

Non-conformism or Nationalism? Yuriy Butsko and His “Russian Dodecaphony”

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Abstract: During most of the Soviet era, it was considered ideologically suspect – and anti-nationalistic – to perform, compose, or study any kind of sacred music. How some composers who identified with Orthodoxy conveyed their spirituality through their art in spite of official prohibitions illuminates an interesting way of expressing Russian identity through heritage revival. This paper explores a unique compositional technique that bridged liturgical experience and the concert stage by means of a rather calculated but inspired methodology that expanded the znamenny chant structure into a 12-tone row. Starting with his *Polyphonic Concerto* (1969), composer Yuriy Butsko (1938–2015) successfully adapted the old chant to modern times while preserving its religious meaning. “Butsko’s row” indigenized a transnational compositional technique (dodecaphony) by kneading principles of Russian chant scale into its core. In the midst of the Cold War a Russian composer reached out to the world by globalizing an inherent pre-Soviet musical element. At the time (though seemingly without any explicit intent on the part of the composer) this could be considered a non-conformist gesture against the regime. Paradoxically, however, Butsko’s system marked his desire to validate his music as a legitimate means of the Russian national representation. Butsko’s utilization of the znamenny chant could have supported the state, had the state patronized the Orthodoxy.

Keywords: Russian nationalism, Orthodoxy, non-conformism, sacred music, Yuriy Butsko

In any nation state, arts have been a meaningful means to promote nationalism. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak insightfully noted, arts help people to join the authorities “in the task of a massive remembrance project, saying ‘We all suffered this way, you remember, this is what happened, you remember,’ so that history

is turned into so-called cultural memory.”¹ Nation states and propaganda machines have enjoyed utilizing music’s ineffability, as any desired meaning can be attached to it through making it part of everyday ritual. Music is socially and politically important for those in power because it emotionally connects the past and the present, as well as sociopolitical and theoretical values they want to promote, while speaking to many people in multiple languages at once. Music can be readily acculturated to a new environment and reclaimed for different interpretations due to the lack of linguistic or technological barriers.

Through public broadcasts and performances, nation states strive to create a specific nation-oriented everyday sound aura which Brian Currid calls a “national acoustics.”² When all sound representations are controlled by the government, only those music types that people become accustomed to through the institutionalized sound transmissions are considered to be permissible. Many composers, consciously or subconsciously, chose to follow the often unwritten but clearly perceptible rules of the national acoustics to accommodate ideology, funders and employers, and it happened especially often under the totalitarian regimes.

In Russia, professional music made it to the national platform by employing two of the most obvious musical “super-icons”³ that help “prove” the fact of national affiliation in everyday life: folk tunes and religious chants. Both elements have influenced the “national acoustics” in different periods of Russia’s history. It is important to note that the ancient artifacts do not obtain greater legitimacy or better distribution when converted into sources for professional music. This process has always served the opposite purpose: utilizing these artifacts, or their simulacra, in the professional arena helps the composers validate their music as a legitimate part of the Russian national representation. Since the 18th century, Russian composers have used folk elements in order to “indigenize” their music and to indicate their unity with the people, an operation that was propagated by official promulgations of nationalism.

However, to cultivate and dignify the Russian melodic material, professional Russian composers relied on Western compositional techniques, placing Russia squarely on the globalized map rather than ghettoizing and over-elevating its artistic and political uniqueness.⁴ Many contemporary composers still frame their geographically Russian art by inserting Western-style embellishments, and “exotic”

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 281.

2. Brian Currid, *A National Acoustics: Music and Mass Publicity in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

3. Marina Ritzarev, “‘A Singing Peasant’: An Historical Look at National Identity in Russian Music,” *Min-AD: Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 6 (2007–2008), 5.

4. This issue has recently been studied by leading specialists in Russian history and music. See especially the following sources, among others: Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism from Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven–London, 2007); Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

versions of Western compositional techniques adorned with Russian trimmings still get exported abroad with great success. For instance, one of the works by a living Russian composer that is frequently performed both in Russia and in the West is the 8-minute-long Concerto for Orchestra no. 1 by Rodion Shchedrin, *Ozornye Chastushki* (Naughty Limericks). While utilizing the “low” genre of humorous and often indecent songs with primitive melodies, Shchedrin also gave a nod to Copland in the overall “people-friendly” idea of the piece. The real source of his inspiration, however, was Stravinsky’s visit to Russia in 1962, the year before the piece was written; thus the made-up Russianness of Stravinsky’s method that synthesized, in Richard Taruskin’s words, “his country’s musical traditions, both those reflective of the high literate culture and those of folklore”⁵ made it full circle in contemporary Russian music. Shchedrin imaginatively employed a Petrushka-enriched combo-Russian outlook that modernizes the rhythmic diversity and the colors of quasi-folk elements by combining them with Western instrumental traditions, thus attempting to refresh the potency of the Russian music brand in both Russia and the West. Like in many works by Stravinsky, the main tune in his piece is not a folk tune. It is a well-crafted simulacrum, and it is nicely adjusted to the medium of the symphony orchestra with the help of the funny timbres and sharp accentuations within an even and square beat.

