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A MUSIC HISTORY WITH LOVE? THE HITS, THE CULTS, AND THE SNOBS*

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ABSTRACT

In this article I refer to a number of examples of powerful manifestations of love for music that routinely fall under the radar of music historians. One of these is the present case study: the 'tenor cult' as a prominent feature of Soviet culture in the 40s and 50s. Discouraged by the authorities and scorned by critics, it led to extravagant behaviour that may seem anomalous for such a regimented society. This potent love for both music and performer was largely female-driven, and it delivered formative, life-defining experiences for many of the participants. I test the suitability of the concept of "the middlebrow" for analysing this phenomenon and investigate how such studies can contribute to the project of a listener-oriented music history.

KEYWORDS: the "tenor cult", Sergei Lemeshev, Ivan Kozlovsky, the middlebrow, music listeners

Imagine a history of twentieth-century music based on the preferences of today's listeners. In one quite typical poll, held in Australia in 2011, the central figures were Elgar, Holst, Gershwin, Vaughan Williams, and Rachmaninov. The next five positions in the poll were held by Rodrigo, Barber, Orff, Stravinsky and Prokofiev (Lesnie 2011). This particular poll happened to pass over Ravel in its top ten, but since he featured prominently in similar polls, we should add him too. What if we

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were then to reconstruct the historiography of twentieth-century music so that it revolved around these eleven figures? Can we imagine such a narrative? Perhaps not. Why the difficulty?

We can make sense of the list only if we take a step away from musicology in order to enter the mind of the casual classical-music listener. Then we are able to see that each composer has one, or at most a handful of pieces that have entered the popular consciousness. Elgar? The Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1, "Nimrod" from the Enigma Variations and the Cello Concerto. Holst? *The Planets* alone. Gershwin? *The Rhapsody in Blue*, perhaps parts of *An American in Paris* or the Piano Concerto. Vaughan Williams? *The Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* or *The Lark Ascending*. Rachmaninov for his Second Piano Concerto, with the Third Concerto and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* just behind. Rodrigo for the *Concierto di Aranjuez* alone. Barber's Adagio for Strings. Orff for *Carmina Burana*. Stravinsky: *The Rite of Spring* and perhaps *The Firebird*. Prokofiev most probably for *Peter and the Wolf*, but the *Kizhe* Suite and a couple of numbers from *Romeo and Juliet* also assist his bid. And finally, Ravel for the *Bolero*.

While such polls doubtless offer some information about the marketing of classical music today, we should not dismiss the innocent joy that these "greatest hits" have given to millions of people around the world. We can number even musicologists among these listeners, even if they maintain a discrete silence, or deny their guilty pleasures. But the divergence between public and academic perceptions is extreme. With the sole exception of Stravinsky, these most popular composers are marginal at best in most academic surveys of twentieth-century music history. For all the stubborn, enduring love Rachmaninov continues to earn from performers and listeners alike, for academic historians, he belongs to a kind of musical Jurassic Park.

In the 1980s, when literary scholars started talking about reader-oriented history, musicologists suddenly remembered about listeners,² leading to a new focus on the psychology of listening,³ the history of listening practices,⁴ and reception studies. Of these three areas, only reception studies (the largest of them) has been integrated into the more traditional historical writing that had been concerned mainly with composers and their works. Reception studies are still most often focused on particular works, as in traditional musicology, but the informal concept of the musical work in reception studies is of something mutable, subject to reinterpretation in each society that receives the work. There is a natural bias towards a narrow and atypical sector of the listening public, namely the music critics employed by newspapers and music journals, and this is understandable, since these are the only listeners who habitually commit their musical opinions to print after concerts, operatic performances or the release of new recordings. It is much more difficult to excavate the opinions of

2 See, for example, an important manifesto in Obelkevich 1989: 102–108.

3 For example, Sloboda and O'Neill 2001: 415–429.

4 For example, Botstein 1998: 427–431.

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“ordinary listeners”, until the present century, which has yielded up a phenomenon that offers a great potential advance in this musicological enterprise: namely, the social media, which offer us a copious supply of listeners’ opinions to be searched and collated for arriving at results such as the concert hit parade I began with.

The story of public taste for classical/concert music in the twentieth century has still not been recounted in any systematic way (along the lines of William Weber’s pioneering study of public taste in nineteenth-century musical life) (Weber 2009). We still tend to write and teach twentieth-century history as the story of musical modernism exemplified through composers and works, attempting to avert our eyes from the open secret that the work-based approach collapses in the second half of the century. This is simply because the concepts of masterworks and great composers no longer had a clear application. Concertgoers were no longer acquiring new “friends” in the concert hall, whose company they wanted to enjoy again and again. Most of the avant-garde’s music was simply off the public radar, confined to cliques based around Darmstadt, Donaueschingen and other festivals, with a high proportion of fellow composers and performers in the audience.

Once again following literary studies, in recent years, musicology managed to find one way of accommodating the listeners’ perspective, and that is through the concept of “the middlebrow”. Just a few decades ago, a classical hit parade would still have been condescendingly dismissed as “middlebrow”, but in recent years, academic usage of the word has become neutral. The shedding of the old polemical baggage made the concept a useful tool in revealing previously unnoticed cultural vistas.

