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Abstract

Opera as Statecraft in Soviet Armenia and Kazakhstan

Knar Abrahamyan

2022

This dissertation reconceptualizes Soviet music history by focusing on the artistic productions of ethnic and racial minorities under the Communist Party's subjugation. According to communist propaganda, the Soviet state overthrew Russian imperialism and—as part of a cultural revolution—commissioned national operas to celebrate the diversity of each republic. I argue, however, that under the guise of modernization, the allegedly anti-colonial Communist Party used opera as a colonial technology of rule to negate difference. The Soviet national opera project thus pursued the age-old Russian imperial practices of assimilation and subjugation, which allowed communists to maintain rule over a multiethnic population. Each of the chapters focuses on one of the four intersecting axes across which the Soviet state attempted to redefine Armenian and Kazakh nationalism through opera: religious practices, historical memory, racialization, and gender norms. In addition to examining opera as an instrument of totalitarian control, as many scholars have done, a key feature of this study is the reversal of “the imperial gaze.” I propose a theory of drastic hybridity to examine how Armenian and Kazakh composers negotiated their identities in creative and subversive ways. The interdisciplinarity of this project—spanning music studies, Slavic studies, and postcolonial studies—charts new paths for remapping the geopolitics of Soviet history, which in turn allows us to understand the present-day struggle of Armenian and Kazakh peoples to decolonize their cultural identities.

Opera as Statecraft in Soviet Armenia and Kazakhstan

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of
Yale University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Knar Abrahamyan

Dissertation Directors: Patrick McCreless & Edyta Bojanowska

May 2022

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the ethical commitments of my research. Lastly, the most heartbreaking regret in finishing this project is that I cannot visit my ancestral land, which is presently under foreign occupation. Hadrut, my spirit is with you. I believe we will reunite.

Introduction. The Origins of the Soviet National Opera Project

Following the 1917 October Revolution, most Bolshevik activists opposed opera as it embodied a remnant of bourgeois culture, inimical to the new proletarian society. Even though the leader of the Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, loved opera, in particular Richard Wagner's music dramas, he hesitated to budget large sums of money for social entertainment when there were much more pressing needs such as industrialization, agricultural development, poor infrastructure, and prevailing illiteracy.¹ By the 1930s, as the interest of state leaders in the political function of opera grew, the genre's status transformed from a relic of the past to signifying the most efficacious musical genre. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar for Enlightenment, was one of the key figures in salvaging opera, as he advocated for keeping the Bolshoi Theatre running.² In addition to the efforts of figures like Lunacharsky, new bureaucratic organizations also contributed to the development of opera. Established in 1933, *Sovetskaia muzyka*, for instance, served as an outlet for disseminating opinions and theories on the role of opera expressed by the members of the Union of Soviet Composers. The very first issue of the journal featured an article that highlighted the importance of the genre: "Of all musical forms, it is precisely opera that in our day has the capability of becoming the most substantial factor within cultural-enlightenment and propaganda significance."³ The lofty status of

¹ Irina Kotkina, "Soviet Empire and Operatic Realm: Stalinist Search for the Model Soviet Opera," *Revue des études slaves* 84, no. 3/4 (2013): 508.

² After the 1917 Revolution, opera theaters, which were previously sponsored by the imperial court, were no longer government-sponsored; two years later, however, following a decree from August 26, 1919, the state resumed sponsorship of theaters. Ibid., 506. For a primary source account of how Soviet officials advocated that opera was not "alien" to the proletariat, see Boris Asafiev, "Opera v raboche-krest'ianskom teatre" (Opera in the worker-peasant theater), in *Ob opere: izbrannye stat'i* (On opera: selected essays) (Moscow: Muzyka, 1976).

³ Mikhail Iordanskii, Pavel Kozlov, and Valentina Taranushchenko, "O probleme sovetskoi opery" (On the problem of Soviet opera), *Sovetskaia muzyka* 1, no. 1 (1933): 19–50. "Iz vsexh vidov muzykal'nogo iskusstva, imenno opera v nashe vremia raspolagaet vozmozhnostiami stat' krupneishim faktorom kul'turno-prosvetitel'nogo i agitatsionnogo znacheniia."

opera is also evident from the scrutiny it began to receive from the state's new leader, Joseph Stalin. The scandalous government attacks on composers in 1936 and 1948 took place after Stalin and other major politicians attended opera productions at the Bolshoi Theatre.⁴ Stalin's dissatisfaction with the state of opera initiated "the Soviet opera project," introduced and developed at the initial meetings of the newly established State Committee for Artistic Affairs (*Komitet po delam iskusstv*, KDI).⁵ As Ekaterina Vlasova points out, "the state spared neither material nor organizational resources to accomplish its aim."⁶ While she claims that these efforts were focused primarily on the Bolshoi Theatre, the state amassed even more creative, economic, and institutional forces to promote the "Stalinist opera project" in the Soviet satellite republics. Beyond commissioning national operas for each republic, the state sponsored the construction of opera houses in republics that did not already have them: Frunze, Kyrgyzstan (1930), Yerevan, Armenia (1933), Minsk, Belarus (1933), Almaty, Kazakhstan (1934), Dushanbe, Tajikistan (1941), Akhhabad, Turkmenistan (1941), Tashkent, Uzbekistan (1947) and Chisinau, Moldova (1957).

Despite the attempts of many composers to write a proper Soviet opera, most music scholars conclude that the Soviet opera project was a failure. They blame the ambiguous requirements of socialist realism—the official cultural doctrine introduced in 1932 to bolster artworks that projected *narodnost'* ("peopleness," i.e. demonstration of national characteristics),

⁴ The infamous 1936 *Pravda* article "Muddle Instead of Music" targeted Dmitry Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, while the vehement 1948 Zhdanov decree "Against Formalism in Soviet Music" condemned Vano Muradeli's *The Great Friendship*.

⁵ There are some variations of how scholars name the project: Marina Frolova-Walker has coined the term "the Soviet opera project," Irina Kotkina terms the project "the model Soviet opera," while Ekaterina Vlasova "the Stalinist opera project." See Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. *Ivan Susanin*," *The Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 181–216; Kotkina, "Soviet Empire and Operatic Realm: Stalinist Search for the Model Soviet Opera," *Revue des études Slaves* 84, no. 3–4 (2013): 505–18; and Vlasova, "The Stalinist Opera Project," in *Russian Music Since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, ed. Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker, 164–87 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁶ Vlasova, "The Stalinist Opera Project," 165.

partiinnost' ("party-mindedness," i.e. promotion of communist ideology), and *dostupnost'* ("accessibility," i.e. appeal to masses).⁷ This interpretation posits that composers, unable to fulfill the many contradictory demands of socialist realism, produced works that were either "ideologically flawed or artistically unsatisfying."⁸ Irina Kotkina goes so far as to suggest that because opera failed in the Soviet metropolises, Moscow and Saint Petersburg, the state introduced cultural festivals—*dekadas*—in 1936 to recuperate the status of opera by promoting composition of national operas in the satellite republics.⁹ Why was opera so central to the Soviet state's cultural agenda? In what ways were the politics of its production and ideological function distinct in satellite republics?

Reasons to promote opera across the Soviet Union, both as a genre and an institution, were manifold. First, opera featured text, which made it the second most accessible genre after film for the purposes of communicating elaborate ideological narratives. Second, its multimedia nature and monumental scope were instrumental in evoking emotions. Lastly, beyond embodying an aesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a unified work of art, opera also served as an allegory of Joseph Stalin's political consolidation: as "a Soviet spectacle and national ritual," opera elevated the prestige of the new government by showcasing its success, not only in accomplishing a political revolution but also a cultural one.¹⁰ The latter reason uniquely pertained to peripheral republics, where opera embodied the process of modernizing the "backward" nations.

⁷ These include Kotkina, "Soviet Empire and Operatic Realm;" Philip Ross Bullock, "Staging Stalinism: The Search for Soviet Opera in the 1930s," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 83–108; and Katerina Clark, "Shostakovich's Turn to the String Quartet and the Debates about Socialist Realism in Music," *Slavic Review* 72, no. 3 (2013): 573–89.

⁸ For instance, Bullock notes that Felix Dzerzhinsky's song-opera *The Quiet Flow of Don* was condemned as artistically unsatisfying. Bullock, "Staging Stalinism," 84.

⁹ Kotkina, "Soviet Empire and Operatic Realm," 516. Frolova-Walker suggests an alternative official solution to the failure of the Soviet opera project by claiming that the 1939 revival of Mikhail Glinka's *Life for the Tsar*, revised and renamed into *Ivan Susanin*, became the ideal Soviet opera.

¹⁰ Bullock, "Staging Stalinism," 85–86.

This dissertation investigates opera in two satellite republics, Armenia and Kazakhstan, as sites of imperial dominance and political negotiation. It argues that under the guise of seemingly benevolent modernization, the allegedly anti-colonial Communist Party deployed opera as statecraft to negate and homogenize ethnic and racial difference, disseminate communist ideology, and ultimately maintain control over its colonies. Examining operas in Armenia and Kazakhstan, I foreground how local composers, librettists, performers, directors, and audiences responded to and resisted the state's attempted religious erasure, revisionism and falsification of history, racialization, redefinition of gender roles, and exploitation of human and environmental resources. Thus, while extant scholarly accounts largely narrate the history of Soviet music as one steeped in communist and totalitarian control, I provide an unexplored perspective by chronicling the colonial and empire-building imbrications of the opera project.

A central claim of this dissertation is that the Soviet Union's empire-building cultural production was as coercive as any social, political, legal, or economic policies. As such, my interrogation of the Soviet opera's consequences revisits and questions Joseph Nye's juxtaposition of "hard" and "soft" power.¹¹ In doing so, I follow scholars of colonialism, such as historian and anthropologist Nicholas Dirks, who have critiqued the separation of hard and soft power: "Colonial conquest was not just the result of the power of superior arms, military organization, political power, or economic wealth—as important as these things were. Colonialism was made possible, and then sustained and strengthened, as much by *cultural technologies of rule* as it was by the more obvious and brutal modes of conquest that first established power on foreign shores."¹² Approaching opera as "a cultural technology of rule," I thus contend that, at first glance, soft power masked entrenched

¹¹ See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004) and "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153–71.

¹² Nicholas B. Dirks, foreword to Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), ix. Emphases mine. Also see Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992).

modes of hard imperial domination, including cultural erasure, covert racialization, and human exploitation. To set up my further exploration of the interconnectedness between hard and soft power, the introduction proceeds with a historical excursion to trace the Russian Empire's conquest of Armenia and Kazakhstan, leading up to the October Revolution. I then explore how imperial attitudes toward Armenians and Kazakhs as Oriental Others influenced communist leaders' approaches to managing the USSR's multi-ethnic populations. Here, I emphasize that the Soviet Union remained a colonial empire, despite openly denouncing tsarism, colonialism, and "great Russian chauvinism." Lastly, I sketch a theory of *drastic hybridity* that anchors my analyses of operas as cultural products of unequal colonial intercultural exchange. Developing this theory, I locate my project's interventions within the broader interdisciplinary constellation of music theory and history, postcolonial studies, Slavic studies, and race and ethnicity studies. Challenging music theory's prioritization of compositionally complex music, "Opera as Statecraft" draws attention to seemingly unsophisticated operas to show that their structural elements can illuminate negotiation of power and identity. Within music history and opera studies, I contribute to discussions on musical representation and difference by addressing formerly overlooked ethnic groups.¹³ Lastly, by foregrounding music's unique political affordances, my project engages in the ongoing debates on the controversial nature of Soviet colonialism and racism within Slavic studies.¹⁴ More than speaking individually to each of these fields, the interdisciplinarity of my project reorients the geopolitics of Soviet music history to offer new paths for understanding how present-day Armenian and Kazakh people reconcile their communist past.

¹³ For music historical accounts on difference, see Ruth Solie, ed., *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993) and Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg, eds., *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Most recently, issues of race have been examined in a special issue of *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (2021).

Historical Excursion: Russian Conquest of Armenians and Kazakhs

“Liberating” Armenia

The “liberation” of Christian Armenians, allegedly oppressed by neighboring Islamic powers, has for centuries served as an excuse for Russian expansion into the Caucasus. In the aftermath of the Ottoman-Persian War, the 1639 Treaty of Zuhab granted the Persian and Ottoman empires control over Armenia’s eastern and western lands, respectively. Struggling with heavy taxation and threats of religious conversion to Islam, in 1699 an Armenian intellectual, Israel Ori, secretly met with Armenian leaders and clergy to discuss the possibility of seeking assistance from European states. Leopold I, the Holy Roman Emperor, eventually told Ori that without Russian support Europeans could not offer much help since to get to Armenia they would have to get permission to cross Russian borders.¹⁵ Ori wrote to Peter the Great, expressing the Armenian people’s reliance on Russian help: “Like the sons of Adam, who awaited the coming of the Messiah to save them from eternal death, the Armenians have been living and continue to exist in the hope of liberation. [...] From the great house of Moscovy, a prince shall appear, wise and mighty as the second Alexander the Great, who shall take over the Armenian kingdom and save the Christians.”¹⁶ In 1701, Ori met with Peter the Great, who promised to assist Armenians after resolving Russia’s conflict with Sweden.

While the rhetoric of Russian leaders prioritized delivering Armenians from Islamic oppression, a brief foray into primary sources reveals that for the most part this rhetoric was

¹⁵ George A. Bournoutian, *A Concise History of the Armenian People: From Ancient Times to the Present* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2006), 237. Ori also visited Prince Johann Wilhelm of the Palatinate and the grand duke of Tuscany, all of whom offered little practical support.

¹⁶ Bournoutian, *Armenians and Russia (1626–1796): A Documentary Record* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2001), 45. In 1703, the *meliks* of Karabagh wrote a letter to Peter the Great in which they once again plead for Russian help: “We believe that with the help of God, You shall free us. We put all our hopes on You.” Ibid., 51.

nothing but empty promises.¹⁷ After Ori's death in 1711, the Armenian priest Minas Vardapet became the central negotiator of the Armenian question with Russia. In 1714, he wrote a petition to the Russian State in which he claimed that Armenians of Persia "are totally willing to become Russian subjects."¹⁸ In response to the letter, Peter the Great instructed Aremii Volynskii, who in the same year became the Russian ambassador to Persia, to pay a visit to the Persian Shah. Peter instructed Volynskii to examine the rivers, lands, fortresses, and the Persian army, as well as to establish a trade agreement and convince the Shah that Persians must ally with Russians against the Ottomans.¹⁹ From this letter, it is evident that Peter's main concern in relation to Armenians centered on ensuring that the Shah would allow Armenian merchants to continue transporting Persian goods to Europe through Russia and not through the Ottoman lands.²⁰ Peter continued to delay sending his troops due to his avoidance of entering a war with the Ottomans. An agreement on dividing control was reached with the signing of the Russo-Ottoman Treaty in 1724: Russia would govern the "eastern Transcaucasia," while the Ottomans the western (Armenia and Georgia). Armenians were thus left without Peter's promised help.²¹ The fact that Armenians themselves pleaded for Russian intervention was treated by Russian leaders as justification for imperial rivalry with the Ottomans and Persians.

¹⁷ Bruce Grant applies anthropological theories of gift exchange to analyze the sacrificial, messianic self-identity that Russia constructed to justify its empire-building. See Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Bourtnoutian, *Armenians and Russia*, 77–78.

¹⁹ Ibid., 80.

²⁰ This arrangement would secure the continuation of Russia receiving economic benefits paid as duties by Persia's Armenian Trade Company (the trade agreement was reached in 1667 under Tsar Aleksey).

²¹ When Peter died in 1725, Russian troops withdrew from the Terek River, allowing the Ottomans to take over fortresses in Yerevan, Nakhichevan, Ganja, and Georgia, as well as most of Iranian Azerbaijan. In 1735, Nader Shah managed to excise the Ottomans from Karabakh and Siunik—the regions in which Armenian *meliks* maintained relative autonomy; he also arranged Russian troops' removal from Transcaucasia, which led to fifty years of Russian absence in the region. Bourtnoutian, *Armenians and Russia*, 80.

Under Catherine the Great's reign (1762–1796), Russia's favorable policies toward Armenians sparked hope that “financial and military cooperation” could lead to Armenian autonomy under the empress's protection.²² The Russo-Persian War (1804–1813), led by Alexander I, prolonged negotiations over who would get to control eastern Armenia. According to the Treaty of Gulistan, which concluded the war, the khanates of Karabagh, Ganja, Shakki, Kuba, Baku, and Talesh were transferred to Russian control.²³ The next Russo-Persian War of 1826–1828 ended with the critical Treaty of Turkmenchai that designated the khanates of Yerevan and Nakhichevan to Russia, proclaiming them as the Armenian Province.²⁴ Many Armenian intellectuals believed that this signaled Armenian liberation. However, in 1829, the Treaty of Adrianopole, which brought the Russo-Turkish War to a halt, triggered the transmission of nearly all of Russian-controlled western Armenian territories back to the Ottomans. Yerevan and Nakhichevan, however, were allowed to continue being part of the Armenian Province under the control of Nicholas I. This relative autonomy lasted from 1828 to 1840, when the tsar decided that it hindered his policies of Russification. In the decades that followed, Russian authorities had two distinct approaches to treating their colonies: while some advocated for allowing preservation of socio-cultural norms and improvement of economic conditions, others argued for assimilation and colonial exploitation.²⁵

In the period leading up to the October Revolution, the spheres of influence over Armenian

²² Ibid., 239.

²³ Ibid., 240–41. The first two of these khanates constituted half of eastern Armenia. The goal of Armenians was now to emancipate the other half, which included Nakhichevan and Yerevan, along with Ejmiatsin—the religious center of Armenians. But by the time these were liberated, the previously liberated half became incorporated into Georgia and the Caspian Province.

²⁴ As Bournoutian notes, the treaty also guaranteed Russia “indemnity of twenty million rubles, exclusive naval rights in the Caspian Sea, and other economic and political prerogatives in Iran, which bound the Qajar dynasty to Russian whims throughout the rest of the nineteenth century.” Bournoutian, *A Concise History*, 241.

²⁵ Bournoutian, *A Concise History*, 282. See also Louise Nalbandian, *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement: The Development of Armenian Political Parties through the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963).

territories remained divided among the Russian and Ottoman empires. Following the Revolution, the establishment of the First Armenian Republic marked a brief moment of independence that lasted from 1918 to 1920. However, the Turkish invasion of Armenia led to the Bolsheviks' intervention, resulting in the end of Armenian self-government and the establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia in December 1920.

Civilizing the Steppe

While the conquest of Armenia was justified as liberation of Christians, Russian colonization of Central Asia was reasoned as a noble duty of civilizing backward Eastern nomads. Russia began to actively expand its colonial borders into the Central Asian steppe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fighting against the Nogay and Kalmyk nomads who inhabited the steppe.²⁶ This territorial expansion brought Russia in closer proximity to the lands governed by Kazakhs at the turn of the eighteenth century. The Kazakhs conducted raids on surrounding peoples and endangered the territorial frontiers established and governed by the Russian Empire. From this time onward, Russians and Kazakhs engaged in a rather turbulent military-political relationship. In the eighteenth century, Peter the Great's growing interest in Central-Asian trade further contributed to Russia's desire to establish control over the Kazakhs. After an unsuccessful attempt to pacify Kazakhs in 1714, he continued his efforts to turning them into Russian subjects as he realized that "even though the Kazakhs were nomadic and unreliable people, they were both the key and the gates to all of Asia."²⁷ It was not until after the tsar's death, however, that in 1731 Russians gained control of the Lesser Kazakh Horde, thanks to the cooperation and allegiance of its ruler, khan Abulkhayir. (The

²⁶ For additional historical accounts of Russian colonization of Central Asia, see Hafeez Malik, *Central Asia: Its Strategic Importance and Future Prospects* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Martha Brill Olcott, *The Kazakhs*, second edition (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1995); and R. Charles Weller, *Rethinking Kazakh and Central Asian Nationhood: A Challenge to Prevailing Western Views* (Los Angeles: Asia Research Associates, 2006).

²⁷ Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 149.

division of Kazakhs into three hordes, the Lesser, the Middle, and the Greater, was recorded by Russians in 1730s.) Although Kazakh noblemen (*mukhtar* in Turkic or *starshina* in Russian) were distrustful of Russian promises to protect them from neighboring peoples, especially from Oirats and Dzungars, the khan of the Middle Horde, Abdul Muhammed, nonetheless, also pledged allegiance to Russia in 1740.

Under the pretense of a civilizing mission, which strove to tame and culture the “steppe beasts,”²⁸ Russia continued to fulfill its colonial ambitions by building military forts that limited Kazakh pasture lands and weakened their economic independence. As historian Michael Khodarkovsky points out, the more Russians began to associate themselves with European civilization, the more they antagonized Eastern peoples by characterizing them as non-civilized, referring to them as “wild, untamed horses,” “wild animals,” “wild, unruly, and disloyal peoples,” “unbridled [...] and savage peoples.”²⁹ Tensions between Kazakh khans and noblemen over their subordination to Russia continued until 1822, when stricter imperial regulations were established by Mikhail Speranskii, the governor-general of Siberia.³⁰ Speranskii eliminated the title of a khan in the Middle Horde altogether and “imposed on it Russian imperial administrative, fiscal, and legal systems without the slightest consideration for the traditional structures of Kazakh society.”³¹ In 1860s, Russians completed their subjugation of the Kazakh steppe by gaining control of the Greater Horde, which until that time had managed to stay independent.

²⁸ Ibid., 153. The reference to Kazakhs as “steppe beasts” appears in a letter from the Russian envoy to the Kazakhs, Muhammed Tevkelev, to Abulkhair khan.

²⁹ Ibid., 186–87.

³⁰ As Khodarkovsky has shown, Russia had to carefully balance how much power it allowed the Kazakhs to exercise: “In the long run they [Kazakhs] were expected to settle down, partake of the fruits of civilization, and become faithful subjects. In the meantime, however, they were to be kept divided and weakened enough to prevent any threat to the Russian borderlands, but strong enough to be used against their neighbors and against the encroaching Qing China.” Ibid., 170–71.

³¹ Ibid., 182.

Although different Russian tsars implemented assimilationist policies in varying degrees, they all acknowledged the threat posed by the empire's non-Christian subjects. Religion presented a central marker of difference, with non-Christians exemplifying the ultimate Other—uncivilized, untrustworthy, and therefore dangerous to the state. Conversion of its Islamic subjects to Christianity, both in Central Asia and the Caucasus, was thus one of the central concerns of the Russian Empire. As one Russian governor put it in 1775, “Nothing can tame their barbarity better and make them more docile than their conversion to Christianity. Then, through contact with our people, it will not be difficult to eradicate their language and customs.”³² As a marker of difference, religion played a decisive role in determining the social and political status of imperial subjects. In the early nineteenth century, non-Christians, who were previously referred to as *inovertsy* (“of other faith”), were now categorized as *inorodtsy* (“of different origin”). The change in language illustrates that non-Christians were not only conceived of as differing in religious practices but also, more crucially, in ethnic and racial belonging.³³

For the Central Asian people, being ascribed to the category of *inorodtsy* carried consequences beyond Russian settlers' personal intolerance. At the turn of the twentieth century, the state did not grant *inorodtsy* full religious, political, legal, or social rights. For example, the Turkestan and Kazakh *inorodtsy* were not represented in the State Duma (established in 1906). Like other *inorodtsy*, they were exempt from army conscription because the state regarded them as “too primitive and potentially disloyal to serve as soldiers.”³⁴ Even after the state issued the disastrous decree on the conscription of *inorodtsy* on June 25, 1916, they were enlisted as forced laborers rather than competent soldiers

³² From a memorandum of the Astrakhan governor Petr Krechetnikov concerning Russia's policies in the North Caucasus. Ibid., 189.

³³ See Robert P. Geraci and Khodarkovsky, eds., *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

³⁴ Matthew J. Payne, “Do You Want Me to Exterminate All of Them or Just the Ones Who Oppose Us?: The 1916 Revolt in Semirech'e,” in *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands*, ed. Krista A. Goff and Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 69.

who received government benefits.³⁵ The conscription decree aggravated the already disaffected Kazakhs, who were systematically abused by Russian peasant settlers. Encouraged by Pyotr Stolypin's agrarian reforms, millions of settlers relocated to the steppe and expropriated lands from the indigenous population.³⁶ Justified by the empire's modernization mission, the "Russification of borderlands" program led to the expropriation of more than half of agricultural land in the region known as Semirechye (Zhetysu), modern Kazakhstan. These events triggered the 1916 Central Asian Revolt—a cataclysmic anti-imperial uprising during which non-Russian guerilla warriors, mostly Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen, attacked and killed over two thousand Russians.³⁷ The state responded to the revolt with unprecedented brutality, exterminating natives, including peaceful population, or expelling them into deserts. Under the pretext of suppressing the revolt, "the colonial authorities licensed this vigilantism, tolerating ethnic terrorism in order to Russify a strategic borderland."³⁸ These retaliations took the lives of an estimated 100 to 200 thousand nomads.³⁹

Following the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks faced a predominantly hostile Central-Asian population.⁴⁰ The first independent Kazakh Government, Alash Autonomy, was established in 1917 and supported the Mensheviks, another branch of Russian revolutionaries who competed with the Bolsheviks over establishing a socialist regime. In 1920, however, the Bolsheviks took over the Mensheviks and proclaimed Alash Autonomy to belong to the USSR, naming it the Kyrgyz

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See Ian W. Campbell, "Norming the Steppe: Statistical Knowledge and Tsarist Resettlement, 1896–1917," in *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire: Kazakh Intermediaries and Russian Rule on the Steppe, 1731–1917*, 125–56 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

³⁷ Scholars estimate that between two and ten thousand people were killed.

³⁸ Payne, "Do You Want Me to Exterminate?," 74.

³⁹ Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire*, 183.

⁴⁰ For a recent history of early Soviet rule in Kazakhstan, see Dina Amanzholova, *Sovetskii proekt v Kazakhstane: vlast' i etnichnost', 1920–1930* (The Soviet project in Kazakhstan: power and ethnicity, 1920–1930s) (Moscow and Saint Petersburg: Tsentr humanitarnykh iniciativ, 2019).

Autonomous Soviet State.⁴¹ Anti-Russian Muslim men, who became known as Basmachi, conducted guerilla attacks against the Bolsheviks, continuing the resistance movement that was initiated in the 1916 into the early 1940s. Basmachi particularly resisted the Soviet anti-Muslim propaganda across Central Asia. Kazakhs were given the status of Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in December 1936.

The turbulent history of tsarist Russia's conquest of the Caucasus and Central Asia is rife with violence over territorial control, struggle for political sovereignty, and the quest for preserving cultural heritage when confronted with colonial assimilation. Unique geographic contexts, social customs, and religious backgrounds of the colonies presented subtle differences in the ways that the imperial rulers approached their subjects. Armenians, for instance, practiced Christianity and led a settled lifestyle, while Kazakhs mostly followed Islam and led a nomadic lifestyle. This distinction led to a layered hierarchy of Oriental Others: colonial subjects who aligned with Russian culture more closely did not face the same prejudice and racial bias as those whom colonizers viewed as barbarians. The fractured nature of assimilation policies, according to historian Alfred J. Rieber, was among the "reasons why no single overriding myth of the frontier [...] prevailed in Russian history."⁴² The distinct types of frontiers, "military, extractive, and settlement," also prevented a unifying colonial narrative.⁴³ Yet an absence of an "overriding myth" does not diminish the magnitude of Russian colonial expansion, which we can grasp from the map in Figure 1, over the centuries leading up to the October 1917 Revolution.

⁴¹ Because Russians called Kazakh people Kyrgyzs, Kazakhstan was initially named Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic.

⁴² Alfred J. Rieber, "Colonizing Eurasia," in *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland Colonization in Eurasian History*, ed. Nicholas B. Breyfogle, Abby Schrader, and Willard Sunderland (New York: Routledge, 2007), 267.

⁴³ Campbell, *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire*, 183.

From Tsarist Subjects to Communist Citizens

Russian Empire and its colonial “Others”

The multi-ethnic constitution and the contiguous nature of the Russian Empire’s territories have challenged historical and contemporary definitions of empire and national identity. Markers of



Figure 1. Map of Russian Expansion, 1533–1894.⁴⁴

Russian national identity—such as ethnicity, religion, language, and class—have been used with varied emphasis throughout different historical periods. Unlike in the British or French empires, here, defining nationality on purely ethnic grounds was impossible due to the multiethnic

⁴⁴ “Russian Empire,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russian-Empire#/media/1/753050/3392>.

constitution even in the Russian metropole.⁴⁵ While in the eighteenth century it was the Orthodox faith that represented Russianness, by the early twentieth century Russian language had become the defining feature.⁴⁶ Further complicating the definition of national identity was Russia's geographic location between the West and the East. In Mark R. Bassin's words, "Identity was of course problematic and contested, in Russia as everywhere. This contestation was not, however, expressed through the nation/empire juxtaposition, but rather through alternative visions of Russia as an empire."⁴⁷ The alternative empire thrived by articulating difference between the ruling powers and their subservient subjects.⁴⁸

Though the meaning of Russian national identity was ambiguous and shifting at the turn of the century, Russians nonetheless always distinguished themselves from non-Russians—the Other. Central Asia and the Caucasus were two of the largest peripheral regions which comprised Russia's colonial Others ever since these regions were annexed by Russia the nineteenth century. Historian Adeeb Khalid notes that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, "the Orient (*Vostok*) had become a self-evident category of analysis in Russian thought, with associations to despotism, fanaticism, deceit, violence, and eroticism that were no different than in the rest of Europe."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ As historian Ronald Grigor Suny argues, although the members of the "ruling institution" were "culturally Russified," the metropole as a whole "prevented the homogenization and incorporation of the population into a single 'imagined community' of a Russian nation." Suny, "The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, 'National' Identity, and Theories of Empire," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Suny and Martin Terry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25 and 57.

⁴⁶ John W. Slocum, "Who, and When, Were the *Inorodtsy*? The Evolution of the Category of 'Aliens' in Imperial Russia," *Russian Review* 57 (1998): 175.

⁴⁷ Mark R. Bassin, "Geographies of Imperial Identity," in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 2, edited by Dominic Lieven (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 45. Bassin demonstrates that Russia's imperial expansion was in vogue with European colonialism: for instance, Russian intellectuals often referred to Siberia "as 'our Peru', 'our Mexico', a 'Russian Brazil', or indeed 'our little India'." Ibid., 48.

⁴⁸ Suny notes that "diverse administrative practices, as well as the compactness of the local ethnicities and the effects of settlement policies, maintained and intensified differences between the Russian core and the non-Russian peripheries." Suny, "The Empire Strikes Out," 56.

⁴⁹ Adeeb Khalid, "Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 4 (2000): 697.

Prince Alexander M. Gorchakov (1798–1883), who served as the foreign minister during Alexander II's rule, openly declared the civilizing role of Russia in its conquered lands: "The position of Russia in Central Asia is that of all civilized states which are brought into contact with half-savage nomad populations possessing no fixed social organization."⁵⁰ Russia's growing confidence in its imperialist politics also marked a shift in the use of the term *inorodtsy*. Translated as "aliens," or "of other birth," *inorodtsy* was employed as a legal term to designate ethnic minorities who were subject to special laws. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, this word acquired broader meaning and became a condescending mode of addressing all members of non-Russian ethnic communities.⁵¹ While the imperial modernization mission promised to transform *inorodtsy* from "aliens" into proper subjects, even learning the Russian language did not guarantee such a transformation, as there was no legal description of how *inorodtsy* could be converted into Russians.

The first all-Russian census, conducted in 1897, proved that the issue of nationality within the multi-national borderlands posed a potential threat to the empire's coherence. According to the questionnaire, the ethnic make-up of the population was determined through questions about language and *soslovie* (estate). The decoding and interpretation of the census results, however, brought forth many instances which proved the inadequacy of attributing ethnicity to linguistic or social class criteria. For instance, at times the questionnaire's respondents conflated confessional identity with the ethnicity. Moreover, some indicated "Muslim" or "Lutheran" under the question on linguistic affiliation.⁵² The consolidation of non-Russian populations into national movements during the 1905 Revolution, as historians Juliette Cadiot and John Slocum point out, heightened the

⁵⁰ "The Gorchakov Circular on Russia's Mission in Central Asia, November 21, 1864." Cited in Seymour Becker, *Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865–1924*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2004), 14. See also Ulrich Hofmeister, "Civilization and Russification in Tsarist Central Asia, 1860–1917," *Journal of World History* 27, no. 3 (2016): 411–42.

⁵¹ Slocum, "Who, and When," 185.

⁵² Juliette Cadiot, "Searching for Nationality: Statistics and National Categories at the End of the Russian Empire (1897–1917)," *The Russian Review* 64, no. 3 (2005): 444.

metropole's fear of disloyal peripheries and intensified the urge to reconsider the national question.⁵³ Consequently, in the 1910s, the Russian government initiated discussions about conducting a new census, but this never materialized due to the Bolsheviks' overthrowing of the tsarist regime. Thus, at the eve of Imperial Russia's demise, the question of Russian and non-Russian ethnic and national identity remained unsolved, all the while policies and practices regarding the integration of multiethnic Others remained vexed.

Internationalism as Disguised Colonialism

After the October Revolution, one of the central challenges for the Bolsheviks was how to preserve the enormous multi-ethnic territories conquered by Imperial Russia and convert them to the new socialist order. Realizing that military force alone would not suffice, the revolutionaries devised multiple tactics pertaining to the nationalities question. As a primary tactic in preserving the territorial gains of Imperial Russia, the new Soviet government promulgated the rhetoric of internationalism. Rather than attempting to assimilate the various ethnicity groups into Russian cultural norms, the Bolsheviks promised ethnic minorities the right to national self-determination. To this end, in the first two decades of Soviet rule, the official rhetoric attacked Russian chauvinism and promoted what historian Martin Terry terms an "Affirmative Action Empire."⁵⁴ According to the politics of Affirmative Action, peripheral republics were prioritized in gaining access to economic and educational privileges that were unavailable to them prior to the Revolution. Thus, the Soviet government's promise of decolonization was its primary vehicle of gaining the "Other's" trust. To encourage Kazakh loyalty to Russia, the state generated a rhetoric of delivering Kazakhs from cultural backwardness and political oppression by khans and noblemen. A 1922 article from

⁵³ See Slocum, "Who, and When," 186 and Cadiot, "Searching for Nationality," 440.

⁵⁴ Terry, "Affirmative Action," in *State of Nations*, 71. As Terry notes, "Non-Russian nationalism was primarily a response to tsarist oppression and was motivated by an historically justifiable distrust of the Great Russians."

the *Pravda* newspaper stated that “Asiatic chaos, lack of discipline, and contagious disorder” must follow the “sense of order and balance in the [Soviet] mass movements.”⁵⁵ For instance, the policy of *korenizatsiia* (nativization or, more literally, rootedness) was implemented in early 1920s with the goal of integrating non-Russians into the political life of the USSR.⁵⁶ The policy, although never fully abandoned, disappeared from the official rhetoric when in 1930s Joseph Stalin began to promote rehabilitation of Russian culture (1934 and 1936).

Though Soviet leaders, from the Bolsheviks onward, promoted “national” self-determination politics, they in fact viewed them as only a temporary solution. Stalin, for instance, wrote about the necessity to encourage self-determination in order to ensure that each nation went through the necessary steps of cultural and political formation within the teleology of progress toward internationalism. In an essay written before the 1917 October Revolution, Stalin foreshadowed his approach to ruling a multi-ethnic state: “The national question in the Caucasus can be solved only *by drawing the belated nations and nationalities into the common stream of a higher culture.*”⁵⁷ Thus, under the doctrine of Friendship of Peoples, the identity of “the Soviet person” (*sovetskii chelovek*) had to simultaneously encompass singularity and diversity. Cultural studies scholar Svetlana Lurye writes: “Ethnicity was supported inside of nations in order to preserve a simulacrum of nation so that there was something out of which proletarian internationalism was to be built.”⁵⁸ Expression of national identity was permitted only in so far as it did not interfere with the socialist agenda. The difficulty of

⁵⁵ Greg Castillo, “Soviet Orientalism: Socialist Realism and Built Tradition,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 8, no. 2 (1997): 35.