When it comes to real folk tunes, when adapted into “high art,” most of the time they have been heavily edited to accommodate patriotic dispositions.⁶ Such versions were appropriated by the government supporters both in Russia and later in the Soviet Union as identity constructs intended to nourish ideological tasks. In other words, they became the main source of the Russian “national acoustics.” After they were institutionalized in this manner, they often bounced back into the repertoire of the ensembles that pride themselves for advocating Russian folk music.

As opposed to the postcard variant that was pictured first by the Russian government and then by Diaghilev and his ilk as Russian, unedited *autochthonous* Russian music rarely made it to the professional concert stages. In fact, such elevation was never destined to succeed anywhere. The aboriginal performance art of any country rarely survives transplantation into a concert hall, especially when shifted into the medium of orchestral instruments and professional structures.

Nevertheless, since the early 1970s, more specifically Russian (or, to be more precise, consciously less Western) features have been used in some works by contemporary Russian composers. Paradoxically, utilizing a “more inherently Russian” approach does not necessarily translate into a “more nationalistic” re-

5. Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1675.

6. Laura J. Olson, *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity* (London–New York: Routledge-Curzon, 2004), 40.

sult. Very often, introducing elements of heritage revival went against the official promulgations of nationalism.

New explorations of Russian folk principles in contemporary music were inspired by the efforts of Dmitry Pokrovsky (1944–1996), a front-rank ethnomusicologist who strived to revive folklore's true regional nature. Doing so meant to place oneself in opposition to the official nationalism and *narodnost'* that featured, among many other examples, songs and dances performed in a quasi-folk manner by Ludmila Zykina and the Berezka Dance Ensemble.

The folk ensemble established by Dmitry Pokrovsky has commissioned many important Russian composers to write some very interesting pieces for this group. Among these composers were Alexander Wustin (b. 1943), Alexander Raskatov (b. 1953), Vladimir Martynov (b. 1946), Vladimir Nikolaev (b. 1953), Iraida Yusupova (b. 1962) and Anton Batagov (b. 1965).

Perhaps the most charismatic of these works is Vladimir Martynov's *Night in Galicia* (1996), a major Russian minimalistic landmark structured as a game in the spirit of a fantastic ritual. It is set to poems by the Russian futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov and archaic thaumaturgic folk texts. Martynov did not use the actual folk melodies discovered by Pokrovsky in rural Russian villages; instead, he utilized the non-academic style of singing that was explored by Pokrovsky and transmitted into the professionalized activities of his ensemble. In *Night in Galicia*, the formulaic melodic motives become repeated patterns in a minimalistic structure that create, despite featuring typical principles of Russian folk music making, a transcultural canvas of "cosmic ritual vibration" and become "a manifestation of the cosmic order rather than embodying the 'language of feelings.' ... The sonic space of *Night in Galicia* springs from this intersection of tradition and innovation, the authored and the non-authored, ancient and modern."⁷

Martynov feels that minimalist principles help him to avoid personification in music and to better celebrate the artistic idea of anonymous religious service, when the author's "self" is leveled, hidden behind the absolute idea. Through his reliance on minimalist principles, Martynov is able to comment on the whole cultural mass of the past and present, distancing himself from it. The ways in which Martynov and other Russian composers transform minimalism is perhaps one of the most fruitful cases for studying both the effects of globalization in the area of classical music and the contemporary Russian musical identity. The high accessibility of minimalism was predicated by its structural proximity to popular music, and it is possible to consider minimalism as a transnational classical music style in the same way we consider the omnipresent character of rock music. Non-American minimalistic composers often try to do what popular artists

7. Vladimir Martynov, Program note for *Night in Galicia*, <http://www.longarms.net/cdcatalog/detail.php?ID=1784>.

do when they adopt popular genres to their local styles: they infuse the internationally conventional minimalistic techniques with local melodic, linguistic, and instrumental material.

Russian iterations of this style often incorporate the folk heterophonic principles of formal construction: the motives are repeated many times with slight variations and often varying simultaneously in different overlapping voices. Purity and independence from associations, which were the most important features of early minimalism of Philip Glass and Steve Reich, are darkened in its Russian counterpart with the palpable intensity of semantic connections.

