

No Cantatas for Stalin ?

WHERE are the funeral cantatas for Stalin? Why has the task of lamenting his death been left, so far, almost exclusively to the solemn marches of Beethoven and Chopin? Why have the composers of the U.S.S.R.—the Great and Small Russians, the White Russians, the Uzbeks, the Ugro-Finns, the Armenians, the Georgians—failed to render their musical homage to Him who is no longer with us? After all, only about eight months ago these same composers were issuing a daily torrent of musical praise to Stalin the good, Stalin the far-seeing, Stalin the founder—according to his own announcement of 1937—of “the happy new life.” It was neither Marx nor Engels nor Lenin, but always Stalin and only Stalin who was thus hymned in the inevitable major key of Soviet self-glorification.

It may be objected that Stalin has only been dead about seven months, and that one can hardly expect to see the fruits of composition in so short a time. This was presumably the point which the Russian composer, Kabalevsky, intended to convey in the interview he gave to the French press, when he said that the funeral cantatas were in course of preparation, and that they would not be ready until the autumn, when they will be performed in the House of Modern Music in Moscow. But this is not convincing. The present situation is in too marked a contrast with the staggering speed with which the unfortunates in the 1948 Zhdanovite campaign against “formalism” produced their works of penance and rehabilitation. Then, within three or four months the Soviet musical repertoire was flooded with brand-new music for films, new songs, new ballets, new symphonies, even new operas, all written in accordance with the pure principles of “socialist realism,” all filled with perfect major chords, gloriously optimistic; one can roughly estimate the average time of composition as having been eight to twelve weeks.

What has slowed down the pace? No, one can hardly be satisfied with Mr. Kabalevsky’s statement. Instead, one is constrained to wonder whether the complete absence of funeral odes to Stalin, or at least the extraordinary delay in their composition, might not have some relation to the sudden infrequency with which his name is mentioned in the pages of *Pravda*. Or is it that Soviet composers have become so used to the musical language of joy, with its abundant major “intonations”—to use a term dear to Soviet musical theorists—that they experience some difficulty or disinclination in venturing upon the *stilisticheskaya pereustanovka* (“stylistic re-orientation”) required for the composition of lamentations in minor keys? This last point is worth lingering over.

In “socialist realism,” whose principles of musical composition stem from 19th century textbooks on harmony, there is only one harmonic style possible: that based on the conventional use of major and minor triads and their inversions. When, as is usually the case, a Soviet composer deals with “heroic socialist construction,” his score is full of major triads. It is only on those infrequent occasions when his work describes the “abject sadness” of pre-revolutionary life that minor triads prevail. The use of “free” dissonances, or rather of the dissonances “freed” by the work of such great composers of the 20th century as Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg, Bartók, and Hindemith, is strictly forbidden. Such music is condemned as “formalist,” “decadent,” and “bourgeois,” and the penetration of the ideas of free dissonance into the “pure body” of Soviet music assumes in the eyes of official authority the character of an infiltration by “secret agents of imperialism.” It is possible, therefore, that after Stalin’s death the Soviet composers found it profitless to switch over, merely for the sake of a passing moment, to the pessimistic tones of music set in a minor key.

For in the uplifting atmosphere of the Soviet Union this could only be a temporary deviation from the all-pervading major key of joy and praise. Perhaps they preferred to seek other subjects, which are no less portentous than the death of the Father of the Russian peoples, but which do not require the use of the unfamiliar minor key of sorrow and restraint.

BUT let us leave these conjectures, and await the fulfilment of Kabalevsky's promises. In the meantime, let us take a glance at the Soviet press to see what news of musical developments can be gleaned from its pages and what can be gathered from this and other sources as to the character of musical life in the Russia of 1953.

The outstanding feature, which is at once apparent, is the complete isolation of Soviet music from that of the West. Not a single work by Stravinsky, Berg, Schoenberg, Hindemith, and Webern—to name some of the leading exponents of contemporary music—is ever included in the repertoire of Soviet performers. Occasionally, a few of the works of Bartók, notably those based on folk music, are given a hearing; but this is in the main intended as a gesture of friendship to the sister republic of Hungary.