⁵⁶ Ronald Grigor Suny, ed., *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 404.

⁵⁷ Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (1913) (Tirana: The 8 Nëntori Publishing House, 1979), 78. Emphases original.

⁵⁸ Svetlana Lurye, “Druzhba narodov’ v SSSR: natsional’nii proekt ili primer spontannoi mezhetnicheskoi samoorganizatsii?” (Friendship of the peoples in the USSR: a national project or an example of a spontaneous inter-ethnic self-organization?), *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennosti*’ 4 (2011): 145–56. Accessed at http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2011/0475/analit02.php#_FNR_2.

negotiating between singularity and diversity led to the conversion of national difference into international sameness and often contributed to a blurring of the center's own self-image.

In December of 1935, Stalin announced the Friendship of the Peoples model, which defined Soviet republics as equal participants in the construction of a happy socialist future. Following this new model, all republics were to celebrate their diverse ethnic roots. One of the main objectives of this new model, as Terry points out, was the vindication of Russian culture from its associations with “great-power chauvinism” and, hence, “the greatest danger.”⁵⁹ An editorial in the *Pravda* from February 1936 testifies to a transformation of rhetoric, with Russia being condemned as an oppressor to being celebrated as the greatest of all Soviet republics:

All the peoples [of the USSR], participants in the great socialist construction, can take pride in the results of their work. All of them from the smallest to the largest are equal Soviet patriots. But the first among equals is the Russian people, the Russian workers, the Russian toilers, whose role in the entire Great Proletarian Revolution, from the first victory to today's brilliant period of its development, has been exclusively great.⁶⁰

Even though with the new diversifying policies every culture was to be celebrated as equal, the Soviet media portrayed Russia as “the first among equals.”⁶¹ Rather than shying away from praising the greatness of Russian culture, as was done in the 1920s, the government now implemented the *pokrovitel'stvennaia politika* (patronizing politics), which explicitly recognized Russia as the benefactor, the older brother, to whom the other republics should express gratitude for fulfilling the revolution.⁶² Although the term *inorodtsy* disappeared from Soviet discourse, it was replaced by *otstalye narody*—backward peoples.⁶³ Despite the Soviet government's promises of civilizing the *otstalye*

⁵⁹ Terry, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001), 441.

⁶⁰ Cited in *ibid.*, 452.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Terry, “An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism,” in *A State of Nations*, 23–66. Terry's translation *pokrovitel'stvennaia* as “protecting” does not capture the connotation of the word, which also means “patronizing.”

⁶³ *Inorodcheskie tely* (alien bodies) was used in *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia* (The great Soviet encyclopedia), but in the context of a medical discussion. Slocum, 190.

narody, and thus delivering them from colonial oppression of the past, its simultaneous policies of promoting diversity while emphasizing integration disguised empire-building as nation-making. The governing cultural dictum “nationalist in form, socialist in content” preserved and promoted folk elements in order to create the illusion of diversity and to conceal the imposition of the hegemonic culture unto peripheries. As historians Valerie Kivelson and Ronald Suny note, according to this motto, art was to contribute to building a single socialist identity while maintaining “ethno-national diversity in the name of Friendship of Peoples.”⁶⁴

Although Terry acknowledges and stresses this shift, his conclusion about its ramifications—including the 1938 decree on Russian language being taught in all Soviet republics—is rather surprising: “No attempt was ever made to create either a Soviet nationality or to turn the Soviet Union into a Russian nation-state. [...] The role played by the dominant nationality of traditional nation-state would be played in the Soviet Union by the Friendship of the Peoples.”⁶⁵ In contrast, I argue that cultural policies were implemented precisely for the purposes of homogenizing cultural difference and creating a “Soviet nationality.” In addition to learning the Russian language—which was the dominant marker of *sovetskii chelovek* (the Soviet person)—all nations were to partake in creating prototypes of “high culture” as epitomized by Russian adaptations of Western culture.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 335. The discourse of Friendship of the People was introduced by Stalin in the early 1930s.

⁶⁵ Terry, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 461.

⁶⁶ As Igor Pantin states, “Stalinist politics, aimed at unitarity, was prone to destroy any and all differences—cultural, social, national—and was based on the old great-Russian statehood.” “Stalinskaia politika, napravlenaia na unitarnost’, byla chrevata unichtozheniem vsekh i vsiakikh razlichii, kul’turnykh, sotsial’nykh, natsional’nykh, i orientirovalas’ na staruiu velikorusskuiu derzhavnost’.” Pantin, *Russkaia revoliutsiia: idei, ideologii, politicheskaia praktika* (Russian revolution: ideas, ideologies, and political practice) (Moscow: Letnii sad, 2015), 282. See also Dina Amanzholova, “Ot poddanstva k sem’e narodov” (From subjects to the family of nations), in *Sovetskii natsional’nyi proekt v 1920–1940-e gody: ideologiya i praktika* (The Soviet national project in 1920s–1940s: ideology and practice), ed. Amanzholova, Konstantin Drozdov, Tamara Krasovitskaia, Vitalii Tikhonov, 254–338 (Moscow: Novyi khronograf, 2021).

Many historians and political scientists have debated the Soviet Union's standing as a political entity, defining it variously as an empire (Beissinger), a colonial empire (Tlostanova), an affirmative action empire (Terry), settler communism (Khalid), and contiguous empire-state (Suny). Despite varying language, however, there is a consensus that although the Soviet government rhetorically claimed to distance itself from Russia's colonial past, it nonetheless continued its colonial and empire-building project. Political scientist Mark R. Beissinger writes:

A widespread sense of foreign domination can exist even in the presence of the attempt to transcend hierarchy, for as the Soviet experience suggests, the attempt to enforce integration and modernization can just as easily be understood as a form of foreign domination, as the attempt to enforce cultural or racial difference.⁶⁷

Even though the Soviet rhetoric centered on promises to deliver the brotherly nations from the colonial oppression of the past, the “integration and modernization” of its republics—as underscored by Beissinger—contributed to the promulgation of empire-building techniques that aimed to enhance control and strengthen the Soviet regime by circumscribing cultural difference.

According to official rhetoric, the state-sponsored production of Western-style artworks, architecture, and educational institutions in all republics proved that in communism all nations were equal. However, putting these cultural modernization efforts alongside economic, technological, and territorial management projects shows that the state differentiated ethnic and racial minorities as second-rate citizens. The center/periphery dichotomy continued to stand, as Moscow, with its ruling elite and intellectuals, remained at the top of the political and cultural hierarchy, while imperial peripheries were exploited to attain state aims. Because of Stalin's collectivization, in Kazakhstan and Ukraine, mass famines took the lives of over two and a half million people between 1930 and 1933; all the while export of grain prevailed to sponsor import of technology to bolster

⁶⁷ Mark R. Beissinger, “Soviet Empire as ‘Family Resemblance’,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (2006): 302.

industrialization.⁶⁸ In the late 1930s, a wave of repressions targeted nationalistically inclined intellectuals who expressed anti-socialist views.⁶⁹ In media, Stalin was portrayed as the father of all nations, much like a tsar. Mass deportations, which historians interpret as ethnic cleansing, displaced thousands of people of various ethnicities to fulfill Stalin's vision of territorial demarcations.⁷⁰ After World War II, the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site in Kazakhstan operated for forty years (1949–1989), causing immense environmental and human devastation. In what follows, I sketch a theory of drastic hybridity that serves as an analytic for bridging the gap between these coercive practices and production of operas.

Toward a Theory of Drastic Hybridity

Opera represented the quintessential genre that could showcase complete modernization because it engendered every aspect of progress: musical literacy, mastery of compositional techniques (including polyphony, orchestration, and form), and proficiency in classical vocal style. Because many artists and intellectuals remained skeptical toward modernization, musicological writing was deployed to encourage the composition of national classics in Western genres for each republic. Soviet musicologist and ethnographer Viktor Vinogradov condemned those who believed that Eastern music could disregard “artistic values of the West” and should preserve its own

⁶⁸ Some historians interpret these famines as acts of ethnic genocide. See Sarah Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 170. In Kazakhstan, the perished people constituted 25 percent of the local population. Mass famines also took place in Ukraine, where an estimated one million people perished from hunger.

⁶⁹ In Kazakhstan, these included Alikhan Bukheinov, an ethnographer and leader of Alash, Akmet Baitursynov, Mirzhakip Dultanov, and others. In Armenia, repressed intellectuals included the poet Eghishe Charents and writers Alex Bakunts, and Zabel Yesayan.

⁷⁰ See J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937–1949* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999). Targeted groups included Koreans, Finns, Germans, Greeks, as well as indigenous people like Kalmyks, Karachays, Chechens, Ingush, and Crimean Tatars, among others.

“independent path.”⁷¹ Vinogradov labeled such thinkers as reactionaries, stating that their beliefs exemplified “erroneous” attitudes such as “museum-like protective relation toward local musical traditions; conservation and idealization of archaism; underestimation, misunderstanding, and even ignoring of polyphony, temperament, symphonic orchestra, opera, choir—in a word, all of the musical accomplishments of the world and of Russia.”⁷² As Vinogradov’s statement illustrates, composers from satellite republics could overcome cultural stagnation by adapting so-called progressive polyphonization, standardization of tuning, and institutionalization of musical practices through establishing orchestras and conservatories.⁷³ The development of music, as of other arts, thus followed a teleological arch, where aesthetic hierarchies were rooted in the colonial dichotomy between the so-called “archaic” local indigeneities and the “progressive” Western culture exemplified by Russian music.

In the rare cases when contemporary music historians consider operas written in Soviet republics, they develop varying approaches to the issue of intercultural translation. For instance, investigating Azerbaijani composer Uzeir Hajibeyov’s alleged critique of Russian Orientalism, Marina Frolova-Walker suggests that Hajibeyov’s first opera, *Keroglu* (1937), was a poor copy of nineteenth-century masters of Orientalism: “As an anti-orientalist gesture, however, *Keroglu* was a failure. The blend of East and West in the music of Rimsky-Korsakov, for example, at least benefits from a sophisticated technique, which Hajibeyov signally lacks.”⁷⁴ Focusing on stylistic considerations, Frolova-Walker thus concludes that Hajibeyov’s mimicry of nineteenth-century

⁷¹ Viktor Vinogradov, *Muzyka sovetskogo vostoka: ot unisona k polifonii* (The music of the Soviet East: from unison to polyphony) (Moscow: Sovetskii Kompozitor, 1968), 4. Vinogradov graduated from the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied with Nikolai Garbuzov and Georgy Katuar. Among his writings is the five-volume series *Muzyka narodov Azii i Afriki* (The music of Asian and African peoples) (Moscow: Moskva, 1969–87).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁴ Marina Frolova-Walker, “National in Style, Socialist in Context: Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, no. 2 (1998): 361.

Russian masters resulted in a form of self-Orientalism rather than anti-Orientalism.

Ethnomusicologist Inna Naroditskaya states that the interpretation of Azerbaijani music as a by-product of a unidirectional “colonization” is incomplete. She offers a different perspective:

By bringing together the formal patterns of opera and *mugham* melody, the written musical text and the native modal system, the composer used two ‘canons’ whose juxtaposition resulted in a new form. According to the Azerbaijanian musicologists Ramiz Zokhrabov and Solmaz Kasimova, ‘*Keroglu* exemplifies a synthesis of two different types of cognition, one of *mugam* and the other of operatic/symphonic artforms.’⁷⁵

By undermining the power hierarchies that resulted from clashes between untranslatable cultural elements, Naroditskaya’s reading of *Keroglu* presents an almost effortless synthesis and thus overlooks the tensions involved in the merging of local musical practices with the European art form of opera.⁷⁶ As such, her explication is less politically charged than Frolova-Walker’s, who argues that composers in Soviet republics were unable to escape the hegemonic culture of nineteenth-century Russian masters.

While the scholarly accounts addressed above examine cultural ramifications of fusing Eastern folk music into Western operatic conventions, the impact of colonial domination at both aesthetic and political levels has not received critical attention. Since national operas in republics were created following demands of an occupying power, a postcolonial lens is necessary to our understanding of their hybrid nature. As defined by Homi Bhabha, hybridity presents “not the nostalgic dream of tradition, nor the Utopian dream of modern progress; [but] the dream of translation as ‘survival’.”⁷⁷ The “survival” of local music traditions was viable only insofar as it aligned with the Russian and European cultural heritage.

⁷⁵ Inna Naroditskaya, *Song from the Land of Fire: Continuity and Change in Azerbaijanian Mugham* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 110.

⁷⁶ Valeriia Nedlina similarly interprets Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakh music as synthesizing “traditional and classical genres,” which she calls bilingualism (*dvuiazychie*). Nedlina, “Puti razvitiia muzykal’noi kul’tury Kazakhstana na rubezhe XX–XXI stoletii” (The paths of development of Kazakh musical culture in 20th–21st centuries) (PhD diss., Moscow Conservatory, 2017), 93.

⁷⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 227.

To navigate hybridity's complex web of aesthetic markers, identity construction, political hierarchies, modes of oppression, and acts of resistance, we must then interrogate the relationship between empire-building and hybridity's translational, intercultural logic. One potential theorization of operas as hybrid texts would be to employ Bhabha's notion of *mimicry*, which he defines as "the affect of hybridity—at once a mode of appropriation and resistance, from the disciplined to the desired."⁷⁸ Mimicry would complement Frolova-Walker's notion of self-Orientalism with Occidentalism, i.e., to explore how ethnic composers employed stereotypes of Russian and Western musical idioms as critiques of power. However, a mere reorientation toward the perspective of the East is not sufficient to capture the social, political, and cultural entanglements of opera. As historian Douglas Northrop suggests, cultural production always involves a "two-way process of influence" through which both parties provide instances of "intervention, transformation, and mutual self-definition."⁷⁹ Beyond demonstrating the state's attitude toward the "Other" as inferior, the desire to civilize and remake the periphery also reveals how the Bolsheviks and the later communist leaders continued to grapple with Russian Empire's self-image as a subpar empire.⁸⁰ As Rumina Sethi argues, while postcolonial notions of hybridity, ambiguity, eclecticism, and fluidity all point at instances of "mutual self-definition," their emphasis on "the mutual contagion of binary entities" produces interpretations in which "we may never be able to distinguish the exploiter/exploited."⁸¹

⁷⁸ Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 162.

⁷⁹ Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 8.

⁸⁰ Madina Tlostanova, "The Janus-Faced Empire Distorting Orientalist Discourses: Gender, Race and Religion in the Russian/(post)Soviet Construction of the 'Orient'," *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* (2008): 1–11; and Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁸¹ Rumina Sethi, *The Politics of Postcolonialism: Empire, Nation, and Resistance* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 19. See also Avtar Brah and Annie Coombes, eds., *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000).

To understand the workings of empire and disentangle the uneven powers within it, we must then complement the predominant focus on textual analysis in postcolonial studies with investigation of historical and political materiality.⁸² A clear shift from understanding texts qua ambiguity to placing them in the “thick” of history can be traced in the writing of Edward Said. In his works from early 1990s, he emphasized “multiple identity, the polyphony of many voices, playing off against each other, without, as I say, the need to reconcile them, just to hold them together, is what my work is all about.”⁸³ By contrast, in 2000s, Said augmented the political stakes of analysis, which demanded engaging texts with historical materiality:

Humanism, I think, is the means, perhaps the consciousness we have for providing that kind of finally antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again, as we encounter our own silence and mortality—all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation.⁸⁴

As hybrid cultural products steeped in colonial oppression, national operas in the Soviet republics thus call for a new postcolonial analytic, one that must attend to both textual means of interculturality and the historical materiality underpinning the process of their creation and performance.

To foreground the tensions present in the acts of persistent exchange and resistance, I develop a theory of *drastic hybridity*. While “hybridity” refers to its traditional postcolonial sense, i.e., it highlights the “mutual self-definition” within cultural production, the adjective “drastic” orients analysis of hybrid artifacts such as opera toward the political aims and ideological gains of the state.

⁸² As Marwan M. Kraidy puts it, “in formulating critical transculturalism,” we must pursue “full integration of historical, rhetorical, and empirical aspects of hybridity in international communication theory and research.” Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), viii.

⁸³ Edward Said, “Criticism, Culture, and Performance: An Interview with Edward Said,” *Performing Arts Journal*, 13, no. 1 (1991): 99.

⁸⁴ Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 83.

Intercultural translation in such analysis thus operates not only in terms of negotiation of musical idioms, but, more importantly, discloses the clashes between the unequal imperatives and competing epistemes—those of the hegemonic power and oppressed groups. While inspired by Carolyn Abbate’s call to privilege music as “a temporal event with material presence,” my approach to opera as a drastic event departs from Abbate and Roger Parker’s refusal to attend to music as a text.⁸⁵ Because many of the operas analyzed in my project are no longer performed, a drastic approach in the sense that Abbate and Parker have developed would imply that these works cannot be studied. Exclusion of repertoire based on its absence on stages, however, would cast aside a rich colonial archive that can help us understand political history outside of official narratives that appear in documents and textbooks.

Drastic hybridity also challenges those recent approaches to transcultural or intercultural analysis in music studies that suggest the possibility of separation between culture and politics. One such approach, recently proposed by Yayoi Uno Everett, suggests that in the postwar era composers were able to withstand Orientalist and exoticist stereotypes in their music by generating “‘non-hierarchic interconnections’ between cultures.”⁸⁶ Everett sides with Christian Utz’s definition of interculturalism as “a middle ground (*eine Mitte*) between two distinct cultural entities.”⁸⁷ Everett’s departure from Orientalism is motivated by her desire to foster more inclusive theoretical analysis, which gives agency to non-European composers. However, her dispensing with the discourse of the Orient, and as such empire, brings us back to Naroditskaya’s notion of synthesis, suggesting that musical idioms can coexist outside of political structures. As Said put it in his analysis of Giuseppe

⁸⁵ Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (Spring, 2004): 530; and Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

⁸⁶ Here, Everett borrows from Shay Loya’s interpretation of exoticism in Franz Liszt’s music. Everett, “From Exoticism to Interculturalism: Counterframing the East–West Binary,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 43 (2021): 331.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Verdi's *Aida*, ignoring "imperialist structures of domination [...] we reduce those works to caricatures."⁸⁸ Whether we study hybridity in historical or contemporary contexts, bypassing imperialism we erase what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls "a past of interlocked unequal exchanges."⁸⁹ Attending to the unequal hierarchies is thus key to unlocking the colonial history of Soviet opera and giving agency to a new group of historical actors who resisted imperial exploitation.⁹⁰ Drastic hybridity thus realigns modes of cultural negotiation with the Soviet communists' unique imperial tactics of domination, thus exposing the economic, religious, political, and racial forms of oppression in the allegedly egalitarian state.

Chapter Outlines

The Soviet national opera project thus pursued the age-old Russian imperial practices of assimilation and subjugation, which allowed communists to maintain rule over the multiethnic population. In addition to examining opera as an instrument of totalitarian control, as many scholars have done, I also interrogate its empire-building potential. A central feature of my work is the reversal of "the imperial gaze." How, I ask, did marginalized people involved in the creation of operas negotiate their identities in creative and subversive ways? Studying original archival materials from Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Russia, I develop a discursive method of analysis that foregrounds interactions between members of a broad socio-cultural network of composers, ethnographers, performers, critics, audiences, and state officials. Each chapter of the dissertation initiates a dialogue between

⁸⁸ Said, "The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*," in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 157.

⁸⁹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 92.

⁹⁰ The aspirations of drastic hybridity to recover the agency of the oppressed through the study of music is inspired by Clyde Woods's *blues epistemology*—a concept that he develops to explore blues as a mode of resistance among African Americans grappling with post-civil-war racialized structures of urban development. See Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power of the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 1998).

operatic production and one of the four intersecting axes across which the state negotiated and redefined nationalism: religious practices, historical memory, ethnic and racial identity, and gender norms.

Chapter 1 explores how cultural workers negotiated the production of Soviet Armenian national art within the state's massive antireligious campaign. First, it explores various forms of mass media—including newspaper articles, music history textbooks, and film adaptations of operas—in order to show how an emergent secular discourse inconspicuously obliterated religion from historical plots. Second, it examines the opera's multimedia form—a combination of music, dance, spectacle, and textual narrative—as a vehicle for the invention of national mythologies. I show how opera revised historical facts to provide a new unifying ideology based on the Friendship of the Peoples paradigm, designed by Stalin to enforce brotherhood and camaraderie among the multiethnic Soviet population. The chapter argues that the composer Armen Tigranyan and Armenian music critics resisted the state's attempts to erase religious difference and advance atheism. Tigranyan employed tactics such as repetition of liturgical music but with strategic use of untranslated Armenian text, while critics described operas in ways that veiled these religious references. These tactics, as I show, allowed preservation of certain religious elements within the strictly censored environment.

Chapter 2 focuses on operas about collectivization and agrarian modernization in the Armenian kolkhoz (collective farm). It explores the tensions and paradoxes that emerged at the intersection of socialist realist claims that art depicts reality and the fact that accurate depiction of contemporaneous events or Soviet history was politically untenable. Analyzing two operas—Haro Stepanyan's 1950 *The Heroine* and Andrey Babayev's 1957 *The Eagle's Fortress*—the chapter traces how Soviet composers and censors reinvented the pastoral trope in operas related to labor. The socialist realist pastoral opera, as I contend, reconciled the dire kolkhoz reality with Stalin's, and later

Khrushchev's, utopias of agrarian modernization and economic progress. Based on materials from the National Archives of Armenia, this chapter offers the first account of the behind-the-scenes creation of Armenian national operas by analyzing minutes taken during the meetings of the Yerevan Opera Theatre's artistic committee. Reconstructing the process of the operas' evolution from one version to another, I highlight how the members of the committee, along with composers, struggled with meeting the absurd official demands.

Chapter 3 traces the entanglement of ethnicity and race in the formation of Kazakh national opera. It explores the power dynamics between the Russian composer Yevgeny Brusilovsky and Kazakh musicians who assisted him in the making of the first Kazakh national opera *Kyz Zhibek* (1934). I first contextualize the Soviet ethnographic project, which the state sponsored as a prerequisite for the making of national art. I then analyze Brusilovsky's adaptation of a Kazakh folk song "Gakku," focusing on two markers of racial difference—metric (in)ability and vocal technique—which the composer perceived as hindrances to the creation of Kazakh national opera. The chapter argues that in the allegedly egalitarian, antiracist Soviet Union racial politics operated in subtle but prominent ways that reaffirmed white hegemony. Because the term race was absent in Soviet legislation, I employ the notion of racialization to analyze the acts of bodily inscription that Brusilovsky and white audiences of opera used to ascribe racial difference. It is precisely this distinction between race and racialization that allows me to uncover the contradictions between the theory and practice of Soviet socialism: while in theory socialism overcame race and racism, in practice, racialization was actively embedded in social life and cultural production.

Chapter 4 examines the intersections between Kazakh opera and the state-sponsored "liberation of the Muslim woman" campaign. It focuses on the woman composer Gaziza Zhubanova's confrontation of the Soviet colonial exploitation of Kazakhstan—including the state-induced mass famine in the 1930s and the devastating human and environmental impact of the

nuclear tests in Semipalatinsk. I show that Zhubanova's biography and her music presented two competing cultural imperatives. On the one hand, she remained an agent of the Soviet state through her bureaucratic involvement and compositions that publicly praised the Party (e.g., the oratorio titled *Lenin* and *The Cantata about the Party*). On the other hand, as my analyses show, her operas such as *Enlik Kebek* and *The Steppe Yedygey*, decolonized Kazakh culture and historical memory by amplifying the voice of the woman and developing a modernist musical language that went against the officially sanctioned demands of socialist realism. I argue that Zhubanova's foregrounding of the woman's voice—both literally and figuratively—in conjunction with her search for independent Kazakh musical modernism, aligns her with the leading figures of the rising Kazakh resistance in the years leading to the dissolution of the USSR.

In the epilogue, I briefly address contemporary resonances of Soviet-era operas. It examines how recent events—such as Putin's proposal in 2019 and 2021 to build a new nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan and his brokerage of peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the war in 2020—continue to bolster policies of the former Soviet state. I scrutinize the responses of Armenians and Kazakhs to the neo-imperial Russian ambitions by examining contemporary opera repertoires at the Spendiaryan Theatre of Opera.

Chapter 1. Opera and the Antireligious Campaign in Soviet Armenia

The report from the 1922 meeting of the Armenian Congress of Unions (ACU), the highest governing body of the Armenian USSR, recapitulated the conditions that afforded the creation of Armenian Soviet national culture:

Thanks to Soviet power, unprecedented dimensions of cultural and spiritual development have opened in Armenia—a former peripheral province—a colony that never before had higher education, museums, theaters, or a conservatory. Cultural development, unprecedented in the history of the Armenian people, has begun: the creation of a culture that is national in form and socialist in content.¹

The report emphasized the dire state of pre-revolutionary Armenia to ensure that skeptical Armenians recognized Russia's role in bringing forth the Revolution, both political and cultural.² In addition to spotlighting that it was “Soviet power” that enabled Armenia's cultural modernization, the report conspicuously suggested that the nation was spiritually underdeveloped prior to Soviet rule. The fact that in the report cultural and spiritual evolutions appear in tandem reveals the Soviet government's attempt to transplant the pre-Soviet Christian meaning of spirituality into a new

¹ Servand Kharmandaryan and Konstantin Khudaverdyan, eds., *S"ezhdy soiuzov Armenii (1922–1937)* (Meetings of the congress of Armenia) (Yerevan: Armianskoe Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1963), 42. This was the ACU's second meeting, held on November 29–December 3, 1922. “Blagodaria Sovetskoi vlasti, otkrylis' nevidannye prostory kul'turnogo, dukhovnogo razvitiia Armenii—byvshei okrainnoi gubernii—kolonii, nikogda ne imevshei rannee ni vysshego zavedeniia, ni teatrov, ni konservatorii. Nachalos' nevidannoe v istorii armianskogo naroda kul'turnoe razvitie, sozdnaie ego natsional'noi po forme, sotsialisticheskoi po sodержaniu kul'tury.”

² Following the October Revolution, the Armenian National Council announced the independence of the First Republic of Armenia in May, 1918. This independence, however, was short-lived, as in November of 1920 the Red Army overtook power and established the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. In December 1920, Stalin himself wrote a celebratory *Pravda* article, where he stated, “The exhausted and long-suffering Armenia, which with the mercy of the Entente and the dashnaks was given to famine, devastation, and migration, a country deceived by all of its ‘friends,’ now found its deliverance through announcing itself a Soviet country... Only the idea of a Soviet power brought peace and the possibility of national renewal to Armenia.” (“Armeniia, izmuchennaia i mnogostradal'naia, otdannaia milost'u Antanti i dashnakov na golod, razorenii i bezhenstvo,—eta obmanutaia vsemi ‘druz'iami’ Armeniia, nyne obrela svoe izbavlenie v tom, chto ob”iavila sebia sovetskoi stranoi... Tol'ko ideia sovetskoi vlasti prinesla Armenii mir i vozmozhnost' natsional'nogo obnoveniia.”) Cited in Iurii Iaralov, *Yerevan* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Arkhitektury SSSR, 1948), 5.

secular form—national culture. The impetus for this transformation was the atheist foundation of communism. To implement atheist ideology, the Soviet leadership initiated a colossal antireligious campaign and denounced religion as the ideological enemy of the state, antithetical to class equality and cultural progress.

Soviet communism framed religion as one of the backward elements of Armenian culture, overall in desperate need of modernization. As part of the modernization agenda, in 1925, the ACU announced its decision to establish a national opera theater in Yerevan. The theater building was designed by Alexander Tamanian, whom the Armenian government leaders invited to conduct the architectural transformation of Yerevan into a modern capital of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.³ Tamanian was a graduate of the Saint Petersburg Academy of Arts and had previously served in the most prestigious architectural positions in Imperial Russia—the vice-president of the Saint Petersburg Academy of Arts and the director of the artistic department of imperial palaces, parks, and theater buildings in Saint Petersburg. In his architectural plan of Yerevan, the opera house was the cultural center that complemented the capital’s political center, The Government House, at the heart of the city. The “grand size of the theater, its large volume,” according to Soviet architect Edmond Tigranyan, “is meant to serve as one of the main components of the overall city-silhouette décor and to spatially mark the compositional center of the north-south axis. At the same time, the voluminous composition of the theater is certainly conditioned by the natural silhouette of

³ The opera theater, which in addition to the opera stage includes a separate philharmonic hall, was first envisioned by the government as part of a *narodnyi dom*, “people’s house.” Common in late-nineteenth-century Imperial Russia, *narodnyi dom* was a social gathering space that offered educational and leisurely pastime opportunities. While it is not known when exactly the Yerevan *narodnyi dom* was reinterpreted as an opera house, it is clear that the imperial associations of a *narodnyi dom* influenced the Soviet state’s reenvisioning of the project. Although Tamanian did not live to witness the completion of the theater in 1940, the monumentality of the building has firmly ingrained his legacy in Armenian culture to this day.

the Ararat valley, which is surrounded by a chain of mountains and hills.”⁴ Tigranyan suggests that the theater building organically blends in with the natural terrain of the capital, yet his eulogizing description remains silent about the fact that making space for the new architectural structure necessitated the demolition of the Gethsemane Chapel.⁵ The replacement of this thirteenth-century chapel, as well as the old Yerevan cemetery that surrounded it, with a new cultural marvel is a material manifestation of the antireligious campaign.⁶ Under the pretext of clearing physical space for the theater building, the act of demolition, I contend, represents the State’s ideology of substitution whereby old Christian traditions were erased and replaced with new secular culture. This substitutional imperative relied on excisional practices which resulted in the emergence of a sacred void—a figurative space that was emptied of religion and became available for a new type of Soviet spirituality. The creation of national opera—both the genre and the socio-cultural institution—became a cornerstone in a twofold process of secularization and respiritualization: it simultaneously produced a sacred void and offered means to inculcate Soviet ideological values.

For Tamanian, satisfying the state with the theater building’s visual elements proved to be an arduous endeavor. One of his early designs of the theater’s façade, shown in Figure 1a, resembled the octagonal pointed domes characteristic of Armenian church architecture. A more gargantuan version was supposed to emulate the Moscow Palace of the Soviets (Figure 1b), the top of which

⁴ Edmond Tigranyan, “Arkitektura teatrov Armenii” (The architecture of Armenian theaters), *Patma-banasirakan bandes* 3 (1974): 73.

⁵ The Gethsemane Chapel was built in the thirteenth century but was reconstructed at the end of the seventeenth century after an earthquake destroyed it in 1679. Tamanian resisted the demolition of the chapel, but his attempt to transfer it to a different location failed.

⁶ The replacement of demolished churches with various cultural and political sites was a commonplace occurrence: the Moscow Cinema replaced the Medieval Apostolic Saint Paul and Peter Church; the Egishe Charents School was built in place of the nineteenth-century Saint Gregory the Illuminator Church; the Monument of Stepan Shaumian (a Bolshevik revolutionary) was erected in place of the early-twentieth-century Orthodox Saint Nikolai Cathedral.



a) Tamanian's early draft of the façade



b) Boris Iofan's Palace of the Soviets that was to be emulated by Tamanian



c) the constructed final version of the Yerevan Opera Theatre

Figure 1. Three versions of the Spendiaryan Theatre building.⁷

was adorned with a massive statue of Lenin.⁸ In the humble final version, however, the building's top tier (Figure 1c) did not showcase any distinctive features, making it appear incomplete and pointing out the difficulty of negotiating the identity of the structure. Although Soviet leaders did not allow an explicit visual reference to a church in the form of a dome, they did envision opera's

⁷ Images for Figure 1 a and c are reproduced from Iurii Iaralov, *Tamanian* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo arkhitektury i gradostroitel'stva, 1950), 111 and 109, respectively. Figure 1 b is reproduced from Andrei Barkhin, "Rebristy stil' vysotnykh zdaniy i neoarkhaizm v arkhitekture 1920–1930kh," *Academia: Arkhitektura i stroitel'stvo* 3 (2016): 65.

⁸ The Palace of the Soviets was supposed to replace the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which was destroyed following Stalin's orders. The construction of the palace was halted during World War II; the cathedral was rebuilt following the collapse of the USSR.

institutional role to be a new space for spiritual ritual.

Even though in the early years after the October Revolution many Bolsheviks attacked opera for its associations with the bourgeois class, prominent intellectuals successfully advocated for the preservation of the genre by pointing out its social and spiritual potency.⁹ Anatoly Lunacharsky—who was the first leader of the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment in 1917 and occupied this position for twelve years—defended the maintenance of the Bolshoi Theatre, linking opera with spiritual development. He argued for opera’s evolution from a secular form of entertainment to a “ceremonial oratorio of the future”: “I specifically refer to oratorio, and not opera. [...] We will with absolute honesty see in opera not a realist spectacle, but a celebratory act, a people’s revolutionary ceremony.”¹⁰ In an earlier essay, written prior to the revolution, Lunacharsky explicitly linked art with religion, stating that “new aesthetics” should be based on “social-biological (and at the same time...*religious*.) criteria.”¹¹ He concluded the essay by proclaiming that theater must play a central role in the “economic, political, and *spiritual* liberation of the proletariat.”¹² Lunacharsky was not the only Soviet intellectual to have believed in art’s capability to replace organized religion. Lev Trotsky, another preeminent Bolshevik intellectual, proclaimed in his oft-cited essay “Vodka, the Church, and

⁹ Katerina Clark has cogently argued that the atheist communist leadership appropriated the old paradigm, “Moscow as the Third Rome,” into “Moscow as the Fourth Rome”—a unifying center that was now based on secular culture rather than Orthodox Christianity. The first three Romes were Rome itself, Constantinople, and Orthodox Moscow. Clark also claims that in the Soviet imagination literature fulfilled the “sacral function” of culture. Clark, “Moscow, the Lettered City,” in *Moscow the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 82–83.

¹⁰ Anatoly Lunacharsky, “Dlia chego my sokhraniaem Bolshoi Teatr?” (For what are we saving the Bolshoi Theatre?), in *Lunacharskii o teatre i dramaturgii* (Lunacharsky on theater and dramaturgy) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1958), 358.

¹¹ Lunacharsky, “Sotsializm v iskusstve” (Socialism in art) in *Kniga o novom teatre*, 5–33 (Moscow: RATI-GITIS, 2008). This collection of essays on theater was originally published in Saint Petersburg by the publishing house Shipovnik in 1908.

¹² Ibid., 32–33. In his run-through of the operatic history, Lunacharsky places Musorgsky above Verdi, Wagner, and Tchaikovsky, stating that Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina* should serve as models for proletarian “verismo.” See Lunacharsky, “Dlia chego,” 355.

the Cinema” that art, particularly cinema, could compete not only with pubs but also churches.¹³ Cinema, Trotsky believed, was “the best tool for propaganda” as it could fulfill the people’s demand for “ritualism” and “need of theatricality.”¹⁴ Lunacharsky’s and Trotsky’s ideas of art as the new form of spirituality certainly echo Richard Wagner, whom both esteemed highly.¹⁵ For Wagner, the secular spirit of his age required that religion be replaced by art; the rituals enacted in his music dramas fulfilled the same spiritual task previously accomplished by religion and united German people under the common German national mythos.¹⁶ In the multiethnic Soviet context, however, such common national unifying mythos was absent. As such, it was invented and imposed by the state. The sheer diversity of religious practices, which included Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and all forms of Christianity, was among the chief obstacles that prevented the creation of a uniform Soviet citizen.¹⁷

While the Soviet leadership applied brute force and swiftly replaced physical churches with new cultural institutions that offered sites for cultural ritual, its imposition of the Soviet type of spirituality—in the form of secular national art—faced a protracted struggle. The old and new kinds of spirituality radically differed in their ideological substance. While Christian spirituality relied on a

¹³ Lev Trotsky, *Voprosy byta: epokha ‘kul’turnichestva’ i ee zadachi* (Questions of the everyday: the epoch of culturalism and its goals) (Moscow: Krasnaia nov’, 1923), 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 35–36.

