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The poverty and great wealth of Russia's new music

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By **George Loomis**
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MOSCOW — The program book for this year's Moscow Forum contemporary music festival mimics a faded green booklet, its edges yellowed and worn. With Russian self-deprecatory humor, the cover symbolizes, says the composer Vladimir Tarnopolski, the financial "poverty" that afflicts new music in Russia and, specifically, Moscow Forum, which he has run since 1994. "We received no money from the Ministry of Culture," he said of this year's event, held last week. "The only major funding comes from Germany," which financed appearances by the crack Freiburg-based Ensemble Recherche. "Our performers play for free." Fortunately, the Moscow Conservatory's Studio for New Music Ensemble, Igor Dronov, conductor, holds its own with the best such groups.

New music in Russia could indeed use an angel in the form of a business oligarch who craves Pierre Boulez, Elliott Carter or, closer to home, Sofia Gubaidulina. The realities of survival in Russia leave little room for orchestras to demonstrate the altruism of American counterparts, with their institutionalized programs to overcome audience resistance to new music. Vladimir Martynov, a prominent Moscow composer who has proclaimed that the age of the composer is past, may have put matters in perspective in an interview last week: "the situation is bad everywhere but worse in Russia."

Of particular concern in a country where Shostakovich captured the grim national mood decades ago is the absence of successors to the Soviet composers born around 1930 and thereafter: Edison Denisov, Alfred Schnittke, Gubaidulina and Arvo Pärt, among others. Whatever the aesthetic reasons for this, one can hardly overestimate the disruptive effect of the exodus of composers following the collapse of the Soviet Union. With its leaders gone and the topsy-turvy musical environment offering few outlets, it is a wonder that new music endured as well as it has.

But young audiences now pack the Conservatory's Rachmaninoff Hall for Moscow Forum, an ideal event in which to seek out Russia's current compositional voices. Of Moscow's other new music festivals, Moscow Autumn is an unwieldy forum for the vast membership of the city's Composers' Union, while the Alternativa festival ventures beyond the purely musical. International in scope, Moscow Forum includes European and American works, establishing a context for Russian offerings and allowing for notable new music from abroad, such as Steve Reich's "Different Trains," given its Russian premiere last Tuesday.

Tarnopolski's programming favors cutting-edge music, a point illustrated by this year's theme, "freedom of sound." Like any good festival theme, this one embraces much, even alluding to former political constraints. But it signifies primarily an emphasis on sonority over traditional elements such as harmony and melody. One could hardly count the number of times air was blown through a flute without producing traditional tone. Yet the Russian offerings, while stylistically advanced, rarely reached the extremes of, say, the German composer Helmut Lachenmann, as performed by Ensemble Recherche. Perhaps closer in spirit was the Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino, the subject of a detailed retrospective by the group.




New music is widely neglected by mainstream Russian performers, but exceptions exist and a particularly bright one came with the fine Moscow pianist Alexei Lyubimov's recital of American and Russian works. The textures of Alexander Knaifel's ruminative "Declaration" were sparse but had nothing like the long silences between notes of Morton Feldman's "Variations." Predictably, strong impressions were made by Valentin Silvestrov's post-Impressionistic, richly inventive Sonata No. 2 and by Sonata No. 6 of Galina Ustvolskaya, who died last year at 87. Her bracing piece embodies a relentless assertion of tones and clusters in a steady, pulsating rhythm.

Given the emphasis on sound, an all-percussion concert by the estimable Mark Pekarsky Percussion Ensemble was in order, as was the choice to begin with Shostakovich's epochal percussion interlude from "The Nose;" the latter's deafening volume was followed by the eerie repose of Viktor Ekimovsky's "Assumption," with its muffled drumbeats and swishing cymbals. The gongs and plate bells of Alexander Raskatov's enchanting "Madrigal in Metal" brought glimpses of euphony, while the driving intensity of Martynov's "Action" was both exhilarating and frightening.

Martynov's participation represented a welcome gesture of inclusiveness by the festival. His intensely repetitious music, which has been promoted by Gidon Kremer, is steeped in Russian chant and medievalism and has won a following. By contrast, Leonid Desyatnikov, whose opera "The Children of Rosenthal" was premiered at the Bolshoi Theater in 2005, has never been represented in Moscow Forum. Tarnopolski prefers composers who have made distinctively new contributions, yet securing a Bolshoi commission in this day and age is arguably credential enough. And it is frustrating that Tarnopolski, an important composer by any standard, with a wealth of European credits, declines to program his own music at his festival.

Alexander Wustin, 63, who has probably chalked up more performances at Moscow Forum than anyone else, was represented by the world premiere of "Theater," an effective if brief setting of a poem, and Yuri Vorontsov's "Touch," for solo violin and ensemble, brought a dash of lyricism to the hard-core modernism around it. But a program of young, Moscow Conservatory-trained composers - Nikolay Khrust, Vladimir Gorlinsky, Olga Bochikhina, Andrey Kuligin and Alexei Syumak - offered the most heartening best grounds for optimism. Syumak's "Illusion of a Concerto" emerged as an imaginative evocation of a piano concerto shrouded in haze, and Bochikhina's "Chordoneon" teemed with arresting ideas shrewdly organized. Her composition entitled "Cadenza to Mozart's Violin Concerto" was commissioned by the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg and performed last December, Valery Gergiev conducting - just the kind of boost a composer in her mid-twenties craves but rarely gets, whether in Russia or anywhere else.

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