Martynov's friend, composer Nikolai Korndorf (1947–2001), forged a unique path in Russian music by including minimalistic principles in large-scale symphonic works while concentrating on one mode that penetrated the entire piece. The composer paid close attention to the unfolding musical forms, each element building on the previous statements. Korndorf continued to write in this style while living in Canada in the last 10 years of his life, thus bringing a Russian transformation of a Western technique back to the West.

Having moved to Canada, Korndorf started using Russian elements in his music even more consistently than before. He grew up listening to the peal of bells and to the singing in Church Slavonic while attending services with his grandmother, and later he prominently included both these and other Orthodox elements in his music. In 1991, the year he emigrated to Canada, Korndorf wrote one of his most important compositions – *Continuum* for organ – using a scale principle derived from the structure of Orthodox chant, the other, non-folk, “icon.”

Korndorf was not the only composer who referred to the Russian Orthodoxy in music and who used this particular methodology. During the Soviet era, the great Russian sacred music tradition had fallen into obscurity and neglect. It was considered ideologically suspect to perform or compose any kind of sacred music in the USSR. Despite the efforts to eradicate it entirely, Orthodoxy remained functional, even thriving in the hearts of the faithful. In fact, some scholarly research was officially permissible, such as paleography, the restoring of old religious artifacts, studies of different schools of iconography and similar scholarly interests in music. However, religious practice in churches was not allowed.

Towards the end of the Soviet era, when the prohibitions on religion began to gradually soften at the state level, Orthodoxy (if not faith per se then at least some knowledge about it) became one of the driving forces that motivated stylistic developments in the art of many composers. Among them were Georgy Sviridov (1915–1998), Galina Ustvolskaya (1919–2006), Nikolai Karetnikov (1930–1994), Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931), Sergei Slonimsky (b. 1932), Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998), Alemdar Karamanov (1934–2007), Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), Nikolai Korndorf, Andrey Golovin (b. 1950), Mikhail Kollontay (b. 1952) and Vladimir Martynov.

All of these composers in one way or another embodied religious aspects in their art beginning in the mid-1960s. Despite their very different creative methods, all of them came to adhere to the same spiritual tendency: they saw the contemporary world through the prism of philosophical contemplation and religious belief.

How some composers who identified with Orthodoxy conveyed their spirituality through their art in spite of official prohibitions illuminates yet another way of expressing Russian identity through heritage revival. In this article, I will only concern myself with the music written before Orthodoxy became officially allowed in Russia, which happened along with the celebration of the thousandth anniversary of Christianity in Russia in 1988. Around that time, Orthodoxy became fashionable and brought controversially nationalistic tendencies in the ensuing decades, with some composers exploiting church-related features in an attempt to redefine both their art and the meaning of Russianness altogether. Many have played the religious card in order to engage new followers, while detonating artistic, aesthetic and branding incentives into a suspiciously unhealthy religion-infused musical mix that was instigated by the current nationalistic repositioning. But back in the period I am discussing today, religion was still prohibited. As Marina Rakhmanova, a prominent researcher of early Russian music, said in a recent interview, “nobody would snatch away a znamenny book from your hands, but nobody would encourage using it either.”⁸

In the mid-1960s, her husband, composer Yuriy Butsko (1938–2015), found a successful way to adapt the old chant to modern times while at the same time preserving its religious context and meaning. The unique compositional technique he developed helped to bridge liturgical experience and the concert stage by means of a rather calculated but inspired methodology derived from the structure of the znamenny chant.

Znamenny chant is the main form of Russian church chant; it is generally diatonic and it is sung, as no instruments were allowed in Orthodox Church services. Attempts were made starting in the 19th century to transfer the chant into the realm of instrumental music, beginning with Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Russian Easter Overture*, but most of them failed to embrace the modal system of the znamenny chant as the composers tended to harmonize each sound of the chant with a new chord (that is, vertically) rather than making sense of them by means of counterpoint (that is, horizontally).

Yuriy Butsko’s system offered a new way to bring the znamenny chant to the professional music arena. Although the chant was originally limited by the compass of a human voice, Butsko extended its range in accordance with its scale structure (which consists of two trichords separated from each other by half-tone).

8. The interview was conducted on 8 December 2014, in Moscow.

He did this by adding trichords up and down, all similarly separated by half tones, until reaching the initial pitch and thus completing the circle. The system has twelve tones; therefore Butsko describes it as Russian dodecaphony, a twelve-tone row extracted from ancient Russian material. There is an axis in this system (between E and F above Middle C), and in relation to it any consonance can have a mirror reflection in the opposite segment of the row. The entire sound space is logically coordinated around this single axis in such a way that direct and inverted motions and symmetrically organized chords become the major texture-forming building blocks.