For other reasons, one or two symphonies of the great British composer, Vaughan Williams, and some of the works of Francis Poulenc are occasionally performed. Not that there is an affinity of style between these works and the officially authorised Soviet form of music; but the harmonious and melodic tones of Williams and Poulenc are appreciated as "easy to understand." Moreover, in the case of Williams, most of his work is in the form of massive and eloquent symphonies, and this is a type of music which has always been much appreciated in Russia. A few other Western composers whose music is consonant in character sometimes appear on Soviet concert programmes, and at times one even meets American names.

But all this only represents a very small part of the Soviet repertoire and plays a minor role in Soviet musical life. The usual contemporary Soviet musical repertoire is laid down as though the Western world had ceased to exist at some moment during the period 1905-15.

There has been some difficulty in fixing the exact date. During the time of Zhdanov's prominence, Wagner and Debussy were singled out as two of the main culprits responsible for Western decadence. Debussy has since been rehabilitated, at any rate as a composer of piano music, and even figures in the programmes of piano recitals at Soviet conservatories as "the inventor of a valuable style." In general those composers whose musical idiom is, in part at any rate, that of a past century, are for that reason regarded as "classics" and it was only the excess of Zhdanovite zeal in 1948-49 which caused them to be excluded from the Soviet repertoire.

The main stock-in-trade of Soviet musical performers are those same "great classics" of Russia and of Europe which are regularly performed in the Paris or London or New York musical season. There is a wealth of Chopin recitals, of annual performances of the same favourite symphonies, of repeated renderings of Schumann and Schubert *Lieder* cycles, of the same old violin recitals which start with "La Folia" and end with an encore of "The Bumble-Bee" by Rimsky-Korsakov. In addition, a number of secondary 19th century Russian composers, such as Taneyev and Kalinnikov, have been elevated to the rank of "classical" composers.

In Soviet Russia, the expression "classic" or "classical composer" does not relate to any feature of musical style or any historical epoch, but rather to all musical works or persons which have achieved an established reputation. Rachmaninov, for example (although he died in exile) has now become a "great Russian classic." He is one of the most popular composers in present-day Russia. His old-fashioned sentimentality, his orthodox harmonic style, are in tune with the taste of the new middle classes of Soviet society.

Another composer who has recently been elevated to the status of a "great Soviet classic" is Prokofiev, that unhappy and indomitable figure who was so often subjected during his lifetime to the stigma of "formalism." The official post-mortem on his life has begun to distinguish between two main periods in his creative work. The first, which comprises his writings after his return to Russia in 1933, is, with few exceptions, considered as a manifestation of the "great classical tradition of Russian music." But that part of his work

which was composed abroad remains under the stigma of "formalism."

Thus in Soviet terminology there is no distinction of quality or relative importance within the broad field of musical composition which is covered by the term "classic." In this respect, the Soviet musical pantheon is absolutely democratic: the only indispensable qualifications for entrance are (1) the composer must be dead, and (2) he must on no account have composed any music that could be described as dissonant.

ALTHOUGH it occupies only a modest position in the repertoire of Soviet performers, the output of contemporary Russian composers is actually very substantial. There is an unceasing flow of symphonies, operas, ballets, quartets, sonatas, cantatas, romantic airs, and choral pieces. The dominant feature of this vast output is its oppressive uniformity: it is difficult to detect any significant difference between one piece and another. Nor is there any relief from the dominant tone of "uplift." The musical products of different parts of the Socialist Fatherland all sound as though they had been turned out by Ford or General Motors.

Anyone who spends a day reading musical scores from the U.S.S.R., with their uninterrupted uniformity, their unwavering adherence to the same official tone of laudatory optimism and the same style of superlative panegyric, will inevitably ask: how has it happened that a great nation, which up to twenty-five years ago was in the van of modern cultural movements, and which was one of the most lively centres of musical experiment during the early years of the revolution—and indeed as late as 1931–32—could have so rapidly and so completely relapsed into the musical idiom dictated by an orthodoxy? In the early 1920's, hardly any of the works of Schoenberg, Berg, Stravinsky, or Bartók were lacking from the repertoire of Moscow and Leningrad. As soon as they were written, these works were performed in Russia in crowded halls before an enthusiastic audience. What could have occurred since then?

