies of the Soviet State. Gerald Abraham for example dismisses the work of foreign musicians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Russian court by saying that: “They neither influenced nor, except in a few doubtful cases, were they influenced by, church music or folk music...it can hardly be said that they contributed much or directly to the music of the Russian people” [1, p. 49–50]. In 1984 Richard Taruskin wrote: “There is no area of music historiography that is in greater need of fundamental revision than that of Russian

music, and here the corrective can only come from the West" [8, p. 323].

Taruskin could not have known of course, that everything was about to change with explosive force. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the task of the fundamental revision of Russian music historiography was aided by works of scholars emerging from the ruins of Soviet musicology. The cultural context changed completely after 1991: there was no longer any pressure, control or censorship. But in spite of this new freedom, something was definitely missing. Art, literature and music were tending to be less social and more academic. This is very unusual for Russia, where culture has always been presented as a substitute for real life. Alexander Ivashkin gives his definition of Russianness in the context of new realities. "Russian art seldom goes in the same direction as real life. Primarily, that has been because of the very individual, personal, and sometimes even selfish character of Russian music, poetry, prose and painting . . . A work of Russian art is a confession. There is nothing commonplace in it, nothing decreative, well balanced or moderate. Everything is extreme, sometimes shocking, and strange. We treat music as something more than just music; it is a means to express something spiritual . . . The Russian School has always been very advanced in the technical sense, but in Russia they have never had art for the sake of art. Even the Russian avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century only used their extreme means to express a new metaphysical image, for the Russian style is, first of all, a metaphysical one . . . The real content, the real tensions are between the words, the colours or the sounds" [2, p. 544–546].

Following on from this definition, the ideal performing qualities for the players performing in this research should include the ability "to treat music as something more than music," to be able to ensure that "all the events, all the written notes, all the words or colours do not conceal the content of the work", and finally, to be aware that "the real content, the real tensions are between the words, the colours or the sounds" (see above).

In order to be able to transform these ideas into practical performance, all players involved in this research had to possess similar performing qualities and attitudes, at least to a certain degree. The basic foundations and some technical aspects of the Russian school of strings will be analysed in the following section.

Technical Aspects

The origins of the Russian School of violin are normally traced back to the towering figure of Leopold Auer. Auer however, was the last in a succession of great violinists who came to take employment with the Tsars of Russia. The first was the Belgian

Vieuxtemps, who became the Director of Violin Studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire and the Solo Violinist to the Imperial Court in 1846. In 1860 the Pole Henryk Wieniawski succeeded Vieuxtemps in St. Petersburg. He held the position for twelve years and was replaced by the Hungarian born Leopold Auer, who remained in Russia for over four decades, emigrating in 1918.¹

The most important element of the Russian School of violin is the development of bow-hold and the use of the bow. Carl Flesch in his remarkable two-volume tome "The Art of Violin Playing" maintained that the Russian School as represented in Auer's studio held the bow with the index finger higher on the stick, at or past, the second joint of the index finger, with a high elbow and a pronated forearm. This is just a technical description, and such hard and fast stipulation is not by any means a part of Russian teaching tradition. It is important that students find their own personal way of holding a bow that suits their physique. Nevertheless, there are elements in this position which explain the philosophy behind the whole approach to sound production, to the finding and creating of 'the Voice'. In my own teaching practice I try to communicate to students the following: the bow should not be perceived as an instrument which needs to be manipulated and forced to produce different strokes/sounds. Rather than physically forcing the result with rigid movements of the hand/wrist, it should be led to move freely and fluidly.

The best way to explain the relationship between the bow-hand and the bow is through the equestrian metaphor. To operate the bow is like riding a horse; the best riders never force the animal to do anything by applying rigid pressure or too tight control. The rider becomes a continuation of the animal. With a slight push the horse starts moving and you ride with it, interfering at the crucial moments only with the minimum force required. This is the best way in which I can describe my own relationship with the bow. It is that kind of proficiency I wanted to see as the prerequisite for the selection of the players of this research.