A brief history of the concept will be helpful for present purposes. Amusingly, but appropriately, “highbrow” first appeared in the literature of phrenology, in 1875, the hypothesis being that those blessed with higher foreheads had larger brains and were therefore more intelligent. The contrary term, “lowbrow”, had to wait another thirty years to appear in print, by which time “highbrow” had expanded far beyond its phrenological origins, since “lowbrow” was a straightforward derogatory term for someone who lacked culture and good taste (Levine 1988: 222–289). The stage was set for the entrance of “middlebrow”, which finally appeared in 1912, in an article for the American weekly magazine, *The Nation*. This is the pioneering passage:

[T]here is an alarmingly wide chasm, I might almost say a vacuum, between the high-brow, who considers reading either as a trade or as a form of intellectual wrestling, and the low-brow, who is merely seeking for gross thrills. It is to be hoped that culture will soon be democratized through some less conventional system of education, giving rise to a new type that might be called the middle-brow, who will consider books as a source of intellectual enjoyment.⁵

This allows us to see that “middlebrow” was at least neutral, and possibly laudatory, a label for a desirable social goal. But with the first stirrings of literary modernism, solid unexperimental works were placed in a middlebrow category that the more adventu-

5 Attributed to B.W. Huebsch, President of the Booksellers’ League, *The Nation* (25 January 1912), 75.

rous and ambitious highbrows could dismiss and denigrate. Here is an aloof Virginia Woolf on the subject:

But what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer. They are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between. ... The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige. ...

We highbrows, I agree, have to earn our livings; but when we have earned enough to live on, then we live. When the middlebrows, on the contrary, have earned enough to live on, they go on earning enough to buy—what are the things that middlebrows always buy? Queen Anne furniture (faked, but none the less expensive); first editions of dead writers, always the worst; pictures, or reproductions from pictures, by dead painters; houses in what is called „the Georgian style”—but never anything new, never a picture by a living painter, or a chair by a living carpenter, or books by living writers, for to buy living art requires living taste (Woolf 1947: 115).

To be fair to Woolf, this highbred sneering appeared in a draft letter to an editor of the *New Statesman* and *Nation*, and was never actually sent.

From the 1920s onwards, the three terms established themselves among journalists on both sides of the Atlantic, and in 1949, *Life* magazine produced a classic chart, a witty array of cartoons illustrating the preferences of the three brows in music and in many other aspects of life, such as clothes, food, games and charitable causes. The lowbrow contents himself with whatever the jukebox offers, middlebrow tastes range widely from Perry Como to Brahms, while the highbrow only admits to “Bach and before; Ives and after” (Lynes 1949: 99–102).

Histories of music, art, and literature have, in the nature of things, been written by highbrows – a middlebrow who acquired the knowledge and connections to academic publishers would have transformed himself into a highbrow. And so middlebrow cultural products and practices and products were largely excluded from consideration. But now that they have been brought back from the cold, let us look for a present-day definition of the middlebrow. A useful checklist has been provided by a literary theorist Beth Driscoll, who offers eight characteristics of the middlebrow, and her intention is that anything characterised as middlebrow should exemplify several of these, but not necessarily all eight (Driscoll 2014, 17-44). Thus, according to Driscoll, the middlebrow is:

1) middle-class

Both Virginia Woolf’s essay and *Life* magazine’s chart correlated the three brows with the three social classes. The aspirational nature of the middle class is reflected in the self-improving character of much middlebrow culture.

2) reverential towards elite culture

Middlebrow reverence for high culture leads to a degree of insecurity. A columnist for *Punch* magazine in 1925 tells us that the middlebrow category “consists of people who are hoping that someday they will get used to the stuff they ought to like”⁶.

But this reveals something about the habits of highbrows. If middlebrows are patronised for their efforts to understand, this is because highbrows tend to conceal their own past efforts. No-one is born with an appreciation of complex and challenging art. This is, of course, snobbery in action, which will always threaten to undermine attempts to turn “middlebrow” into a neutral term, to take the “sting” out of the word (Driscoll 2014: 1).

3) entrepreneurial or commercial

Middlebrow art is commercially packaged for ease of use and therefore generates income for middlemen in advertising, distribution and retail.

4) mediated

This word is understood broadly: Driscoll discusses personal, institutional and technological mediation. People and institutions, such as classical-music radio presenters, mediate between high culture and the middle class. A succession of technologies mediates concretely, whether radio, records, television or YouTube. A BBC Proms concert unites many of these: the prestige and infrastructure of the BBC, which even employs some of the orchestras performing, the BBC presenters, who also interview guest musicologists and musicians, the live broadcast on digital radio or television, and the video streaming at the BBC website afterwards.

5) feminised

This is an intriguing point: women make up the majority in audiences for the middlebrow. In the early and mid-twentieth century, the privacy and lack of commercial timetabling in the life of a housewife made it easier to cultivate middlebrow habits – listening to a Mendelssohn symphony on the radio at low volume while ironing, as the baby sleeps. The reasons for this continuing to the present are more complex.

6) emotional

Here we come a crucial aspect of the middlebrow, and one which I have taken as the starting point and core of the present article. As Driscoll puts it, “Middlebrow practices emphasise emotional connection with culture. This involves a number of different modes, including sentimentality, empathy, and therapy” (Driscoll 2014).

7) recreational

This flows from the previous two points: middlebrow cultural practices are performed out of love, not obligation.

8) earnest

The idea here is that the middlebrow only listens in earnest, while the highbrow cultivates the ability to listen with ironic distance. Again, an element of snobbery threatens to encroach here.

6 *Punch*, 23 December 1925.

How have musicologists used the concept? One of the early adopters and promoters of the concept for musicology is Christopher Chowrimootoo, whose recent book *Middlebrow Modernism* (2018) analyses production and consumption of Benjamin Britten's operas outside the standard grand narrative of twentieth-century modernism. He describes his book as "a tale of composers, critics, and audiences torn between seemingly conflicting commitments – on the one hand to uncompromising originality and radical autonomy, and on the other to musical pleasure and communication with a new mass audience". Chowrimootoo also points us to our own "guilty pleasures", as scholars, critics, and audiences, "the conflicts between what we think we "ought to like" and what we actually like, between aesthetic ideals and the messy realities of artistic taste (Chowrimootoo 2018: 3).