The superficial answer, that subservience to orthodoxy in the sphere of musical composition is only a special case of the wider servitude to reactionary dictatorship which is characteristic of the Soviet régime, is quite simple.

But there is another, more fundamental and complex reason for the return of Russian music to the conventional idiom, and for the abandonment of all innovation and experiment. This second underlying cause is rooted in the radical transformation which has taken place in the social structure of the Russian state since 1930. The essential feature of these changes, as they affect artistic creation, is the complete disappearance of the old social classes and particularly of the Russian intelligentsia which played a leading part in the earlier days of post-revolutionary Russia.

It was the intelligentsia which set the tone of the cultural life of the nation, because it alone could understand and encourage the work of the pioneers in the arts. With the disappearance of this class, the cultural life of the Soviet Union has become completely subject to the needs and tastes of the new classes which have emerged from the revolution, and particularly to those of the class of petty bureaucrats. In their attitude to the arts, as in their cultural background generally, this new class was inevitably on a very different plane from that of the "Westernised" intelligentsia with its intimate knowledge of all the latest artistic and intellectual developments.

Furthermore, it has to be remembered that the Russian artist has always, rightly or wrongly, regarded his work as being in the nature of a social dedication, and that this view prevails quite apart from the teachings of Marxism. The Russian artist feels that he is entrusted with a sacred duty to the community, which he must discharge to the best of his ability. Thus, one can well understand that the Russian composers turned away from the experimental phase of music which had prevailed in the 1920's, when they saw that there was no longer any public for such music, and that by pursuing this line they would be creating a barrier between themselves and the mass of opinion as it had developed in the new social structure—a barrier which has in fact emerged in similar circumstances in the West. It was not unnatural that they should have preferred to place themselves in the service of the new social classes whose supremacy was established during the 1930's. One can distinguish this line of development as something quite distinct from the external pressures to which they were subjected by the party leaders, whose outlook was, in artistic matters, strictly

representative of the views of the new social classes.

BUT at the present time, several months after the death of Stalin, of which the repercussions are already becoming audible, one inevitably seeks some signs which might give reason for the hope that this period of narrow-minded censure, of isolation, and of subservience to orthodoxy, may be approaching its end. At first sight, it appears that everything is still as it was in the era of Stalin. Russian composers are still devoting themselves to the same "patriotic" subjects, the predominant form of harmony is still set in the all-pervading keys of "heroic major," the diverse patterns of folk-music still carry the imprint of officially inspired uniformity. Nevertheless, on closer inspection one can distinguish some faint indications of novel tendencies.

There is, first of all, the development of closer connections between the Soviet Union and its satellites, which has brought the Russian composers into contact with individuals and societies among whom the spirit of subservience to orthodoxy is not yet so deeply rooted as in the Soviet Union, and who still have some surviving memories of a period in which musical composition was free to develop according to the talents of composers. At the same time, there has been a gradual extension during the last two years in the range of musical repertoires in the Soviet Union, particularly in the field of Western classical music. For example, the works of Bach, which had in the past been only partially and imperfectly understood in Russia, were brought to the fore on the occasion of his bicentenary and have since enjoyed outstanding favour. Similarly, at the jubilee celebrations in honour of Monteverdi several of his pieces were performed which had previously been unknown, or at any rate never performed, in Russia. Again, Debussy, Ravel, da Falla and Richard Strauss have quite recently penetrated the iron curtain which marks the limit of the Soviet musical repertoire.