¹⁵ In an article that commemorated 50 years since Wagner’s death, Lunacharsky wrote that Soviet composers and poets need to learn from Wagner’s ability to “raise art and theater to the grand significance and artistic abstraction” in order to write a “grand opera about our revolutionary passions and our world struggle” (“podymat’ iskusstvo, podymat’ teatr do vysokoi znachitel’nosti i khudozhestvennoi abstraktsii [...] dat’ krupnuiu operu nashikh revoliutsionnykh strastei, nashei mirovoi bor’by”). Lunacharsky, “Richard Wagner,” *Sovetskaia muzyka* 3 (1933): 6.

¹⁶ Richard Wagner, “Religion and Art,” in *Religion and Art*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, 211–52 (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

¹⁷ For the Soviet state’s approach to different religious confessions, including Buddhism and Islam, see James Thrower, *Marxist-Leninist ‘Scientific Atheism’ and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1983). For an in-depth account on Stalin’s extensive campaign against the Russian Orthodox Church see Igor’ Kurliandskii, *Stalin, vlast’, religii* (Stalin, power, and religion) (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2011).

person's connectedness with god, Soviet spirituality was founded on communist moral values such as "devotion to the communist cause; socialist patriotism and internationalism; high labor and social-political activity; rejection of exploitation, oppression, and national and racial prejudices; class solidarity with the workers of all nations."¹⁸ However, I define and interpret both spiritual paradigms as structurally similar in that they present realms of social relationships between people, mythologies, doctrines, and institutions. In Christian spirituality, the realm of relationships consisted of believers, the Christian god, biblical teachings, and the church. In Soviet spirituality, these relationships unfolded between citizens, state leaders, the Marxist-Leninist ideology, and a plethora of cultural and sociopolitical institutions. Soviet opera embodied this relational meaning of spirituality: composers, librettists, performers, directors, and audiences participated in the creation and reception of national art, the form and content of which was defined by the government to promote Marxist-Leninist ideology.

For the purposes of advancing atheism, the state regulated opera production in two distinct ways. First, it deployed various forms of mass media—including newspaper articles, music history textbooks, and film adaptations of operas—to generate what I term a secular discourse, which inconspicuously created a sacred void by obliterating religion from historical plots in which religion occupied a central role.¹⁹ The secular discourse had a twofold impact: while critics participated in

¹⁸ From a decree of the Communist Party, "O podgotovke k 50-letiiu obrazovaniia Soiuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik" (On the preparation for the 50th anniversary of the formation of USSR), February, 1972. Cited in Khudaverdyan, *Kul'turnye svyazi sovetskoi Armenii: kratkii istoricheskii ocherk* (Cultural connections of Soviet Armenia: a short historical sketch) (Yerevan: Izdatel'stvo AN ArmSSR, 1977), 84. "Predannost' delu kommunizma, sotsialisticheskii patriotizm i internatsionalizm, vysokaiia trudovaia i obshchestvenno-politicheskaia aktivnost', neprimirimost' k ekspluatatsii i ugneteniiu, natsional'nym i rassovym predrassudkam, klassovaia solidarnost' s trudiashchimisia vsekh stran."

¹⁹ The state censored performances of scenes and entire operas dedicated to religious figures. A liturgy scene from Tigran Tchouhadjian's *Arshak II* (1868), for example, had been omitted in the productions between the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and Stalin's death in 1953, when the artistic committee of the opera theater raised the possibility of reinstating it. "Protokoly zasedaniia khudozhestvennogo soveta za 1953 god," in The National Archives of Armenia (from here on, NAA), 1393, 2, no. 53. Since composers were aware of atheist censorship, they rarely composed operas that

creating the sacred void, their writings, at the same time, diminished the role of religion, allowing pre-Soviet operas with religious themes to continue their stage life.²⁰ Second, the state capitalized on the opera's multimedia form—a combination of music, dance, spectacle, and textual narrative—to produce national mythologies that revised historical facts in order to legitimize Russian and Soviet rule over Armenia. For this purpose, libretti that dealt with pre-Soviet history retrospectively enforced trust in Imperial Russia by demonstrating that it assisted Armenia in liberation from Persian and Ottoman occupation.²¹ The state's regulation of cultural production raises the guiding question of this chapter: How did cultural workers, who participated in the creation and promotion of operas, negotiate the production of Soviet Armenian national art within the underlying antireligious campaign?

To answer this question, I turn to two operas by Armen Tigranyan: *Anush* (1912), an opera from the imperial tsarist period which premiered in Soviet Armenia in 1935, and *Davit Bek* (1950), an opera composed with Soviet censorship in mind. Tigranyan was born in 1879 in Alexandropol (present-day Gyumri), an Armenian city then governed by the Russian Empire. He graduated from the Russian Musical Society's Music College branch in Tiflis, where he studied with composers Makar Ekmalyan (Armenian ethnographer and composer) and Nikolay Klenovsky (Russian

centered on religion. Nonetheless, Ervand Erkranyan dedicated his opera *Shushanik* (1980–81) to the fifth-century Armenian female martyr Shushanik. The state, of course, banned the opera from performance.

²⁰ Pauline Fairclough has written on the role of criticism in the appropriation of pre-Soviet European sacred works for performances in the Soviet era. See Fairclough, “‘Don’t Sing It on a Feast Day’: The Reception and Performance of Western Sacred Music in Soviet Russia, 1917–1953,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (2012): 67–111. On the appropriation of Russian and European classics more generally, see Marina Raku, *Muzykal’naia klassika v mifotvorchestve sovetsskoi epokhi* (The classical music in the mythology of the Soviet age) (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014).

²¹ Historian David L. Hoffmann notes that such historical revisionism, especially under Stalin's leadership, was ubiquitous across the USSR: “Party functionaries and intellectuals in national minority republics were required to write national narratives that stressed the historical cooperation and friendship of their nationality with the Russian people.” Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 168.

composer and conductor who studied with Pyotr Tchaikovsky himself).²² Hailed by Soviet critics as the creator of the first Armenian national opera, *Anush*, he was awarded the Order of Lenin after the opera's performance at the first Armenian *dekada* (cultural festival) in Moscow in 1939. Because the state positioned Tigranyan as one of the greatest national composers, his operas embody cultural artifacts and socio-political avenues through which the state sought to fill the sacred void caused by the absence of religion in everyday life. In addition, the temporal span of these two works allows us to trace cultural and political changes across the shifting Stalinist policies on cultural production preceding and following World War II.

Drawing on archival materials from The National Archives of Armenia, I argue that Tigranyan's operas partook in a cultural transformation that was defined by two conflicting cultural imperatives. As a representative of the state, Tigranyan was obliged to join the antireligious campaign and promote socialist values. Yet as an ethnically Armenian composer, he found ways to subvert the state's atheist objectives in order to preserve elements of pre-Soviet Armenian religious culture. In my analysis of *Anush*, I develop the notion of secular discourse and inquire into how music critics promoted atheist propaganda through appropriating this pre-revolutionary opera. My exploration of Tigranyan's *Davit Bek*, which he wrote during Soviet times, accounts for the ways in which the composer navigated antireligious censorship. Through a comparison of divergences between the early libretto drafts and the published score, I explore the sacred void and the new forms of Soviet spirituality that emerged with Tigranyan's revisions. With an attunement to moments of tension and paradox, I underscore the fraught nature of the Soviet operatic project and argue that it functioned as a statecraft: under the guise of promoting ethnic culture, opera perpetuated historical revisionism to legitimize Russian and Soviet colonialism.

²² At the time Tiflis, now Tbilisi, was the cultural and administrative center of the Russian-governed Transcaucasus and had an Armenian community that outnumbered the local Georgians. See Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Spirituality in an Atheist State

Religion represented an ideology which competed against communism and compromised the authority of Soviet leadership. Adapting writings of Karl Marx, the Bolsheviks interpreted religion as a temporary phenomenon within the progressive development of humanity.²³ Marx claimed that religion was a provisional mechanism of coping with class and economic injustices that were corollaries of capitalism. As he famously stated, “*Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also a *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.”²⁴ Thus, upon successful implementation of communism, “real distress,” caused by class and economic struggle, would vanish, making religion superfluous. Vladimir Lenin’s interpretation of Marx was similar in its claims about religion: the Marxist-Leninist justification of an atheistic world was based on the premise that religion was only necessary in a society where class struggle was still prevalent. But while Marxism allowed room for religion to dissipate gradually, Marxism-Leninism actively sought to accelerate the process of secularization by creating a sophisticated propaganda mechanism. Because religion was rooted in the old bourgeois world order that Bolsheviks strove to suppress, the overarching Soviet ideology of modernization was inconceivable without secularization.²⁵ In tandem with other modernization techniques—such as industrialization and eradication of illiteracy—secularization, implemented through the dissemination of scientific

²³ For a thorough account on Soviet adaptation of Marx’s views on religion, see Thrower, *Marxist-Leninist ‘Scientific Atheism.’*

²⁴ Karl Marx, “Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law. Introduction,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3 (Electric Book: Lawrence & Wishart), 175.

²⁵ On the interconnection between secularization and modernization, see *Religion and Modernization*, ed. Dennis J. Dunn (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977). On atheist propaganda, see David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1975).

atheism, was meant to accelerate the accomplishment of class equality and economic prosperity.²⁶

This official rationalization of Marxist-Leninist scientific atheism by no means captures the totality of objectives behind the Soviet antireligious project. Above all else, religion threatened the new Communist order as it interfered with its leadership's desire to gain absolute control in all domains of its citizens' lives.²⁷ Since the stakes were high, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) took considerable measures to fight the hostile power presented by religion. To control the multi-confessional population, the state proclaimed religion a remnant of the bourgeois past and conducted large-scale antireligious propaganda. It established what historian Victoria Smolkin calls a powerful "atheist apparatus" that consisted of "party and government officials, ideology theorists and propaganda cadres, social scientists, cultural workers, and enlightenment activists."²⁸

Institutional forces that served as vehicles of the atheist apparatus included the Antireligious Committee of the Central Committee of the CPSU (1922–28); the newspaper titled *Bezbozhnik*, literally, "godless" (1922–41); The League of the Militant Godless (1925–41); the Leningrad State Museum of Religion and Atheism (opened in 1931); the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge (established in 1947); and the Institute of Scientific Atheism in Moscow (founded in 1964).²⁹ All of these institutions pursued the twofold goal of undermining the institutional power of the church and strengthening Soviet citizen's trust in the new government.

The fact that Christianity had been part of Armenian culture for over 1600 years by the time

²⁶ Scientific atheism was an official term that Soviet leaders promoted in order to accentuate the progressive, historical-materialist teleology of communism.

²⁷ As Victoria Smolkin notes, "Religion represented, above all, an obstacle to its [Soviet Communism's] monopoly on political, ideological, and spiritual authority." Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 4.

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹ Ibid., 17. Smolkin outlines three periods of Soviet rules that implemented distinct approaches to the religious question: "militant atheist propaganda" during Lenin's and Stalin's rule; "extensive antireligious campaign" and scientific atheism promoted under Khrushchev; and a move from negative to positive atheism under Brezhnev's rule. Ibid., 18–19.

Bolsheviks took power presented unique challenges to the secularization and dissemination of scientific atheism. For centuries, the Armenian Apostolic Church embodied a “sanctuary of national identity” not only for those Armenians who lived in Armenia, but also for the diaspora.³⁰ Educated church clerics, along with the educated middle class, fomented nationalistic sentiments and spurred suspicion towards Bolshevik rule. Realizing the threat that the church posed to the process of Armenia’s Sovietization, the Soviet State pursued an ideological goal of destabilizing and overtaking the authority that belonged to the Catholicos (Patriarch of the Armenian Church), the Bible, and the Christian god. During the first meeting of the Armenian Communist Party in 1922, when the constitution of Soviet Armenia was drafted, officials noted that among “the central principles of the Soviet rule were the separation of church from the state, of schools from church.”³¹ Party members also condemned religion for reinforcing class division and hence diverging from Socialist values of equality. During the fourth meeting of the members of the Armenian Party in 1925, Armenian State officials, who sided with the Moscow leadership, villainized spiritual leadership as “reactionary” by grouping them with other “class enemies of the Soviet order” such as *nepmeny* and *kulaki*.³²

In addition to political and ideological goals, the process of secularization in Armenia carried economic consequences. The government’s persecution of the Church culminated in two decrees that proclaimed nationalization of church properties.³³ To the same end, the Soviet State sponsored

³⁰ Claire Seda Mouradian, “The Armenian Apostolic Church,” in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 354.

³¹ Kharmandaryan, *S’ezhdy soiuзов Armenii*, 25.

³² Ibid., 100. *Nepmeny* were the people who managed to acquire considerable fortunes during the years of the New Economic Policy (1921–28); *kulaki* were formerly rich peasants. The Party attacked both of these groups, condemning them in reinforcing class inequality.

³³ Despite the economic advantages, the state’s attempts to undermine the prominent role of the Armenian Apostolic Church at times required expenses. For instance, the SovNarKom’s (*Sovet narodnykh komissarov*, Council of People’s Commissars) budgeted 5,000 rubles for the purposes of “decomposing the Armenian clergy.” Jakub Osiecki, “The Invigilation Clergy (1920–30) According to Documents in the Possession of the Armenian National Archive and the Georgian State Archive,” *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 21 (2012): 5.

various institutional initiatives, such as the special commission for antireligious propaganda, led by Sarkis Hambartsumyan, who advocated that the church could survive without the “churches (buildings), sacraments (Holy Liturgy), and even without clergymen.”³⁴ Aside from destroying material attributes of religion, the atheist apparatus promoted a narrative of the Church’s withering. It reasoned that if people were convinced that “division inside the church” was the cause of an underlying internal crisis, they would be more likely to reject the authority of the church, due to its perceived inefficiency.³⁵ During the 1924 meeting of the Third Convention of the Communist Party of Armenia, Sergey Melik-Osipov, the president of the Soviet police organization Cheka, gave a secret lecture on strategies for suppressing religion. Furthering its efforts to discredit the Church, the State established a “pseudo-clerical organization” *Azāt Yekeghetsi* (“free church”) and a journal of the same name in 1924. Another atheist propaganda journal, *Anastvats* (“godless”), appeared in print in 1928 and was the Armenian-language equivalent to the Russian *Bezbozhnik* (“godless”).³⁶ The atheist apparatus worked to beguile Armenians into atheism by reviving and mass-publicizing the writings of Armenian intellectuals of the past who cast doubt on the institution of the church. Articles in the 1940 Armenian *Anastvats*, for instance, included excerpts from two Medieval Armenian authors, Vardan Aigektsi and Frik, who sowed seeds of atheism even though they did not reject god entirely. According to the respective authors of these articles, Aigektsi, in his books of parables based on folk tales, showed that “only stupid and naïve people feared god” and criticized the “oppression of the

³⁴ Osiecki, “Antireligious Propaganda in Soviet Armenia: *Azāt Yekeghetsi* and *Anastvats*,” 2.

³⁵ Ibid., 3. As historian Felix Corley has shown, there were indeed some contradictions within the Church itself. For instance, Corley comments on the corrupt Church leaders who received donations from the Armenian diaspora and used them for personal profit. There were also quarrels between church officials in Etchmiadzin (the spiritual center of the Armenian Church) and village priests who were provoked by the church officials’ attempts to exercise absolute control over the latter’s practices. See Corley, “The Armenian Church Under the Soviet Regime, Part I: The Leadership of Kevork,” *Religion, State and Society* 24, no. 1 (1996): 21–23.

³⁶ Osiecki, “Antireligious Propaganda,” 1. Osiecki comments that the visual medium of a journal allowed reaching the illiterate population through “comic strips, posters, [and] photographs” that offered negative, satirical depictions of clergy. Ibid., 3.

workers by the church and the feudals,” while Frik revolutionized Armenian poetry by writing about earthly matters and “turning against social inequality.”³⁷ State-sponsored atheist propaganda persisted in various forms until 1990 and impacted cultural production.

The state’s antireligious strategies did indeed result in social changes, to which church leaders responded differently from cultural workers who represented the Soviet state. The Armenian bishop Terenig Poladyan of Antilias, Lebanon, who visited Armenia in the mid-1940s and 1950s, regretfully observed: “Churches serve more often as depots for harvests or as clubs. Priests have disappeared and young people have lost all contact with those who a generation before constituted the soul and identity of the Armenian people.”³⁸ While Poladyan lamented the decline of the church, representatives of the state atheist apparatus celebrated it. For instance, the Soviet historian Konstantin Khudaverdyan hailed the success of scientific atheism: “Changes in the everyday life are reflected in the overcoming of many old religious beliefs and superstitions. Thanks to the antireligious work and the propaganda of scientific atheism, a significant part of the population, and, in the first place, youth, were drawn out of the influence of the church.”³⁹ Soviet musicologists also advocated for the removal of religious influence from musical culture, suggesting that such culture could be built solely on peasant folk elements.⁴⁰ “The clergy,” as Soviet music historian Semen

³⁷ R. Vart, “Vardan Aigektsi i ego pritchi” (Vardan Aigektsi and his parables), *Bezbozhnik* 6 (1940): 12–14; F. Megrezhan, “Frik,” *Bezbozhnik* 7–8 (1940): 15–17.

³⁸ Corley, “The Armenian Church Under the Soviet Regime,” 44.

³⁹ Khudaverdyan, *Kul'turnaia revoliutsiia v sovetskoi Armenii* (The cultural revolution in Soviet Armenia) (Yerevan: Izdatel'stvo AN Armyanskoi SSR, 1966), 236. “Izmeneniia v bytu otrazilis' i v preodolenii mnogikh starykh religioznykh verovanii i sueverii. Blagodaria antireligioznoi rabote, propaganda nauchnogo ateizma, znachitel'naia chast' naseleniia, i v pervuiu ochered' molodezh', byla vyvedena iz-pod vliianiia tserkvi.”

⁴⁰ The Soviet musicologist Nelli Shakhnazarova, for instance, falsely claimed that the Armenian composer Komitas—the so-called father of Armenian classical music, who wrote a liturgy and advocated for the position that church music represented the purest form of national culture—only relied on folk peasant tradition in his music. Shakhnazarova, *Muzyka vostoka i muzyka zapada: tipy muzyka'nogo professionalizma* (The music of the east and the music of the west: types of musical professionalism) (Moscow: SK, 1983), 48. A similar phenomenon occurred in the debates about musical traditions in

Ginzburg wrote, “created the legend as if the best times of Armenian history were related to the dominion of the church.”⁴¹ According to Ginzburg, such “clerical-restorative streams” were “inimical to the progressive growth of national art.”⁴² To distance culture from the influence of the Church, Soviet officials offered a new secular formula of Armenian national identity.⁴³ The physical and discursive excision of pre-Soviet spirituality thus paved the way for the production of new ideological substance. Because Christianity had been part of Armenian identity since 301 AD, the new ideology that could replace it had to be at least as enduring. Representing the most elite and highest of cultural achievements within the overarching cultural revolution, the national opera project became a viable supplanter of spirituality as it constructed identity on the basis of the people’s putative ethnic boundedness, a basis that was more ancient than Armenia’s Christian roots.

To analyze the role of music in carrying out ideological goals, I adopt Robert Hatten’s theorization of musical topics and topical troping.⁴⁴ “A topic,” as Hatten defines it, “is a familiar style

Central Asia, where musicologists juxtaposed the religious mullah singing with the Caucasian bard tradition. See Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda*, 53.

⁴¹ Semen Ginzburg, *Iz istorii muzykal’nykh svyazei narodov SSSR* (From the history of musical connections of the USSR peoples) (Leningrad & Moscow: Sovetskii Kompozitor, 1972), 34. Ginzburg referred to the detrimental role of the Armenian diaspora because it prevented cultural modernization by proposing “liturgical singing as the basis for the development of Armenian music.” According to him, any attempts to preserve church monophony and the ancient *khaz* notation system contributed to advancing “clericalism,” which represented the “embodiment of the ideology of governing classes.” Ginzburg, 99.

⁴² Ibid. “Rukovodstvuiushchuiu rol’ v armianskom kul’turnom dvizhenii stremilos’ zakhvatit’ dukhovenstvo, sozdavshee legendu, budto luchshie vremena v istorii Armenii byli svyazany s vladychestvom tserkvi. [...] V kachestve osnovy razvitiia armianskoi muzyki vydvigali tserkovnoe penie, chto pokazyvaet suchchestvovanie ochen’ sil’noi klerikal’no-restavratorskoi strui vrazhdebnoi progressivnomu rostu natsional’nogo iskusstva.”

⁴³ Under the Imperial Russian rule, which promoted the doctrine of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality,” the Christian faith of Armenians presented a favorable, integrational element. Even though Armenian Christianity differed from Orthodoxy, it nonetheless provided a unifying force which was absent in the case of Russia’s Islamic colonial subjects in Central Asia. Under the new atheist regime, universal culture replaced Christianity as the unifying force.

⁴⁴ See Robert S. Hatten, “The Troping of Topics in Mozart’s Instrumental Works,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka, 514–33 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) and Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017).

type with easily recognizable musical features;⁴⁵ topical troping, in turn, is the combination of and interrelation between several topics that give rise to “a more radical mixing of established correlations” and produce “an emergent, and often rather unstable or indeterminate, meaning.”⁴⁶ Attending to musical topics reveals moments of disjuncture between what operas communicated to pass censorship and what they conveyed to an insider audience. In several instances, as I will demonstrate, what looks censor-proof on the pages of the score produces an aural effect that subverts the secularization agenda. Although Hatten uses this approach to analyze Western-European music of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many of the topics that he identifies are present in the operas that I examine. This is the case because social practices associated with topics such as fanfare, *tempesta*, or ecclesiastical, among others, are not unique to the Western-European context. The presence of topics also reflects the fact that composers of operas in Soviet republics treated Russian nineteenth-century operas, which themselves were based on European precedents, as their models. As Marina Frolova-Walker insightfully unpacks, the Soviet composers’ reliance on operas by *kuchka* composers as their models, coupled with the official requirement to compose music that is “national in form,” created a problematic encounter with the issue of Orientalism.⁴⁷ Well aware of the colonial connotations of Orientalism, Soviet musicology redefined this notion by replacing “Orient” with “Vostok” (East) and, as I argue, Orientalism with the ethnographic style—a style that undermined particularity and instead essentialized folk idioms transforming them into ready-made, amenable building blocks for new national art.

⁴⁵ Hatten, “The Troping of Topics,” 514.

⁴⁶ Hatten, “On Metaphor and Syntactic Troping in Music,” in *Music Semiotics: A Network of Significations*, ed. Esti Sheinberg (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 91.

⁴⁷ Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). Frolova-Walker states: “Insofar as any non-Western music is poured into the moulds of Western institutions (whether opera houses, orchestras, harmony or equal temperament), it will have great trouble escaping the Orientalist legacy, whether the impulse is indigenous (as in the cases of Turkey and pre-’30s Azerbaijan) or external (as in the Stalin-era Caucasian and central Asian republics).” Ibid., 338.

The Secular Discourse around *Anush*

In 1908, Tigranyan began working on his first opera, *Anush*, in Tiflis. A group of amateur musicians, gathered by the composer, premiered the work in Alexandropol in 1912. The libretto is based on Hovhannes Tumanyan's (1869–1923) eponymous poem that portrays peasant life in a nineteenth-century Armenian village. Since the Soviet revival of *Anush* on March 27, 1935, the opera became a staple in the Yerevan Opera Theatre's repertoire.⁴⁸ In Act I, a young girl, Anush, hears the song of a shepherd named Saro; enchanted by this song, Anush falls in love. The two protagonists meet and confess their feelings for each other. In Act II, Anush and her friends participate in a fortune-telling ritual that takes place as part of the Ascension Day celebrations. During the fortune-telling, Anush learns that her love affair will end tragically. In Act III, Saro defeats Anush's brother Mossy in a mock wrestling match, leaving Mossy infuriated because according to the local customs friends cannot humiliate each other by defeat in front of the entire village. In Act IV, Anush and Saro abandon the village to live in the mountains. Seeking revenge for his and his sister's honor, Mossy kills Saro. In the final "mad scene," the devastated Anush becomes delirious and plunges to her death in the river. Ascension Day occupies a central role in the libretto: it is during this religious holiday that Anush learns about her doomed love through the fortune-telling ritual. The prominence of Ascension Day—unproblematic within the pre-revolutionary context in which the opera was written—presented an obstacle for the opera's circulation in the Soviet atheist world.

To make *Anush* ideologically correct, Soviet music critics appropriated the opera in two ways. First, they stressed that Tigranyan was able to compose the opera because he was exposed to the Russian operatic tradition. They did so in order to emphasize that Armenians are indebted to Russia not only for political liberation but also for their cultural modernization. Second, in their

⁴⁸ In 1955 the theater celebrated the 500th staging of the opera. "Opera liubimaia narodom: 500-e predstavlenie op'ery 'Anush'" (The opera beloved by people: the 500th performance of *Anush*), *Kommunist* (March 11, 1955). NAA, 1260 1, no. 162.

publications about *Anush*, critics generated a secular discourse in order to undermine or disguise religious references. The latter strategy was implemented to ensure that *Anush* would fit the antireligious agenda.⁴⁹ However, as my analysis will demonstrate, both of the strategies for appropriating *Anush* succeeded only partially.

Armenia did not neatly fit the Soviet modernization narrative, according to which its backward culture was ennobled and enlightened by progressive Russian traditions. Prominent Armenian cultural figures had actively participated in promoting national culture since the resurgence of nationalism in the nineteenth century. Because at the time Western Armenia was governed by the Ottoman regime, many of these developments—such as the establishment of the first music periodical *Knar Haykakan* (“The Armenian Lyre”) in 1857 and the foundation of the Armenian Musical Society in 1862—took place in Constantinople and had nothing to do with the Russian-governed Eastern Armenia.⁵⁰ Significant at the turn of the century was the work of composer and ethnomusicologist Komitas (1869–1935), who collected and transcribed folk songs and liturgical music. Soviet music historians were certainly aware of this rich Armenian cultural heritage, yet constantly undermined it in order to emphasize “the grand progressive meaning of Armenia’s inclusion into Russia.”⁵¹ The author of the historical account of Armenian opera and ballet, Georgy Tigranov, claimed that “Russian musical culture, its foremost leaders, its richest traditions [...] have enriched Armenian musicians with new creative principles, new understanding of nationhood, and life truth.”⁵² Soviet musicologists discredited operas written by Armenian

⁴⁹ Jan Plamper has argued that critics’ interpretations of approved works were integral to Stalin’s censorship politics. See Plamper, “Abolishing Ambiguity: Soviet Censorship Practices in the 1930s,” *Russian Review* 60, no. 4 (2001): 526–44.

⁵⁰ The journal was renamed into *Knar Arevelyan* (The eastern lyre) in 1861.

⁵¹ Georgy Tigranov, *Opera i balet Armenii* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1966), 8. “Prisoedinenie Armenii k Rosii imelo gromadnoe progressivnoe znachenie.”

⁵² Ibid., 11. “Orgomnuiu polozhiet’ nuiu rol’ v formirovanii armianskoi muzykal’noi shkoly sygrala russkaia muzykal’naia kul’tura, ee peredovye deiateli, ee bogateishie traditsii. Oni obogashchali armianskikh muzykantov novymi tvorcheskimi printsipami, novym ponimaniem narodnosti i zhiznennoi

composers prior to *Anush*, such as Tigran Tchouhadjian's *Arshak II* (1868), as not representative of Armenian nationalism. Tchouhadjian, who received music education in Milan, was proclaimed by contemporaries *il Verdi Armeno*, "the Armenian Verdi." Because he lived in Constantinople and was not exposed to the "realist principles and achievements of Russian historic operas," his music was not truly national according to Soviet musicologists.⁵³ Tigranyan, on the other hand, was educated in Tiflis—then administrative and cultural center of the Russian-occupied Caucasus—and was exposed to the "progressive ideal-artistic principles, deep liveliness, and folkness" of Russian opera classics.⁵⁴ The influence of Russian masters on Tigranyan's music allowed Soviet music historiography to proclaim *Anush* the first truly national Armenian opera.

While statements on the immense benefits that Armenians gained during Imperial Russian rule were ubiquitous, Soviet music historians had to distinguish and emphasize the benefits of the communist rule. One author, for instance, stated that in addition to contributing to political and economic development, Sovietization of Armenia enabled a "great upheaval" in "spiritual practices and in the realm of culture."⁵⁵ Music history textbooks abounded with claims that the creation of Armenian opera was indebted to Sovietization: "While in the previous epoch the operatic form was only a subject of dreams for Armenian composers, in Soviet times opera repeatedly materializes into

pravdy." Another critic used almost the same language as Tigranov: "Armenian musical art and musicology, to a large degree, owe their successes to the Russian music culture with its high artistic traditions and glorious music institutions." Khristofor Kushnarev, *Voprosy istorii i teorii armianskoi monodicheskoi muzyki* (Questions of history and theory of Armenian monodic music) (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe muzykal'noe izdatel'stvo, 1958), 291. "Esli v predydushchuiu epokhu forma opery byla lish' predmetom mechtanii armian-kompozitorov, v sovetskoe vremia ona neodnokratno pretvorიაetsia v zhizn', stanovitsia real'noi deistvitel'nost'iu."

⁵³ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁴ Tigranov, *Opera i balet*, 49. "Russkaia opernaia klassika s ee peredovimi ideino-khudozhestvennimi printsipami, s ee glubokoi zhiznennost'iu i narodnost'u."

⁵⁵ Khudaverdyan, *Kul'turnaia revoliutsiia*, 6. Other publications that stressed the benefits of Armenia's Sovietization include Ivan Tairian's *XI krasnaia armiia v bor'be za ustanovlenie i uprochnenie sovetskoi vlasti v Armenii* (The 19th army in the struggle for establishing and strengthening Soviet rule in Armenia) (Yerevan: Aistanyan, 1971) and Khudaverdyan's *Kul'turnye sviazi*.

life and becomes a real actuality.”⁵⁶ However, the inconvenient truth that *Annush*—the first national Armenian opera—was written before the Revolution meant that culture was already in place in pre-Soviet Armenia. To downplay this inconvenience, Soviet critics emphasized the amateur quality of the performance during the 1912 premiere of *Annush* in Alexandropol. They contrasted it with the “truly professional” 1935 production at the Yerevan Opera Theatre, which was made possible thanks to the new resources enabled by the Soviet rule. To the same end, critics pointed out that the opera comprised a compilation of songs that lacked symphonic development; they also stressed that Tigranyan’s initially poor orchestration was significantly improved for the opera’s Soviet performance. The conflicting remarks on the artistic merit of *Annush*, which simultaneously praised its pioneering status as the first national opera and criticized it as not fully professional, highlight the shift in the official stance on the Soviet Union’s Imperial heritage. While in the early years of Soviet rule, the Bolsheviks condemned the so-called great Russian chauvinism and tsarist oppression, Stalin’s policies recovered Russia’s reputation and reinstated it as the greatest and most progressive among the Soviet republics.

In addition to generating commentary that emphasized advantages of Armenia’s affiliation with Soviet (now synonymous with Russian) culture, Soviet critics responsible for marketing *Annush* developed a secular discourse around the libretto in order to advance antireligious propaganda. One of their prevalent secularization strategies was the relegation of religion to the outmoded past. This strategy is evident in a propaganda poster from 1933, “The Young Godless,” which associates religion with rural backwardness and unsophisticated folk culture.⁵⁷ The poster, reproduced in

⁵⁶ Kushnarev, *Voprosy istorii i teorii*, 293. “Svoimi uspekhami armianskoe muzykal’noe iskusstvo i armianskoe muzykoznanie v bol’shoi mere obiazany russkoi muzykal’noi kul’ture s ee vysokimi tvorcheskimi traditsiiami i slavnymi muzykal’nymi uchrezhdeniiami.”

⁵⁷ Samuil Adlivankin, “Tunie bezbozhniki” (The young godless) (Khudozhestvennoe izdatel’skoe aktsionerhoe obshchestvo AKhR, 1933). From the Allan Chasanoff Collection, New York, 2018, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

Figure 2, portrays cheerful atheist *pionery* tearing down icons from the walls of a village house. The hunched-over man's concerned face and his wife's beseeching hand gesture testify to the violent nature of the pioneers' intrusion. Elements of everyday village life, including the ornamented curtain



Figure 2. Samuil Adlivankin, “The Young Godless” (1933).

rods, embroidered runners, the chime clock, and Christian icons, appear as antiquated relics that must give way to the shiny modern technology—the phonograph. The clashing identities and attitudes of the villagers and pioneers exemplify the substitutional policies of the state: the archaic past must give way to the progressive future. The disdainful removal of the icons parallels the state’s emphasis on “overcoming religious relics” in villages as part of the modernization process.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Ivan Zhivogliad, *Selo, religiia, ateizm: sekulyarizatsiia sel'skogo naseleniia v usloviakh nauchno-tekhnicheskogo progressa na etape razvitoogo sotsializma* (Village, religion, atheism: secularization of the village population in the conditions of scientific-technological progress at the stage of developed socialism) (Almaty: Kazakhstan, 1985), 3.

Commentators of *Anush* evaluated sacred-music elements in the opera through the archaic-versus-progressive binary lens present in the poster. One Soviet ethnomusicologist, for instance, noted that “the customs and rituals, music and songs, related to the church component of traditional cults have moved away into the past.”⁵⁹ Critics also claimed that the tragic ending of the plot embodied the backwardness of village traditions:

Anush presents a portrait of the old peasant life [with] its lack of women’s rights in the miserable and dark old village.⁶⁰

In Tumanian’s poem, the pitiful life of Armenian village of the past is painted with a rich palette and grand artistic power. The wretched Anush and Saro become victims of the village’s everyday existence and morals, ignorance and darkness, old traditions.⁶¹

All of these comments over-emphasize the outmodedness of village life to juxtapose it with the positive changes of the new industrialized progressive city life brought forth by Communism.

Soviet critics capitalized on the blurred distinction between religious and pagan ritual in *Anush*. The co-presence of Ascension Day and fortune-telling in the plot of *Anush* illustrates that in Armenia, as in many nations that converted from paganism to Christianity, religious holiday celebrations were often overlaid with rituals from the pagan past. Historically, even though the Armenian Apostolic Church dissociated itself from pagan customs, the two realms continued to be interlinked in social practice. In various instances of media coverage—including magazine articles and fabricated reviews of the opera—commentators conflated the Ascension celebration with fortune-telling in order to portray both as elements of old rural life. The published score for the

⁵⁹ Izalii Zemtsovskii, *Narodnaia muzyka SSSR i sovremennost’* (Folk music of the USSR and modernity) (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1982), 10. “Otoshli v proshloe obychai i obriady, muzyka i pesni, sviazannye s tserkovnym komponentom traditsionnykh kul’tov.”

⁶⁰ Georgy Tigranov, *Gosudarstvennyi teatr opery i baleta Armenii im. A. A. Spendiarova* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1939), xiii. “Kartina starogo krest’ianskogo byta. Bespravie zhenshchiny, ubogaia i temnaia zhizn’ staroi derevni.”