Pauline Fairclough attempts to do something similar for the symphonies of Shostakovich: that is, she attempts to save them from the Cold War "socialist realist" ghetto by relocating them to the middlebrow category (Fairclough 2018: 336–367). This makes sense from our present-day Western perspective: on this basis, we no longer have to burden Shostakovich with the dead weight of his political circumstances, but we are free to listen to him in the same way we listen to his counterparts in the Western symphonic tradition of the mid-twentieth century. Yes, his political circumstances are interesting (and I for one can hardly be accused of neglecting them), but the musicality of his work is too easily forgotten.

In this article, I also wish to test the concept of the middlebrow within the context of Soviet musical culture, but Shostakovich will not be my focus. To begin, I will quote from the scholar of Soviet literature Stephen Lovell, taking a passage that Fairclough cited as being particularly helpful when she was trying to articulate her position:

In early Soviet Russia... culture was issued with an imperative to be both "legitimate" and "popular", and as a result became "middlebrow". There was no "high" culture that corresponded to a dominant social class, nor can we really speak of a "popular" culture; there emerged a single "Culture", which was not allowed to reflect diverse social interests, but rather provided the model for the Marxist-Leninist project of social unification (Lovell 2000).

I am actually going to take issue with Lovell here. What he describes was the situation the Soviet authorities hoped to bring about: it was indeed how Soviet culture was supposed to operate. But that is not what happened in practice. The culture did, in fact divide into high, middle and low strata, even if these were not the exact counterparts of the Western categories. Let us look at the situation in music. The difference arises from the absence of elite modernism, which was prohibited and unheard in public between roughly 1936 and 1956. This absence had significant consequences for Soviet culture: for one, Shostakovich's symphonies occupied the very top tier of musical culture. For all their supposed middlebrow character today, they were generally difficult music, even if certain passages had a greater popular appeal. The Soviet artistic elite, let alone the wider public, had to give the works several liste-

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nings before they were satisfied that they understood enough of what they had heard. Their main audience was always a minority within the Soviet concert-going public. Virgil Thomson's famous *bon mot* that the Seventh Symphony "seems to have been written for the slow-witted, the not very musical and the distracted" (Thomson 1942) is a travesty only uttered to serve Thomson's own ends. Beyond the famous "invasion episode", which came to stand for the whole symphony (and, without doubt, helped its acceptance), there is nothing easy about the Seventh. The Eighth is even more difficult, and the famous sculptor Vera Mukhina, intellectually well endowed and sympathetic to Shostakovich, still found herself struggling after four listenings (Frolova-Walker 2016: 93–94).

I am happy to take Fairclough's point that the Fifth Symphony is (only) middle-brow with respect to its mediation. She understands mediation here as a transaction between different socio-economic groups, following Russell Lynes and Richard Taruskin (Fairclough 2018: 340). In this particular case, the Soviet authorities wanted the symphony to be accessible to a broad audience and Shostakovich followed the brief (the work is challenging, true, but it lacks the forbidding modernism of Symphonies 2–4). But even with all these precautions, the Moscow venue was no longer full after the fourth concert. This was a city of 4 million at the time, of which only 8–10 thousand people actually went to hear the Symphony. And who belonged to this quarter-of-one-percent of the populace? It was precisely the cultural elite.

The discussions of the Stalin Prize Committee give us a good sense of the Soviet high-, middle- and lowbrow in music. In one of these, we learn that the most requested piece of music on Soviet radio is Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto – this represents middlebrow taste. In another discussion, there is a criticism of popular but "debased musical tastes", with Lidia Ruslanova's "gypsy" songs singled out, as an undesirable vestige of late Tsarist culture – this is lowbrow taste. The Committee discusses Shostakovich's music in very different terms from classic favourites like Tchaikovsky; Shostakovich was generally considered challenging and sometimes problematic – this gives us a location for highbrow taste. In fact, most other new Soviet concert works were discussed along similar lines, so they can generally be considered highbrow by Soviet standards of the time (Frolova-Walker 2016: 188; 275).

And here I would like to offer my own candidate for the Soviet "middlebrow", a certain musical phenomenon that won an adoring mass audience. The story I want to tell is not well known outside of Russia, but it still has resonance in post-Soviet Russia, and its effects extended to my own family. I shall begin with the extraordinary cult of the Bolshoi Theatre's two leading tenors, from the 1930s to the 1950s. The singers in question were Ivan Kozlovsky (1900–1993) and Sergei Lemeshev (1902–1977). But they themselves were part of the "popular opera" phenomenon, a middle-brow mainstay of Soviet musical life in the Stalin period. To be part of the opera-going public means access to an opera house, and for most of the Soviet population outside the main urban centres, this was not possible. Nevertheless, the Soviet authorities wanted its citizenry to be acquainted with opera, so more accessible and digestible forms had to be created. Accordingly, extracts from classic operas were presented on the radio, or in the cinema, while in the concert hall, medleys of favourite arias were

commonly performed. In this manner, many a Soviet citizen who had never set foot inside an opera house would still know famous arias by heart.

In the 1954 Soviet film *Verniye druž'ya* (True Friends), there is an episode where the audience is kept waiting for a performance that is late to start. A couple of besuited bureaucrats mount the stage in an attempt trying to pacify the crowd, whose frustration is becoming evident. For our purposes, what is interesting is that they start to shout out their requests. One of these is for the song "Lodochka" (Little Boat), but this was only the theme song written for the film, so it is a red herring for our purposes. The other three requests are all standard items of "popular opera": the Habanera from *Carmen*, Lensky's Aria from *Eugene Onegin*, and Susanin's aria from Glinka's *Ivan Susanin* (the Sovietized version of *A Life for the Tsar*).