The other important element of the performing qualities is the mastery and use of *vibrato*. There is a widespread misconception about the nature of the 'Russian violin sound': "Sustained cantilena – the epitome of dark, noble Russian string sound" [4, p. 31]. For many musicians and music lovers the Russian violin sound is just that – rich *cantilena* 'enhanced' by strong and continuous *vibrato*. "In this part [first movement of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto] Oistrakh uses pretty wide vibrato, which is typical of the Russian School of Violin and he also uses the whole bow from the frog to the top as frequently as pos-

sible which is also one of the characteristics of the Russian School" [3, p. 5].

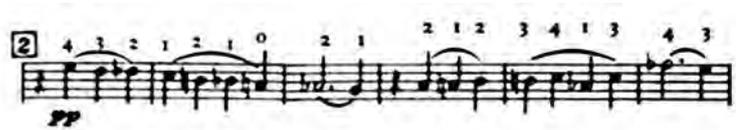
The truth of the matter is actually completely opposite to the opinions expressed above. From the very beginning the most flexible use of *vibrato* is demanded from every student in Russia; it is a wide and distinctive palette of sound and not wide and continuous *vibrato* which is at the heart of the Russian School's sound production. Everyone who has closely studied the technique of Oistrakh and Rostropovich will have noticed an almost constant 'unrest' of the left hand. This is however not a sign of continuous *vibrato* but rather a sign of freedom and lack of tension.

Lastly, the quality that every performer of Russian music needs to possess is the readiness to see "between the words, the colours or the sounds". The Borodin String Quartet gives us a masterclass of just such a readiness in their interpretation of Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet. In the opening section after *fugato*, the first violin starts to play a chromatic figure.

In the following example, I demonstrate the fingerings which I copied from the recordings of the same piece by the Fitzwilliam Quartet (Example 1), compared to the fingerings used by Dubinsky in the Borodin String Quartet version (Example 2).

Example 1.

Shostakovich, String Quartet No. 8: First Movement, Figure 2 (Fitzwilliam Quartet)



Example 2.

Shostakovich, String Quartet No. 8: First Movement, Figure 2 (Borodin String Quartet)



The first violinist of the Fitzwilliam Quartet (Rowland) uses normal chromatic fingerings, but in Dubinsky's version he slides down and up the chromatic scale using just one (third) finger in *vibrato*-like *portamento* motion which is exceedingly difficult for both the intonation and the rhythm.

When I asked Professor Alexandrov (who pointed out these fingerings to us), what the reason behind such fingerings could be, he answered: "it might look as a chromatic scale to you but for Rostik it was a wail, a cry and therefore should be played as such"².

On The Question of Interpretation

In his celebrated essay "The Interpretation of Music: A Theory of Communication", E. O. Turner defines the meaning of the term "a work of art" as "a communication from the mind of the creator through certain symbols to the mind of the recipient . . . It is a highly organized unity of complex impulses . . . Both the intellect and emotions must be involved. . . The creator transmits, expresses, and embodies the impulses of his mind through the

symbols of his technique in an objective medium, notes and expression, line and colour, or words and meter" [9, p. 299–300].

So where does this definition leave the performer? No matter how much time has been invested into rehearsing or how much inside knowledge the performer has from the composer, decisions must be made ultimately by the performers themselves.

In the course of recording the pieces selected for this research I encountered a number of interpretive issues. Khodosh's string quartet was probably the easiest in term of interpretation. This piece bears close structural, modal and expressive allusions to Shostakovich's output. Like Shostakovich, Khodosh is absolutely explicit about note lengths and the mode of bowing.³ In the first movement between figures 8 and 9, while in all instruments quavers are marked *détaché*, two crotchets at the end of each 3/4 bar are marked with dots. This could easily be overlooked, but we made a point of executing this precisely, giving the music a curious sarcastic limp which was probably the intention of the composer.

Исполнительское искусство

Composers are often the first to acknowledge that their metronome marks are not always the best guidance on pace for performers (in the recording of Shostakovich's 'Cello Sonata, Shostakovich and Rostopovich play *scherzo* something close to $\text{♩}=182$, while the metronome mark for this movement is $\text{♩}=152$). In Khodosh's string quartet the third movement tempo

mark is $\text{♩}=170$. In both recordings of this latter piece (original 1985 and the current) we used the speed close to $\text{♩}=158$, which helped to play the passages (such as in figure 4, Example 3) much more smoothly and expressively, and gave a strutting, rolling quality to the whole movement which was quite impossible to achieve in the much faster tempo.