⁶¹ Armen Tigranyan, *Anush* (Yerevan: Airapet, 1954), preface by Al. Tatevosyan. “Poema Ov. Tumaniana, v kotoroi bogatymi kraskami i s bol’shoi khudozhestvennoi siloi izobrazhena gor’kaia zhizn’ armianskoi derevni proshlogo, ee byt i navy, nevezhestvo i mrak, starye obychai, nevinnyimi zhertvami kotorykh delaiutsia neschasnyie bliublennye—Anush i Saro.”

premiere of *Anush* during the 1939 Moscow cultural *dekada* featured a preface in which the author emphasized the naïve and superstitious nature of customs associated with Ascension Day and fortune-telling:

The old, outdated, and dead prejudices and superstitions, the customs, the so-called ‘adat,’ hold the people in a firm grip and prevent them from living a full, happy life. The lives of Anush and her beloved Saro are also ruined because of the ‘adat.’⁶²

The commentator’s transliteration and repetition of the Armenian word “adat” (custom or tradition) produce a strategic “othering” of the past. “Adat,” here, functions as a code for all things old: social customs, superstitions, and, by extension, Christianity. The secular discourse around *Anush* thus appropriated Tigranyan’s pre-Soviet opera to create a sacred void, which it then filled with inflated rhetoric of modernization.⁶³

Even though Tigranyan edited the score of *Anush* for its premiere at the Yerevan Opera Theatre in 1935, he retained “Hambartsum iala” as a returning chorus that unifies the opera both structurally and symbolically. “Hambartsum iala” is a ritual song commemorating the Ascension Day (“Hambartsum” is the Armenian word for Ascension, while “iala” is the name for a circular ritual song-dance). Strikingly, throughout the entire chorus, the repeated phrase “Hambartsum iala” is not fully translated to Russian in the libretto that was circulated during the opera’s performance in the 1939 Moscow *dekada*. The Russian text simply states “Hambartsum has come,” preserving the word “Hambartsum” in Armenian. This strategic move was carried out by the editors of the score to avoid issues with the Russian-speaking censors. According to Tigranyan, when he decided to write the opera, the melody for the chorus was the first thing he composed.

⁶² Armen Tigranyan, *Anush* (Moscow & Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe muzykal’noe izdatel’stvo, 1939), 6. Preface by A. Shaverdyan.

⁶³ Among other things, such rhetoric often emphasized the alleged liberation of women by the communist regime. On the pages of *Kommunist*, in what appears to be a fabricated review of the 1962 production of *Anush*, a female teacher from a village stated, “One can’t compare the fate of a contemporary Armenian woman with the fate of Anush.” “Ne sravnit’ sud’bu nyneshnei armianki s sud’boi Anush.” Accessed in “Anush—50-aia godovshchina,” 1260/1, no. 150.

The first iteration of “Hambartsum iala” in Act II features an ABAB structure, where A is akin to a stanza and the B refrain. The opening phrases of sections A and B are presented in Example 1. Before the chorus enters, an orchestral introduction juxtaposes B \flat -major and G-minor as competing tonal centers. This juxtaposition serves as the driving device in the tonal and dramatic role of the chorus. Although in section A each phrase ends on a G-minor chord, the absence of F \sharp s (the leading tone of G) confirms that G minor here functions as a vi chord within the overall B \flat -major tonic. By contrast, each phrase in the refrain features an authentic cadence in G minor, which confirms the modulation to the relative minor. A brief codetta at the end of the chorus reaffirms the modulation to G minor with a dramatic cadence that features an ascending line in the soprano (D–E \flat –F \sharp –G) and foreshadows the tragic fate of Anush and Saro. The reappearance of the “Hambartsum iala” chorus as a leitmotif emphasizes the Ascension celebrations as a decisive force in the outcome of the drama.

As illustrated in the formal diagram in Figure 3, various fragments of the chorus are interlaced with solo singing in a responsorial manner before, during, and after the fortune-telling scene. Once Anush’s tragic fate is predicted, the “Hambartsum iala” refrain is manifested in transformed versions (reh. 60, 68, and 70) that all feature slower tempi, a new 3/4 meter signature, and new tonal contexts, F-sharp minor and B minor. Through the tonal departure from the initial B \flat -major/G-minor profile of the chorus to its statements in exclusively sharp minor keys, as well as through the effect of rhythmic augmentation, Tigranyan transforms the theme’s initially joyful, nonchalant quality into one of gravitas and despair. “Hambartsum iala” is stated again in its tragic

Soprano
 Ам - бар-цум на - стал, к нам при-шел в цве-тах, го - ры, лес и дол все в жи-вых ков - рах.

Alto
 Ам - бар-цум на - стал, к нам при-шел в цве - тах, го - ры, лес и дол все в жи-вых ков - рах.

Tenor
 Ам - бар-цум на - стал, к нам при-шел в цве - тах, го - ры, лес и дол все в жи-вых ков - рах.

Bass
 Ам - бар-цум на - стал, к нам при-шел в цве - тах, го - ры, лес и дол все в жи-вых ков - рах.

Piano

a) the opening of the stanza (section A), reh. 3+18.

Soprano
 Ам - бар-цум яй - ла, яй - ла джан яй - ла, свет - лый день яй - ла, яй - ла джан яй - ла.

Alto
 Ам - бар-цум яй - ла, яй - ла джан яй - ла, свет - лый день яй - ла, яй - ла джан яй - ла.

Tenor
 Ам - бар-цум яй - ла, яй - ла джан яй - ла, свет - лый день яй - ла, яй - ла джан яй - ла.

Bass
 Ам - бар-цум яй - ла, яй - ла джан яй - ла, свет - лый день яй - ла, яй - ла джан яй - ла.

Piano

b) the opening of the refrain (section B), reh. 4.

Example 1. The “Hambartsum iala” chorus in Tigranyan’s *Amush*, Act II, Scene 1.

Act	Act II									Act IV
Scene	Ascension celebrations		Fortune-telling ritual, <i>dzhban-gyulum</i>				Chorus following the fortune-telling			Duet of Anush and Saro
Reh. number	[1–6]	[30]+9	[44–45]	[46]+2	[47]+2	[48]+11	[60]	[68]	[70]	[21]
Thematic material	intro–A–B–A–B–codetta	B	variation, then B	B altered	B altered	B	B altered	B altered		B
Key area	BbM–Gm	BbM–Gm	Gm, then BbM–Gm	BbM	BbM	BbM–Gm	F#m	Bm	Bm over pedal ^5	Bm
Meter	6/8						3/4			
Tempo marking	<i>Allegretto</i>						<i>Andante</i>	<i>Andantino</i>	<i>Andante</i>	<i>Adagio</i>

Figure 3. “Hambartsum iala” in Acts II and IV of Tigranyan’s *Anush*.

instantiation in Act IV. Here, it highlights another critical moment in the plot: Anush and Saro’s decision to flee the village into the mountains.

The repeated iterations of “Hambartsum iala” punctuate the soundscape of Act II and return in Act IV. The refrain of the chorus functions as a mnemonic device which continuously points at the inextricable connection between the characters’ fates and their socio-cultural belonging. The role of the chorus in *Anush* is reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche’s interpretation of chorus in Greek drama. Following Nietzsche, the chorus transcends the role of an “ideal spectator” and embodies the tragedy of the drama. In his words, “the chorus is a living wall against the onslaught of reality because a truer, more real, more complete image of existence is presented by the chorus of satyrs than by cultured man who generally thinks of himself as the only reality.”⁶⁴ Even though the “cultured men” in the face of the Soviet critics attempted to align *Anush* with the state’s atheist agenda—through ascribing both religious rituals and pagan customs to relics of the past—the reappearance of the chorus allows the opera to sonically mark the persistence of the past as an integral, ineradicable marker of collective national identity. Thus, the sonic materiality of the opera

⁶⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 41.

troubled the secular discourse that eschewed religious reference in order to produce the sacred void. In sum, the invented Soviet music historiography, in which Armenian music manifested progress brought forth by Russia, contradicts and negates the rich cultural heritage that Armenians developed outside of their encounter with Russia. Similarly, the secular discourse in the form of commentary on *Anush*, clashed with the musical and dramatic content of the opera.

The Politics of the Sacred Void in *Davit Bek*

Unlike the critics' retrospective discursive creation of the sacred void in Tigranyan's pre-revolutionary *Anush*, the antireligious agenda of the Soviet state directly informed the music and libretto of his second opera, *Davit Bek*, written immediately after World War II. With its historical heroic-patriotic plot, *Davit Bek* embodied a true Soviet-era national opera. The libretto, written by the composer himself, is based on an eponymous novel by nineteenth-century Armenian writer Raffi (pen name of Hakob Melik-Hakobyan, 1835–88). Raffi wrote *Davit Bek* in 1882, amidst the continued negotiations of control over Armenian lands. This historical novel partook in and contributed to the rise of national self-consciousness by recreating the events of Armenian liberation from Persian subjugation in the early 1720s. Tigranyan's choice of historical subject matter reveals the cultural politics of socialist realism: art was to educate masses about history, in a version determined by the Party. In order to relate this plot to the contemporary political scene, that of the immediate aftermath of World War II, Tigranyan promoted the opera as a heroic national-patriotic drama and connected it with the "great struggle of the heroic Red Army and Soviet peoples against the fascist enslavers."⁶⁵ Critics too participated in boosting the relevance of the opera. One

⁶⁵ Tigranyan, "Szhatoe opisaniie libretto opery *Davit Bek*" (Abridged summary of the *Davit Bek* libretto), NAA, 1260 1, no. 3, "Davit Bek." "V protsesse raboty eta opera otkliknulas' v moem serdtse s velikoi bor'boi geroicheskoi krasnoi armii i sovetskikh narodov protiv fashistskikh porabotitelei."

commentator, for instance, noted on the pages of *Kommunist*: “Service to the fatherland, friendship of the peoples, heroic deeds in the name of the fatherland, manliness and love of freedom—all of these are dear to and understood by Soviet people, the builders of the most advanced and democratic human society in history.”⁶⁶ Soviet musicologists specifically praised Tigranyan’s use of mass scenes with choruses and ensembles that exemplified the “civil foundation and heroism” of Armenians in their struggle for liberation.⁶⁷

The divergences between the many archival drafts of the libretto and the four extant complete versions of the opera reveal the difficulty of navigating the political tensions around its historical plot. Tigranyan began writing the music for *Davit Bek* after having composed several numbers for a play based on Raffi’s eponymous novel in 1942.⁶⁸ He planned to complete the opera by 1945 in order to have it performed as part of the celebrations dedicated to the twenty-fifth anniversary of Soviet rule in Armenia. Due to bureaucratic complications related to the composer’s quarrels with the opera theater’s administration, *Davit Bek* was not premiered until 1950, when Tigranyan was already dead. The opera’s production was marketed as commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Soviet Armenia, not the twenty-fifth as the composer had initially planned.⁶⁹ The first authorial version is Tigranyan’s own piano vocal score, which was nearly completed by the time he died in 1950. The second version is the orchestrated edition prepared by Leon Khodzha-Einatov for the opera’s premiere in Yerevan in 1950.⁷⁰ The third version was produced and published for the 1956 production of the opera at the *dekada* of Armenian culture in Moscow; this version was edited

⁶⁶ Georgy Tigranov in *Kommunist* (December 17, 1950). NAA, 1260 1, no. 156. “Opera *Davit Bek* i v nashi dni zvuchit aktual’no. Sluzhenie Rodine, druzhba narodov, geroicheskie podvigi vo imia Otchizny, muzhestvo i svobodoliubie, vospetye v opere, vse eto blizko i poniatno sovetskim liudiam—stroiteliam samogo peredovogo i demokratcheskogo v istorii chelovechestva obschestva.” NAA, 1260 1, no. 156.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal’nyi teatr*, vol. 2 (Yerevan: Airapet, 1960), 44.

⁶⁹ In Soviet times, the opera was produced again in 1956, 1974, and 1980.

⁷⁰ There are two films that narrate the story of Davit Bek, one from 1944 and one from 1978. The latter is titled *Star of Hope* and is a collaboration between Armenfilm and Mosfilm.

by Tigranyan's son, Vartan Tigranyan, and the dramaturg and director of the Copyright Committee, Arshaluis Ter-Ovnanyan, who was listed as the libretto's co-author. In the fourth version, published in 1981, some of the dance scenes not composed by Tigranyan, which were added for the *dekada* production, were omitted (this is the primary version I analyze below). Based on archival evidence, it is not possible to determine whether the changes between Tigranyan's initial libretto and the 1981 score were implemented by the composer himself or by Ter-Ovnanyan. Nonetheless, the divergences indicate that *Davit Bek* contributed to the secularization project. Through a careful comparison of the many different versions of *Davit Bek*, I will demonstrate that the politics of the sacred void in this opera extend beyond the secularization project. In addition to filling the void with national forms, the libretto filled it with dramatis personae who misrepresented historical facts for political purposes. The following analysis proceeds in three stages: it first traces the gradual emergence of a sacred void throughout the revisions of the opera; it then points out the elements intended to take the place of the Christian god; lastly, it addresses the opera's focus on the new unifying force, The Friendship of the Peoples.

The narrative of *Davit Bek* begins in 1722 when amidst the decline of the Persian Safavid Dynasty, Eastern Armenians regained hope for liberation from the Persians. Act I of the opera introduces an Armenian melik (a land ruler from a noble class) who betrayed his people and entered service to the Persian Aslamaz-Kuli-Khan (to whom he gave away his own daughter Shushan). In Act II, another Armenian melik, Stepanos Shaumyan, arrives at the palace of Georgian King Vakhtang VI in order to invite Davit Bek—an Armenian military commander who served King Vakhtang—to lead Armenian liberation. Davit agrees and, crucially, states that Shaumyan must also seek Russian help if he wants victory. In Act III, Scene 1, set at the foothills of the Armenian Tatev Monastery, the long-awaited Russian messenger arrives and reads Peter the Great's letter of promise of Russian help. In Scene 2, Armenians, Georgians, and Russians begin a lavish feast to honor

Russia and to celebrate the friendship between Armenian, Georgian, and Russian peoples. In Scene 3, Shaumyan is reunited with his love Shushan at the Armenian Fortress of Zevu that is occupied by Persians; together they plot setting Zevu on fire and liberating the fortress. Act IV begins with a song of an Armenian soldier who laments Armenia's sorrowful state of affairs, continues with Davit Bek's aria that reignites hope in liberation, and concludes with an elaborate chorus that celebrates the Armenian people's liberation of Zevu from the Persians.

Tigranyan's initial libretto preserved the historical religious content from Raffi's novel, whereas the later versions eschewed it. Originally, Act III of the opera closely followed the events that take place in the novel's Part III, Chapter 5. Here, Raffi describes the gathering of the Armenian people at the Monastery of Tatev to participate in the liturgy in honor of Saint Vardan Mamikonyan. This religious scene leads to the blessing of Davit Bek and culminates in a ceremony during which Davit gives an oath to free the Armenian people. In the preserved complete libretto from 1946, Act III, Scene 1, narrates these events:

The orchestral prelude to this scene alternates between a church theme and the theme of Davit Bek. The curtains rise accompanied by the quiet ringing of bells. [...] Liturgy. Praying people gradually fill the church. There is a growing agitation around the monastery [...] As the liturgy ends, more and more armed people enter the church territory. The meliks, under the leadership of Shaumyan, kneel and, unsheathing their swords, pray for the victory of the Armenian army [...] The mighty ringing of the legendary Tatev bell resounds [...] The church gates open and a prayer service for granting of liberty begins. The bell and the cannonade quiet down as night descends [...] In the morning, in preparation for meeting the nation's beloved hero [Davit Bek], the bells ring, fanfares resound, and the march "The Native Country" is being heard. The clergymen walk to meet Davit Bek. The people guided by the clergy vow faith to the fatherland and to the continued fight for liberation. The clergymen take out relics and gems out of the monastery; the cross and the sword of Vardan Mamikonyan are placed on the table. After the oath ceremony, Davit Bek and the clergy enter the church.⁷¹

⁷¹ NAA, 1260 1, no. 178. This version states that Tigranyan began the libretto in 1946. The next extant version appears in document no. 179, the year of which is not indicated. The Russian translation of the text suggests that it appeared after the 1946 libretto.

From Tigranyan's mention of a church theme to his detailed description of the sequence of religious rituals, it is evident that his opera foregrounded faith and religion as pivotal practices in the eighteenth-century historical events. However, already in the next (undated) draft of Act III, clergymen are absent from the character list, which now shows the masses participating in the opera. Additions to the character list included new groups such as "people, rebels, Armenian and Persian armies, leaders, Armenian meliks, Georgian princes, courtiers, entourage, guards."⁷² This version also transferred the location of the scene from Tatev Monastery to the "square in front of the Armenian principedom."⁷³ In the versions of the opera published in 1956 and 1981, the order of events in the 1946 libretto is altered. Scene 1 begins with a confrontation between Santur (an Armenian peasant) and Tanuter (the servant of the betrayer-melik) over striking the Tatev bell to gather Armenian people.⁷⁴ Upon capturing Tanuter, the powerful ringing of the bell is followed by a chorus of Armenian people: "Let the ringing of the bells resound, / So that my people, young and old, rise up, / So that the abhorrent Khan does not rule our nation. / Let all gather and protect our native land."⁷⁵ Shaumyan sings praises to Davit Bek, for whom the people are anxiously waiting. Davit appears and promises to lead them in their fight for liberation. In his aria, "Oh, my native country," he makes another promise: "Soon from the mighty Russian Tsar / We will receive the

⁷² NAA 1260 1, no. 179. In the final version of Act IV another religious reference was removed: the prayer of Shushanik, who was imprisoned by the Persian khan at the Fortress of Zevu.

⁷³ Ibid. The 1981 score, however, reinstates Tatev Monastery as the locale of the action. The temporary removal of Tatev may have been caused not only due to its Christian associations but also out of political precaution. It was in Tatev where the anti-Bolshevik Armenians declared the short-lived independent Republic of Mountainous Armenia in 1921.

⁷⁴ NAA, 1393 4, no. 178. Tigranyan explicated the significance of the bell: "According to the tradition, the large bell in Tatev was rung when the nation faced danger in order to call the people for defense. From here, the name of the area "zangezur"—from *zang* (bell), "zur" (in vain)—a vain sound; according to another version, "zangezor"—from mighty zor)—meaning a mighty bell." "Po predaniiu v Tateve imelsia bol'shoi kolokol, v kotoryi zangezursy zvonili v momenty opasnosti dlia strany, prizyvaia narod k oborone. Otsiuda i nazvanie mestnosti 'zangezur'—'zang' (kolokol), 'zur' (naprasno)—naprasnyi zvon; po drugoi versii, zangezor ('zor', moshchnyi), to est' moshchnyi kolokol."

⁷⁵ Tigranyan, *Davit Bek* (Yerevan: Sovetakan Grokh, 1981), 167.

news about assistance.”⁷⁶ These lines foreshadow the increasing significance placed on Russia in the following scenes of the opera.

Within Act III, the number titled “The Oath” presents the most striking instance of erasure in this score: the character who blesses Davit and grants him Saint Vardan’s sword remains unnamed.⁷⁷ Raffi’s novel specifies the historical figure who performed these rituals: “Father Nerses solemnly sanctified the cross, the Gospel, and the swords of the princes and meliks that were laid on the coffin of Vardan.”⁷⁸ The published score literally creates a sacred void by removing the name of Archbishop Nerses. Tigranyan’s music, however, fills this void. As shown in Example 2, in the orchestral transition leading to Nerses’s words, the shift to a block-chord texture and the tempo marking *Moderato maestoso* establish the solemn tone of the ecclesiastical style. Archbishop Nerses’s words are set to a melody that revolves around two main pitches—BH and F—in a manner of a final and confinal recitation tones. Furthermore, when he sings, the orchestra remains silent, only punctuating the ends of his lines with block chords. The predominantly unaccompanied singing thus resonates with Armenian church monophony. Although Tigranyan does not quote any specific passage from Armenian liturgical singing, the explicitly liturgical features that he employs serve as signifiers for the clergyman’s presence even to a listener who is not aware of the religious context described in the 1946 libretto.⁷⁹ While the text of the score erases the church leader’s name, his aural presence remains intact and subverts the atheist apparatus’s censorship control. This paradox is most likely a result of the editors’ attempt to quickly “fix” the score so that it can be approved by

⁷⁶ Ibid., 23–24.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 179–80.

⁷⁸ Raffi, *Davit Bek* (Yerevan: Sovetakan Grokh, 1987), 197.

⁷⁹ It would be invaluable to gain insight into the performance practice of this scene to examine whether the singer wears a clergyman’s attire. However, there are no accessible visual records of the historical production.

Вар-да на меч я те-бе да-рю, с то-

бой он прой-дет сквозь о-гонь в бо-ю, за стра-ну сво-ю.

Example 2. The ecclesiastical topic performed by an anonymous character in Tigranyan’s *Davit Bek*, “The Oath,” Act III, Scene 1, reh. 45–47.

censors. Immediately after the lines sung by the not-so-anonymous Archbishop Nerses, Davit Bek sings: “Since my native people will so, / I am happy to accept the sword of sacred freedom; / I vow to keep its honor high, high.”⁸⁰ Compare this with Raffi’s version of Davit’s response: “I am sure that the Armenian god will crown our deed with success because he has helped our fathers on many occasions.”⁸¹ Davit’s reliance on the spiritual authority of god in Raffi’s novel is corroborated by historical documents: many Armenian meliks and church leaders who were involved in the liberation movement of the 1720s appealed to the Christian god as their liberator. In a letter from 1723, Catholicos Nerses wrote to Peter the Great: “We put our hope first in God and second in Your

⁸⁰ Tigranyan, *Davit Bek*, 180–81.

⁸¹ Raffi, *Davit Bek*, 197.

Majesty.”⁸² It is evident that while Armenians were desperately waiting for Orthodox Russia’s military intervention, their faith in the Christian god took precedence over that of the secular authority of Peter the Great.

The absence of a reference to a god in the opera is telling. The opera, however, does not merely erase the name of god from the libretto, but also replaces it with “the Northern Eagle”—Peter the Great—as the only deliverer available to the Armenian people. Referring to the two-headed eagle on the Russian Empire’s coat of arms, “the Northern Eagle” is personified by Peter the Great. Although in the opera Peter does not make an appearance himself, his name is omnipresent. As shown in Example 3, the Tsar’s long-awaited messenger is announced by trumpets playing a cliché fanfare topic motive—first muted, then in full capacity with accompaniment provided by trombones that provide the bass line in the final six bars.

The musical score for Example 3 is written for a vocal part and three instrumental parts. The vocal part is for 'The head watchman' and includes the lyrics 'The messenger of Peter the Great is here!'. The instrumental parts are for 'Trbe con sord.' (trumpets), 'Timp.' (timpani), and 'Trbe senza sord.' (trumpets). The score is in 3/4 time, key of D major. The vocal line begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics. The instrumental parts feature fanfare motifs and a bass line in the final six bars. The score is marked 'Maestoso' and 'f' (forte).

Example 3. Peter the Great’s Messenger arrives as *dens ex machina* in Act III, reh. 82–84.

⁸² George A. Bournoutian, ed. and trans., *Armenians and Russia (1626–1796): A Documentary Record* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2001), 105.

The messenger, who descends upon Armenian people as a *deus ex machina*, declares that “the Sovereign of all Russia” has “received the letter from the Armenian princes asking for help against Persians, and has decided to come assist them.” To this, the Armenian chorus exults: “Greetings to the great Tsar! / To the Russian people glory eternal! / To the people friendly to us / Glory eternal, glory!”⁸³ This chorus is followed by a celebratory feast in honor of Russian’s friendship. While in the 1946 libretto this scene followed the oath ceremony and concluded with a celebration dedicated to Vardavar (the day of Saint Vardan), in all of the performed and published versions, the feast is stripped of religious connotations and focuses on praising Peter the Great and Russian people. During this secular celebration, amidst songs and dances, the messenger’s aria amplifies Russia’s role in liberating the Armenian people:

Soon, the Tsar of all Russia	Will reach the Caspian coast.
Will overcome the Persian and the Ottoman	And will breathe then
With a mighty strike!	The Armenian land,
With a victorious march	Under the Russian patronage
The courageous Russian troops	They will see the spring. ⁸⁴

In his response to the messenger, Davit remarks that only “the mighty and great Russian people” can save Armenians after Europeans failed to send their promised help.⁸⁵ The praises of Russia also appear in several earlier drafts of the opera to which a final scene, titled Apotheosis, is appended.⁸⁶ The chorus in this Apotheosis once again applauds Russia: “Glory eternal to the Russian nation, our friend!” The Apotheosis certainly echoes Stalin’s historical 1945 toast that praised Russian people’s role in the World War II victory: “I am drinking to the Russian people first, because in this war it earned everyone’s recognition as the leading force among all the peoples of the Soviet Union. [...]”

⁸³ Tigranyan, *Davit Bek*, 201–06.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 235–36.

⁸⁵ The 1946 libretto states that a majestic Russian theme follows in the orchestra. NAA, 1393 4, no. 179, 32.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

We thank the Russian people for this trust. To the health of the Russian people!’’⁸⁷ The Apotheosis did not make it into the published 1981 score. Yet the erasure of religious ritual in favor of a secular celebration, along with exaggeration of Peter’s significance in Armenia’s fate, nonetheless contribute to a broader secularization whereby faith in Russia replaces faith in god.

Curiously, the messenger of Peter the Great was not mentioned in Tigranyan’s 1940 initial cast list.⁸⁸ Whether Tigranyan was instructed to emphasize Russia’s importance and “friendliness,” or if he decided to do so on his own, remains unknown, but the intentions behind this addition were motivated politically.⁸⁹ First, the insertion of a Russian character is not surprising, given the surrounding rhetoric of crediting Russia with winning World War II. Second, the preparations for the premiere of *Davit Bek* were unfolding during the height of Stalin’s rule when Russian culture regained its dominant role.⁹⁰ While Raffi’s novel, similar to Tigranyan’s early libretto, does not mention Peter the Great’s messenger, this character has a historical precedent. In 1723, Ivan Karapet arrived in Armenia to deliver “Peter the Great’s Declaration to the Armenian People.”⁹¹ The declaration concludes with announcement of Russia’s advances into the Caspian and creates an expectation that the promised troops are on their way:

With God’s help, We shall soon be able to help the Armenians and rescue them from the Muslim yoke. If for some reason they cannot defend themselves or Our troops do not reach their lands, We invite them to come to the Caspian towns which are under our control. [...] The wording of this declaration is purposely vague so that if it falls into the hands of the Muslims, the Armenians shall not suffer and our plans are not revealed.⁹²

⁸⁷ Cited in Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, 306.

⁸⁸ NAA 1393 4, nos. 170–71. In no. 170, the messenger is not listed. In all versions beginning with no. 171 (which unfortunately is not dated), this character—bass baritone—is present.

⁸⁹ There is a possibility that these changes were implemented by Ter-Hovnavyan, who prepared the opera for performance after Tigranyan’s death in 1950.

⁹⁰ While Lenin’s cultural policies were geared toward eradicating Russian chauvinism, under Stalin’s rule, Russia’s reputation as culturally and politically superior was redeemed.

⁹¹ Bournoutian, *Armenians and Russia*, 110. The declaration is dated June 3, 1723.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 111.

The language of the declaration is purposefully indefinite: the Tsar hints that Armenians may have to fight on their own if Russian troops do not arrive on time; furthermore, the allusion to the “vagueness” of language, supposedly to keep the Russian-Armenian alliance secret, is telling of the Tsar’s double politics: he was certainly not willing to sacrifice his own advances and diplomatic relationships with Persians and Turks in order to help “fellow Christians.”

The 1723 declaration was a response to countless letters with requests and complaints of Armenians sent to the Tsar. In one of the final letters to Peter, from March of 1725, Katolikos Esayi and meliks of Karabakh wrote: “It has been three years that we are awaiting Your Majesty’s assistance. We are left without anyone. Our enemies, the Turks, the Persians, the Daghestanis, and others have surrounded us. [...] We have placed our hope in God and in Your Majesty’s benevolence.”⁹³ Ironically, this letter was sent after Peter’s death on January 28, 1725, the news of which had not yet reached Armenians. Thus, Peter died without ever sending the help promised in the 1723 declaration. The Soviet authors of the preface to the Russian translation of Raffi’s novel, published in 1987, misrepresent these facts: “Russia was liberating [Armenians] from the Turks.”⁹⁴

Raffi’s novel itself accurately captures Russia’s failure to fulfill its promises: “But to all of their offers and for all of their services, Armenians received only empty promises and advice to wait...”⁹⁵ Raffi further explains that Peter’s delay of sending troops was caused by his avoidance of entering a war with the Ottomans. In 1724, Peter agreed with the Turks to split territorial control: Russia would govern the eastern Transcaucasia, while the Ottomans the western (Armenia and Georgia). This agreement, reached in the Russo-Ottoman Treaty of June 13, 1724, left Armenians without Russian help. Upon Peter’s death in 1725, Russian troops withdrew from the Terek River

⁹³ Ibid., 129. “Armenians [of Karabakh] here complain that it has been eight months since I delivered the Tsar’s decree and no Russian army has arrived. [...] without the help, Armenians would have “to submit to the Turks.”

⁹⁴ Raffi, *Davit Bek*, 7.

⁹⁵ Bournoutian, *Armenians and Russia: Documents*, 172.

which allowed the Turks to overtake “fortresses in Yerevan, Nakhichevan, Ganja, and Georgia, as well as most of Iranian Azerbaijan.”⁹⁶ The promised “help” was fulfilled over a century later, when in 1828 Russia annexed Eastern Armenia, then governed by Persians. While Armenians appealed to Russia to rescue them from the Persians, they quickly became dissatisfied with the Russian rule and began to actively oppose it. Thus, Tigranyan’s very choice of this particular historical moment is ideological: it affirms that Russian rule in Armenia was desired by the Armenians themselves.

Tigranyan, well aware of the fact that Russian aid in liberation did not occur in eighteenth century, nonetheless puts the 1723 declaration, full of false promises, on center stage in the final version of the opera.⁹⁷ In working on this opera, Tigranyan could not have ignored the infamous 1948 Zhdanov decree “Muradeli’s Opera *The Great Friendship*,” which had enormous consequences for the musical life in the entire Soviet Union. This document targeted Muradeli’s opera *The Great Friendship*, which staged the struggle between Bolsheviks and the anti-Bolshevik Whites in Georgia in 1918–1920. The decree carried ramifications for many composers working in the center and peripheries alike, including Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, and Aram Khachaturyan. While it mainly attacked the opera’s presumably formalistic musical style, the decree also accused Muradeli of not relying on Russian operatic heritage:

In his desire to achieve a falsely conceived ‘originality,’ Muradeli ignored and disregarded the finest traditions and experience of classical opera, and particularly of Russian classical opera. The latter is distinguished for its rich intrinsic content, wealth and wide range of melody, artistry, refined and clear musical idiom—things that have made the Russian opera, which is

⁹⁶ Ibid. In 1735, Nader Shakh “forced the Turks out of” Karabakh and Siunik—the regions in which Armenian *meliks* maintained relative autonomy; he also arranged Russian troops’ “withdrawal from Transcaucasia,” which led to fifty years of Russian absence in the region.

⁹⁷ The opera also remained silent about the Russian Empire’s economic and political interests in the Caucasus. As Raffi noted in his novel, whereas before Peter’s rule, Russians protected Persian Armenians out of their interest in trade development, Peter recognized that Armenians could also assist Russia in its Eastern expansion. Moreover, Raffi pointed out that since Armenian merchants had connections with many of the influential leaders—in “Java, Sumatra, Philippines, Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, and Singapore”—Peter’s “eagle eye” saw Armenians as the “key to the East.” Raffi, *Davit Bek*, 170.

rooted in the life of the people, the best in the world, a genre loved and understood by wide sections of the people.⁹⁸

Aside from failing to emulate the great example set by Russian composers, Muradeli also offered an inaccurate musical representation of ethnic minorities. According to the decree, he did not incorporate “folk melodies, songs, tunes, and dance motives” to portray the diversity of Soviet peoples, in particular “the peoples of North Caucasus where the action of the opera is laid.”⁹⁹ Media coverage followed the decree in pointing out the flaws of *The Great Friendship*:

This opera contains serious political errors. The peoples of the North Caucasus (Lezghins and Ossetians) are presented as the progressive, bright, and revolutionary agents, and the music is packed with Oriental motives almost throughout. As for the Russian people, they are shown only as incidental participants in the events; [...] the music is almost entirely lacking in Russian intonations.¹⁰⁰

Muradeli’s imbalanced representation of Caucasian and Russian peoples contradicted Stalin’s ideology of The Friendship of the Peoples—a friendship in which the supposedly inferior peoples of the periphery were indebted to Russia because it delivered the non-Russian peoples from past misfortunes and united them under the Red torch.

Since the decree was released amidst Tigranyan’s work on *Davit Bek*, it could not have been overlooked by the composer and the editors who prepared the edition for the 1950 premiere. To secure the presence of *Davit Bek* on the operatic stage thus entailed demonstrating that the composer avoided the “deficiencies” of *The Great Friendship* and absorbed the lessons of the decree. Media commentators assisted in aligning Tigranyan’s opera with the demands of socialist realism.

⁹⁸ Decree of the Central Committee, CPSU(b), “Ob opere V. Muradeli *Velikaia Druzhiba*,” from August 26, 1946. Cited in *Decisions of the Central Committee, C.P.X.U.(B.) on Literature and Art (1946–1948)* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1951), 31–32. For a thorough historical account of the events leading to the 1948 decree and its significance see Ekaterina Vlasova, *1948 god v sovetskoi muzyke* (Moscow: Klassika, 2010).

⁹⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰⁰ Shepilov and Lebedev, “O nedostatkakh v razvitií sovetskoi muzyki” (On the shortcomings of the development of Soviet music), in *Tak eto bilo: Tikhon Khrennikov o vremeni i o sebe* (Thus it was: Tikhon Khrennikov on the epoch and himself). Cited in Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music*, 352.

One commentator, for instance, writing about the staging preparations of *Davit Bek* in 1950, noted that the opera was representative of “realist national music,” which the decree identified as “the only correct path for the future development of operatic art.”¹⁰¹ Another critic highlighted “the social significance, the realism of the characters, the true nationalism (*narodnost'*) of the musical language, and the affinity between Armenian ethnic art and the democratic traditions of Russian classical opera.”¹⁰² But in addition to successfully emulating socialist realism—which was Tigranyan’s response to the decree’s condemnation of stylistic formalism—he also had to grapple with weightier accusations of Muradeli’s inaccurate musical representation of Caucasian peoples.

The political flaws of *The Great Friendship* explain the two misrepresentations of historical reality present in *Davit Bek*: Russia’s role as deliverer and the alliance between Armenians, Georgians, and Russians. Unlike in Muradeli’s opera, in Tigranyan’s *Davit Bek* there are no negative Russian characters. The positive character, the Tsar’s messenger, receives ample attention, as addressed above. Negotiating the musical representation of the various peoples, Tigranyan dealt with the decree’s accusations of the false antagonism between Russians and Georgians and Ossetians set by Muradeli. Acknowledging any antagonism would imply that the Caucasus was forcefully integrated into the tsarist empire and then into the Soviet Union. In line with this purpose, Tigranyan imports the ideology of The Friendship into his opera that narrates pre-Soviet, eighteenth-century events. To stage the state-mandated gratitude to Russia, the opera introduces two crude contrivances: the forceful replacement of faith in God with faith in the Northern Eagle and the emphasis on Peter’s 1723 declaration which in reality offered nothing but unfulfilled promises.

¹⁰¹ A. Khandzhyan, *Kommunist* (October 12, 1950), NAA, 1250 1, no. 156. “Istoricheskoe postanovlenie TSK VKP(b) ob opere *Velikaia družba* opredelilo edinstvennyi vernyi put’ dal’neishego razvitiia opernogo iskusstva. Eto put’—realisticheskoi narodnoi muzyki.”

¹⁰² Georgy Tigranov in *Kommunist* (December 17, 1950). “Sotsial’naia znachimost’ soderzhaniia, iarkaia realistichnost’ obrazov, podlinnaia narodnost’ muzykal’nogo iazyka, blizost’ k armianskomu narodnomu tvorchestvu i demokraticeskim traditsiiam russkoi klassicheskoi opery.”