With Lensky, we are right in the centre of our topic: it was the signature aria for Sergei Lemeshev, one of our two tenors from the Bolshoi. The other, Ivan Kozlovsky, was best known for his Song of the Indian Guest, from *Sadko* (and later for his Yudodiv, from *Boris Godunov*). If you search for these clips on the internet, you will immediately be struck by the difference between the two voices: Lemeshev is smooth, tender, lyrical, and romantic, while Kozlovsky has a "bite" to his voice, which some found exciting, while others considered it a detraction. But even those unconvinced by Kozlovsky's vocal timbre, were won over by his impeccable technique, his wider repertoire, and his powerful, heart-stopping high notes. The two singers were never promoted internationally, so you should not be surprised if you have never heard of them, but among Russians, their recordings still command deep affection today, thirty or forty years after their deaths. One Russian internet discussion around the relative strengths of the two tenors flourished for no less than four years, from 2004 to 2008; in the end, a vote was taken, and Lemeshev won by a long stretch.⁷ Since familiarity with internet forums was largely confined to the young at this point, very few of the participants had heard the tenors live, and even those who had heard them were only old enough to catch them when they were well past their prime.

The cult of these two singers took two principal forms. The first was the role of radio and film in building their popularity across the Soviet Union. Lemeshev was given a great boost by his starring role in *A Musical Story* (1940), a fictionalised account of his own life.⁸ The film rode the wave of Lemeshev's radio popularity, but the screen portrayal added a new intimacy to his public image. His daughter attested that in the film, he behaved and spoke just as she knew him: a simple and unpretentious man from a small village, free of the artifices of celebrity culture.⁹ Kozlovsky appeared on the big screen two years later, in the wartime documentary *A Concert*

7 "Lemeshev i Kozlovskiy – postfactum", ClassicalForum.ru, <http://classicalforum.ru/index.php?topic=2251.25>.

8 There is an insightful essay on this film by Anna Nisnevich (2014: 193–211).

9 "Doch' Lemesheva o nishchenskom detstve, sumasshedshikh poklonnitsakh i zhenakh velikogo otsa", <https://7days.ru/stars/privatelife/doch-lemesheva-o-nishchenskom-detstve-sumasshedshikh-poklonnitsakh-i-zhenakh-velikogo-otsta/2.htm#ixzz686kRtSha>.

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for the Front (Kontsert Frontu, 1942). After these films, there were few Soviet citizens who would not have heard their voices or known their names. For that level of isolation, you would have to belong to remote communities that lacked even a single village radio set, such as the Old Believers hidden away in the middle of the taiga. The Soviet state relied on radio for the creation of a common culture for the nation, and one feature of Soviet life during the 30s-50s period was that the continuous background sound of the radio. The Soviet sets did not even have an off switch – you turned the volume knob down if you needed some quiet.

The second form of the cult was localised. Both Kozlovsky and Lemeshev were pursued by large groups of fans, mostly female. These fans gave their loyalty exclusively to one singer or the other – you were a *lemeshistka* or a *kozlovityanka* – and each reputedly harboured some hostility towards the other camp. These groups were seen at the Bolshoi, and their noisy adulation resulted in long interruptions to the performance of operas when their idol first stepped out on to the stage.¹⁰ They were also to be seen at the artists' entrance, and it was recorded that Kozlovsky often ran in by the back entrance to avoid being mobbed. They accompanied the singers on the way from the theatre afterwards, and these women even managed at times to lift Lemeshev's car off the ground, carrying him along with the rest of the adoring crowd. They also congregated near the apartment block in which their idol lived. A Russian word in Soviet times for "fans" or "admirers" was *sirikhi*, derived from *sir* (cheese); this actually stems from the fact that in bad weather, Lemeshev's fans would take shelter nearby in the imposing cheese shop on Tverskaya. They travelled the country to follow their idols around, when they were on tour, obviously enough, but also, more disturbingly, when they were on vacation. They were happy to intrude on their idol's personal life: when Lemeshev and his wife Irina (who was a soprano at the Bolshoi) parted ways, he came out on stage to be greeted by a chorus of *sirikhi* shouting "Go back to Irina Maslennikova."¹¹

This behaviour, when viewed in isolation, may not be so very different from the behaviour of other groups of fans, such as the earlier cult of the bass Fyodor Chaliapin, in fin-de-siècle Russia, the subject of a book by Anna Fishzon (2013). What distinguishes the present case, however, is that this adulation of opera singers took place in the Soviet Union, and not only that but throughout the years of high Stalinism. The formation of obsessive and hysterical cults around opera singers is, after all, a phenomenon that would seem alien to Soviet life: it is hedonistic, escapist, redolent of psychological disorder, and it is accompanied by a spectrum of hooliganistic behaviour: disruption of performances at state opera houses, gate-crashing, loitering, climbing drainpipes, and so on. In addition to all these problems, it was fundamentally un-Soviet to build your identity and existence around a recreational practice, since work, as a form of service to the state, were supposed to come first. The indul-

10 In the following PhD thesis, the author focuses on the (mainly negative) influence of the "cult of the singer" on the artistic level and day-to-day running of the Bolshoi Opera: Panchuk 2006.

11 This was one of the Lemeshev stories told to me by my mother.

gence of obsessions was inimical to the kind of healthy and balanced life the Soviet authorities promoted among its citizenry. Any obsessive behaviour was supposed to be channelled into useful Soviet activities such as fulfilling industrial goals, hunting down saboteurs or fighting wartime enemies. Even the objects of admiration were far from the severe, muscular Soviet men of monumental sculpture and propaganda posters. Lemeshev was small and slight, with big eyes, his looks as sweet as his voice. Kozlovsky was at least tall, but decidedly effeminate, always wrapped in a long scarf off-stage, of aristocratic bearing and mannerisms (despite the fact that like his rival, he also came from a peasant family).