Example 3.
Khodosh, String Quartet: Third Movement Figure 4

Dynamics are often an issue for the interpreter. In Zhukov's *Concerto-Partes*, in the second movement between figures 8 and 15 a minimum dynamic is *forte*. Internal balancing by performers is crucial and the composer assists in ambiguity by marking parts *sul pont* and *espressivo*. It became clear that the movement loses its surging quality if projected too loudly for too long, so *diminuendos* and *subito pianos* were inserted in a few strategic places clearing the balance and aiding the culminations. This was endorsed by the composer.

In Kusyakov's piano trio (Example 4) I encountered an interpretation problem of another sort. The composer meticulously bowed the strings in the third movement, splitting phrases into short sec-

tions. Combined with the dynamics marking of *pp*, tempo marking $\text{♩}=48$ and general marking *con sord espressivo* this created a flowing, quite strongly rolling movement of music. During the rehearsals back in 1974 Kusyakov did not like the feel of this, saying that he envisaged it like a lament sang by a girl. We did not, however, change bowing at that time, and I did my best to play within the constraints of the composer's bowings. This second time around I re-bowed the movement creating much longer sentences (Example 5). It took a great effort to maintain an extremely slow bow while keeping the melody alive in the left hand, but the result was much more satisfying and I think the composer would have agreed with it too.

Example 4.
Kusyakov, Piano Trio, Third Movement, Opening (original bowing)



Example 5.
Kusyakov, Piano Trio, Third Movement, Opening (re-bowed)



Even a brief examination of Denisov's string trio reveals a very high level of detail, meticulously marked by the composer. And the importance of every single detail is stressed by the composer himself in no uncertain terms. The main challenge for every performer of this piece will be finding the balance between the execution of extremely concentrated musical information and at the same time being able to switch between very short multiple phrases and dynamics and long breathtaking melodies, revealing the 'lyrical romantic' side of this composer.

While the string trio did not present many difficulties in the way of interpretation due to very detailed musical information passed to us by the composer through the score, the piano quartet by Busogly gave us a different interpretation experience. Extended recitatives usually leave the composer more vulnerable to the expressive eloquence of the performer than at any other time. In the open-

ing of Busogly's piano quartet we tried our best to level out our respective entries to present three consecutive recitatives as one continuous expressive line rising from the "cello through viola to the high notes of the violin". The musical interpretation of this work was clearly self-evident from the dedication to the memory of Shostakovich. A crucially important consideration with this piece (and this could be said as well about Shostakovich's chamber music in general) is in the deployment of sound and colour, which does not always coincide with the markings in the score. An example of such an interpretive problem can be found in figure 38 of the first movement of Busogly's piano quartet (Example 6), where all three instruments play a succession of *pizzicati* and *sul pont arco* short passages intended as a digital effect by the composer. The dynamic markings are *piano* for the violin and viola and *mezzo forte* for 'cello and piano. This however, did not work and could not be balanced.

The image shows a musical score for a piano quartet, specifically Figure 38 from Busogly's Piano Quartet. It consists of four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Piano. The Violin I and II staves feature numerous 'pizz.' (pizzicato) markings and 'sul pont.' (sul ponticello) instructions, often with 'arco' (arco) markings. The Viola staff also has 'pizz.' and 'sul pont.' markings. The Piano staff includes a 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking and various dynamic markings like 'mf' and 'f'. The score is numbered '38' in the top left corner of the first two staves.

A similar problem was encountered by the Fitzwilliam Quartet when they were preparing Shostakovich's Thirteenth Quartet for performance. "The effect of these taps . . . is often shattering . . . and marking of *piano* might just be increased . . . The same applies to the first violin's *pizzicato* at fig. 40 and fig. 46 where Shostakovich asked our leader to play these *forte* rather than *piano*" [4, p. 29]. Following the example of the Fitzwilliams Quartet we increased the dynamics and achieved a much better

balance and atmosphere in the section. "The composer is subject to the same emotions as we are; the symbols he uses form a language common to us all; his greatly superior gifts are those of originality in utterance, in coordinating his impulses, in achieving that complex unity of thought and feeling that is far beyond our power to initiate, but not to understand and follow . . . A tremendous responsibility rests on the shoulders of the interpreter, therefore, he must not distort the message in transmitting it" [9, p. 303].