Collaboration and friendship between the peoples are carried out through multiple scenes that musically portray each of these nations. In the preface to the 1981 score, G. Tigranov praised “the fraternal help that was delivered to the struggling Armenia by the Russian and Georgian peoples.”¹⁰³ On the surface, representation of Armenians, Georgians, and Persians was an easy task that Tigranyan could have accomplished by following Orientalist idioms of nineteenth-century Russian composers. However, as Marina Frolova-Walker insightfully explicates, the Soviet composers’ reliance on operas by *kuchka* composers as their models, coupled with the official requirement to compose music that is national in form, created a problematic encounter with the issue of Orientalism (the *kuchka*, “mighty handful,” was a group of five nationalist Russian composers, including Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Modest Musorgsky).¹⁰⁴ Turning to *kuchkeist* Orientalism could not provide a solution because whereas traditionally Orientalism, as theorized by Edward Said, highlights the construction of difference between the imperial West and the colonized East, in Tigranyan’s opera, this binary East-West distinction could not be maintained due to political reasons.¹⁰⁵ Even though Armenians, Georgians, and Persians geographically represent the East, Persia was an imperial rival to Russia and, as such, had to be distinguished from the other Eastern nations. In addition, Russia—a colonizer of the Caucasian frontier—has historically fashioned itself as an Occidental civilizing power over the Caucasian Orient. For these reasons, constructing a historically accurate dynamic between Armenian, Georgian, Persian, and Russian political powers

¹⁰³ *Kommunist* (December 7, 1950). “Opera rasskazyvaet o bor’be armianskogo naroda protiv inozemnykh zakhvatchikov. B nei pokazana takzhe pomoshch’ gruzinskogo naroda i Rossii Armenii v ee bor’be s vragami rodiny.” Tigranov, in the preface to 1981 score of *Davit Bek*, made a similar statement: “fraternal help was given to the struggling Armenia by the Russian and Georgian peoples” (“bratskaia pomoshch, okazannaia boriushcheisia Armenii russkimi i gruzinskimi narodami”).

¹⁰⁴ Frolova-Walker states, “Insofar as any non-Western music is poured into the moulds of Western institutions (whether opera houses, orchestras, harmony or equal temperament), it will have great trouble escaping the Orientalist legacy, whether the impulse is indigenous (as in the cases of Turkey and pre-’30s Azerbaijan) or external (as in the Stalin-era Caucasian and central Asian republics).” Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music*, 338.

¹⁰⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

would have betrayed the promise of The Friendship of the Peoples.

Tigranyan had to exhibit ingenuity to create and maintain ideologically appropriate musical representation of the nations in *Davit Bek*. The difficulty in distinguishing the three Eastern nations musically consisted in the fact that their ethnic music featured similar elements—the quintessential augmented second, among others. Example 4 illustrates how he “othered” Persia, as the outsider which did not belong to the Soviet Union, through the use of a recognizable Spanish topic, the military pasodoble. The fact that Tigranyan was able to capture the main elements of each nation’s culture and create his own representations of them demonstrated that he was now a trained professional capable of writing music beyond stringing together folk songs. As a skillful composer



Example 4. “Othering” Persians through a Spanish pasodoble in Act I, reh. 120.

who could masterfully capture the musical essence of each ethnic group, Tigranyan embodied the success of the cultural revolution. Ultimately, within the Soviet spiritual realm, Tigranyan’s emphasis on the alliance between Armenians, Georgians, and Russians capitalized the ideology of friendship as the new reliable institution to which Armenians can turn in times of need.

The operatic project assisted Soviet historiography in fabricating a clear distinction between Russia and other imperial powers. Musical representations of the different nations perpetuated

ideological goals: above all, the construction of a secular Armenian national narrative in which Russia's role is reconfigured from a colonizer to a deliverer. While the changes in the libretto of *Davit Bek* contributed to creating the spiritual void, the opera's national musical style filled this void with patriotic content. Not only did art serve as an inconspicuous simulacrum for the sacred, but it also carried out the function of reinforcing the void by negating the role of religion. In other words, culture acquired a double role: it created the sacred void by indoctrinating masses to the new atheist order and simultaneously served as the substance that filled the void.

In Tigranyan's *Anush*, secular discourse emphasized the misery of peasant village life in order to legitimize Russia's annexation of Armenia, which allegedly modernized a rural superstitious culture, including religion. Thus, even though *Anush* was composed in 1912, prior to the October Revolution, it was repurposed to promote secularization and to augment pretense to modernization. In *Davit Bek*, Russia's intervention into the Armenian-Persian conflict reframed Peter the Great's colonial expansion by portraying Russia as the benefactor without whose help Armenia would have vanished under Muslim oppression. By emphasizing Russia's benevolence towards the Armenian people, the final version of *Davit Bek* obscured Russia's role as a colonizer and compared it favorably to its rivals—the Persian and Ottoman empires. Tigranyan's *Davit Bek* thus recreated a national narrative with the goal of not only constructing an atheistic state, but also strengthening Armenia's trust in Russia and (problematically) distinguishing Russia from other exploitative feudal empires by portraying it as a benevolent protector.

Marxism-Leninism interpreted religion as an outdated coping mechanism for dealing with economic and class oppression. Similarly, it viewed the national self-determination of Soviet ethnic minorities as a temporary stage on the path to communism. The state allowed expression of national forms in

art in order to gain the trust of the peripheral republics. For the Party, “national in form” was only a provisional step within the formation of a “depoliticized” identity.¹⁰⁶ As Lenin stated, “mankind can proceed towards the inevitable fusion (*sliianie*) of nations only through a transitional period of the complete freedom of all oppressed nations.”¹⁰⁷ Stalin similarly claimed, “We are undertaking the maximum development of national culture, so that it will exhaust itself completely and thereby create the base for the organization of international socialist culture.”¹⁰⁸ The provisionality of national self-expression through culture further reveals Stalin’s perspective on nationalism, which he expressed in an early essay from 1912–13: “Social-Democracy alone, could do this [resist nationalism], by countering nationalism with the tried weapon of internationalism.”¹⁰⁹ The state’s two-part ideological motto, “national in form, socialist in content,” concealed a third component which was explicitly stated in one of the reports of the Armenian Congress of Unions: “national in form, socialist in content, and *international in character*” (my emphases).¹¹⁰ In the Soviet production of spiritual art, the preserved ethnic elements became stripped of their associations with social practices such as religion and obscured historical facts. A poster from 1963, titled “To create for the people, in the name of Communism! Art belongs to the people,” is illustrative of the ideology of

¹⁰⁶ Martin Terry, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 74.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (Tirana: 8 Nëntori Publishing House, 1979), 11. In similar rhetoric, ethnomusicologist Zemtsovskii has stated: “The fates of the USSR peoples have interwoven so tightly that it is impossible to comprehend one without the others. The multinational culture of a new type is forming; this culture avoids national insularity and accepts everything that is progressive and wonderful in the fraternal cultures.” (Sud’by vseh sovetskikh narodov pereplelis’ tak tesno, chto poniat’ odin v otryve ot drugikh nevozmozhno. Proiskhodit stanovlenie mnogonatsional’noi kul’tury novogo tipa—kul’tury, izbegaiushchei zamknutosti, vosprinimaiushchei vse progressivnoe i prekrasnoe v bratskikh kul’turakh.) Zemtsovskii, *Narodnaia muzyka SSSR*, 5.

¹¹⁰ *S’ezdy soiuзов Armenii*, 216. “Na osnove podlennoi kul’turnoi revoliutsii v Armenii rastsvetaet natsional’naia po forme, sotsial’naia po sodержaniuu, internatsional’naia po kharakteru kul’tura armianskogo naroda.”

internationalization (Figure 4).¹¹¹ Despite the fact that it features Lenin and recalls his famous phrase, “Art belongs to the people,” the drawings in the background suggest that it was the people who belonged to state-sponsored art. Instead of having the opportunity to preserve indigenous forms of culture, as the drawings illustrate, the people were forced to adapt Western art forms such as opera because the Soviet State esteemed them as true art. The imposed production of new secular cultural forms thus represented what Stalin called the “tried weapon of internationalism.” This “weapon,” however, was a concealed form of colonialism which reached beyond cultural assimilation to revise historiography and ensure the obedience of Soviet minority republics.

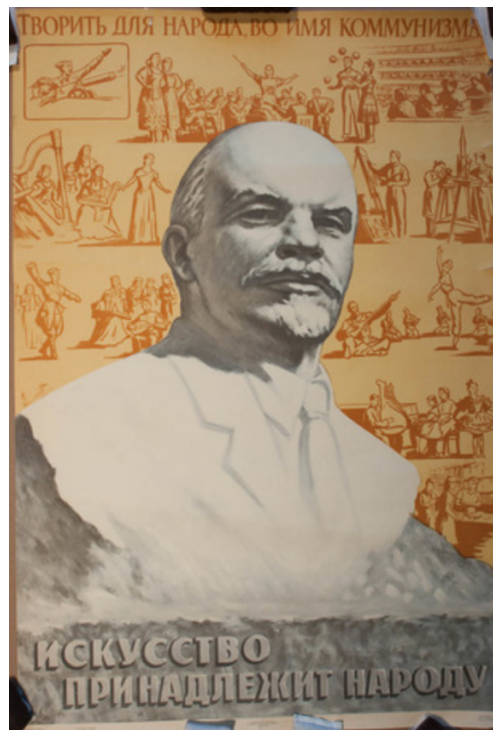


Figure 4. Mikhail Solov'ev, “Tvorit’ dlia naroda, vo imia kommunizma! Iskusstvo prinallezhit narodu” (To create for the people, in the name of Communism! Art belongs to the people) (1963).

¹¹¹ Mikhail Solov'ev, “Tvorit’ dlia naroda, vo imia kommunizma! Iskusstvo prinallezhit narodu” (Create for the people, in the name of communism! Art belongs to the people) (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1963). Allan Chasanoff Collection, New York, 2018, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

Chapter 2. Socialist *Verismo* and the Pastoral Idyll of Armenian *Kolkhoz*

In 1927, an issue of the *Sovetskii teatr* journal featured statistics about repertoire changes in drama theaters: “While in the 1926–27 season the Soviet play comprised 25–30 percent, while bourgeois (‘other’) 60–70 percent, the situation was reversed during the 1927–28 season. We have 55–65 percent of Soviet plays, no more than 25–30 percent of bourgeois, and 15–30 percent of classical plays.”¹ Such proud display of statistical reversal in the origins of plays reflects the Soviet state’s preoccupation with establishing a new Soviet version of classicism that would supplement, if not supplant, the historical repertory of the pre-Soviet past. In particular, the state demanded works that addressed “the Soviet thematic” or “the contemporary Soviet theme.” These demands became even more pressing in 1934, during the first meeting of the Congress of the Soviet Writers, when Andrei Zhdanov, one of the most powerful and influential Soviet ideological censors, proclaimed socialist realism the official doctrine for all arts. In his speech, Zhdanov defined the aim of the socialist realist paradigm: “to depict reality in its revolutionary development” and to create “works attuned to the epoch.”²

The implementation of socialist realist style in music paralleled its trajectory in literature.³ In his seminal 1933 essay, “On Socialist Realism,” Maxim Gorky, the Chairman of the Union of Soviet Writers (1934–36), characterized the Soviet writer as a “midwife and grave digger.”⁴ Gorky claimed that “young literature,” in its role as a grave digger, “is called by history to extract (*dobyť*) and bury

¹ Cited in Ekaterina Vlasova, *1948 god v sovetskoi muzyke* (1948 in Soviet music) (Moscow: Klassika, 2010), 43.

² Andrey Zhdanov, *Essays on Literature, Philosophy & Music* (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 7–15.

³ The first issue of the Soviet Union’s chief music periodical, *Sovetskaiia muzyka*, appeared in 1933 and featured an oft-quoted article in which one critic linked music with socialist realism for the first time. See Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917–1970* (London: Norton, 1971), 223.

⁴ Maxim Gorky, “O sotsialisticheskom realizme” (1933) (On Socialist realism), in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 27 (Moscow, GIKhL: 1953), http://az.lib.ru/g/gorxkij_m/text_1933_o_sotzrealizme.shtml.

everything that is inimical to people—inimical even when they love it.”⁵ Among the key inimical aspects that Gorky singled out were old bourgeois individualism and self-love, which he claimed were enforced by “the German philistine Immanuel Kant.” Gorky further characterized individualism as “zoological,” “bankrupt,” and “decrepit.” As an alternative to self-love, he proposed a new kind of love which is based on “mutual respect towards people’s boundless collective labor power.” Published amidst collectivization (1928–37), it is not surprising that Gorky’s essay foregrounded labor and juxtaposed individual self-love with collective love. Stalin launched a massive (*sploshnaia*) collectivization campaign in 1928, which he referred to as the second October Revolution.⁶ Collectivization spearheaded the first five-year plan, which aimed to subsume agricultural production across all Soviet republics under state control. Armenian officials addressed this plan during the sixth meeting of the Party in April, 1929. When the participants eagerly greeted the plan, they anticipated that the enforcement of a significant rise of industrial production would transform Armenia from a backward agrarian country into an industrial republic.⁷ During the meeting, while discussions focused on improvements in industrial production—including metallurgy, construction materials, the energy industry, and chemical production—participants also critiqued the dramatic theatres of Yerevan and Leninakan for not including enough plays on “the contemporary Soviet thematic” in their repertoire.⁸

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Following the October Revolution, at first, the Bolsheviks were ruthless in their treatment of land owners. However, Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP), which lasted from 1921 to 1924, alleviated the clashes by not imposing complete nationalization of economy. As Ronald Grigor Suny notes, NEP policies nationalized only “large-scale enterprises, railroads, and banks,” leaving “peasants free to run their own farms after paying a set tax to the government.” See Suny, “Soviet Armenia,” in *Armenian People: From Ancient to Modern*, vol. 2, ed. Richard Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 352.

⁷ Segvard Kharmandaryan and Khristofor Khudaverdyan, eds., *S’ezdy soinozov Armenii (1922–1937)* (Meetings of the congress of Armenia) (Yerevan: Armianskoe Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1963), 148.

⁸ Ibid., 150 and 161–62.

As collectivization became one of the defining stages in building socialism, opera composers and librettists turned to plots that showcased village life and labor at various historical moments of agrarian transformations. Literature and music scholar Philip Ross Bullock evocatively states that the “search for Soviet opera” assumed its own Five-Year Plan (1936–1941).⁹ Bullock and other scholars, however, have not critically assessed the impact of Soviet opera in the republics following these formative years, when the state continued to request and sponsor operas on contemporary Soviet themes.

Turning to the post-World-War-II context, this chapter focuses on operas about collectivization and agrarian modernization in the Armenian *kollehoz* (collective farm). It explores the tensions and paradoxes that emerged at the juncture of socialist-realist claims that art depicts reality and the fact that accurate depiction of contemporaneous events or the not-so-distant Soviet history was politically untenable. The chapter first summarizes key aspects within debates about opera on the contemporary Soviet theme leading up to the 1950s. It then examines two operas: Haro Stepanyan’s 1950 *Herosuhi* (The Heroine), which celebrates farming labor in a post-World-War-II village, where collectivization is already completed, and Andrey Babayev’s 1957 *Artsvaberd* (The Eagle’s Fortress), which narrates the process of collectivization in an Armenian village. Through the analyses, the chapter traces how Soviet composers and censors, who participated in the creation of operas, reinvented the pastoral trope in operas related to labor. By examining the collective nature of opera-making, I intervene in scholarly debates on the relationship between political doctrines, such as socialist realism, and compositional practices.¹⁰ In the making of socialist realist pastoral operas, I

⁹ Philip Ross Bullock, “Staging Stalinism: The Search for Soviet Opera in the 1930s,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 108.

¹⁰ Here, we may note two distinct approaches. On the one hand, scholars such as Pauline Fairclough interpret socialist realism as not sufficiently defined to have influenced compositional choices. On the other hand, Marina Frolova-Walker and Alexander Ivashkin show the active, material interrelation between political doctrines and composition. See Fairclough, “The ‘Perestroika’ of Soviet Symphonism: Shostakovich in 1935,” *Music and Letters* 83 (2002): 259–73; Frolova-Walker, “Stalin and the Art of

argue, aesthetic and political ideology actively shaped textual and musical considerations to (re)present and reconcile the dire *kollektiv* reality with Stalin's, and later Khrushchev's, utopias of agrarian modernization and economic progress.

Opera on the Contemporary Soviet Theme: The Origins of Genre

Operatic composition became a contested topic within Soviet aesthetic debates for three reasons. First, opera was a popular art form among the ruling elite who wanted to repurpose the bourgeois genre for advancing socialism. Second, it was slow to incorporate socialist realist developments, particularly the creation of works on the contemporary Soviet theme.¹¹ Third, the government viewed opera as the grandest and most prestigious musical genre, essential for mass indoctrination. In the early years of Soviet rule, some cultural critics questioned whether an elitist bourgeois genre such as opera belonged in a proletarian society. Those who advocated for opera's relevance—among them, Stalin himself, Anatoly Lunacharsky, and Boris Asafiev—argued that opera was not “alien” to proletarians.¹² In order to remain relevant for contemporary audiences, operas had to address the Soviet reality and educate workers on what it meant to be a contemporary Soviet citizen. Thus, while Soviet censors endorsed multiple genres of opera—including fairytale-everyday (*skazochno-bytovye*), epic-monumental, and historical-romantic—they especially prioritized and promoted operas on the

Boredom,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 1 (2004): 101–24; and Ivashkin, “Who’s Afraid of Socialist Realism?,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 92, no. 3 (2014): 430–48. Though my reading of the interconnection between socialist realism and Soviet composition is consistent with Ivashkin’s, I do not agree with his statements that “we should be grateful to Stalin” for “a truly remarkable achievement” of blending musical geographies, genres, and styles. Ivashkin, 447.

¹¹ In 1929, Glavrepertkom (The Central Repertory Committee) published the first repertoire index that classified operas into four categories according to their ideological appropriateness. Vlasova, *1948 god*, 47–48. Similar lists were issued in 1931, 1934, and 1950.

¹² Boris Asafiev, “Opera v raboche-krest’ianskom teatre” (Opera in the worker-peasant theater), in *Ob opere: izbrannnye stat’i* (On opera: selected essays) (Moscow: Muzyka, 1976).

revolutionary theme and on contemporary reality that provided exemplary models of the new Soviet person.¹³

At the 1935 meeting of the Union of Composers, the shortage of operas on Soviet themes assumed center stage.¹⁴ A wave of media criticism of the Bolshoi Theatre followed in 1935, which led to its director announcing the slogan “Special Attention to Soviet Operas!”¹⁵ The Leningrad Mali Theatre (Malegot), on the other hand, had been working on “the creation of a modern musical spectacle” for several years.¹⁶ In 1936, during the Malegot tour to Moscow, four of the five operas performed were written by contemporary Soviet composers: Ivan Dzerzhinsky’s *Tikhii Don* (The Quiet Don), Dmitry Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, and Valerii Zhelobinskii’s *Kamarinskii muzhik* (The Kamarino Peasant) and *Imeniny* (The Name Day). But only *The Quiet Don*, based on Mikhail Sholokhov’s eponymous socialist realist novel, was based on a Soviet theme.¹⁷ Stalin attended the performance of *The Quiet Don* on January 17, 1936. Although critics described Dzerzhinsky’s musical language as “amateur,” Stalin praised the work as an exemplar of “classical Soviet opera,” the development of which “should be the concern of all people active in Soviet music.”¹⁸ At a meeting on the same day, Stalin outlined the main criteria for a socialist realist opera:

¹³ Georgy Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal’nyi teatr*, vol. 2 (Yerevan: Aipetrat, 1960), 116.

¹⁴ Bullock cites two articles in *Sovetskaiia muzyka* that addressed this shortage: “Diskussiiia o sovetskoi opere (po materialam stenogrammm)” (Discussion on Soviet opera) *Sovetskaiia muzyka* 37, no. 7–8 (1935): 38–55, and Iv. Shishov, “O repertuare nashikh opernykh teatrov” (On the repertory of our Soviet theaters), *Sovetskaiia muzyka* 3, no. 9 (1935): 64–65. Bullock, “Staging Stalinism,” 89.

¹⁵ A series of articles, authored by the director of Bolshoi, Vladimir Mutnykh, appeared in *Sovetskii artist*: “Theater is Not a Museum,” “Towards the Rebirth of Realistic Stage Design,” and “Against Imperial Kitsch.” Mutnykh contented that “Youth does not work hard enough in the Bolshoi!” Cited in Irina Kotkina, “Soviet Empire and Operatic Realm: Stalinist Search for the Model Soviet Opera,” *Revue des études slaves* 84, nos. 3–4 (2013): 512.

¹⁶ From a letter of Aleksandr Shcherbakov, the head of the Central Committee’s Cultural Department, to Stalin (January 1936). Cited in Bullock, “Staging Stalinism,” 91.

¹⁷ Dzerzhinsky’s opera *Podniataia tselina* (Virgin soil upturned) was also based on a novel by Sholokhov. *The Quiet Don* is about the Cossacks and the many wars that they underwent over the course of the formation of the USSR. *Podniataia tselina*, in turn, is dedicated to collectivization.

¹⁸ *Leningradskaiia Pravda* (January 24, 1936). Cited in Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 144–45.

“a libretto with a Socialist topic, a realistic musical language with stress on national idiom, and a positive hero typifying the new Socialist era.”¹⁹ The leader next visited the Bolshoi on January 26, 1936, to hear Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. This event was followed by the infamous anonymous *Pravda* articles, “Muddle instead of Music” and “The *Limpid Stream*,” which indicted the so-called modernist bourgeois aspirations of Soviet composers.²⁰ The task of producing “the Soviet national music drama” that would embody the Party’s three-fold credo—party-mindedness, ideological content, and national orientation (*partiinnost’*, *ideinnost’*, *narodnost’*)—now became the concern of composers and librettists across all republics.²¹ The first Armenian composer to tackle writing a socialist realist opera was Haro Stepanyan, whose *Lusabatsin* (1937–38) depicted Armenia’s inclusion into the USSR in 1920.²² Operas that demonstrated the new life of Soviet citizens, once the Bolshevik order was in place, followed suit.²³

In the next decade, World War II diverted the government’s attention from regulating opera composition toward pressing practical matters. Once peace was restored, however, the leadership in

¹⁹ Kotkina, “Soviet Empire,” 518.

²⁰ See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992).

²¹ The Soviet national music drama genre was inspired by the name Musorgsky gave to his operas: “national music drama.” From *Sovetskaia muzyka* 6, no. 1 (January 1938): 11. Cited in Bullock, 94. The three-fold credo is a direct critique, and thus replacement, of the tsarist official nationality policy based on orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality (*pravoslavie*, *samoderzhavie*, *narodnost’*). Translating the terms is problematic because the translations do not show the proper connotation: *ideinnost’* is based on the word idea, not ideology; *narodnost’* has to do with people/populism, not necessarily nations/nationalism.

²² Avet Terteryan’s *The Ring of Fire* (1967) is another opera that addressed this history.

²³ Armenian operas on Soviet topics include Leon Khodzha-Einatov’s operas *Shbyuz* (1931, on construction of socialism and class struggle in the first years of revolution in Ural), *Miatezh* (1938, about class struggle in Central Asia in 1920s), and *Family* (1940, about a Jewish resettlement kolkhos in the Amur taiga); Vardkes Talyan’s *Rushanskaia skala* (1938); Karo Zakaryan’s *Mardjan* (1941); Anoushavan Ter-Gevondyan’s *Astghadzor* (1950, about Armenian repatriates who praise the Soviet homeland); and Terteryan’s *Ring of Fire* (1967, on the Russian Civil War). Several Armenian ballets also addressed the Soviet theme: Zakaryan’s *Pioneriia* (1936); Aram Khatchaturyan’s *Gayane* (1939, which at various times featured at least three different librettos; the first libretto, for instance, culminated with a chorus of farm workers and border guards who glorify the fatherland); Grigor Yeghiazaryan’s *Sevan* (1956, about the building of a hydropower plant); Eduard Khagagortyan’s *Sona* (1957, on the revolutionary struggle in establishing Soviet power in Armenia in 1920).

Moscow resumed demands on operas on the contemporary Soviet theme. Art was now an avenue through which the state celebrated victory and assured people's trust in the unity among republics. The next wave of official intervention into cultural production occurred with the historical decrees of the 1946–48. During this time policies of Zhdanovism (or Zhdanovshchina) placed tight restrictions and censorship guidelines on all cultural production, including literature, theater, film, art criticism, and music. The decree from August 26, 1946, titled “The Drama Repertoire and Measures to Improve It,” commanded playwrights “to concentrate on creating plays dealing with contemporary Soviet life” and outlined the nature of such plays in its resolution:

Plays of high artistic value must vividly portray the life of Soviet society and Soviet people. Playwrights and theatres must depict the life of Soviet society in its constant forward movement; they must make every effort to promote the further development of the finest traits of the Soviet character, which were brought out so forcefully and saliently during the Great Patriotic War. It is the duty of our playwrights and producers to take an active part in the work of educating the Soviet people, to meet their advanced cultural requirements, to educate the Soviet youth to be optimistic, buoyant, devoted to their country and confident in the victory of our cause [...]. At the same time, the Soviet theatre must show that these qualities are intrinsic not only in chosen individuals, in heroes, but in the millions of Soviet men and women.²⁴

Four central themes, henceforth, became mandatory themes not only of Soviet plays, but also operas: the realistic portrayal of Soviet life, pervasive optimism, unwavering progress, and, crucially, portrayal of an intrinsically positive Soviet individual who represented “millions of Soviet men and women.” The 1948 decree, titled “On Vano Muradeli’s Opera *The Great Friendship*,” addressed the issue of socialist realism in music more directly. Muradeli’s opera, which became the main target of the decree, focused on the friendship between the Soviet peoples, featured a score with multinational musical idioms, and used a Bolshevik revolutionary, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, as the prototype for the protagonist. According to the decree, some of the criteria for a model Soviet opera

²⁴ Decree of the Central Committee, CPSU(b), “The drama repertoire and measures to improve it,” from August 26, 1946. Cited in *Decisions of the Central Committee, C.P.S.U.(B.) on Literature and Art (1946–1948)* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1951), 17–18.

were executed incorrectly. First, the libretto was accused of being “historically false and artificial” as it suggested hostility between Russians and Georgians and Ossetians, while in fact, according to the decree, “it was the Ingush and Chechens who hindered the establishment of friendship among the peoples.”²⁵ Next, musically, Muradeli was accused of “neglecting the best traditions and the experience of the classic opera in general, and Russian classic opera in particular.” Lastly, the hero, Ordzhonikidze, turned out to be an old friend of Stalin who fell out of the leader’s favor.²⁶ The decree thus introduced new challenges for writing an opera on the Soviet theme. To write such an opera meant to confront the unachievable task of depicting Soviet reality in ideologically irreproachable light.

Even within the repressive regime, cultural production was not entrapped in a monolithic top-down process dictated by the state. Rather than a center-to-periphery machine, cultural production was entangled in an elaborate and often messy bureaucracy operated by people with conflicting interests. Every opera thus emerged through the process of accommodation that occurred behind the scenes during meetings of special artistic committees that embodied state organs functioning as forums for negotiation. Like every opera theater in the Soviet Union, the Spendiaryan Theatre in Yerevan had an artistic committee comprised of composers, poets, and music critics, who were responsible for ensuring artistic quality and ideological correctness of the theater’s repertoire. The committee censored elements of old operas that were hostile to socialism and controlled the creation of new operas through a tedious process of multiple revisions.²⁷ Discussions of operas on the Soviet theme were particularly heated. Composers and librettists had

²⁵ Ibid., 32.

²⁶ For a thorough account on the 1948 decree, see Ekaterina Vlasova, *1948 god v sovetskoi muzyke* (1948 in Soviet Music), (Moscow: Klassika, 2010).

²⁷ Simon Morrison documents how censors interfered with Prokofiev’s work on *War and Peace*, *The Story of a Real Man*, and *Distant Seas*, preventing his success as an opera composer. See Morrison, “The Forefront of Soviet Music, 1944–1947” and “1948,” in *The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

to achieve synthesis between realistic representation and musical form that was pervaded with a series of aesthetic “isms.” Reestablished by Soviet critics, realism, with a capital R, opposed the Soviet brands of “naturalism” and “formalism” that were frowned upon by the official decrees. Critics perpetuated formulaic statements in disapproval of new works: “during the formation of the new theme, posterishness (*plakatnost'*), schematism, and oversimplification often manifested themselves as composers struggled with foreign tendencies and falsely understood newness;”²⁸ “the rendition of the topic is schematic and outwardly fabular, it is defined by qualities of false formalist novelties;” and “the mass of people is abstract and faceless.”²⁹ While these evaluations seemingly pertained to the aesthetic qualities of operas, they often concealed ideological censure.

Representation of the Soviet citizen in operas posed one of the core issues faced by the new genre of opera on the contemporary Soviet theme. The censorship closely scrutinized this issue in operatic libretti because it desired to make audiences self-identify with characters on stage.³⁰ The relationship between the individual and the collective unlatched a paradox: the protagonist had to have personality, but had to personify the entire proletarian class. Librettists, composers, and directors were confronted with questions: How can an individual typify the collective? How can an archetypal hero be an individual? How can music portray characters as not too flat, but at the same time not too complex?

²⁸ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal'nyi teatr*, 276.

²⁹ Ibid., 93. Tigranov also critiques the “speculative quality (*umozritel'nyi*), the everydayness, the rhetoric, and declarativeness.” Tigranov, 275 and 277.

³⁰ For a review of scholarly works on individual and collective identities in Russian and Soviet imagination, see Alain Blum, “Identities in Soviet History,” *Contemporary European History* 12, no. 2 (2003): 213–23.

The Reinvention of the Pastoral Trope

With its roots tracing back to ancient Greece, the pastoral trope gained prominence in opera in the early seventeenth century. Broadly defined, pastoral plots unfold in Arcadian locales, feature shepherds and other countryside inhabitants as their main characters, and depict bucolic life and nature in a highly idealized manner. Beginning in the latter half of the seventeenth century, this topic developed into the subgenre of *pastorale héroïque* within French opéra-ballets of the leading court composers, Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Phillipe Rameau. Among the most notable eighteenth-century pastoral operas are Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Le devin du village* (1752) and Mozart's early *Bastien und Bastienne* (1768), which satirize the pastoral and reflect on the Enlightenment's rupture with magic.³¹ During this period, critics began commenting on pastoral operas. They argued that while pastorals claimed realism, they employed unrealistic means of representation. The subsequent critiques of the pastoral trope during the Romantic age are similar to the kinds of critiques that emerged during socialism. Socialist realist operas about village life aspired to realism but crafted an illusory reality that reflected the state's utopian projection of rural life.

Since the Soviet leadership referred to nineteenth-century Russian operas as models to be emulated by Soviet composers, it is worthwhile to briefly explore the multiple guises in which pastoral themes appeared in pre-Soviet Russian operas.³² Pyotr Tchaikovsky's "The Honesty of the Shepherdess" in *The Queen of Spades* (1890), for instance, is a classic example of the pastoral trope: it appears as a mini play within the opera and stands as an episodic interpolation that does not directly relate to the main plot. In Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* (1879), the pastoral functions differently, as most of the opera is set in the country estate which represents an idyllic Arcadian locale. However,

³¹ Gary Tomlinson, "Pastoral and Musical Magic in the Birth of Opera," in *Opera and the Enlightenment*, ed. Thomas Bauman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7–20.

³² On the "epigonism" of Soviet composers, see Frolova-Walker, "National in Style, Socialist in Context: Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, no. 2 (1998): 331–71.

the peasants who appear in the opera are far from protagonists. Instead, they are relegated to the chorus, providing a colorful backdrop for the dramatic affairs that unfold between the main characters, who are members of the aristocracy. Two prominent scenes with peasants appear in Act I: peasants sing and dance in celebration of the harvest (Scene 1) and a group of servant girls sings folk-inspired songs as they collect fruit. Yet simply transplanting Tchaikovsky's notion of the pastoral into a Soviet opera on village life would have been incompatible with socialist realism. The scene from *The Queen of Spades* would have been deemed irrelevant since it did not contribute to the main plot, while the scenes from *Eugene Onegin* would have been considered inappropriate because they consigned workers to the background, undermining the prominence of the collective.

Representations of common folk in operas of Mikhail Glinka and the *kuchka* composers certainly come closer to serving as viable models for Soviet composers. Unlike the aristocrat Tchaikovsky, these composers identified themselves with "the people." Modest Musorgsky, for instance, went as far as to refer to his operas as people's dramas (*narodnaia drama*).³³ But in his operas, people (*narod*) are portrayed in their deep misery and are always set in opposition to the exploitative state. Such antagonism between the common folk and the leadership would not have reflected the ideological standards of the Soviet state, according to which people, especially in peripheries, were expected to express eternal gratitude for being delivered from servitude and atavism. Following the demands of socialist realism, operas on village life had to exemplify progress brought forth by the Soviet modernization project in all domains: economic prosperity, technological advancement, and elimination of class struggle. As Sergei Prokofiev wrote about *Semyon Kotko* (1940), his version of the opera on the contemporary Soviet theme, "Here exist new

³³ Bullock, "Staging Stalinism," 94. Tigranov, for instance, stated that choral scenes in Stepanyan's operas resemble those by Musorgsky and Borodin. Tigranov, 118. See also Richard Taruskin, "Crowd, Mob, and Nation in Boris Godunov: What did Musorgsky Think and Does It Matter," *The Journal of Musicology* 28, no. 2 (2011): 143–65.

people, new feelings, new everyday reality; hence, many devices that are inherent in classical operas may turn out to be alien and unsuitable.”³⁴ Without a clear model, Soviet composers were thus thrown into a process of trial and error in their attempts to create an opera that would appropriately showcase Soviet pastoral life. Whereas the traditional pastoral model was concerned with separation of the countryside as an escape from urban life, in the Soviet model, the countryside became a space for manifesting the village’s integration into the urbanized, industrialized, and acculturated city life.

Depiction of the “new village” in Soviet operas partook in the creation of the old/new binary that the state employed to prove the success of its modernization mission. This binary was articulated by a politician during one of the Armenian Party’s congress meetings: “Where previously all ‘industry’ was represented by a simple village ard (*sokha*), where the main tool of agrarian production was a plough, that helplessly picked (*kovyrial*) at narrow scraps of land of like-minded people (*edinolichniki*), there are now grand collectivized expanses (*prostranstva*) with furrowing ‘iron tanks’—tractors.”³⁵ When revising operas, music censors also amplified the misery of the old village: “The poverty of the mass during the rule of the Dashnaks is not highlighted enough. [...] It would be great to add one or two scenes of hungry and semi-naked villagers.”³⁶ Even in operas on contemporary Soviet reality, the past oppression and underlying trauma were ever present, to remind audiences of pre-Soviet misery, and to maintain the illusion of the messianic Soviet state. The

³⁴ Abram Klimovitskii, *Opera S. Prokof'eva 'Semen Kotko': poiasnenie* (Prokofiev’s opera *Semen Kotko*: an explanation) (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1961), 34. The opera is about Civil War in Ukraine in the early Soviet years. “Zdes’ novye liudi, novye chuvstva, novyi byt, i potomu mnogie priemy, svoistvennye, naprimer, klassicheskoi opera, mogut okazat’sia chuzhdymi i neprigodnymi.”

³⁵ *S’ezdy soiuзов Armenii*, 187. This statement was made during the eighth congress of the Party in January, 1935.