And yet for all their un-Soviet behaviour, there was nothing underground about these fans in pursuit of their idols – on the contrary, it was highly public. For as long as individual fans stopped short of outright criminality, their behaviour was treated as a tolerable embarrassment, and as such, it passed largely unremarked in newspapers, music journals and other printed literature of the period. The memoir literature is another matter, and much amusement is drawn from the more bizarre antics of the opera fans, but these were published long after the events. Still, the tiny number of contemporary pieces addressing the matter are worth examining.

One such piece is the short newspaper article, “A Claque at the Bolshoi”, which appeared in 1936 (*L’vov* 1936: 3). The journalist blames the artistes for the existence of their claques, since they offer encouragement by handing out free passes to their fans. The writer further complains that Lemeshev would place a toy poodle in his dressing-room window as a signal to his fans that he was about to make an unscheduled appearance. The fans who spotted the poodle would hurriedly circulate the information around the claque. The writer of the article approvingly provides an example of another star singer, the soprano Elena Kruglikova, whose behaviour was much more sober and Soviet. Instead of encouraging her incipient claque, she would hold “serious, comradely conversations” with her fans to explain why she was not going to offer free passes, and as a result, they left her alone. Another article on the topic comes from 1954, and it is once again centred around Lemeshev (it also covers other forms of bad behaviour in the opera house, such as late arrivals) (Anon. 1954: 2).

The most interesting of my exhibits, however, is a little article from 1949, signed by Lemeshev himself, in the Bolshoi Theatre’s own paper, distributed exclusively to employees (although the actual readership extended to friends and family). The article is entitled: “This is unworthy of Soviet youth!” (Lemeshev 1949: 3), and it enters into greater detail on the kind of behaviour found among claque members, which included (older) schoolgirls missing their classes in order to pursue their idol. This was deviant behaviour, shirking the responsibilities of young citizens to join a community of idlers. The point of the article is unclear: it seems to be admonishing the fans directly, but these fans were not officially part of the paper’s readership. Alternatively, it might have been an oblique attempt to exculpate Lemeshev from the behaviour of his claque (he could hardly be accused of dragging girls from their schoolrooms). At any rate, after 20 years of Lemeshev hysteria, no one could seriously expect such an article to have any effect.

Most of our information about the tenor cults comes from later memoirs and interviews, rather than from any contemporaneous printed sources. My own interest in the topic was initially sparked by my own mother's recollections, since she herself was one of those errant Moscow schoolgirls scolded in the Bolshoi paper. Even the period is right, since she was in her early teens during the post-War period. She was drawn into this "deviance" by her friend Lyuba, who was indeed, by my mother's account, quite obsessed. Lyuba decided to avoid the more oversubscribed cults, and chose a tenor of the second rank, Anatoly Orfyonov (who often served as Lemeshev's understudy). My mother, already an individualist, would not even follow Lyuba's choice, but instead selected another tenor with the same lyrical repertoire, but a little further down the ranks again. Even so, the mementos that she passed on to me clearly show that she was a great admirer of Lemeshev, even if she kept her distance from the herd back in her teens.

Lyuba became a senior acolyte in the cult, so to speak: she made personal contact with her idol, began to receive free passes from him, even came to know various members of his family. In the end, she became a life-long friend of her idol's family. My mother was more reticent, and contented herself with constant trips to the opera house – whatever fantasies she harboured never became reality. She never had much confidence in her singing voice, and her childhood piano lessons were set aside after a few years, so she could not even be called an amateur musician at any level. Even so, she came to know several repertoire operas by heart, with *La Traviata* and *Eugene Onegin* as her favourites. By her own accounts, she was sufficiently immersed in the operatic experience to shed frequent tears in the darkness of the auditorium. Her own mother she lost when she was only 15, and the opera house became a happy place of escape from sad realities. Many decades later, she still spoke with great warmth about her operatic experience, and it remained in her memory as an important rite of passage, although she also cautioned me to guard against any obsession on the level of Lyuba's, an obsession that could affect or even derail career and marriage plans.

Is it appropriate, then, to treat the Soviet tenor cult as a middlebrow cultural practice? Following Driscoll's approach, let us see how the cult holds up against his eight criteria (remembering that Driscoll did not expect them all to be met by any single cultural phenomenon).

1) middle-class

Although class-society had officially disappeared from the Soviet Union by the mid-1930s, this was a fiction. There were, in fact, huge differences in earning power and prestige across Soviet society. At the top was Stalin's elite of senior military personnel, government officials, academicians and the uppermost layer of cultural figures. At the bottom of society, constituting the majority, were the ordinary workers and (collective) farmers. Between these groups was a middle class of professionals: teachers, scientists, engineers, managers and civil servants. Culturally, there were also highbrows, middlebrows and lowbrows, although these strata did not align precisely with the social strata. The musical highbrows were those who attended symphony concerts

and piano recitals; their interests extended to opera, but their attendance patterns differed from that of the cultists, favouring new productions, and lacking the obsessive desire to see the same opera again and again. The lowbrows were those who shunned opera or classical music in general, preferring to follow recent popular songs. Opera cults fit in the middle. As a member of the musical public, Stalin himself belonged to the middlebrow group, attending the same productions of classical opera (and ballet) repeatedly, but avoiding or actively rejecting new works, as we know from the scandal that overtook Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth*.

To belong to an opera cult, devotees needed a lot of leisure time in order to visit the Bolshoi several nights a week. Cult members therefore consisted mainly of housewives whose husbands could provide for the family, or university students and older schoolchildren who did not have to spend their free time earning extra income. The ticket price was not, in itself, a great obstacle, since prices had not been set by market forces since the end of the 1920s. But even if they were easy to pay for, actually obtaining them was another matter. The normal operagoer had to queue for hours (which itself required leisure time), so cult members tried to bypass the normal process by developing helpful contacts. If they were enterprising and charming enough, they might become sufficiently acquainted with their idol to acquire a free pass, as we saw earlier.

