

**Chevengur** for mezzo–soprano and ensemble set to texts by Andrey Platonov was written upon a commission from the Deutschlandfunk (2001) appeared two years after the premiere of the opera *When Time Overflows Its Margins*. Intrigued about working a new genre, Tarnopolski was about to embark on another opera project, but it took some time for it to acquire a certain form, so by autumn 2001 *Chevengur* appeared as a concert piece, carrying however the signs of a true drama unfolding strictly within the realm of sound. The voice is accompanied by a small personalized ensemble (flute/bass flute, clarinet/bass clarinet, trombone, percussion, bayan [Russian button accordion], violin, viola, cello and double-bass), the sound of which in the richness of timbre palette creates a near-orchestral effect. At the climax a tape-recorded voice joins in, “splintering” the soloist’s part and turning the monologue into an intense inner dialogue. The first concert performance was carried out by the *Studio for New Music* with soprano Svetlana Savenko and conductor Igor Dronov (the composition dedicated to them both and the Studio for New Music ensemble) on September 4, 2001 at the *Paradiso* in Amsterdam.

Notwithstanding the title chosen by Tarnopolski, the only text he uses from the novel of the same name is the final song “Ah, my comrade in arms,” which ends with a bitter observation typical of Platonov: “it is a shame to live, it is sad being dead”; the rest comes from Platonov’s novellas *The Juvenile Sea* and *The River Potudan*. *Chevengur* is a dystopian novel of the great writer, who had better than anyone managed to express the existential meaning of the cataclysms that Russia underwent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is as if the consciousness of the individual loses its sense of self, being dissolved in the elements around them and descending to the level of dumb creatures and inanimate objects. The word becomes an instrument of this transformation.

Tarnopolski “dissects” it, dismembering it into phonetic units and aligns the vocal and instrumental intonation on a single timbre scale that has a carefully designed system of timbre modulations operating within it. According to the composer, it was important for him that “the instruments would speak and the voice play; when the soloist is articulating the word ‘s-no-va,’ separating every phoneme, the violin immediately joins in imitating the sound ‘s’ (with *glissando* by the bow along the string); the syllable ‘va’ is handed over to the trombone with ‘wa’ mute, and so on. Every word is standing on its own and the music of it acquires its own weight.” Yet, in focusing on the phonetics of the words, Tarnopolski does not dissolve its semantics. The motion of the form (conceived by the author to be in the spirit of the ancient motet) is directed by the change of text and the nature of its articulation; moreover, the composer creates within the fabric of the music itself non-verbal equivalents of Platonov’s images, following the spirit of Platonov’s surrealism, growing on the soil of the most authentic lifelikeness. The clanking and screeching of a train travelling in times of havoc (the train not being mentioned in the text) accompanies the hoarse mournful song “the likes of which,” – the composer comments, – “are heard at all of Russia’s multiple wars, from the Civil War to the war in Chechnya, whose very title was mystically “foretold” by Platonov’s *Chevengur*.”

*Svetlana Savenko*

From the CD–booklet *Vladimir Tarnopolski portrait*

**Chevengur** for mezzo-soprano and ensemble (2001)

Text fragments by Andrei Platonov

Day after day a man walked on into the depth of the south-eastern steppe of the Soviet Union.

...Space was a space of depth, not of thickness, and there were such powerful hillockings of soil everywhere that the world seemed dreary and stifling.

*(Translated by R. & E. Chandler and A. Livingstone, from "The Juvenile Sea")*

With the establishment of peace it had become quiet again in the provinces and there were fewer people: some had died in the fighting, many were being treated for their wounds, forgetting the heavy work of the war in long sleep, while some were still making their way home, walking over thick unfamiliar grass which there had not been time to see before, or maybe it had just been trampled down and had not been growing then.

They walked with faint, astonished hearts, recognising again the fields and villages along their path. Their souls had changed in the torment of war and they were on their way to live as if for the first time, dimly remembering themselves...

*(translated by R. & E. Chandler and A. Livingstone, from "The River Potudan")*

Ride on, comrade, and sing a song;

Sing, comrade, and ride ahead.

Our turn to die came long ago --

It's shame to live, it's sad being dead.

Comrade, comrade, don't lose heart!

Our mothers said life lay ahead --

But my mother told me: "First

Make sure your enemy's nice and dead

And then lie down on top..."

*(translated by R. & E. Chandler from "Chevengur")*