³⁶ Protocol of the meeting of the artistic committee from November 23, 1956. The National Archives of Armenia (from here on, NAA), 1393 2, no. 64. Discussion of the ballet *Zare na vstrechu* (Toward the dawn). “Nedostatochno podcherknuta nishcheta massy v period polnovlastiia dashnakov. [...] Bylo by neplokho vnesti odnu-dve kartiny golodnogo i polugologo naseleniia.” Dashnaks is short for members of Dashnaktsutyun, or The Armenian Revolutionary Federation, a nationalist party that existed since 1890 and governed the First Armenian Republic from 1918 to 1920.

interjections of dire past contrasted the romanticized pastoral “present” of Stepanyan’s *The Heroine* and Babayev’s *The Eagle’s Nest*, in which arias and choruses constantly glorify spring, sun, fields, rivers, skies, mountains, trees, flowers, etc. Through heightening representations of nature, which invoked the Romantic sublime, musical and textual means satisfied the socialist realist style’s demands for realism. But more importantly, as my analyses demonstrate, the fabricated fusion of bucolic allure and farm labor camouflaged the gruesome reality of *kolkhoz* life.

Post-War Stalinism and Stepanyan’s *The Heroine*

As the Soviet music critic Georgy Tigranov stated, “Stepanyan is the first who in Armenian opera tackled the hardest task of musical-scenic embodiment of the contemporary theme: the image (*obraz*) of the person of our epoch.”³⁷ The composer wrote *The Heroine* in 1950 at the height of Zhdanovism, during which, as discussed above, several decisive decrees impacted cultural production. The artistic committee of the Spenidiaryan Opera Theatre recognized the necessity of implementing Zhdanov’s ideological demands. In one of the protocols from a 1950 meeting, the committee acknowledged that it should and would assist Stepanyan in “eliminating all the negative and securing all the valuable aspects” of the opera, which “was written according to the historical decree on *The Great Friendship*.”³⁸ Above all, to secure this opera’s place in the theater repertoire, the artistic committee had to make sure that the opera was relevant to the contemporaneous climate of post-World-War-II recovery.

The victory over fascism became a potent catalyzer for renewing the rhetoric of Russia being the greatest among the Soviet nations. If prior to the war, propaganda agents credited Russia with accomplishing the October Revolution and establishing the socialist order, they now boosted

³⁷ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal’nyi teatr*, 125.

³⁸ NAA, 1393 4, no. 43. Protocol from 1950.

Russia's messianic image by crediting it with steering the global fight against fascism. Although the totalitarian regime did not loosen its grip even during the war years, following the end of the war in 1945, it intensified oppressive measures against any nonconformity with the Party line. The postwar years, until Stalin's death on March 5, 1953, became some of the most gruesome pages in the history of global totalitarianism as the state mercilessly persecuted any Soviet citizens who could conceivably be suspected of showing an affinity with ideologies foreign to socialism.³⁹ Propaganda efforts against anti-socialist tendencies produced artifacts such as the poster from 1949, on which the father of socialist realism, Gorky, denounced bourgeois ideology: "The bourgeoisie is hostile to culture: There it is, the hideous and disgraceful 'spirit' of contemporary bourgeois 'culture'."⁴⁰ As illustrated in Figure 1, the ink-pens that appear between skyscrapers that symbolize this "hostile" worldview represent the deadly sins associated with it: "lies, racism, cosmopolitanism, provocation, militarism, obscurantism (*mrakobesie*), slander, fascism." Ironically, in their resistance to "bourgeois 'culture'," Soviet censors, who previously critiqued the bourgeois origins of opera, have appropriated this genre for their ideological purposes. In the postwar years, these purposes included production of works that promoted the glorification of the state, praised war veterans, and encouraged consolidation of forces for economic recovery.

The Heroine, according to one Soviet critic, was "the first attempt in Armenian opera to solve the accountable task of creating an opera on the relevant subject: the after-war life in a mountain *kolkhoz*."⁴¹ The libretto of the opera is based on N. Zaryan's poem "Armenui," which is named after

³⁹ See A. A. Danilov and A. V. Pyzhikov, *Rozhdeniie sverkhderzhavy: SSSR v pervyie poslevoennnye gody* (The birth of a superpower: the USSR in the early post-war years) (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001); and E. Yu. Zubkova, *Obshchestvo i reformy: 1945–1964 gody* (Society and reforms) (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1993).

⁴⁰ Viktor Ivanov, "Burzhuaizii vrazhdebna kul'ture" (The bourgeoisie is hostile to culture) (1949), from the Allan Chasanoff Collection, New York, 2018, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/176543>.

⁴¹ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal'nyi teatr*, 110.

the millet culture that occupies a central role in the plot.⁴² The action unfolds in 1945–46 in a post-World-War-II Armenian *kolkhoz*. Vahan, a veteran and hero of the war, returns to his native village



Figure 1. “Burzhuaziia vrazhdebna kul’ture” (The bourgeoisie is hostile to culture) by Viktor Ivanov (1949).

and ignores his former beloved Nazeli amidst the village celebrations in his honor. The chairman of the *kolkhoz* offers Vahan the opportunity to lead the sowing of Armenui for a crops competition. Vahan arrogantly refuses, claiming that he has more important things to do in the city. Nazeli, who is still in love with Vahan, volunteers to lead the sowing endeavor. Acknowledging his error, however, Vahan later takes over another brigade of sowers. As Nazeli’s team wins the crops competition, bringing her the title of a Hero of Socialist Labor, Vahan begins to pursue her. His

⁴² The poem was critiqued in G. Ayryan, “O nekotorykh voprosakh sovremennoi armianskoi literatury” (On some issues in contemporary Armenian literature), *Pravda* (May 13, 1951). Cited in Marian Koval’, “Za vysokoe opernoe masterstvo (K diskussiiam o novykh operakh v Armenii i Gruzii),” *Sovetskaiia muzyka* 152 (June, 1951): 40.

brigade comes second, bringing him the next prestigious title, the prize of Lenin.⁴³ Nazeli forgives Vahan, and the opera culminates with a triumphant finale in which the entire village praises Stalin.

The extant documentation of the production of *The Heroine* from the meetings of the Spendiaryan Theatre's artistic committee reveals the collective nature of operatic creation and illustrates that the logic behind its political-ideological enterprise was often untenable. The debates about the opera were rather heated and touched on its every aspect, often including harebrained suggestions such as changing the tonality of the finale from A-flat major to G major.⁴⁴ During the initial round of revisions, before the opera's 1950 premiere in Yerevan, critics recommended adding labor scenes, heightening the overall mood by incorporating dances, and solving the issue of conflict between the main characters, Nazeli and Vahan. Stepanyan, thanking the committee members for their "rightful criticism," agreed to add labor scenes, but disagreed with the addition of dances because he believed that they would distract from the main action. Despite the fact that Stepanyan had integrated the suggestions of the committee, the stage life of the opera's premiere version was interrupted by yet another official decree that appeared in *Pravda* in 1950. This time, the opera under attack was German Zhukovsky's 1950 opera, *Ot vsego serdtsa* (From all one's heart), which featured a plot similar to *The Heroine*, but was dedicated to *kolkhoz* life in Ukraine.⁴⁵ The decree resulted in the recalling of the Stalin Prize which Zhukovsky was awarded for writing this very opera.

Shortly after the decree, the editor of *Sovetskaia muzyka*, Marian Koval', published an article which addressed the necessary improvements in Armenian and Georgian operas.⁴⁶ Koval', acknowledged that the new 1950 decree prompted a reevaluation of the entire "operatic household"

⁴³ Another not historically accurate feature of *The Heroine* is that women were rarely allowed to occupy high ranks in agriculture. See Liubov' Denisova, *Rural Women in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia*, trans. Irina Mukhina (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁴ NAA, 1393 4, no. 43, "Protocol from November 11, 1950."

⁴⁵ The events in Elizaveta Mal'tsev's novel, on which the opera was based, took place in Altay. However, in the opera, it was moved to Ukraine, a change to which Stalin objected.

⁴⁶ Koval', "Za vysokoe opernoe masterstvo."

as it “outlined some of the most important demands of the Soviet operatic aesthetics.”⁴⁷ Citing from the decree, he claimed that similar to *From All One's Heart*, “the authors of *The Heroine* ‘did not study in depth the life of a contemporary *kolkhoz* village and did not truthfully demonstrate its alive artistic characters in bright, realistic music’.”⁴⁸ Koval’ further elaborated the idea that the aesthetic means of an opera should be directly relevant to the representation of real life:

The goal is to use bright, impressive means of the operatic art in order to demonstrate the lively artistic characters of the *kolkhoz* peasantry, the rich spiritual world of Soviet people who are led forward by the ideas of communism. [...] As stated in *Pravda*, during the work on *From All One's Heart*, editorial fear of deviating from accepted slogans significantly contributed to the substitution of real actuality with ‘an appearance of modernity.’⁴⁹

Koval’ concluded that Stepanyan’s opera could not be claimed a success on the mere grounds that the composer avoided formalistic musical language, for, after all, the ideological message of the work was more important than its artistic form. He pointed at the necessity of revisions of *The Heroine* which should be guided by “conscientious and implacable criticism” from the Spendiaryan Opera Theatre leadership.⁵⁰ Following these recommendations from Moscow, the artistic committee of the theater attended an orchestra rehearsal of the opera in 1952 and gathered for revising *The Heroine* yet again.⁵¹ These revisions were critical for another reason: they aimed to prepare the opera’s 1956 *dekada* performance in Moscow. In the opening remarks of the meeting, one commentator noted

⁴⁷ Ibid., 40. Koval’, who was the editor of the journal in 1948–50, published a series of defamatory articles about Shostakovich’s works.

⁴⁸ Ibid. “Avtory ee takzhe ‘ne izuchili gluboko zhizn’ sovremennoi kolkhoznnoi derevni, ne smogli pravdivo pokazat’ ee v zhivyykh khudozhestvennykh obrazakh, v iarkoi realisticheskoi muzyke’.” He also expressed his worry that *From All One's Heart* set a dangerous precedent, stating that the opera’s “false, perverse plot situation [is] a kind of ideological frivolity (*nedomyслие*) that is becoming standardized” in works such as the Kyrgyz opera *On the Shores of Issyk-Kul*’ by Vladimir Vlasov, Abdylas Maldybayev, and Vladimir Fere.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 40. “Zadacha iarkimi, vpechatliaiushchimi sredstvami opernogo iskusstva pokazat’ zhivye khudozhestvennye obrazy kolkhoznogo krest’ianstva, bogaty dukhovnyi mir sovetskikh liudei, vedomykh vpered velikimi ideiami kommunizma. [...] Imevshaia mesto pri rabote nad operoi ‘Ot vsego serdtsa’ redaktorskaia boiazn’ otkloneniia ot lozungovykh kanonov v znachitel’noi mere sodeistvovala podmene real’noi deistvitel’nosti ‘vidimost’iu sovremennosti,’ o chem pishet ‘Pravda’.”

⁵⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁵¹ NAA, 1393 4, no. 44, 1952–53. Protocol “Discussion of *The Heroine*” from July 10, 1952.

that “the theater has conducted and continues to conduct truly heroic work on the creation of *The Heroine*, and the difficulties in solving its problems are understandable.”⁵² The following analysis focuses on three central themes: conflict and its relation to the individualism/collectivism binary; realistic representation; and the opera’s relation to historical temporality. Locating these themes within the opera, I illustrate their contested nature by foregrounding them alongside the voices of critics who participated in the collective creation of the opera at various points of its shaping.

Soviet critics acknowledged that an operatic libretto must feature conflict in order to propel dramatic action. Defining the opposing poles within operatic conflict, Tigranov outlined the musical means for their rendition:

The mass and individual popular (*narodnye*) characters resist the despots and tyrants, betrayers and rapists [...]. The first group is represented through “the realm (*stikhiia*) of folk song, wide melodism (whether mournful, lyrical, heroic, or jubilant), clear harmonies, string timbres, winds, trumpets and horns. The second, which portrays the enemies of the people, completely lacks the intonations of folk music and is abundant with rhythms of war marches, wild dances, war cries, abrupt, dissonant, augmented harmonies, cold timbres of horns, heavy, oppressive sound masses.”⁵³

Choosing the “correct” musical-expressive means was essential for the composer’s reputation, because according to critics, these means “reflected the composer’s relation to the two realms.”⁵⁴

The problem of conflict in *The Heroine* emerged due to the fact that the plot unfolds in the immediate postwar years (1945–46). Since this timeframe suggests that collectivization had already taken place in the village and that class struggle had been overcome, the conflict that would generate the drama, theoretically, could not exist on the collective level. Thus, the opera stages a conflict between two individuals, the war veteran Vahan and *kolkhoznitsa* Nazeli.⁵⁵ However, showcasing a

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal’nyi teatr*, 119.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ NAA, 1393 4, no. 156. The preliminary title of the opera, *Nazeli*, was crossed out and changed to *Geroinia* (*The Heroine*) (July 29, 1950). The erasure of the protagonist’s name in favor of the more generic “heroine” illustrates the obligatory emphasis on the civic rather than the individual.

war veteran as an antagonist was in itself problematic because during the postwar years the official line mandated “theatrical works of pathos” which “created the character of the Soviet patriot—the participant of the Great Patriotic War.”⁵⁶

Although the protagonist Nazeli is “a selfless toiler of socialist fields,”⁵⁷ her antagonization by a war hero presented an ideological puzzle that troubled the committee who worked on the opera’s revisions. As one censor noted, villainizing a war hero was inappropriate because “his mockery could create a harmful generalization.”⁵⁸ Stepanyan agreed that he too disliked the character of Vahan and stated that, in fact, he had written three versions of the plot, in one of which Vahan was also a hero. The composer concluded by promising to “soften” this character in order to avoid generalizing a war veteran in negative light.⁵⁹ Another critic blamed the poem on which the opera was based, stating that it is “founded on a made-up intrigue, on the basis of which lies an artificially crafted conflict between the hero of the poem Vahan, who returned from the war, and his beloved Nazan [Nazeli in the opera].”⁶⁰ While it was clear that the central conflict in the opera was “between the progressive and the backward,” the conflict between Nazeli and Vahan as the protagonist and antagonist, respectively, was inappropriate because Vahan could not contain any negative traits since he was a veteran of the Great Patriotic War.⁶¹ This did not necessarily mean that the opera had to be

⁵⁶ Patriotic plays following World War II included *Molodaia gvardiia* (The young guard) a 1947 play, staged by Sergei Gerasimov based on Alexander Fadeyev’s 1946 eponymous novel, Boris Lavrenyov’s 1947 *Za tekhn, kto v more!* (For those who are in the sea!), and Oleksandr Kornychuk’s 1948 *Makar Dubrava*.

⁵⁷ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal’nyi teatr*, 119.

⁵⁸ NAA, 1393 4, no. 43.

⁵⁹ Ibid. “Vaan ne nravitsia i mne. Vse, otnosiashchiesia k ego obrazu vypravit’ legko tak, kak imeetsia napisannykh tri varianta; est’ variant, gde i Vaan—geroi. [...] Obiazatel’no nado smiagchit’ obraz Vaana, ibo on delaetsia tipicheskim.”

⁶⁰ Ibid. “Opera postroena na nadumannoi intrigue, v osnove kotoroi lezhit iskustvenno spletennyi konflikt mezhdu geroem poemy Vaanom, vernuvshimsia s voyny, i ego vozliublennoi Nazan.”

⁶¹ NAA, 1393 4, no. 44. Minutes from a meeting that took place in 1952. “Vriad li budem govorit’ o konfliktakh [...] mezhdu progressivnym i otstalym. Konflikt mezhdu Vaanov i Nazeli mog by byt’, no mne khotelos’ by chtoby otritsatel’nym personazhem byl by predstavlen ne tot, kogo my s pervykh zhe dnei stranits opery vosprinimaem kak Geroia Otechestvennoi Voyny.”

free of conflicts, but merely that neither of the conflicting sides could be a representative of the state. As another censor explained, the opera's current conflict could exist only if "the negative character was not a hero with a star, but a simple hero."⁶² As one critic summarized, the libretto's shortcomings included "weak motivation behind the conflict, schematism of characters, and lack of definition in the genre."⁶³

Behind the anxiety in these debates loomed a deeper problem related to the Zhdanovism dogma which claimed that the only conflict that is possible in Soviet culture is the conflict between good and best. According to this statement, there are no villains in contemporary Soviet society since their existence would indicate a systemic deficiency or failure. Stepanyan's *The Heroine*, like the rest of the operas on the contemporary Soviet theme, had to stage a conflict in an allegedly conflictless society.⁶⁴ Failure to solve this puzzle would undermine political progress brought forth by societal modernization.

The musical and textual representations of the two conflicting characters point at the ingenuity of the authors when negotiating censorship demands. Koval', who was highly critical of almost every aspect of *The Heroine*, singled out Nazeli's aria as the most successful number in the entire opera: "Nazeli's aria from Act II, when she sings about the joy of free labor, is very spiritualized. In this beautiful, bright music, one feels the character (*obraz*) of an active, advanced (*peredovoi*) person in socialist society. This aria can be claimed the principal success of the composer."⁶⁵ The positive reception of this aria can be attributed to its alignment with the pastoral

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal'nyi teatr*, 111.

⁶⁴ This paradoxical nature of conflict is reflected in the published excerpts of the opera, in which only music that pertains to the positive characters is included. Haro Stepanyan, *The Heroine: Selected excerpts* (Yerevan: Aipetrat, 1952). My analysis is based on this score, which was submitted for publication on April 14, 1951, and approved on April 16, 1952, after Koval's critical article appeared in *Sovetskaia muzyka*.

⁶⁵ Koval', "Za vysokoe opernoe masterstvo," 41. "Ochen' odukhotvorena aria Nazeli iz II akta, kogda ona poet o radosti svobodnogo truda. V krasivoi svetloi muzyke etoi arii oshchushchaesh' obraz

trope. Although the aria does not feature the typical compound meter associated with the pastoral, many of its musical and textual elements highlight this affinity.⁶⁶ First, the aria is written in F major, the pastoral tonality in the music of European composers.⁶⁷ Next, as shown in Example 1, in the middle section of the aria, a thirteen-bar-long prolongation of D in the bass produces another characteristic effect of the pastoral, the drone.

The text of Nazeli's aria, which praises fields, mountains, and the sky, further aligns her character with the pastoral trope. Crucially, her idyllic description of nature is closely interlinked with her affirmations that she owes her happiness to labor. Nazeli exults: "Life is bringing me the light of the sunrise and days of labor;" "I found my happiness in labor. / I live a complete life."⁶⁸ Significantly, on several occasions, the Russian translation diverges from the Armenian text. For instance, the Armenian text reads: "You are in my heart, / my priceless grandfather," while the Russian translates it as "My labor is waiting for me, / our grand labor!" The skewed translation amplifies the importance of labor; the shift of the pronouns from "my" to "our" land advances the transformation of bourgeois individualism into socialist collectivism. As such, the Russian

aktivnogo, peredovogo cheloveka sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva. Etu ariiu mozhno nazvat' printsipial'noi udachei kompozitora."

⁶⁶ In general, I interpret the musical elements of the pastoral style in a more general sense than Leonard Ratner, for whom the pastoral is synonymous with Musette and is associated "with rustic music played on the bagpipe, cornemuse, or musette" and is distinguished by a sustained drone bass. Ratner, "Topics," in *Classical Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980), 9–28. Also see Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) and Danuta Mirka, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶⁷ For example, Bach's Pastorale in F major, BWV 590; Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony; Liszt's Transcendental Etude No. 3, "Paysage;" Berlioz's "*Scene aux Champs*," the third movement of the *Symphonie Fantastique*.

⁶⁸ Stepanyan, *The Heroine*, 11–12.

translation of the libretto represents a further layer of censorship of the text.⁶⁹ Nazeli's singing during her duet with her friend Gohar in Act IV presents another element of the pastoral trope,

Example 1. Transition from the F-major A section to the D-major drone in the middle section of Nazeli's aria, Stepanyan, *The Heroine*, Act II.

text-painting. When she sings of the Bohemian waxwing (*svirel'*), the accompaniment introduces a filigree that evokes birdsong. Here too, Nazeli's text continues to render an idyllic landscape:

⁶⁹ Jan Plamper develops the notion of translational “transposition” as another layer of censorship. Plamper, “Abolishing Ambiguity: Soviet Censorship Practices in the 1930s,” *Russian Review* 60, no. 4 (2001): 526–44.

Hey jan!
 Under the mountain ploughing is finished. [...]
 On my chest I wear a rose,
 On the mount I am ploughing the field.
 Here, hundreds of roses magnificently blossom,
Kolkhoznik love, glorious is our labor. (45–46)

Our harvest is plentiful, hey jan!
 Our native land magnificently blossoms,
 Life is wonderful, Hey jan! (48)

While Nazeli's representation is that of an unambiguous good socialist laborer, Vahan's character is equivocal: he is a hero of the war who exhibits non-heroic behaviors such as arrogantly rejecting Nazeli's love and refusing to lead the farmers in the sowing competition. Koval', for instance, critiqued the extreme vocal range of Vahan's singing part (which supposedly caused discomfort for the singer) and described Vahan's overall part: "The character of Vahan is unpleasant due to its coarseness; some of his ariosos are difficult to listen to because they are so abrupt and intonationally far-fetched."⁷⁰ This description of Vahan's music is rather similar to the language which Koval' and other censors used to describe bourgeois formalism. Formalistic elements that Stepanyan used for representing Vahan's erroneous behavior contribute to what I term the *demonizing trope*, which musically align him with "enemies of the people." Vahan's musical representation thus raised an ideological conundrum that perplexed the censors: the war hero was simultaneously an enemy of the people. In the changes to the initial libretto, an attempt to solve this contradiction is evident from the lines that are crossed out during the scene in which Vahan refuses to participate in the crops competition:

Everywhere on the battlefield he saw life full of heroism...
 What is he supposed to do here!
 Sow millet?!
 No, he has to live in the city:
 Only there he will find purpose.

⁷⁰ Koval', "Za vysokoe opernoe masterstvo," 42. "Obraz Vaana nepriiaten svoei grubost'iu; nekotorye ego arioso trudno slushat', nastol'ko oni rezki i intonatsionno nadumany."

~~Everyone is surprised.
Does Vahan really not see the gigantic growth of the socialist village
and the heroic labor of its people?!~~⁷¹

The crossed-out text reveals the true reason of why Vahan's behavior was faulty: he failed to unequivocally acknowledge the greatness of progress and modernization achieved in his village. Yet while this text was removed due to its excessive political directness, it resulted in Vahan's erratic behavior appearing unjustified to the audience. As Stepanyan promised, he "softened" Vahan by writing a song in which this character portrays qualities associated with proper socialist farmers. In an early version of the libretto, this Act III song, "On the Native Fields," is preceded by the following remark: "He [a farmer] knew that Vahan would come, for there is no life beyond the collective. ~~Vahan had to acknowledge the power of collective labor. He sings a lyrical *kolkhoz* song following Goar's request.~~"⁷² Now that he has repented, Vahan's music is less dissonant and angular, and is featured in the F-major pastoral key. As shown in Example 2, the opening fourteen bars of each strophe are sung above a tonic drone.⁷³ The text, unsurprisingly, follows pastoral idealization of nature, linking it with labor:

On the native fields,
There is a golden harvest.
Majestically has bloomed my native land,
My dear land.
Again, among the native mountains
There is a green space (*prostor*). Jan!
The streams of water flying off the mountains,
Flow to the distance of the summer heat.⁷⁴

⁷¹ The crossed-out text here and below appears in the 1950 libretto. NAA, 1393 4, no. 156. "Povsiudi na fronte videl on zhian', polnuiu geroizma... / Chto zh dolzhen on delat' zdes'! Ispytivat' novuiu pshenitsu?! Net, on dolzhen zhit' v gorode: lish' tam naidet on primeneniye sebe. / ~~Vse udivleny. Uzheli Vaan ne vidit gigantskogo rosta sotsial'nogo sila i geroicheskogo truda ego liudei?!~~"

⁷² Ibid. "On znal, chto Vaan pridet, ibo vne kollektiva net zhizni. Vaan dolzhen byl osoznat' silu kollektivnogo truda. Po pros'be Goar on poet liricheskuiu kolkhoznuu pesniu."

⁷³ After some harmonic activity in the middle of the strophe, the reinstated drone lasts for the remaining thirteen bars of the song.

⁷⁴ Stepanyan, *The Heroine*, 29–30.

of this hero.”⁷⁵ Although Vahan’s character is more pleasant in the lyrical pastoral *kolleboz* song, he is not fully redeemed until his reconciliation with Nazeli. In Act IV, the lovers sing a duet in the quintessential pastoral key, F major. The fact that they conjoin in this key indicates that whatever non-conformism Vahan initially expressed is now eliminated. Most crucially, the initial friction between the two types of heroes—a war veteran, who represents the state’s external political power, and a *kolleboz* laborer, who exemplifies the regime’s internal socialist order—is abolished. Both characters are now heroes, testifying to the Zhdanovist claim that in the conflictless socialist state the only possible conflict is “between good and best.”

Although within the libretto the conflict was resolved, the external conflict over *The Heroine*’s depiction of village life raged on. Specifically, the artistic committee members were concerned about the issue of realistic representation. “A Soviet piece can be realistic if it reflects life,” stated one critic; he found that Stepanyan’s depiction of life in a socialist village seemed to be coming “from a distorted mirror.”⁷⁶ Some commentators suggested that *The Heroine* did not do justice to Soviet labor; others feared that “because most of the labor processes are now mechanized, introducing tools such as a scythe or a sickle would reflect too much naturalism.”⁷⁷ Naturalism, according to Soviet critics, was an excessively realistic type of representation which bordered on vulgarity. This latter comment on avoiding naturalism is a cautious warning against repeating the mistakes of composers who were attacked in the 1936 and 1948 decrees. But more than that, it masks the true reason of why labor scenes could potentially be perceived as ideologically flawed: a scythe and a sickle were indeed often the tools of labor in the *kolleboz*, despite the claims that modernization was

⁷⁵ Koval’, “Za vysokoe opernoe masterstvo,” 41. “Naskol’ko izmeniaetsia otnoshenie slushatelei k Vaanu v III akte, kogda on sredi svoei utomsliaiushche kriklivoi, antivokal’noi partii neozhidanno nachinaet pet’ estestvennuui i iskrenniuiu pesniu! V etot moment nachinaesh’ vdrug verit’ v real’nost’ etogo geroia.”

⁷⁶ NAA, 1393 4, no. 43.

⁷⁷ Ibid. Protocol no. 11, from November 11, 1950. Signed by the director of the artistic committee A. Khandzhyan.

complete. Depicting labor realistically thus would reveal the lack of progress; hence, it was wise to avoid such scenes. As expected, in the second version, Stepanyan's additions of scenes with labor activities did not satisfy the committee: "the landscape in the stage design did not portray the new village, the new socialist order;" "the demonstration of the labor process in Act III [was] very primitive;" "the labor processes did not have anything in common with sowing, and should not be shown at all."⁷⁸ These remarks reveal the committee's anxiety that the opera will fail to illustrate progress and linear evolutionary development.

Censors critiqued the relationship between present and past in *The Heroine* because the idea of time was closely linked with socialist progress. They disliked the "intimate lyricism of the characters who too often turn to the past"⁷⁹ and demanded that characters sing about the present, not the past.⁸⁰ Specific types of reasserting the past, however, were permitted. *The Heroine*, for instance, reminds the audience of Russia's role in the fate of Armenian people. The early libretto featured the role of the Russian professor-agronomist who came to the village to deliver a lecture on the Armenui millet. Critics deemed this character's portrayal unsatisfactory and "simply uncomfortable" because they believed it was trivialized. As a result, the professor was entirely removed from the plot, making room for a better representative of the Russian State—Vahan's Russian combat friend Konstantin Smirnov, whose role was penciled into the cast list in an early 1950 draft of the libretto.⁸¹ In Act IV, Scene 2, before the celebration, the stage remarks indicate: "Sounds of a shepherd panpipe are heard from the distance; a pastoral intermezzo in the orchestra. [...] From afar, a march resounds, growing as the curtain rises."⁸² The direct reference to the pastoral trope in this remark, and its juxtaposition with the heroic march associated with Smirnov,

⁷⁸ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal'nyi teatr*, 91.

⁷⁹ NAA, 1393 4, no. 43.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ NAA, 1393 4, no. 157.

⁸² NAA, 1393 4, no. 154.

reenact a subtle version of the obligatory *deus ex machina* which reasserts Russia's messianic role in bringing progress and peace to rural Armenians. The chorus greets Smirnov: "From our entire souls, we greet you, comrade Smirnov! / Long live the Russian nation (*narod*), victorious, brave and great!"⁸³ Konstantin's glorification of Moscow is joined by the chorus:

Our wonderful Fatherland has stretched
From Northern ice to Southern latitudes;
Under the Stalinist sun,
It is strong and fearless,
It is the hope of the laboring and the bastion of the world.

Chorus: Our native land!
The world is truly proud
Of you, our fatherland, our land,
Of you, Moscow—
Our worthy capital,
Where there shine the stars of our native Kremlin!
We don't know a better and worthier share
Than to build and create for our nation's honor. [...]

The text redirects the gaze of the villagers towards the center, igniting a sense of awe for its aggrandized power. Smirnov's character thus does not merely appear to remind the audience of Russia's past involvement in Armenian history, but to secure continued faithfulness in and obedience to the authorities residing in Kremlin. The *deus ex machina* thus enforces the peripheral people's willingness to serve the center. Smirnov's aria transitions into a waltz, which further elevates his persona due to the noble connotations of this dance.⁸⁴ However, Koval' found Smirnov's aria unworthy of the task it was assigned to accomplish: "his gray 'mass' song is a formulaic tool that belittles the responsible theme of the friendship between the Armenian and Russian peoples."⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid. "Ot vsei dushi my privetstvuem tebia, tovarishch Smirnov! Da zdravstvuet russkii narod, pobedonosnyi, khrabryi i velikii!"

⁸⁴ Ibid., nos. 154 & 155.

⁸⁵ Koval', "Za vysokoe opernoe masterstvo," 43.

The artistic committee found the overall mood of the music in the opera unsatisfactory. One member complained about the minor mode in the opening of Aram's aria in Act II and argued that "the entire opera had to be constructed on optimism."⁸⁶ Another critic claimed that the problem was not the tonality of a single aria, but that the overall "tonus" of the opera was minor.⁸⁷ Musical considerations were also directed against the "Moonlit Night" chorus at the end of Act II, which is dedicated to the victims of war. Three members of the committee found this chorus "wonderful" but too sad and despondent, "as if suggesting that everyone is tired;" they recommended adding a big rejoicing scene with dances to balance out the gloomy mood.⁸⁸ The desirability of an overall positive, uplifting mood points to the opera's function as a conveyor of pervasive optimism. As the libretto states, its massive finale consists of a chorus which sings praises to Stalin and the Russian State: "Triumphantly resound praises to the inspirer and organizer of all victories of the Soviet Nation, STALIN."⁸⁹ This grand finale indicates Stepanyan's implementation of the committee's advice to conclude with a civic version of the finale as opposed to a lyrical one. The finale, thus, once again stresses the dominance of the collective well-being over the individual one.

On January 16, 1954, the director of the opera theater, Artak Tonikyan, sent a letter to the Armenia's Minister of Culture. In this letter, he argued that *The Heroine* should be removed from the repertoire because it "does not fulfill the goals for art workers that were outlined during the nineteenth meeting of the Central Party and does not represent a full-fledged ideologically-artistic

⁸⁶ NAA, 1393 4, no. 154. The same commentator, Anoushavan Ter-Gevondyan, also stated that the bells ring too often. This comment is most likely warning against creating excessive religious associations.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ During the 1952 discussions of revisions, G. G. Tigranov similarly recommended including dance scenes that would represent "the manifold dances of the Armenian people" in order to "relieve the sorrowful mood inflicted by the requiem." Dance music comprises its own trope in Soviet opera. It is a straightforward way of injecting the required "national in form."

⁸⁹ The 1950 libretto stated: "Solemnly resounds glory to the mastermind and organizer of all victories of the Soviet state, STALIN" (*Torzhestvenno zvuchit slava vdokhnoviteliu i organizatoru vseh pobed Sovetskoi Strany, STALINU*), NAA, 1393 4, no. 156.

work that can satisfy the growing spiritual-aesthetic demands of Soviet people.”⁹⁰ What Tonikyan masked behind this vague justification is the fact that following Stalin’s death in 1953 many of this opera’s ideological commitments were no longer obligatory under the changing regime. Following a period of turbulent competition for power in Moscow, Nikita Khrushchev became the leader of the USSR in 1955. In his “Secret Speech,” which he gave during the Party’s Twentieth Congress (February of 1956), he denounced Stalin’s brutality and cult of personality and initiated the so-called “Thaw” period of Soviet history. Although “The Thaw” politics condemned mass terror and seemingly eased censorship restrictions, Khrushchev ultimately inherited and practiced the previous regime’s totalitarian state control. In cultural matters, critics reevaluated works written under Stalin’s rule.⁹¹ Writing about *The Heroine* in the post-Stalin years, for instance, Tigranov critiqued its “weak musical dramaturgy”⁹² and omitted the dithyrambs to Stalin in the finale from the official version of the libretto: “The act ends with a celebration dedicated to the plentiful harvest. Among the guests is Vahan’s combat friend, Konstantin Smirnov. Songs and dances begin. Everyone praises the Fatherland, the victory against the enemy, and the success in labor.”⁹³ The mention of Stalin was also cautiously eliminated in the 1954 protocol that ordered the removal of the opera from the theater’s repertoire.

With the changing of political leadership, the search for an opera on the contemporary theme continued. Critics continued to address “the contemporary Soviet theme” in media with articles such as “The theatre solves the new theme.”⁹⁴ They did, however, recognize and openly

⁹⁰ NAA, 1393, 2, no. 55.

⁹¹ To address “the mistakes” of Zhdanov’s 1936 and 1948 decrees, the state issued “Ob ispravlenii oshibok dopushchennykh v otsenke oper *Velikaia druzhba*, *Ot vsego serdtsa*, *Bogdan Khmel’nitskii*” (On correcting the mistakes made during the evaluation of operas *The Great Friendship*, *From All My Heart*, *Bogdan Khmel’nitskii*) (28 April, 1958).

⁹² Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal’nyi teatr*, 121.

⁹³ Ibid., 296.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 258. From a Russian ballerina’s review of Yegiazarian’s ballet in *Sovetskaia kul’tura* 66 (1956).

denounce some of the previous regime's demands related to this genre. First, as Tigranov noted, the "false theory of [historical] distance" interfered with the development because many authors only reached to historical plots.⁹⁵ Next, "the false theory of conflictlessness, which denied the possibility of conflicts and negative heroes in Soviet reality, and thus produced the creation of works in which there was an unnaturally smoothed, varnished reality, removed from the reality of live struggle of our time."⁹⁶ Lastly, the cult of Stalin and the decrees that his regime produced hindered the development of operas on Soviet themes. The continued search for the perfect Soviet opera faced a new challenge of reconciliation between various layers of Soviet history.⁹⁷

Collectivism and Individualism in Babayev's *The Eagle's Fortress*

The Heroine's fate taught composers a lesson on the problematic nature of operas about "contemporary reality," in which it was impossible to create dramatic conflict in an ideologically appropriate way. Instead of attempting to solve the problem of contemporaneous conflict, Babayev, in *The Eagle's Fortress*, turned to an earlier period of Soviet history and staged conflict in the 1930s collectivization years. Reflecting on the origins of his opera, Babayev wrote: "To write an opera on the theme of contemporary life was my longtime dream. I dedicated all my past efforts to this goal."⁹⁸ The turn to 1930s as an exemplification of "contemporary life" was a strategic decision

⁹⁵ Gorky wrote, "The ease of critical depiction of the past directs authors astray from the necessity of depicting the grandiose phenomena and processes of the present. [...] Because young authors don't have means powerful enough to imbue (*vnushit*) hatred towards the past in the reader, they [...] fixate and conserve the past in the memory of the readers instead of repelling them from it." Gorky, "O sotsialisticheskoi realizme."

⁹⁶ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal'nyi teatr*, 276.

⁹⁷ Frolova-Walker argues that the search for a model Soviet opera ended in 1946 with the revival of Glinka's *Life for the Tsar*. Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. *Ivan Susanin*," *The Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 181–216.