Butsko often juxtaposes different versions of the original chants (or of his own melodies in the character of the *znamenny* chant) in polyphonic and heterophonic layers. This makes the texture of his music viscous and resilient, its fabric and melodic pattern pleasantly heavy, all unspooling in an atmosphere of continuously elaborated monotony and rotations within a single sound sphere of extended length. The composer interprets *znamenny* chant as the ideal of spiritual perfection, the goal to be constantly pursued, and avoids decorating it with fancy mannerisms. The timeless and impersonal Old Russian chant thus acquires the semantics of a single and inevitable objective, a reference point for all times.

Butsko's system was fully established in the *Polyphonic Concerto* (1969) for four keyboard instruments (piano, organ, harpsichord, and celesta). Such instrumentation helped to create an interesting acoustic thickness close to that of a reverberant choral performance in a church setting because it is impossible to tune these instruments without slight variances between themselves. This is a monumental three-and-a-half-hour-long cycle of 19 counterpoints in which the composer applied his technique to the original *znamenny* chants that had been deciphered from 16th- and 17th-century manuscripts by M. Brazhnikov, N. Uspensky and M. Rakhmanova. The 19 movements of the concerto are grouped into five "notebooks" according to their instrumental principles: counterpoints I–IV in the first notebook are solos for each of the four main keyboard instruments; counterpoints V–X are duos; counterpoints XI–XIV are trios; counterpoints XV–XVIII bring back the solo iterations for each instrument. The last, fifth, notebook includes only one piece – Counterpoint XIX for all of the main instruments plus choir and several percussion instruments – which provides a monumental finale. The main chant, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord," is laid out as a set of variations, in the last of which the choir (singing without words in unison) is joined by the organ (playing the theme at the octave) and by the vibraphone (treating the same theme in a canonic fashion), thus increasing the reverberation to the utmost extent. Other instruments enter with aleatoric sections reflecting upon the different emotions experienced by the parishioners during a church service: pride, resignation, determination, agitation and exaltation. The piece ends with sounds of the solemn and majestic bell-like chords carried in the deep octaves in the piano part.

There has been a whole generation of contemporary Russian composers who have utilized Butsko's Russian dodecaphony, including Alexander Wustin, Mikhail Kollontay, and Nikolai Korndorf. All three began using Butsko's scale right after the period I am concerned with today. For instance, Wustin's *White Music* for organ was written in 1990, and, talking about this piece, he called Butsko's system an "ingenious discovery" that featured harmonic clarity and organized music within a fragile and transparent choral fabric.

The most important of those who used Butsko's system was Alfred Schnittke, who admitted having heard about Russian church music from Butsko, with whom he attended a pre-conservatory college in Moscow.⁹ In 1984, Schnittke wrote his Symphony no. 4 for vocal soloists, chorus and orchestra based on the traditional fifteen *Mysteries of the Rosary* which recalls the life of Mary. The *Rosary* structure predicated the form of this symphony: its single movement is organized as a set of fifteen variations on four themes grouped into four segments. Schnittke wanted to unite together four main confessions – Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy – by using themes rooted in the four confession-specific scales. The last, Orthodox, theme is built on Butsko's principle of Russian dodecaphony. Each of the four themes is unveiled in the form of canon, each with its own polyphonic structure, instrumentation and dynamics. These canons gradually join each other in linear and textural juxtapositions until all four themes coalesce in a polyostinato ecumenical coda.

Butsko's scale represents a unique example of "indigenizing" a transnational compositional technique (dodecaphony) by kneading principles of Russian chant scale construction into its core. It is hard to say what actually took place first – Russification of dodecaphony or dodecaphonization of Russian chant – but the result was quite astonishing for its time. In the midst of the Cold War, a Russian composer reached out to the world by globalizing an unabashedly pre-Soviet musical element. At the time, this could be considered a non-conformist gesture against the regime of the state.

Paradoxically, however, Butsko's system marked his desire to validate znamenny chant as a legitimate means of Russian national representation. Butsko's utilization of znamenny chant could have supported the state, had the state patronized Orthodoxy, but this was not the case at the time.

Butsko's nationalism was not driven by the party and the government, it was not created under the banner of dissidence or dictated by the desire to be appreciated in the West as an object of state repression. Instead, Butsko was trying to get to the essence of things, and he found it in a unique combination of a Western 12-tone idea with the archetypal Russian material which itself was structurally and ideologically cleaner than the folk element. It is also important to remember

9. Alexandr Ivashkin, *Conversations with Alfred Schnittke* (Moscow: Klassika XXI, 2005), 122 and 67.

that, when Orthodoxy became the state religion after Perestroika, he never joined the official Moscow Patriarchy and remained faithful to the Old Believers practice. Butsko's non-official nationalism was a type of *Fronde* in the original French meaning, as he was expressing a quiet unhappiness with the powers and their policies without actively fighting against them. As we can see from his example, Russianness can be demonstrated in many different ways, and not always would it coincide with nationalistic attitudes.