2) reverential towards the elite culture

Some of the memoirists refer to their cult devotions as a process of learning. The screenplay writer and novelist Yuri Nagibin first heard Lemeshev at the age of 12. By his own admission, he paid little attention to the music that was sung, but he was enchanted by the sound of Lemeshev's voice and also struck by his charismatic presence on stage. Through Lemeshev, Nagibin says that he was able to learn the operas by heart, without any musical knowledge (although musicians will understand that he was certainly picking up solid musical skills along the way). He admitted that his knowledge of operas' first acts was hazier, simply because the most rudimentary way to bypass the long hours of queuing for a ticket was to slip discretely into the auditorium during the interval (as many did). His initial appreciation of Lemeshev in time led to a general love of opera. This eventually extended to a driving passion for classical music of all kinds, which he promoted in his journalism with a missionary zeal.¹²

Let us broaden our focus to the much larger radio audience for a moment. Soviet radio (not unlike the early BBC) had a primary function of "enlightening" listeners and directing their leisure hours towards their intellectual and cultural development. Opera was present from the beginning: on 17 September 1922, listeners were able to the first broadcast concert (in Russia, and indeed, the whole of Europe), consisting of three operatic arias and one song. This was the programme:

12 Yuri Nagibin, "Pevuchaya dusha Rossii", <https://profilib.website/chtenie/40287/yuriy-nagibin-pevuchaya-dusha-rossii-10.php>.

Borodin, Igor's Aria from *Prince Igor*
 Tchaikovsky, Polina's Romance from *The Queen of Spades*
 Rimsky-Korsakov, Marfa's Aria from *The Tsar's Bride*
 "Krasnyi sarafan", a drawing-room song (Sukhareva 2017: 63).

To take an example from the early years of Soviet broadcasting, in the course of 1925 alone, the so-called "trade-union radio" station presented 28 opera broadcasts from the theatre, and 9 more operas from their studio, together with 171 concerts (which in all probability featured many performances of operatic arias). There was a deliberate drive to bring opera to the ordinary listener, who was even lectured, before the performance, on why this was an edifying activity for Soviet citizens. There was some grumbling from the public: "It's hard for a worker to make sense of operatic music" and "The words in opera are not comprehensible".¹³ But whatever the public initially thought, a respect for high culture was carefully inculcated, raising much of the citizenry from the lowbrow to the middlebrow.

3) entrepreneurial/commercial

Within the Soviet context this point is far from straightforward, yet it has been shown on many occasions that the Soviet arts had to commercially viable up to a point: that is, state subsidies only covered a percentage, while the rest had to be earned from ticket sales and other sources of commercial revenue. There was a flourishing record industry and also a market for operatic postcards; the ordinary public bought these too, but the opera-cult members bought them in amounts commensurate with their obsession. For this reason, it was not in the Bolshoi's own commercial interests to discourage the opera cultists, and this is no doubt a larger factor in their survival, in spite of the decadence of their behaviour by Soviet standards. But the cults sometimes benefitted the singer directly, rather than the opera house. Kozlovsky in particular, became a star feature in the shadowy private economy, singing in many private concerts where he could command enormous fees (Frolova-Walker 2016: 12). Although this aspect of his career needs much more research, the level of his fees implies wealthy individuals or institutions to pay him, so it is safe to assume that these private appearances were often at the behest of senior Party officials, or from the larger factories or collective farms (which does not mean that he sang on the factory floor or in the fields).

4) mediated

Technological developments played a major role in the way opera was disseminated, and even in the formation of the cults. The original broadcasting of operas direct from the theatre was exciting at first, but it was dogged by various technical problems. A much smoother and better digestible presentation was achieved through the tech-

13 All this information also comes from Sukhareva 2017: 87–90.

nique of radio montage. This was a somewhat abridged version of a given opera, the music interspersed with explanations of the story, but the recording process was now generally studio-based, usually from prior recordings, but sometimes live. Several studies have shown how the broadcasting opera actually influenced the development of radio and recording technology in the U.S., and while these studies are lacking for the USSR, it is more than likely that the broad conclusions would be the same. The very first radio receivers were public, not domestic: the broadcasts were heard in the street, creating a collective mass audience (as opposed to a mass audience that was just the aggregate of private listeners at home). But the spread of domestic radio technology led to listening habits similar to those found in the West from the 1920s–1940s, and the cultists could enjoy Lemeshev, Kozlovsky intimately, in their own rooms, decorated with postcard pictures of the singer in his various roles, or in his elegant street clothes.

5) feminised and 6) emotional

These two points are tightly connected, and of paramount importance for my argument. In the development of literary middlebrow studies, much has revolved around changing attitudes to women's reading habits. As Driscoll suggests in her book, "Women's reading has been dismissed and degraded as part of elite responses to the middlebrow" (Driscoll 2014: 46). She argues that Flaubert created a dichotomy between woman as "the emotional, passive reader of inferior literature and man as the objective, ironic and active writer of authentic literature" (Driscoll 2014: 49). In the same way, the female-dominated tenor cult has attracted much sneering, with dominant tropes of hysteria and sexual frustration. I have described various aspects of Moscow's operatic cults that are indeed amusing, but this should not lead to a facile dismissal of the cult members' personal experiences – from their writings, we know that they were capable of engaging with the music and drama, not just sobbing at the sight of their idol coming on stage. The ability to sing one's way through a whole opera (and hum the main instrumental line in non-vocal sections) is a considerable musical achievement after all, and anyone who tries to psychologise this away (hysteria, sexual frustration) merely demonstrates his lack of musical knowledge. Ethnographic studies of opera fandom that have been carried out in other localities attest the depth of individual experiences.¹⁴