⁹⁸ *Kommunist*, December 14, 1957, "Osushchestvleniia mehta." Cited in Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal'nyi teatr*, 259–60. The composer also commented on the musical language of the opera: "Before I began writing *The Eagle's Fortress*, I diligently studied the musical heritage of my native Armenian people, I strove to more closely approach its roots that served as the basis for the wonderful works of Komitas,

which justified the existence of villains, *kulaks*, because they represented remnants of pre-Soviet class struggle. One critic approved this choice, stating that “The libretto has sufficient conflict.”⁹⁹ In addition, the plot’s focus on labor satisfied Khrushchev’s demands for art that took part in communist education of laborers.¹⁰⁰

The Eagle’s Fortress is named after the eponymous Armenian village, Artsvaberd, where the action of the opera takes place. This specific village represents kolkhoz life in the years of collectivization across the USSR. As such, it has to exemplify an ideal and generalized *locus amoenus* (beautiful place), a term used in literary studies for pastoral locales. The action unfolds during Soviet collectivization in 1930s over the background of “a harsh and majestic mountainous nature.”¹⁰¹ Act I of the opera opens with the malicious killing of Karo, a *komsomolets* (member of Komsomol, The Communist Union of Youth), who was on duty guarding the *kolkhoz* hay. Accompanied by a thunderstorm, this event symbolizes the main conflict of the opera: the good proletarians’ resistance against the wrongdoings of evil former *kulaks*. Stabbed by Sarkis, son of a *kulak*, Karo heroically protects the hay (set on fire by Sarkis), shielding it with his own body. In the next scene, Sarkis admits to Avo (a formerly rich peasant) that he killed Karo and vows revenge on the Bolsheviks who confiscated his family’s riches and put his father in jail. Sarkis admits that he wants to kill Ruben, the chair of the kolkhoz. Avo’s niece, Shushan, overhears the conversation but is pressured by Avo to remain silent. In Act II, Shushan admits her feelings to Karo, but he tells her that he loves Maro—the deceased *komsomolets* Karo’s sister. In Act III, a May celebration unfolds in the *kolkhoz*. Amidst these celebrations, Toros, an elderly *kolkhoznik* who is a former Red partisan,

Spendiaryan, Melikyan, Tigranyan. I wanted to combine the two traditions of Armenian opera: the songfulness, melodiousness of Tigranyan’s *Anush* and the high professionalism symphonism of Spendiarov’s *Almast*.”

⁹⁹ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal’nyi teatr*, 269.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 282.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 260.

reminisces about fighting the Dashnaks. This scene yields to a triumphant chorus “Tale on Lenin,” which culminates with a public double accusation of Ruben: Shushan accuses him of being dishonest toward her, while Avo accuses him of killing Karo. The crowd is shaken by this news and expels Ruben from the village. In the final act, just as the judgment of Ruben is supposed to take place in the court, a group of *komsomol'tsy* appears with the real killer, Sarkis. Shushan reveals to everyone that Ruben is innocent. The crowd is relieved and departs, leaving Ruben and Maro alone. The couple sings a love duet.

Kulaks, in Stalin’s vision, posed a major challenge for the implementation of collectivization. They were peasants who after the 1861 abolition of serfdom became affluent enough to own their own land and to hire workers to cultivate that land. Denouncing their actions of resistance as counterrevolutionary, Stalin proclaimed them enemies of the people and commanded the elimination of the *kulak* class in a 1930 article in *Krasnaia zvezda* (Red Star).¹⁰² This brutal process of elimination was termed dekulakization (*raskulachivanie*). According to it, the wealthiest *kulaks* were filed under first category and were sentenced to death; approximately 400 thousand were killed.¹⁰³ Those who were assigned to the second category of *kulaks*, nearly 2.5 million people, were sent to labor camps for “re-education.”¹⁰⁴ During the forced resettlements, thousands of *kulaks* died of starvation, epidemics, and unbearable living conditions. The peasants who remained in the villages were actively recruited into *kolkhozy* by special propaganda groups. Those who refused to join and participated in rebellions were brutally crushed by the Red Army. During the eighth meeting of the Armenian Congress, Party members announced that small peasant farms were “transported into the tracks of socialist development” and the main problem, “the elimination of *kulachestvo*,” was

¹⁰² Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). Also see Stalin, “K voprosu o likvidatsii kulachestva kak klassa” (On the question of eliminating kulaks as a class) *Krasnaia zvezda* 18 (January 21, 1930).

¹⁰³ Denisova, *Rural Women*, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

resolved.¹⁰⁵ What was not mentioned at the meeting was the fact that in Armenia, as in thousands of villages across the USSR, collectivization resulted in mass famines, protests, and deaths not only among the *kulaks*, but also among the peasants who resisted joining *kolkhozy*.

The central conflict of *The Eagle's Fortress* unravels around *kolkhozniks* and former *kulaks*. Subtle musical and textual details, however, complicate the facile division of characters into two opposing poles. On one hand, certain individual characters of the opera fit squarely into this division: the chair of the *kolkhoz* Ruben is a proper socialist, while former *kulaks*, Sarkis and Avo, are evil traitors. Musically, this dichotomy is clearly marked. For instance, Tigranov has shown that Ruben's music is based on the Revolutionary song "*Varshavianka*," connecting him with the Bolshevik Revolutionary past and asserting him as a unilateral Party-minded leader.¹⁰⁶ While Ruben's musical representation is unambiguously heroic, that of the former *kulaks* Sarkis and Avo is unambiguously evil. These two characters are portrayed using what I call the *demonization of the enemy* trope, which Babayev achieves through using a leitmotif consisting of chromatically transposed parallel thirds. This leitmotif of evil characterizes *kulaks* who "set the bread on fire and shed blood."¹⁰⁷ The collective of the farmers, on the other hand, does not always exemplify positive characteristics. This plays a critical role in contributing ambivalence to the simple class opposition between *kolkhozniks* and *kulaks* that officials established in historical accounts of collectivization. Two scenes, in particular, illustrate points of resistance from the mass of farmers and, as I argue,

¹⁰⁵ *S"ezdy soiuзов Armenii*, 185. The eighth meeting of the Congress took place in 1935.

¹⁰⁶ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal'nyi teatr*, 268. The song was also cited in E. Khagagortyan's ballet *Sona* and in Stepanyan's *Lusabatsin*. Ibid., 271. Representation of women in Soviet operas is an interesting theme. For instance, Maro's lament for her dead brother is a pastoral elegy, "a subgenre that uses pastoral elements to lament a death or loss." Shushan's music, according to Tigranov, exemplifies "intonations of church music, as if highlighting the religiosity of the downtrodden girl's consciousness." Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 89.

points of political critique on behalf of the opera's authors. In these scenes, the behavior of the mass undergoes transformations from content and submissive to exasperated and skeptical.

The mass of *kollehozniks* first appears in Act I, following Ruben's off-stage singing. The libretto introduces them, stating that once Ruben comes to stage, "*kollehozniks*, who are going to field work, gradually gather and pick up his song."¹⁰⁸ The collective does indeed "pick up" the defining motive of its leader's song: a characteristic gesture from Armenian folk music that consists of an ascending second followed by a descending third. Example 3 shows how this motive migrates from the ending of Ruben's song in F-sharp minor to the entrance of the chorus in D-flat major.¹⁰⁹ In the chorus, similar to the translation divergences in *The Heroine*, the Russian text skews the meaning of the Armenian words: "Light has opened to the world, / Light in the fields and the mountains" is translated as "The sun is shining, the field is green, / The faithful plow ploughs the soil."¹¹⁰ Once again, what in the original text depicts a pastoral depiction of the landscape, in the translation amplifies the motif of labor, heightening the opera's edifying role as a promoter of diligent, hard-working farmers. Moreover, the new pastoral landscape eliminates the exotic (to Russians) motif of the mountains, literally deterritorializing the Armenian setting as an all-Russian one (green fields).

The chorus's portrayal of an idyllic life of farmers, however, does not last long. Grigor, listed in the cast as "an old peasant," interrupts the collective contentedness, greeting Ruben and throwing his mattock: "You've appeared? / Great! Take it and toil, / And I will look!" In this shift from chorus to recitative, the momentarily unstable tonality yields to G minor, which is implied through its dominant chord. Although the crowd condemns Grigor's disgraceful gesture, he continues to express his discontent: "We don't have bread at home, / My children are hungry, / I am hungry... /

¹⁰⁸ Andrey Babayev, *Artsvaberd* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1967), 41.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 42, reh. 38.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

(Рубен է դուրս գալիս Բուրժուէզ: Նրա հայտնվելուն պէս հաճաքում են դաշտային աշխատանքի գնացող կոլեզնիկայինները: Նրանք ձայնակցում են Բուրժուէզին:)
(Рубен входит на сцену. При его появлении постепенно собираются колхозники, идущие на полевые работы. Колхозники подхватывают песню Рубена.)

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system shows Ruben's solo with the lyrics: "руч - я, ты-вс. на, ты-лю. бовь, жизнь мо. я!". The second system, marked with a box and the number 43, shows the Chorus (Хор) taking over the melody. The third system continues the Chorus with the lyrics: "на - шот, вер - ный, плуг, лю - ди, вы - шли". Boxed annotations in the original score indicate the migration of Ruben's motive into the chorus.

Example 3. Ruben's aria transitioning into the chorus of *kolkhozniks* in Act I of *The Eagle's Fortress*. The boxed annotations indicate Ruben's motive which migrates into the chorus.

What kind of *kolkhoz*, what kind of labor? / Down with your *kolkhoz*!'' (45–46). The orchestra accompanies his dramatic text, developing the dotted-rhythm motive of resistance. As shown in

Example 4, tonally, Grigor's plea is intensified by the motive's stark statement in F-sharp minor, which creates an abrupt, momentary withdrawal from the G-minor context. A group of *serednyaki* (the peasant class between rich *kulaks* and poor peasants), supports Grigor, exclaiming that he is speaking the truth. The shouts of *serednyaki* are accompanied by the return of the D dominant harmony. This turbulent buildup of G minor, however, is quickly halted as Ruben interrupts it, effortlessly raising the D up by semitone to D-sharp. This interruption results in the inability of the D dominant in second inversion to resolve to the expected first-inversion G-minor tonic. Ruben's assertion of the B-major harmony is accentuated by a glissando in the orchestra and a crescendo that culminates with *fortissimo*. Supporting Ruben's repression of the farmers, Toros states that in their complaints they are merely repeating the words of "the enemies of the *kolkhozs*." The chorus immediately repeats Toros's words, "Truly! The enemies of the *kolkhozs*!" (reh. 63 in Example 4). Although the text illustrates the chorus's sudden complacency, tonally, this remark is accompanied by a final attempt to reach G minor. The music thus points at the farmers' mistrust, even though it does not achieve a G-minor resolution. Ruben takes over, singing about the enemies of the *kolkhozs*, which is accompanied by a modulation to D minor (reh. 64 in Example 4). In this scene, a new relationship emerges between the individual and the collective. Ruben, as the chair of the *kolkhozs*, does not embody the collective that he leads. Rather, he is a representative of authority which is detested by the collective.

A similar clash between the individual and the collective occurs in Act III, which opens with the chorus of *kolkhozniks* celebrating a May holiday. The chorus exuberantly praises nature, emphasizing the beauty of the land and inviting mountains and fields to sing along. Following the chorus, two numbers titled "couplets" recall moments from early years of Soviet life. In the first, "The Couplets of the Yalanchi," a *yalanchi* (Russian *skomorokh*) makes sardonic remarks about the fate of *kulaks*:

48

62

Г. Т. *f*
 [Russian lyrics]
 A group of *serednyaki*
 [Russian lyrics]
 The motive of resistance

С. Т. *f*
 [Russian lyrics]
 Ruben
 [Russian lyrics]

Хор *f*
 [Russian lyrics]

63

Г. Т. *f*
 [Russian lyrics]

С. Т. *f*
 [Russian lyrics]

Хор *f*
 [Russian lyrics]

64 Andante con fuoco

Г. Т. *f*
 [Russian lyrics]

С. Т. *f*
 [Russian lyrics]

Хор *f*
 [Russian lyrics]

Example 4. The motive of resistance in Act I of *The Eagle's Fortress*.

There are no more *kulaks* in the village,
 What will happen now with the poor peasants?
 They all sing and dance out of grief,
 But don't call the rich *kulaks* back!
 Where are you now, *kulaks*?
 Our life without you is not profitable—
 Who is going to drink our blood?
 Without you we will grieve for a century!”¹¹¹

It is significant that this character is named after Medieval Kievan Rus street minstrel performers, *skomorokhi*, who were persecuted by the state and the church for their political critique of leadership.

As illustrated in Example 5, the *yalanchi*'s remarks begin over a repeated C-major tonic arpeggiation

¹¹¹ Babayev, *Artsvaberd*, 126–27. The designation of this character as a *yalanchi*—a Turkic word for liar—is also telling.

ՅԱՆՉԻ
18 ЯЛАНЧИ

Ձմ. նմ. զմն, նր, Ձմ. նմ. զմն, Ձմ. նմ. զմն, ին - թր զմ. զմն,
За. на. зан, ай, За. на. зан, я. зы. ком двор под. ме. ла,
նշր Կեր. Թմն զմ. զմն - զմ. զմն, Ձմ. նմ. զմն,
со. бя. рать сплет. ни по. шла - на. бра. ла
Հա, Հա, Հա, Հա, Հա,
Ха - Ха - Ха - Ха - Ха!
Հա, Հա, Հա, Հա, Հա,
Ха - Ха - Ха - Ха - Ха!
Հա, Հա, Հա, Հա, Հա,
Ха - Ха, Ха - Ха - Ха!
1963

Example 5. “The Couplets of the Yalanchi” in Act III of *Artsvaber*.

in the bass, but are interjected with villagers’ enthusiastic bursts of laughter, which smirch the diatonic major mode by introducing a root-position Neapolitan chord.¹¹²

In the second number, “The Humorous Couplets of Toros,” Toros is asked by the village youth to retell how he “crushed the *Dashnaks* and cleverly captured ministers” during the revolutionary years. Toros begins his couplets recounting the instructions he received from a commissar: “It was the brutal year of 1920... / The commissar gave me a task: ‘Friend, Toros, take a rifle, surround and crush the Dashnaks! You must put the bandits into a sack/ And capture the main

¹¹² Ibid.

ministers!”¹¹³ Toros then recounts that having not found any ministers, he was afraid of the commissar’s reaction and, after days of persistent searching, at last saw six ministers. At this point, one of the youths interferes and reminds Toros that during his last retelling he mentioned only two ministers, not six. In reaction to this comment, the crowd shouts: “Stop trying to clarify! Shut up, chatterbox! Don’t interfere!” As Toros resumes his couplets, this time he increases the number of ministers to ten.¹¹⁴

This scene vividly exemplifies three absurd practices of the Soviet historiography. First, it shows that even where facts that would support the desired official narrative were missing, they were invented and inserted regardless of their accuracy (Toros did not see any ministers but had to search harder to locate them in order to please the commissar). Next, it illustrates that it was impossible to resist the official narrative: any individual attempts to correct misreported historical facts were suppressed by the conforming collective (the young man’s attempt to clarify the accurate number of captured ministers is vanquished by the crowd). Lastly, and most importantly, Toros’s couplets lambaste the politics of difference implemented by the Bolsheviks. This politics implemented propaganda that demonized Dashnaks in order to subdue nationalist sentiments among Armenian people and secure their obedience to the new Socialist regime.

Musically, this threefold critique is achieved by transforming Toros from a wise old peasant (the way he appears prior to the couplets) into a *basso buffo* character. His singing features repetitions of B♭, stated over a static harmonic E♭-minor tonic, with a characteristic quarter-note-eight-note rhythmic pattern within the 6/8 meter signature. As illustrated in Example 6, the endings of the brief instrumental interludes, which appear between the refrains, contribute to the

¹¹³ Ibid., 133–34.

¹¹⁴ This scene culminates in the acknowledgement of Lenin. Babayev, 142. In the chorus, “Skaz o Lenine” (A tale about Lenin), Lenin is likened to the sun: “he brought light, life, and warmth.” Tigranov, 263.

ТОРОС

29 *mf*

Эй!

Эй, сом-ни-те, круг тес-но-е, рас-ска-жу я, как су-ме-ю!

30

Эх!

31 *p*

Octatonic scale

"Wrong" dominant

Шел су-ро-вый

год два-д-ца-тый...

Дал мне ко-мис-сар за-да-чу:

Example 6. *Basso buffo* features in Toros's couplets from Act III of *Arstveder*: repetitive pitch content over a tonic pedal and the octatonic scale leading to the "wrong" dominant.

grotesqueness of the music: after excessive restatements of the Eb-minor tonic, two statements of a descending octatonic passage land on a B-minor chord, which sounds like the “wrong” dominant within the Eb-minor context. While in the couplets of *yalanchi* and *Toros* the text offers a critique of the regime, the light, humorous associations of the music allow this critique to maintain the optimistic façade of the village celebration. In other words, where the text finds fault with the idyllic content mandated by socialist realism, musical form remains within its expressive confines and conceals non-conformism. But whereas in *yalanchi*’s couplets the crowd uniformly supports his sarcastic comments, in *Toros*’s couplets an individual voice stands out from the crowd with an attempt to correct the falsification of history.

Following socialist realist demands, the civic line in the opera had to prevail over the personal drama of the characters.¹¹⁵ In *The Eagle’s Fortress*, this is evident on several occasions. For instance, in his arioso, *Toros* confronts *Ruben* when the latter flirts with women: “We have entered a deadly fight for our freedom, / And you are playing love, / You don’t care about us!”¹¹⁶ In Act II, *Ruben* realigns with his civic mission as he sings “I am devoted to the farm until death.”¹¹⁷ However, unlike *The Heroine*, *The Eagle’s Fortress* does not end with a grand civic finale. As one critic noted, its finale “is solved not in a cut-and-dry apotheotic-ceremonial mode (“trafaretnom apofeožno-torzhestvennom plane”), but very poetically and softly.”¹¹⁸ This ending is a form of political critique and resistance against socialist realism. The finale’s turn to the emotional side of the characters’ lives

¹¹⁵ Bullock addresses the problem of political vs. personal representation of emotional lives of protagonists. For instance, the character of Grigorii Melekhov in *The Quiet Don* is an “embodiment of the journey to consciousness.” “The opera simplified this diversity [of the various accounts of socialism], establishing a party line where none existed and imposing a clear Stalinist teleology on the chaos of history.” Bullock, “Staging Stalinism,” 103.

¹¹⁶ Babayev, *Artsvaberd*, 88–89.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹¹⁸ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal’nyi teatr*, 265.

undermines the teleology of progress. Moreover, as one review of the opera suggests, its plot does not only portray the positive aspects of Soviet life: “[the opera shows] the striving toward a constructive (*sozidatel’nyi*) life and the severe struggle, difficulties, and sacrifices that it takes.”¹¹⁹

These features of Babayev’s opera, as well as the hints of political resistance on behalf of multiple characters that I addressed above, exemplify the more favorable political climate of The Thaw.

However, instances of continuity between the Stalinist and Khrushchevian regimes are evident in Babayev’s opera. For instance, the absent Stalin cult in *The Eagle’s Fortress* is merely replaced by the reinstated Lenin cult.¹²⁰

This chapter shows that the search for an opera on the contemporary Soviet theme persisted across shifting political regimes. Although *The Eagle’s Fortress* was more successful than *The Heroine*—the former was performed 95 times at the Speniaryan Opera Theatre, while the latter only 14—it also failed to satisfy the censors’ expectations of realism.¹²¹ As one critic noted, the staging “suffered from excessive everydayness that conflicted with Babayev’s romantically heightened, emotional music.”¹²² Composers, librettists, and directors were not able to settle the tension between the realistic mode of representation and the content that it was meant to depict. Just like the agrarian revolution, which was an illusory achievement, the “opera laboratory” never succeeded in producing

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 261. “Stremlenie k sozidatel’noi zhizni, surovuiu bor’bu za nee i sopriazhennye s nei trudnosti i zhertvy.”

¹²⁰ 1393 2, no. 64. From a 1956 protocol. This remark was made during a discussion of the ballet *Zare na vstrechu*. “Konchit’ spektakl’ ne pokhoronnoi muzykoi, a na bol’shem mazhore, esli dazhe na stsene trup Lusik.”

¹²¹ 1393 5, no. 18. “Spectators and Earnings.”

¹²² Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal’nyi teatr*, 270.

a perfect socialist-realist product which fully met the demands of the state and satisfied the taste of the audience.¹²³

As I argued in the first chapter, operas with historical plots were instrumental in the Soviet state's project of historical revisionism that sought to replace inconvenient truths with fraudulent "facts" in order to establish peripheral nations' retrospective trust in the Russian Empire's benevolent mission. While operas on historical plots continuously reinserted reminders of the grim past, those on "the contemporary theme" portrayed the new plentiful and happy socialist present. Yet a complete break from the past was impossible. As Kevin M. F. Platt argues, the old and the new realms collided in socialist interpretations of temporality.¹²⁴ Although operas on the Soviet theme were supposed to focus on the present, they continued to incorporate flashbacks of the past, revealing the impossibility of reconciling historical reality with fabricated contemporary actuality. Operas on the *kolleboz* life reinvented the ancient pastoral genre, through which they praised nature and romanticized the rustic locale of the village in order to associate labor with picturesque, positive atmosphere. By emphasizing the affinity between nature and labor, operatic libretti thus glorified, idealized, elevated, and promoted labor. At stake was the very representation of labor: it transformed from an act of arduous toil into a light, desirable, enjoyable, and elevated pastime.

But the reality of a Soviet *kolleboz* was much grimmer than its pastoral operatic (re)presentation: after the forced collectivization, farmers were practically peasants who had few rights, did not own land, and were expected to tirelessly work for the benefit of urban inhabitants. In the pastoral idyll of the opera, where the shepherd was costumed into the *kolleboznik*, the village was no longer juxtaposed with the city because supposedly the rural village had been modernized.

¹²³ As Bullock puts it, Soviet opera's "ambitions were simply unrealistic and ultimately unrealizable." Bullock, "Staging Stalinism," 107.

¹²⁴ Kevin M. Platt, *Greetings Pushkin: Stalinist Cultural Politics and the Russian National Bard* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016).

Indeed, whereas in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* choruses of peasants served as mere background for an esoteric drama, in Soviet operas, the farmers became protagonists. Whereas the people at the end of Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* were left speechless, in Soviet operas they were literally given a voice. Yet the relationship between the urban and rural societies remained fraught. Operas on the contemporary Soviet theme reveal the paradoxical nature of this relationship: despite bureaucratic efforts to attract proletarians to the opera house, opera audiences still mainly consisted of the intelligentsia. One critic reflected on this issue during an artistic committee meeting at the Spendiaryan Opera Theatre: "So we invest all of our efforts, but the audience does not attend our spectacles. From this we conclude that we do not satisfy the public. Our theatre (with the exception of operas *Anush* and *Almast*) serves a certain contingent of the public (the intelligentsia); obviously, we do not satisfy this contingent of high culture."¹²⁵ This statement shows that failure to produce a perfect opera on a Soviet theme embodies the very failure of socialist claims about class equality. In an evaluation of Armenian operas, Tigranov wrote: "Mastery is not only the musical-technological erudition of the composer, it is a worldview (*mirovovzъrencheskaya*), aesthetic category. It is tied with the depth of the apprehension (*poznanie*) and reflection on people's lives."¹²⁶ These words hint at the social gap that separated urban intellectuals from rural toilers. Despite the attempts to bridge class inequality and to portray idyllic conditions of village life in operatic plots, the elite composer remained distant from the reality of *kolkhoz*, just like the *kolkhozniks* remained removed from the allure of the opera house. Despite the state's enormous efforts to make opera accessible to the

¹²⁵ 1393 2, no. 53. "Protocols of meetings of the artistic committee from 1953." "Znachit my otdaem vse sily, no spektakli ne poseshchaiutsia. Otsiuda vyvod—my ne udovletvoriaem publiku. Nash teatr (krome spektaklei *Anush* i *Almast*) obsluzhivaet opredelennyi contingent publiky (intelleghentsiiu); vot etot contingent vysokoi kul'tury, ochevidno, my ne udovletvoriaem."

¹²⁶ Tigranov, *Armianskii muzykal'nyi teatr*, 280.

masses, it remained a bourgeois art form.¹²⁷ Similar to the early pastoral paradigm, which evoked a retreat to an ideal destination, the socialist pastoral offered a peek into the abundant lives of farmers who blossomed in nature. The bucolic idyll allowed the state to maintain the urban Soviet audience's trust in the benevolent mission and messianic power of socialism.

An elite genre, opera persisted as a form of statecraft. It concealed the enormous sacrifices that were made during the modernization process, which was entangled in the Soviet empire-building claims of progress. During the second congress of the Armenian Party, when one commentator attempted to defend the rights of *kulaks*, another one, “accompanied by thunderous applause of the entire congress,” objected by stating that “the construction of one small canal is a grander task than slaughter (*izbienie*) of hundreds of thousands of people.”¹²⁸ Offering a skewed (re)presentation of reality to the intelligentsia opera-goers, the socialist realism in the operas on *kollehoz* life became a cover-up for the reality of the gruesome village life.

¹²⁷ For instance, in 1933, the Bolshoi attempted to attract factory shock workers. Iv. Remezov, “Massovaia rabota s rabochim zritelem,” *Sovetskaia muzyka* 2, no. 4 (April 1934): 94–96. Cited in Bullock, “Staging Stalinism,” 88.

¹²⁸ *S"ezdy soiuзов Armenii*, 48. The statement was made during the second meeting of the Congress, November, 1922.

Chapter 3. From Steppe to Stage: Racialization and the Making of the First Kazakh National Opera

A great many peoples in other parts of the world did not become happier or better from their rapprochement with the Europeans. Some have disappeared, others have been enslaved; most of them have lost the many joys of life, partly from the destruction of their moral self-consciousness, partly from the decrease of their livelihood. [...]
Every sudden change that requires coercion affects people murderously.
—Karl Ernst von Baer, address to the Russian Geographic Society¹

In mid-September 1932 Langston Hughes, the American poet and pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance, boarded the Moscow-Tashkent express train for Central Asia. During his four-month journey, he documented the contrast between “the South” of the United States and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—“the dusty, colored, cotton-growing South” of the Soviet Union.² In his travelogue, published in 1934, Hughes enthusiastically recalled: “Now I am riding South from Moscow and am not Jim-Crowed, and none of the darker people on the train with me are Jim-Crowed, so I make a happy mental note in the back of my mind to write home to the Negro papers: ‘There is no Jim Crow on the trains of the Soviet Union.’”³ During his train ride, Hughes made a brief stop in Kazakhstan to participate in the fortieth anniversary of the Russian writer Maxim Gorky’s literary

¹ Baer was an anthropologist, geographer, and embryologist who co-founded the Imperial Russian Geographical Society. Baer, “Ob etnograficheskikh issledovaniiax voobshche i v Rossii v osobennosti,” in *Zapiski russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*, 93–115 (Saint Petersburg: IRGO, 1846). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

² Cited in David Chioni Moore, “Colored Dispatches from the Uzbek Border: Langston Hughes’ Relevance, 1933–2002,” *Callaloo* 25, no. 4 (2002): 1117. Cotton from Central Asia provided one of the largest cash crops in the Soviet economy. Its agriculture involved child labor and led to the drying of the Aral Sea and the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers.

³ Langston Hughes, *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia* (Moscow-Leningrad: Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, 1934), 7. In addition to praising communists’ achievement of racial equality, Hughes also commended “progressive” developments such as cultivation of literacy, emancipation of Muslim women, and obliteration of religion as a means toward class egalitarianism. On the political significance of Black American presence in post-Stalinist USSR, see Brigid O’Keeffe’s “A Cold War Cold Case: What Huldah Clark Can Teach Us About Teaching Soviet History,” *Slavic Review* 80 (2021): 299–306.

career.⁴ The reason for the brevity of Hughes's stop in Kazakhstan stemmed from the tragic mass famine that struck this Central-Asian nation as a result of Stalin's forced collectivization.⁵ It was amidst this famine, in August of 1933 (a little less than a year after Hughes's visit), that a young Russian composer of Jewish ethnicity, Yevgeny Brusilovsky, travelled from Moscow to Almaty, the freshly minted capital of Kazakhstan (then Kyrgyz ASSR).⁶ Unlike Hughes, who described his train ride in a positive light, Brusilovsky would write about the anxiety and doubts that he experienced during the five-day train journey. In his *Memoirs*, published posthumously in the Kazakh journal *Prostor*, Brusilovsky wrote:

The mysterious unknown future created a feeling of tense and alert anticipation. A non-Leningrad-like starry sky, a steppe sky rich in herbal scents, a strange, fast, incomprehensible language, lights and foreign people in semi-darkness—all of these provoked a sense of uncertainty, and for the first time I inwardly asked myself the nervous question: 'And where has the devil carried you, Yevgeny Borisovich? What were you missing in Leningrad?'⁷

Why, exactly, did Brusilovsky travel to the distant city where, according to him, "one usually went not from good life, nor always following a personal wish, and not so much to live but to serve a sentence"?⁸ As there were no ethnic Kazakh composers with Western musical education, the

⁴ Hughes, *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia*, 11.

⁵ Interpreted as genocide by some scholars, the famine caused the death of an estimated one million Kazakhs in 1932–33. See Sarah Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁶ Brusilovsky (1905–81) attended the Moscow Conservatory (1922–24) and the Leningrad Conservatory, from which he graduated in 1931 with a degree in composition (class of Maximilian Steinberg, who also taught Shostakovich). The capital was relocated from Kzyl-Orda to Almaty in 1929, following the decision of the state announced at the 1927 Sixth Congress of People's deputies. For a detailed account of the many relocations of the Kazakh capital in the twentieth century, see Nari Shelekpáyev, "Astana as Imperial Project?: Kazakhstan and Its Wandering Capital City in the Twentieth Century," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2018): 157–89. Shelekpáyev points out that the 1939 census documented only 25,601 ethnic Kazakhs among the 230,503 total population of Almaty and that Kazakhs represented a minority of Almaty's population through the remainder of the Soviet times.

⁷ Yevgeny Brusilovsky, "Vospominaniia," *Prostor* 9 (1997): 53.

⁸ His personal reasons can be gleaned from his own testimony. First, he admitted that as a young man he dreamt of collecting and preserving Jewish national culture but was advised by a senior Jewish composer that such a project would not be politically feasible. Second, he realized that his name would most likely not appear in the compendium of great Russian composers: "All the more so, who needs me in Russian music, and what can I do in this difficult situation? Here, even without me, there are plenty of

Leningrad Union of Composers sent Brusilovsky to Almaty to provide “patronage assistance” in the making of professional Kazakh national music.⁹ If we find in Hughes’s words an absence of racial divide, Brusilovsky’s reference to “foreign people in semidarkness” alerts us to a rather different picture—one of the Soviet state’s discriminating attitudes toward its ethnic and racial minorities.¹⁰

While historians have reckoned with the imperial and colonial context of the formation of the Soviet Union, the interconnections of ethnicity, nationality, and race in communist imperial and colonial practices have yet to be critically assessed. Under the Soviet regime, much as during the time of tsarist Russia, race was not a legally defined category. Rather, it emerged as a slippery concept that could imply “biology, inheritance, phenotype, civilization, environment, geography.”¹¹ Beginning with the 1930s, the Soviet state distinguished itself from the “zoological thinking” of Nazi Germany: communists ascribed the backwardness of certain ethnicities not to biological origins but to the social conditions.¹² State-sponsored scientific expeditions, which featured “anthropological, ethnographic, medical, and economic components,” aimed to prove this claim.¹³ For instance, an expedition to Tajikistan provided evidence that “no racial or biological factors” hindered the

pretentious and so-called proud descendants.” Based on this explanation, Brusilovsky was a young opportunist who took advantage of the Soviet nationality policies to advance his compositional career. *Ibid.*, 55. On the Soviet nationality policies, see Jeremy Smith, “Was There a Soviet Nationality Policy?,” *Europe-Asia Studies* (2019): 1–22.

⁹ Marina Frolova-Walker writes about this phenomenon in other republics. For example, the trio of two Russian composers and a native Uzbek composer, known by their last names Vlasov-Fere-Maldybayev, wrote national Uzbek operas; an ethnically Armenian composer born in Turkmenistan, Sergei Balasanian, became the national composer for Tajikistan; Russian composer Reinhold Glière wrote national music for Uzbekistan after completing the first Azerbaijani national opera. See Frolova-Walker, “National in Style, Socialist in Context: Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, no. 2 (1998): 336.

¹⁰ Hughes was particularly impressed with his encounter of a man who was “almost as brown” as himself and was the mayor of Bukhara. “In the Soviet Union,” he noted, “dark men are also the mayors of cities.” Hughes, *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia*, 7–8.

¹¹ David Rainbow, “Introduction: Race as Ideology: An Approach,” in *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context*, ed. Rainbow (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 3.

¹² Eric D. Weitz, “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 3.

¹³ Francine Hirsch, “Race without the Practice of Racial Politics,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 35.

“successful participation of Tajiks (a group that German researchers deemed racially inferior) in ‘socialist construction’.”¹⁴ Scholars of Russian and Soviet history have long interpreted the seeming absence of biological racism in Soviet ideology as exemplifying no racial biases. For many, even the gruesome deportations and purges of various minority groups under Stalin did not constitute racial politics.¹⁵ For example, Francine Hirsch argues that race in the Soviet Union did not imply racial politics, and that the “politics of discrimination and exclusion” were conducted to prevent anti-government nationalist uprisings rather than wiping out a specific ethnic or racial group.¹⁶ Marina Mogilner similarly claims that the “indirect influence [of race] over Soviet administrative policies can be seen only in the practice of assigning fixed ‘nationality’ to every Soviet citizen.”¹⁷ Given the absence of official racial ideology, many historians and sociologists have similarly claimed that the Soviet state’s oppression of minority citizens was based not on racial politics but on anti-Soviet sentiments.

As historian David Rainbow points out, these interpretations have contributed to the emergence of the problematic “exceptionalist paradigm,” according to which the USSR is uniquely anti-racist since it did not subscribe to the explicitly biological foundations of race in Western Europe and the United States.¹⁸ Yet recent inquiries into the role of race in Russia and the Soviet

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Weitz points out that one third of the 800,000 repressed people during the “Great Terror” were “arrested, deported, or executed on national grounds.” Weitz, “Racial Politics,” 14.

¹⁶ Hirsch, “Race without the Practice,” 30.

¹⁷ Marina Mogilner, “Conclusion: Did Russian Physical Anthropology Become Soviet,” in *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 372.

¹⁸ Rainbow, “Introduction,” 20. Aisha Khan, in turn, has challenged the generalized interpretation of race in the context of Europe and United States. See Khan, “Race and Racial Thinking: A View from the Atlantic World,” in *Ideologies of Race*, 77–102. Similar to Rainbow, Joy Gleason Carew and Christina Kiaer note that in Slavic studies there still is “the pervasive idea that race has nothing to do with the region, exemplary of the penchant for claiming Russian or east European exceptionalism.” “Introduction: Critical Discussion Forum on Race and Bias,” *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (2021): 204.