But it is in the pages of the musical and artistic journals that the most significant indications of a new atmosphere of thought are to be found. The musical monthly, *Sovietskaya Muzyka*, and the artistic weekly, *Sovietskoye Isskustvo*, have once again become readable. Only a couple of years ago the articles in *Sovietskaya Muzyka* were nothing but a sickening hotch-potch of orthodox discussions explaining and interpreting endlessly the "purifying" decrees of the central committee of the Communist Party which were issued in February 1948. Now this verbiage has almost entirely disappeared. Instead, there are a number of extremely interesting historical studies—though often expounding a questionable and tendentious theory of music—together with serious and apparently objective accounts of new works. There are also studies of important musical documents, such as the article which recently appeared on the subject of the unpublished manuscripts of Beethoven which have been found in Moscow. But the most striking and pleasing sign is the complete disappearance of portraits of Stalin (dressed in all sorts of costumes) and of all the other so-called "composers" such as Mao-tse-Tung, Zhdanov, Voroshilov and Beria (!), which used to appear periodically in the pages of *Sovietskaya Muzyka*. These have been replaced by portraits of real composers whose work is studied in the articles contained in the journals.

Admittedly, these are only very faint indications. One would have to have much stronger signs before one could confidently say that a new spirit is alive in Russia. But in the immense refrigerator in which Stalin had confined the life of the Russian people, these barely perceptible signs of life are significant. The pace of underlying social and cultural change in such a country as Russia is likely to be as gradual as that of geological transformations. But there is always the possibility of sudden acceleration. So long as the door of the refrigerator remains even slightly ajar, there will be an opportunity for some of the outer atmosphere to reach the frozen regions of the interior.

Nicolas Nabokov

Opinions at Large

WHEN the 19th century American socialist, Edward Bellamy, came to consider how an economy producing for use, not for profit, was to know what people wanted, he was on the verge of inventing modern market research. For, though the immediate parents of our contemporary public opinion poll were various experiments conducted by business organisations and universities in the United States in the early 1930's, it is possible to find ancestors that go back fifty years or more. When men began to think seriously of applying scientific methods to social problems, and when the population of cities became so huge and various that it became difficult to ascertain easily what one's "neighbours" really thought, two essential preconditions of the public opinion poll were in existence. One other was necessary: the example of democratic voting, with its startling assumption that each vote, no matter who cast it, should have the same weight.

The public opinion poll has spread far beyond the United States, but to a great extent its boundaries are still those of effective democratic government. It is obvious that where a population does not dare express its opinions there is no way of studying public opinion without using *agents provocateurs*: totalitarian governments make "opinion" anyway and, aside from reading the police reports, find no need to study it. It is perhaps less clear that in places like Iraq or Ethiopia, where a large part of the population has not reached a certain stage of self-expression, it is pointless, if not impossible, to study "public opinion." For one thing, in such countries a census is either inaccurate or non-existent, so that one is hard put to it to know what kind of sample is needed. For another, people who are unaccustomed to expressing opinions are often just as unaccustomed to holding them. To be sure, one could conduct

polls in such countries by limiting one's sample to the literate, the city-dwellers, the rich—who hold opinions—and this has been done. But the pollsters are dissatisfied when their net catches only a fraction of the population. Just as the spirit of democracy seems to insist that the vote should be given to all, so the spirit of public opinion polling seems to demand that a voice should be given to all. Indeed, much of the experimental work in polling has been aimed at getting a sufficient number of the poor and lowly into the sample, for the interviewers inevitably find it pleasanter and easier to approach, and get opinions from, middle-class people.

In short, it appears that highly developed democracy and public opinion polling are closely related, and that the example and practice of the first gives rise to the second. One citizen, one vote, easily suggests one answerer, one opinion; and just as votes are added, so are opinions. The relation is, indeed, so close that the mechanics of the opinion poll in different countries will serve as a crude measure of the perfection of its democracy. It is revealing that no public opinion poll operates in South Africa: what is one to do with the Indians, the Coloured, the Natives? How is one to add Afrikaner to English opinion? In the United States, it is equally revealing to find that the Gallup poll for many years excluded Southern Negroes from its polls on national elections—too few of them voted to affect the outcome. More recently, this single limitation on the Gallup sample has been eliminated.

THIS dependence of a proper opinion poll upon a properly functioning democracy explains the self-imposed limitations of an otherwise full report, recently published, on the way nations view one another, a subject on which we have had a great deal of informed and uninformed speculation in recent years. *How*