ПРИМЕЧАНИЯ

¹ For more on the history and development of the Russian School see B. Schwarz, *Great Masters of the Violin*, New York, Simon and Shuster, 1983.

² Y. Alexandrov, personal communication, September 1984.

tember 1984.

³ For more on Shostakovich's carefulness and attention to detail during the rehearsal process see Rowland C., George A., *Op. cit.*, P. 13-45.

REFERENCES

1. Abraham G. *The Tradition of Western Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. P. 49-50.

2. Ivashkin A. *The Paradox of Russian Non-Liberty* // *Musical Quarterly*, 1992. Vol. 76. No. 4. P. 544-546.

3. Popovich M. P. *I. Tchaikovsky Concerto for Violin and Orchestra Op. 35*, [Unpublished Master's Thesis]. University of Agder, 2012.

4. Rowland C., George A. *Interpreting the String Quartets* // C. Norris [ed.], *Shostakovich: The Man and His Music*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982. P. 13-45.

5. Rutland H. *Composers and Performers* // *The Musical Times*, 1960. Vol. 101. No. 1403. P. 16-18.

6. Stravinsky I. *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*. New York: Vintage Books, 1959. 146 p.

7. *Swan A.* Russian Music and its Sources in Chant and Folk Songs. New York,: Baker, 1973. 234 p.

8. *Taruskin R.* Some Thoughts on the History and Historiography of Russian Music // The Journal of Musicology, 1984. Vol. 3. No.4. P. 323–324.

9. *Turner E.* The Interpretation of Music: A Theory of Communication // Musical Quarterly, 1944. Vol. 30. No. 3. P. 299–300.

10. *Frolova-Walker M.* On Ruslan and Russianness // Cambridge Opera Journal, 1997. Vol. 9. No. 1. P. 21–45.

—————
**THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION –
INTERPRETATION OF SELECTED MUSIC
AND THE PERFORMING QUALITIES OF THE PLAYERS**
—————

In the course of this research the question of 'Russianness' in relation to both the music selected and the performing qualities of players who would be taking part in the project has continually arisen. In the presented article the author will try to give a very brief summary of some of the opinions on this subject from both Western and Russian musicologists (this summary is selective only and is not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive). After that author addresses the

question of 'Russianness' in terms of technique and interpretation rather than through vague or subjective concepts. Interpretation is discussed in terms of general meaning and in the context of this research. Practical aspects of applicature and bowings analysed in preparation for performance and recordings, importance of the informative approach to this characteristics is also discussed. The end result of above mentioned application is presented and considered.

—————
**К ВОПРОСУ О «РУССКОСТИ» В ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИИ
И ТЕХНИКЕ ИСПОЛНЕНИЯ КАМЕРНОЙ МУЗЫКИ
(НА ПРИМЕРЕ ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЙ Д. ШОСТАКОВИЧА, В. ХОДОША И ДР.)**
—————

В ходе исследования камерных произведений Д. Шостаковича, В. Ходоша, А. Кусякова, Э. Денисова и др. был поставлен вопрос о «русскости» как в аспекте анализа избранных музыкальных сочинений, так и мастерства упоминаемых в статье исполнителей. В связи с этим, автор цитирует западных и российских музыковедов, излагающих собственные точки зрения на терминологический аппарат, принятый в советском музыкознании в отношении заявленной проблематики. Автор указывает, что с позиции

некоторых западных исследователей анализ «русскости» в указанных произведениях отличает присутствие неопределённых и субъективных понятий. В свою очередь феномен «русскости» рассматривается автором на уровне техники исполнения и приёмов интерпретации с использованием широко принятой терминологии. Обсуждаются также практические аспекты аппликатуры и техники владения смычком в процессе подготовки к концертному выступлению и студийной записи.

Atlas Lev

Principal Viola at the Royal Scottish National Opera Orchestra,
PhD in Musicology, Senior lecturer in strings
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
Great Britain, G2 3DB, Glasgow
e-mail: levatlas@yahoo.co.uk

Атлас Лев

Концертмейстер группы альтов оркестра Шотландской Национальной Королевской Оперы,
PhD in Musicology, старший преподаватель кафедры струнных
Королевская Консерватория Шотландии
Великобритания, G2 3DB, Глазго
e-mail: levatlas@yahoo.co.uk