7) recreational

This point warrants some elaboration in the Soviet context. As I have already mentioned, it was "transgressive" by Soviet standards to place a recreational practice in the centre of your life. As Claudio Benzecry has argued, opera cults belie the current sociological understanding that the consumption of culture has mostly to do with status,

14 See, for example, Benzecry 2012: 39–45.

cultural capital, or material self-advancement. If we can say that opera fans accrue cultural capital, Benzecry shows that they do not take it outside the group. In this case, it is not even clear whether we can properly use the term “cultural capital” – they have acquired nothing that they can use outside their own small circle of aficionados. Far from serving any external goal, the passion of the opera-cultists is more likely to earn them stigmatization from the outside world (Benzecry 2011: 189). As I believe I have demonstrated, an extreme passion for opera seals the fans off from the outside world. This phenomenon is close to *vnenakhodimost'*, the state of existing outside the system, as diagnosed by the social anthropologist Alexei Yurchak among Soviet followers of rock bands from the 1960s onwards (admittedly, rock had troubled relations with the state, whereas opera was promoted by the state) (Yurchak 2006). *Vnenakhodimost'* insulated such groups from the state ideology, which was ever present for most of the population. The proliferation of subcultures outside state management was, Yurchak argues, one of the (almost concealed) factors that made the fall of the Soviet state so unpredictable and rapid. In other words, while all these millions of people were thought (in the West) to be believers, more or less, in Communism and at least placid Soviet subjects, they were in fact pursuing their private and small-group interests that had nothing to do with the state (some of these interests were purely economic – the black economy was comparable to the official Soviet economy. The tenor cult reveals to us that in some relatively innocuous forms, this *vnenakhodimost'* was present all along. Having said this, we should still exercise due caution before the matter is researched in depth, since there is always the possibility that a significant number of Lemeshev fans could also have been dutiful Komsomol and Party members.

8) earnest

As I have already mentioned, this category may indicate a vestigial condescension on Driscoll's part, since earnestness stands in opposition to the detached, ironic outlook available to the highbrows. Perhaps the theory itself is contaminated by this attitude for all its protestations to the contrary. At the recent conference on music and the middlebrow in London, a sneering, mocking tone was adopted by most speakers.¹⁵ This tone stemmed from their primary sources (in the manner of the earlier Virginia Woolf passage), and mockery, of course, is a great tool for entertaining a conference audience. The speakers ostensibly adopted neutrality, but they seemed to be unable to rid themselves of highbrow assumptions. Academic work is intrinsically highbrow, so this is hardly surprising.

I would propose, then, that while the recent trend of middlebrow studies succeeds in bringing into focus many cultural practices that had hitherto remained invisible, something is still missing from the project. What is missing, in my opinion, is the recognition that a middlebrow experience of the arts can be authentic, valuable and valid. Instead of the precarious category of earnestness, I suggest that we substitute

¹⁵ “Music and the Middlebrow”, three-day conference at the University of Notre Dame's London Global Gateway in June 2017.

“love” – for who can build that into a sneering opposition without collapsing into blatant cynicism and misanthropy?

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

Claudio Benzecry's book *The Opera Fanatic* speaks explicitly of love. It is an ethnography of opera fans in today's Buenos Aires. It is a book of musical sociology, and the author takes issue not with music historiography (as I am doing now) but with sociological theories of cultural consumption. Benzecry identifies three theories for the consumption of classical music: art as status (Weber), art as ideological domination (Marx, Adorno) and art as cultural capital (Bourdieu). All three (and Bourdieu in particular) have been much cited by scholars practising middlebrow studies. He concludes that consumption of classical music is usually studied as “objective culture”, in contrast to popular music, where the listening subject is placed centre stage. In our attempts to reach the subject, an examination of listeners' love for particular pieces, performers or musical genres is very useful, and helps us see how these listening subjects are enabled by music to develop as individuals and to transcend their circumstances. In moments of self-transcendence, of escaping from the world outside the walls of the opera house, the fans experience ecstasies, accompanied by tears, or involuntary shaking. Such mystical, quasi-religious moments have a profound effect on the development of these individuals. This process of self-formation can last a lifetime, with cumulative learning and the cultivation of an undemonstrative connoisseurship, as the investment of time, effort and emotion increases further.

To add to this a little self-ethnography, a single moment of revelation and transcendence that I experienced in my early teens, resulted in a lifetime of devotion to music. My own self-formation began precisely in fandom, and I know very well how intense emotional attachment can open up a piece of music (usually in connection with a particular performance) in the way that no detached analysis can duplicate. I have been feeding off these revelatory moments for most of my career. Fandom led me to some important personal choices such as my choice of career and the shaping of my public persona. It defined my ambitions and shaped my work ethic; it gave me a sense of purpose or even mission in life. It was hugely important to me that my son should be able to experience such a revelatory moment in the opera house – and when that happened, I was satisfied that an important building block of his life has been set in place. That openness to emotion and inhabital thoughts in the opera house would open up paths to empathetic behaviour outside it, and that the therapeutic aspect of art would serve him as a protective cocoon.

Is none of this important when we sit down to write music history? Must we leave our “middlebrow” baggage at the door and assume highbrow posturing?

I could conclude this article modestly – by articulating, for example, how my case study of the two tenors could influence the histories we already have. It is easy to see that new Soviet works produced in the 1930s and 1950s resonate in many ways with the contemporaneous culture of “popular opera” and “popular classics” in general.

Shostakovich's works of the period easily slip into quotations from *Carmen*¹⁶ or *Faust*, or indeed, *Eugene Onegin* or *Khovanshchina*, tapping into the listeners' familiarity with this repertoire. I have examined Shostakovich's demotic style to see what distinguishes it beyond an avoidance of learned devices, and I found that the allusions pile up as if he was summarising a Friday-evening request concert on the radio (Frolova-Walker 2009: 403–423). In Prokofiev, we find less of this behaviour, but his own popular hits, such as the mezzo-soprano aria from *Alexander Nevsky* rode in on the coat-tails of several Russian classical prototypes. It was easier to create a "Soviet classic" this way. When Shchedrin turbocharged Bizet's music for his own balletic *Carmen Suite*, he made one of the shrewdest moves of his career: the opera was so familiar to the Soviet public that he could drop the melody of the Toreador's Song, in the sure knowledge that each listener would imagine it with every detail in place – or even treat the music as a karaoke track.

But there is a broader conclusion to be drawn from all this: if we are ever going to create a genuine listener-oriented history of twentieth-century music, we actually need to take listeners seriously – if this was really as platitudinous as it sounds, the project would be well underway by now. The concept of the middlebrow proves to be of great use here, because it allows us to approach cultural practices holistically, looking simultaneously at works, performers, mediators and audiences. But we must first defang the term "middlebrow", and if that cannot be done, then invent a new term that will perform the same task. We need to recognise that the emotional engagement with culture, essential to middlebrow pursuits, has authenticity and value, rather than deriding it as kitsch culture. Among many other things, we can perhaps finally revise the academic narrative of Rachmaninov's career: that he was a melancholic and nostalgic left adrift after he was thrown off the ship of modernity. Instead, we could have a positive story of the love and elation that his music and his playing elicited (and continues to elicit) among millions of listeners around the world – and for many of them, he is the principal composer of the twentieth century, as absurd as that may sound in a musicological environment. Perhaps such a strategy, allowing for an adoration of music that can be life-enhancing and life-changing, will help us not only to advocate for Rachmaninov, but for classical music in general.

16 References to *Carmen* had a personal significance, as shown by A.S. Benditsky in his book *O Pyatoy simfonii Shostakovicha* (2000). Being aware of the culture of "popular opera" is crucial for appreciate Shostakovich's conceit: he manages to hide in plain view even the greatest hit from *Carmen*, the Habanera.

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МАРИНА ФРОЛОВА-ВОКЕР

ИСТОРИЈА МУЗИКЕ С ЉУБАВЉУ? ХИТОВИ, КУЛТОВИ И СНОБОВИ

(РЕЗИМЕ)

Замислите историју музике XX века засновану на афинитетима данашњих слушалаца. У једној типичној анкети, спроведеној 2011. године у Аустралији, првих пет места заузели су Едвард Елгар, Густав Холст, Џорџ Гершвин, Ралф Вон Вилијамс и Сергеј Рахмањин. На наредних пет позиција пласирали су се Хоакин Родриго, Семјуел Барбер, Карл Орф, Игор Стравински и Сергеј Прокофјев. У овој анкети Морис Равел није успео да се пласира у првих 10, али пошто се он обично налази при врху сличних листа, додаћемо га и овде. Шта би се десило када бисмо реконструисали историју музике тако да централна места заузме ових једанаест композитора? Да ли можемо да замислимо такав наратив? Вероватно да не можемо. Зашто је то толико тешко?

Премда ова и сличне анкете без сумње откривају понешто о маркетингу класичне музике у данашње време, било би погрешно када бисмо одбацили непроцењиве, интимне тренутке радости које ови „највећи хитови” пружају милионима слушалаца широм света, укључујући, вероватно, и бројне критичаре и професоре музике, чак и ако они то не би јавно признали. А ипак, с изузетком Стравинског, ови најпопуларнији композитори су маргинализовани, или чак игнорисани, у већини академских проучавања историје музике XX века. Узмимо, на пример, Рахмањина: иако извођачи и слушаоци упорно и трајно воле његову музику, то није допринело поправљању његове позиције у академском свету: као композитор XX века, он је невидљив, или, у најбољем случају, сматран за фосула.

Последњих година, музикологија покушава да реши овај проблем применом концепта „средњег чела” или „средњеумног” [the middlebrow], позиционираног између „високог чела” („високоумног” [the highbrow]) и „ниског чела” („нискоумног” [the lowbrow]). Овакав приступ већ је коришћен у књижевности и довео је до бројних студија о књижевним делима која су раније била занемаривана. Разматрајући теоријске импликације „средњеумног”, научници су покушали не само да га сместе у одређену друштвену групу или у сегмент тржишта, већ су обратили пажњу и на „емоционалну везу с културом” (Бет Дрискол), што је и предмет ове студије.

Посебно желим да преиспитам да ли наводно објективна употреба концепта „the middlebrow” у академском дискурсу заправо указује на подругљиве конотације овог термина, те да ли су научници коначно искрено признали

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да емоционални ангажман у односу на културу поседује аутентичност и вредност. Да ли научници могу незаинтересовано да разматрају култ једног тако немодерног и емоцијама набијеног композитора као што је Рахмањинов? Или ће увек инсинуирати да такво понашање настаје услед необразованости и лошег укуса? Да ли је концепт „средњеумног” просто превише набијен импликацијама да би могао да се усвоји као научна категорија?

Овом приликом навешћу бројне примене моћних испољавања љубави према музици који рутински пролазе испод „радара” историчара музике. Међу њима је и тема мог тренутног истраживања: „култ тенора”, као значајна одлика совјетске културе у четрдесетим и педесетим годинама XX века. Обесхрабриван од стране власти и презрен од стране критичара, овај култ је доводио до екстравагантног понашања, које је деловато као аномалија у стриктно уређеном друштву попут совјетског. Ова страствена љубав, како према музици, тако и према извођачима, углавном се везивала за жене и резултовала је формативним, животно одређујућим искуствима за многе следбенице култа. Циљ ми је да покажем како проучавањем овог феномена можемо допринети утемељењу историје музике оријентисане на слушаоца.

Кључне речи: „култ тенора”, Сергеј Лемешев, Иван Козловски, концепт средњеумног, слушаоци музике