Union vis-à-vis global discourses have challenged the exceptionalist paradigm.¹⁹ As Rainbow states, rather than seeking to answer “*whether* Russia and the Soviet Union exhibited race and racism that was similar to the ‘classic’ racialized regimes,” it is more productive to explore “*how* race worked [...] at various points.”²⁰ However, in order to understand “*how* race worked,” we must first clearly define charged terms: ethnicity, nationality, and race. Ethnicity, as defined by Eric Weitz, represents the affinity between people who practice “shared customs based on a belief in a common descent.”²¹ Nationality, Weitz continues, emerges when ethnic groups develop political structures to form nation-states. Finally, race, emerges when someone ascribes “indelible, immutable, and transgenerational” qualities to a population.²² Crucially, race is not about a phenotype or “skin color” but about the act of ascription itself, or as Weitz notes, “the assignment of indelible traits to a particular group.”²³ Racialization presents the act and process of ascription of racial difference based on bodily traits. As Edyta Bojanowska recently argued, racialization is more productive as an analytical tool: “as an interactive and dynamic process involved with ‘making, doing, and becoming,’ racialization connects discourses of race with social relations and political practices, revealing how racialism becomes socially consensual.”²⁴ It is precisely this distinction between race and racialization

¹⁹ *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002) and *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (Summer 2021) have featured special discussions on race. In the latter issue, Marina Mogilner points out that race can only be understood in relation to imperial politics. See Mogilner, “When Race Is a Language and Empire is a Context,” *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (2021): 207–15. Similarly, Patrick Wolfe argues that “races are traces of histories,” and more specifically, reverberations of colonialism: “Race is colonialism speaking, in idioms whose diversity reflects the variety of unequal relationships into which Europeans have co-opted conquered populations.” See Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (New York: Verso, 2016).

²⁰ Rainbow, “Introduction,” 20.

²¹ Weitz, “Racial Politics,” 6.

²² Ibid., 7. Rainbow defines race in Russia and the Soviet Union as “multiple and competing sets of ideas about human difference, essence, biology, culture, and inheritance that emerged from—and simultaneously shaped—social, political, and discursive practices over time.” Rainbow, “Introduction,” 21.

²³ Weitz, “Racial Politics,” 7.

²⁴ Edyta Bojanowska, “Race-ing the Russian Nineteenth Century,” *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (2021): 261. Scholars of African American studies also underscore racialization as an analytical category that highlights the mutable and evolving nature of the concept of race. See essays in Grace Kyungwon Hong

that allows us to uncover the contradictions between the theory and practice of Soviet socialism: while in theory socialism overcame race and racism, in practice, racialization was actively embedded in social life and cultural production.

This chapter examines racial politics in the composition and performance of the first Kazakh national opera, *Kyz Zhibek* (1934), which Brusilovsky wrote in collaboration with Kazakh artists. I argue that the making and performance of opera involved acts of racialization whereby Brusilovsky ascribed pre-conceived notions of bodily difference—namely metric inability and vocal inferiority—to Kazakh musicians, thereby reaffirming racial essentialism. As I will demonstrate, the racialization present in the so-called “soft power” realm of culture was intricately connected with the veiled yet highly coercive political ends of the Soviet state: assimilation, subjugation, and erasure of Kazakh identity with the aim to pacify and eliminate any resistance to state control.²⁵

The sonic medium operates as a defining tool in the enactment of racialization. Jennifer Lynn Stoever’s notions of “the sonic color line” and “the listening ear” are useful theoretical categories for thinking about the unique modes of racialization in the Kazakh context.²⁶ The sonic

and Roderick A. Ferguson, *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Recently, social scientist Deniz Uyan has argued against the use of the normative definition of “racialization” as defined and developed by philosopher Adam Hochman. Uyan critiques Hochman’s definition of racialization as based solely on biological descent. However, I find racialization to be productive when used to account for specific historical and cultural contexts, as is the case in this chapter. See Adam Hochman, “Racialization: A Defense of the Concept,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 8 (2019): 1245–62; and Deniz Uyan, “Re-Thinking Racialization: The Analytical Limits of Racialization,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 18, no. 1 (2021): 15–29.

²⁵ The concept of “soft power” was introduced by political scientist Joseph S. Nye to distinguish between less coercive practices of rule and the explicitly militaristic and economic “hard power.” See Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153–71 and *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

²⁶ Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: NYU Press, 2016). On racialization of vocal timbre, see Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). Eidsheim’s case studies illuminate how enculturation influences listeners’ perception and expectations of racialized voices. However, her overall thesis that vocal difference represents a cultural construct has been recently

color line, according to Stoever, “describes the process of racializing sound,” while the listening ear “is a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line’s norms” and “racially codes sonic phenomena such as vocal timbre, accents, and musical tones.”²⁷ Unlike the 1845–1945 African-American context of Stoever’s analysis, where the sonic color line was often demarcated for discriminatory purposes, the sonic color line within the Soviet Kazakh context was racialized only to then be erased. Brusilovsky’s listening ear detected a sonic color line that differentiated Kazakh people as backward Others based on their distinct musicality. As an agent of the cultural modernization project, Brusilovsky was responsible for erasing the sonic color line in order to construct Kazakh national music that complied with, to borrow Stoever’s words, “the default, natural, normal, and desirable” expectations of opera’s white sonic world.²⁸ As a result, he tempered “exotic” markers of racial difference such as metric inability and vocal timbre. In his negotiation of racial difference, Brusilovsky had to promote the state-sponsored cultural modernization project through which Kazakhs, perceived as members of a “backward” race, were forced into the teleological narrative of progress and had to develop traits of white “progressive” Western culture, as exemplified by Russian art.

A complete erasure of the sonic color line, however, was inconceivable because the Soviet national opera project was first and foremost implemented to showcase culture that was “national in form and socialist in content.” Introduced by Stalin in the 1930s, this motto remained the governing ideology for cultural production throughout the Soviet era: “The development of cultures national in form and socialist in content is necessary for the purpose of their ultimate fusion into one General

critiqued by Andrew J. Chung. As Chung contends, Eidsheim’s materialist ontology of the voice privileges the “vibrational interconnectedness” of all voices and as such leads to “exercising difference-phobic routines of thought that forget their own racial and colonial histories.” See Chung, “Vibration, Difference, and Solidarity in the Anthropocene: Ethical Difficulties of New Materialist Sound Studies and Some Alternatives,” *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2021): 229 and 219.

²⁷ Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

Culture, socialist as to form and content, and expressed in one general language.”²⁹ Preservation of ethnic particularities in the operatic project guaranteed a surface-level nationalism but the resultant “cult of form,” as historian Yuri Slezkine argues, “deprived the various nations of the right to political independence—a right that was the culmination of all nationalist doctrines.”³⁰ The transposition of folk songs and ethnic costumes into opera thus functioned as a double-edged sword: it simultaneously performed assimilation and erasure of racialized markers of difference and maintained difference by preserving enough local features to showcase the diversity of the republics and project an impression of national self-determination.

To understand the relationship between the making of Soviet Kazakh national culture and the subtle but prominent ways in which racialization operated at the time, I explore the power dynamics in Brusilovsky’s collaboration with Kazakh musicians during the composition of *Kyz Zhibek*.³¹ I first contextualize the Soviet ethnographic project, which the state sponsored as a prerequisite for the making of national culture. Next, I analyze Brusilovsky’s adaptation of a Kazakh folk song “Gakku” in *Kyz Zhibek* as a case study of the criteria and methods within the process of transforming folk songs into operatic arias. Specifically, I focus on Kazakh metric (in)ability as one marker of bodily difference that Brusilovsky perceived as a hindrance to the creation of Kazakh national opera. Lastly, I turn to vocal technique as another crucial marker of racial difference that had to be overcome in order to align Kazakh singers’ bodies with white operatic standards. The making of national art for each republic ascribed rigid hierarchic categorization and classification of

²⁹ Joseph Stalin, *Marksiizm i natsional’no-kolonial’nyi vopros* (1934). Cited in Frolova-Walker, “National in Style, Socialist in Context,” 331.

³⁰ Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 451.

³¹ In total, Brusilovsky composed ten operas: *Kyz Zhibek* (1934), *Zhalbyr* (1935), *Er Targyn* (1936), *Aiman-Sholpan* (1938), *Altyn Astyk* (The Golden Grain) (1940), *Gvardiia, alga!* (1942), *Amangeldy*, co-authored with Mukan Tulebayev (1945), *Birzhan and Sara* (1946), *Dudarai* (1953), and *Nasledniki* (Heirs) (1962).

the nations within the Soviet empire, despite the fact that the Soviet race science, *rasovedenie*, claimed that “the ‘present racial face’ of the earth should be understood as a ‘phase,’” and that “as societies advanced further on the historical timeline, racial distinctions would disappear altogether.”³²

Through my analysis of Brusilovsky’s negotiation of the sonic color line, I ultimately demonstrate that race in the allegedly egalitarian and antiracist Soviet Union did indeed operate through racialization that reaffirmed white hegemony.

The Ethnographic Project

Despite Vladimir Lenin’s infamous slogan “the folk (*narod*) is the creator of new culture,” folk music fell short of representing each republic’s national culture.³³ “The essence of the nationality question,” as Lenin’s successor Joseph Stalin claimed, “consists of the need to eliminate the backwardness (economic, political and cultural) that the nationalities have inherited from the past, to allow the backward peoples to catch up with central Russia.”³⁴ In their self-constructed role as civilizers, the Soviets mimicked the views of pre-Revolutionary Russian intellectuals. For instance, one member of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society, Grigory Potanin, reported after a trip to the Karkaraly District (then part of Imperial Russia, now Kazakhstan): “The duty of Russian intelligentsia is to take measures to protect *inorodtsy* from vanishing, to make them capable of self-preservation; the best means for this is education.”³⁵ In similar terms, the authors of the Soviet multi-volume *History of Music of USSR Nations* described Russia’s role in educating Eastern nations:

³² Hirsch, “Race without the Practice,” 34.

³³ Konstantin Khudaverdian, *Kul’turnaia revoliutsiia v Sovetskoi Armenii* (Cultural revolution in Soviet Armenia) (Yerevan: Izdatel’stvo AN Armianskoi SSR, 1966), 261.

³⁴ Joseph Stalin, from a speech at the 10th Congress of the Communist Party in 1921. Cited in Slezkine, “The USSR as Communal Apartment,” 423.

³⁵ “Dolg russkoi intelligentsii priniat’ mery k zashchite inorodtsev ot vymiraniia, sdelat’ ikh sposobnymi k samosokhraneniui; luchshim sredstvom dlia etogo iavliaetsia obrazovanie.” Cited in Akhmet Zhubanov, *Solov’i stoletii: ocherki o narodnykh kompozitorakh i pevtsakh* (Almaty: Dayk Press, 2002), 12.

“The grand, progressive significance of Russian music—acknowledged by all of the best representatives of the young national schools—called for a deep and multidimensional assimilation of its creative principles.”³⁶ According to this logic, folk music in its unassimilated form, however beautiful, lingered in the rudimentary stages of the evolutionary ladder.³⁷ Only with the help of professionally trained composers, who would subsume local ethnic materials into Western musical forms, could folklore undergo modernization and be elevated to the status of true national art.³⁸ This was, as the eminent Soviet musicologist Boris Asafiev claimed, “the historically conditioned process of retuning (*pereintonirovanie*).”³⁹

The Soviet state’s aim of creating a uniform culture based on European standards reveals Russia’s long-standing ambiguous outlook of its own identity. Since Peter the Great opened “the window to Europe” in the early eighteenth century, Russian intellectuals struggled to reconcile with Russia’s geopolitical Eurasian status. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky claimed, “In Europe, we were Tatars, but in Asia we too are Europeans.”⁴⁰ Composers too were well aware of Russia’s epigonism of Western European music. As Pyotr Chaikovsky wrote, “No matter how hard we try, we will never leave the European garden, for fate has decided that our acorn fell on ground cultivated before us by Europeans; it planted its roots there long ago and deeply, and now you and I do not have the strength to pull it out.”⁴¹ While immediately following the Revolution the Bolsheviks attempted to

³⁶ Yuri Keldysh, ed., *History of Music of USSR Nations*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Muzyka, 1966), 18.

³⁷ On the role of music in interwar discourses on evolution and racial difference, see Rachel Mundy, “Musical Evolution and the Making of Hierarchy,” *The World of Music* 48, no. 3 (2006): 13–27.

³⁸ Nelli Shakhnazarova, *Muzyka vostoka i muzyka zapada: tipy muzykal’nogo professionalizma* (The music of East and the music of West: types of musical professionalism) (Moscow: Sovetskii Kompozitor, 1983), 46. Shakhnazarova lays out the “ladder of progress” in the elements associated with Western art music: equal temperament, harmony, polyphony, and form.

³⁹ Izalii Zemtsovskii, *Narodnaia muzyka SSSR i sovremennost’* (The folk music of the USSR and modernity) (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1982), 11.

⁴⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Geok Tepe. Chto dlya nas Aziia,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 27 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–90), 32–40.

⁴¹ Cited in Rutger Helmers, *Not Russian Enough?: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Opera* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014), epigraph.

“pull out” European-inspired bourgeois culture from communist society, they soon realized the impossibility of this task. Although the party-state condemned tsarist and bourgeois politics, it did not reject the European influence that shaped Russian cultural heritage. The highly teleological notion of cultural modernization implied civilizing the primitive, backward peoples in light of the many European cultural forms and social norms that Russia had adopted.

The politics of “multidimensional assimilation” outlines a clear divide between center and periphery, which Brusilovsky himself acknowledged. Reflecting on his difficult first year in Almaty, he wrote that he really wished “to abandon to the devil the whole mediocre provincial stupidity [...] and run back to Leningrad.”⁴² Brusilovsky’s comparison between provincial Almaty and sophisticated Leningrad can be illuminated by turning to the cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman’s theorization of the internal center and external periphery. Writing about the two realms, Lotman points out that a complex “operation of translation” must take place in order for them to interact.⁴³ Through this translation, “foreign texts become part of the semiosphere’s internal semiotics while still retaining their own characteristics.”⁴⁴ This model of translation, according to which the external attributes of peripheries are integrated into the internal semiosphere, aligns with the Soviet agenda of preserving national diversity through form while maintaining a unified socialist content. The state’s attempted detachment of form from content evinces the central contradiction in the Soviet nationality politics within the broader cultural modernization project. Slezkine captures the hegemonic foundation of the Soviet motto “national in form, socialist in content”: “National rights were matters of cultural ‘form’ as distinct from political and economic ‘content’; but ultimately all

⁴² Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 9, 62.

⁴³ Yuri Lotman, “The Semiosphere,” in *Universe and the Mind*, 123–42 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990). Lotman coins the neologism semiosphere, paralleling biosphere and zoosphere, to represent the interaction between two *Umwelten* (according to Jakob von Uexküll, *Umwelten* are environments that are formed around biological organisms).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

form was derived from content and it was up to party leaders in Moscow to decide where the line should be drawn in each case.”⁴⁵ As an agent of the center, Brusilovsky thus performed an operation of translation and appropriation.⁴⁶ While ostensibly working toward negotiating and legitimizing Kazakh national identity, he in fact negated cultural difference, induced ethnic erasure, and exercised racial politics.⁴⁷

In a rather self-critical manner, Brusilovsky retrospectively linked his role as a cultural worker with the political aims of the state: “The renaissance of spiritual health, power and talent was supposed to aid in healing of the heavy wounds in the lives of [Kazakh] people. [The state] began to establish regional theaters and even philharmonics.”⁴⁸ By “heavy wounds,” Brusilovsky refers to the devastating consequences of the famine which he witnessed upon his arrival in Almaty:

The so-called *raskulachivanie* (dekulakization), which he [Filipp Goloshchekin] implemented with leftist inhuman brutality and injustice swept through the republic like an exterminating tornado, worse than the most terrible bubonic plague. People ran where they could and died by thousands on the roads. This ‘event’ was called a transition from feudalism to socialism with bypassing the capitalist stage. But there was no working class or proletarians during the feudalism which would lead the revolutionary future of Kazakhstan, and how it was supposed to miraculously appear during socialism was unclear. The nomadic people were pulled by the ear into the unknown socialism, with use of power that destroyed their

⁴⁵ Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 434.

⁴⁶ Any use of folk song in extrinsic contexts represents assimilation and appropriation. Julie Brown, for instance, argues that Béla Bartók was an “internal Orientalist” in that he transcribed Hungarian and Eastern European folk songs in a way that represented local people as Others. See Brown, “Bartók, the Gypsies, and Hybridity in Music,” in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, 119–42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁷ The contradictory nature of Soviet cultural policies, according to Madina Tlostanova, was among the main reasons of the USSR’s demise: “One of the fundamental weaknesses of the Soviet empire which finally led to its collapse was that the Soviet ideology contradicted itself in creating the nationalities in the periphery on the one hand (including the literacies, the sense of ethnic-territorial belonging, etc.) and on the other hand, regarding the national traditions something to be eventually erased.” Tlostanova, “The Janus-Faced Empire Distorting Orientalist Discourses: Gender, Race and Religion in the Russian/(post)Soviet Construction of the ‘Orient,’” *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* (2008), 6.

⁴⁸ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 10 (1997): 101. Brusilovsky attributed the cultural renaissance to what he called “the politics of thaw” implemented by Levon Mirzoyan, who in 1933 succeeded Filipp Goloshchekin as the secretary of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kazakh USSR.

historically established centuries-old lifestyle; simultaneously, in the fight against *baistvo*, small farms of simple people were destroyed, causing ferment, confusion, and terrifying debacle of the republic's agriculture.⁴⁹

Whether willingly or not, Brusilovsky replicated the effects of Goloshchekin's practices within the realm of culture: he "pulled by the ear" the centuries-old, orally transmitted Kazakh folk music into the perceived "General Culture" (to borrow Stalin's words) embodied by Russian music. In a seemingly sympathetic manner, he claimed to be eager "to learn from Kazakh folk music" and "to think and feel like a folk musician who is not burdened by the multi-ton conservatory education."⁵⁰ However, his participation in the making of Kazakh national music resulted in the cultural assimilation and ethnic erasure of indigenous Kazakh music. The making of Kazakh national opera, in which Brusilovsky performed an enlightening mission, was thus embedded in the Soviet state's settler colonialist and empire-building endeavor.⁵¹

Although Brusilovsky's appointment as the scientific worker at the musical-dramatic college (*muzdramtekhnikum*) was initially planned as a two-year term, he ended up spending thirty-six years in Almaty, becoming one of the republic's most prominent musical figures.⁵² The "scientific research

⁴⁹ Brusilovsky, "Vospominaniia," *Prostor* 10, 101. "Tak nazyvaemoe 'raskulachivaniie,' kotoroe on provodil s levatskoi siloi, beschelovechnoi zhestokost'iu i nespravedlivost'iu, proneslos' po respublike istrebitel'nym smerchem, khuzhe samoi strashnoi epidemii chumy. Liudi bezhali, kuda glaza gliadiat, i umirali tysiachami na dorogakh. Eto 'meropriatie' nazyvalos' perekhodom ot feodalizma k sotsializmu, minuia stadiiu kapitalizma. No rabochego klassa, proletariat pri feodalizme kak vedushchego klassa revoliutsionnogo budushchego v Kazakhstane ne bylo, i kak on dolzhen byl volshebnyim obrazom vozniknut' vdrug pri sotsializme, bylo neponiatno. Kochevoi narod za ushi tianuli v nevdomyi sotsializm, razrushaia siloi istoricheski slozhivshiisia mnogovekovoi obraz zhizni, v bor'be s baistvom zaodno razrushaia melkoe khoziaistvo prostykh liudei, vyzyvaia brozhenie, smutu i uzhasaiushchii razgrom sel'skogo khoziaistva respubliky."

⁵⁰ Brusilovsky, "Vospominaniia," *Prostor* 9, 55.

⁵¹ The railway comprised an enormous transportation network that was constructed between 1891 and 1916.

⁵² In 1944, Brusilovsky started teaching at the Almaty Conservatory, where he served as the chair of composition department from 1945 to 1968. In addition to writing the first Kazakh national opera, *Kyz Zhibek*, he composed the first Kazakh national symphony, wrote a cantata called *Soviet Kazakhstan*, and co-authored the republic's national anthem with local composers Mukan Talebayev and Latif Khamidi in 1945. "Brusilovsky, Yevgeny," in *Music Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Moscow: Soviet Encyclopedia, 1991), 84.

cabinet” of the music-dramatic college employed two members: its director, the Kazakh composer Akhmet Zhubanov, and Brusilovsky, who as the scientific worker carried out the director’s plans and “wrote down folk music of dombrists and singers.”⁵³ Among Brusilovsky’s responsibilities was verifying the accuracy of songs in the collections compiled by Aleksandr Zatayevich—the first ethnographer and composer to collect and notate Kazakh songs.⁵⁴ In one of his letters to Zatayevich, Brusilovsky recalled the miserable circumstances of his stay in Almaty: “The conditions of my existence do not dispose to such exquisite type of creativity as letter writing. I am cold with the saxaul and uncomfortable. I received an apartment, but I live in it shabbily. [...] I can’t work in the freezing room. Poor grand piano! My fingers ache so much—I am afraid I’ll get rheumatism. My existence is drearily idiotic and inert.”⁵⁵ Yet, according to him, his belief in the Party’s “high proletarian ideals” and devotion to the modernization project allowed him to persevere.

Zatayevich, too, persevered through many hardships as the first Kazakh ethnographer. As Brusilovsky noted, Zatayevich led an “intellectual life among the aristocratic Warsaw society” and did not express any interest in ethnographic work or in the music of Central Asia, until the outburst of World War I caused his escape to Orenburg—a city that in 1920 would become the temporary

⁵³ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 9, 55. A Russian opera collective arrived in Almaty in 1935 to collaborate with the Kazakh troupe in order to raise the professional level. *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁴ The colonialist underpinnings of this project resemble those of the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv commenced by Carl Stumpf at the height of German colonial empire. For the links between the German and Russian projects, see V. V. Korguzalov and A. D. Troitskaya, “The Phonogram Archive of the Institute for Russian Literature (Pushkin House) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg,” *The World of Music* 35, no. 1 (1993): 115–20. Korguzanov and Troitskaya lay out the events around the foundation of Phonogram Archive of the First Slavic Department of the Library of the Imperial Academy of the Sciences in the beginning of the twentieth century. Soviet ethnography certainly continued the practices of nineteenth-century Russian Imperial institutions such as the Russian Geographic Society and the Society of the Friends of Natural History, Anthropology, and Ethnography. On the history of Russian ethnography, see Adalyat Issiyeva, *Representing Russia’s Orient: From Ethnography to Art Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵⁵ The letter was written in December of 1934. Saxaul is a tree that locals used as firewood to generate heat during the cold winter months.

capital of the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (then called the Kyrgyz ASSR).⁵⁶ The rapid political and social changes provoked a “wonderful metamorphosis” and inspired Zatayevich to pursue the career of an ethnographer with an “ascetic fanaticism.”⁵⁷ A *Pravda* article praised his “heroism” in fulfilling the ethnographic mission:

Through hunger and cold, through typhus and cholera ... Zatayevich, a true seeker of pearls, went and collected wonderful songs of the people in the barracks, in the night shelters, in the bazaars, in schools and courses, in the dormitories of congresses. Who and what, besides the revolution, can give a person the strength for such a feat? Only the great revolution can.⁵⁸

The fruits of Zatayevich’s labor were first published in 1925 as *1000 Songs of the Kazakh People*.⁵⁹ In the preface to this volume, the ethnographer instructed Kazakhs, addressing them using the essentializing name *dzhigity* (equestrians): “Preserve, learn, and multiply your national spiritual riches, develop and adorn them with the achievements of the highest universal culture to which you strive, and let renewed and blossomed Kazakh national music rise from the folk subsoil!”⁶⁰ Zatayevich’s words underscore the prominence of the idea that folk music alone was insufficient and therefore required amalgamation with the accomplishments of “the highest universal culture” in order to

⁵⁶ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 9, 64.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ S. Sosnovsky, “Kul’turnyi podvig” (A cultural deed), *Pravda* (1926).

⁵⁹ The collection was initially titled *1000 Songs of the Kyrgyz People* because until the creation of the Kazakh Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic in 1925, the Soviet government referred to the Kazakh people as *kyrgyzy*.

⁶⁰ Aleksandr Zatayevich, *1000 pesen kazakhskogo naroda* [Orenburg: Kirgizskoye Gosudarstvennoye Izdatel’stvo, 1925] (Almaty: Dayk Press, 2004), 22. Zatayevich’s encouragement for Kazakh people to develop their folk “spiritual riches” is deceptively similar to the Herderian romantic basis of nationalism. However, Zatayevich’s mention of “the highest universal culture”—by which he means Russian culture—stretches back to nineteenth-century debates on superiority of Russian folk song. See Edyta Bojanowska, “A Ticket to Europe: Collections of Ukrainian Folk Songs and Their Russian Reviewers, 1820s–1830s,” in *Ukraine and Europe*, ed. Giovanna Brogi Bercoff, Marko Pavlyshyn and Serhii Plokhyy, 227–248 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018). As Bojanowska has argued, Russian intellectuals did not allow Ukrainians to carve a national, folklore-based identity because it would have compromised Russia’s political and cultural status. The Soviet state, in a similar vein, prohibited any expression of national identity outside of the realm of “universal” genres in order to avoid national uprisings.

blossom. The process of transcription of indigenous oral music into European notation was a prerequisite for producing professional Kazakh music.

Soviet ethnography was distinct from Soviet anthropology in that the former studied ethnicities while the latter races.⁶¹ The purpose of the ethnographic project was to uncover “pure” qualities of each ethnic culture, so that they could be transformed into national art based on European art forms. The Soviet government established various institutions, such as the journal *Sovetskaia etnografiia* in 1931, that conveyed the official vision for the new ethnographic project. It is telling that the project was called ethnographic and not ethnic: rather than aiming to preserve indigenous particularity, the project served to accumulate ethnic material so that trained artists could write over it and transform it into national art. In one of the journal’s initial issues, an anonymous author distinguished the goals of Soviet ethnography from those of tsarist ethnographers who served “the greedy interests” of the ruling elite. The new Soviet ethnography was to be performed by a “cultural army” of “enlighteners, scientists, writers, artists” who were supposed to unearth and repurpose elements of ethnic culture:

Ethnographers will approach the most interesting problem—creation of a new type of people from the workers who just arrived from villages and farms; of reworking and remelting enormous human material in the proletarian vat. In places where this relates to new cadres of national proletariat—where one can notice a live process of breakage in the everyday conventions and ideology of numerous representatives of formerly oppressed and culturally backward nationalities—the task of the ethnographer acquires an even greater acuteness and significance.⁶²

The author’s reference to “remaking and remelting” of “human material” is in affinity with Marxist-

⁶¹ Hirsch, “Race without the Practice,” 34.

⁶² “K novym zadacham sovetskoi etnografii” (To new goals of Soviet ethnography), in *Sovetskaia etnografiia* 3–4 (1931): 2–3. “Etnografy poidut k interesneishei probleme—sozdaniia novogo tipa liudei iz tol’ko chto prishedshikh iz dereven’ i kolkhozov rabochikh, peredelki i pereplavki v proletarskom kotle ogromnogo chelovecheskogo materiala. Tam, gde eto kasaetsia novykh kadrov natsional’nogo proletariata, gde mozžno nabliudat’ zhivoi protsess lomki bytovykh ustoev i ideologii mnogochislennykh predstavitelei ranee ugnetaivshikhsia i kul’turno-otstalykh natsional’nostei, zadacha etnografa priobredaet eshche bol’shiu ostrotu i znachimost’.”

Leninist commitments to historical progress: crucially, folk material that ethnographers collected was perceived as “raw” material, not yet representative of national culture.

As if often the case in ethnographic transcriptions, the integrity of the folk sources was compromised at the stage of transcription. Zatayevich listed a set of performance mannerisms which posed challenges during transcription: “the specific technique of Kazakh singing such as tugging of equally paired notes into syncopated triplets with delays on the second beat; the retraction of final tones in a musical phrase down, in a manner of string glissando; the frequent fermatas, which at first appeared random, and, finally, different shouts, patters and so on.”⁶³ The ethnographer also notes the issue of unequal temperament, writing, “major and minor thirds in a sly (*preluka*) manner teased me with the question: ‘which of the two?’, until during the repeated performances, one of them would announce its prominence!”⁶⁴ Finally, he mentions the difficulty caused by the uneven singing, which emerged as a consequence of “the flight of performance temperament, improvisation, or ineptitude!”⁶⁵ Most of the songs in his collections lack text. Aside from Zatayevich not speaking Kazakh, transliteration into the Cyrillic alphabet required special training because until 1929 Kazakhs wrote using the right-to-left Arabic alphabet.⁶⁶ Aleksandr Kastal’sky, the reviewer of the *1000 Songs*, criticized Zatayevich for reducing the songs to their melodic content. Zatayevich acknowledged that his transcriptions “were not without major blunders and drawbacks,” yet he claimed that he smoothed out the unevenness of the “wrinkled lace.”⁶⁷

At times, Zatayevich’s writings reveal his genuine surprise that Kazakh music is not as primitive as he thought. In his correspondence with Romain Rolland, Zatayevich stated that Kazakh music displays “embryos of our cultural symphonism,” and that “truly, the opening of No. 482

⁶³ Zatayevich, *1000 pesen*, 15.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁶ Varvara Dernova, “Commentary,” in Zatayevich, *1000 pesen*, 477.

⁶⁷ Zatayevich, *1000 pesen*, 16.

["Otte-kette" of Taz-bal] reminds of thematic development similar to Beethoven (!), while the trio of this primitive piece is almost identical to the musical formulas of Anton Rubinstein."⁶⁸ Yet these "compliments" present an exception rather than a general attitude toward folk music. Whether in his expressions of annoyance with syncopated rhythms, that he thought ought to be "equally paired notes," or his references to the Kazakh instrument *dombra* as a "primitive two-string plucking instrument," Zatayevich emerges as someone who arrogantly self-aligns with high Western culture. Although he claimed that relying on his ears was more trustworthy than using the phonograph to preserve the authenticity of the songs, he often obscured the songs, thereby eliminating idiosyncrasies that did not conform to Western standards.⁶⁹

Soviet ethnomusicologist Izalii Zemtsovskii wrote that in order to become part of national culture, folklore of the "old patriarchal order" had to be reworked into folklorism—"a more advanced form of folklore's existence."⁷⁰ He described folklore in general as "regionally and functionally insular" and as requiring "'infiltration' with modernity."⁷¹ Another Soviet ethnomusicologist, Konstantin Khudaverdian, stated, "In the process of the cultural revolution, common patterns (*zakonomernosti*) prevail over national particularities and originalities (*svoeobrazie*)."⁷² These statements of Soviet ethnomusicologists deployed aesthetic terminology in order to justify the state's politically motivated refusal to preserve local cultures in their full diversity. Because preservation of local cultures could overinflate nationalistic sentiment and lead to uprisings against the regime, folk elements had to be used with caution and only in service of ideologically sanitized

⁶⁸ Zatayevich, *Issledovaniia, vospominaniia, pis'ma i dokumenty* (Almaty: KazGosIzdat, 1958), 277.

⁶⁹ The earliest phonograph recordings of Kazakh music from 1905 are archived in the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv. The songs were collected by the German ethnologist and anthropologist Richard Karutz, who also wrote a book, *Among the Kirghiz and Turkmens in Mangyshlak* (1910). See Fatima Nurlybayeva, "Cultural Heritage of Turkic-Speaking Peoples in World Collections: Historical Audio Recordings of the Berlin Phonogram Archive," *Eurasian Music Science Journal* 2 (2021): 54–66.

⁷⁰ Zemtsovskii, *Narodnaia muzyka SSSR*, 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷² Khudaverdian, *Kul'turnaia revoliutsiia*, 261.

purposes, such as effectuating a degree of national self-expression and displaying friendship of nations enabled by socialism.⁷³ As one Soviet official put it, “We must uncover in folklore all of its active powers, use it as a wonderful tool for propaganda, make it a weapon in fighting for a socialist society.”⁷⁴ In the eyes of the Soviet leadership, opera represented “the achievements of the highest universal culture” and could amalgamate transcribed folk songs into a unified drama to fulfill propaganda purposes. Opera thus functioned as a statecraft, or a technique of empire, that aimed to modernize supposedly obsolete elements of Kazakh culture, such as nomadic lifestyle, Islamic religion, and gender norms.

Zatayevich’s collections, including the *1000 Songs of the Kazakh People* (1925), *500 Kazakh Songs* (1931), and *250 Kyrgyz Instrumental Pieces and Chants* (1934), served as source material for many non-Kazakh composers writing Kazakh operas.⁷⁵ In 1942, when the Kazakh Theater of Opera invited Sergei Prokofiev to compose a ballet, the composer proposed to write instead a national historical opera based on Zatayevich’s song collections. In a letter to his former teacher Nikolai Myaskovsky, Prokofiev enthusiastically reported:

I am currently compiling all sorts of Kazakh materials for one rather large work. There are so many interesting things here, an entire untouched sea! I attended an orchestra concert of Kazakh folk instruments—sounds quite amusing and pleasantly out-of-tunish as they fly into the second octave. But there is no trace of any musical treatment of the material; everything is in rudimentary state.⁷⁶

⁷³ As Martin Terry shows, nationalism represented “a uniquely dangerous mobilizing ideology” for the Bolsheviks, and, for that reason, they “remained highly suspicious of national self-expression, even after they adopted a policy explicitly devoted to encourage it.” Terry, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 69.

⁷⁴ A. Astakhova, “Diskussiia o sushchnosti i zadachakh fol’klora v Leningradskom Institute rechevoi kul’tury (IRK) 11 iunია 1931” (A discussion of the essence and goals of folklore in the Leningrad Institute of Oral Culture on June 11, 1931), *Sovetskaia etnografiia* 3–4 (1931): 241–42. “Nuzhno vskryt’ v fol’klore vse ego deistvie sily, ispol’zovat’ ego kak prekrasnyi material dlia agitatsii, sdelat’ ego orudiem v bor’be za sotsialisticheskoe obshchestvo.”

⁷⁵ Zatayevich collected most of the entries for the *1000 Songs* in the Orenburg region. For *500 Songs*, he travelled to Semipalatinsk, Pavlodar, Irtysh, Ural’sk, Kyzylorda, Karakalinsk, and Bukeyevsk.

⁷⁶ Nadezhda Lobacheva “Variatsiia na Kazakhstkuyu temu: o neosushchestvishiesia opere S. S. Prokofieva ‘Khan Buzai’” (A Variation on A Kazakh Theme: Prokofiev’s Unfinished Opera *Khan Buzai*), in *Nauchnyi Vestnik Moskovskoi Konservatorii* 1 (2010): 156.

Prokofiev's description of Kazakh music is consistent with the Soviet claims about the backwardness of Kazakh culture: no matter how "amusing," the music of the Other is awaiting to be touched by the civilizing hand of a Western-trained musician. The preserved sketches for the opera, which Prokofiev never completed, demonstrate his efforts to apply his professional skills to polishing folk songs from Zatayevich's collections. Without having any concern for preserving the integrity of the songs, Prokofiev freely added "missing notes and even entire motives" in order to synchronize his melodies with the libretto.⁷⁷ Furthermore, without considering the origins and contexts of the folk songs, Prokofiev categorized them into standard Western operatic and symphonic tropes such as "primary theme, different 'lyricisms,' dances, wide songs, marches, and action scenes."⁷⁸ While Prokofiev's categorization illustrates continuity with the Orientalist tradition of nineteenth-century Russian composers, Brusilovsky's attitude towards employing Kazakh materials was much more ambivalent. He aspired not to repeat the *kuchkist* composer Alexander Borodin's gross misrepresentation of the Turkic nomadic people, Polovtsy, that appears in the opera *Prince Igor*.⁷⁹ To what degree, and to what ends, Brusilovsky's own interpretation of Kazakh folklore pursued authenticity we shall explore below.

Translating "Gakku" into *Kyz Zhibek*

In 1934, Brusilovsky became the music director of the Kazakh Musical Theatre (Kazmuzteatr), which in 1937 was renamed into the Kazakh National Theater of Opera and Ballet. As a result of this promotion, he was commissioned to compose the first Kazakh national opera, *Kyz Zhibek* (The

⁷⁷ Ibid., 164.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁷⁹ Brusilovsky, "Vospominaniia," *Prostor* 10, 96. "As a whole," he wrote, "the exoticism of the Polovtsian dances is a vulgar, anti-historical, and anti-scientific cranberry." According to Brusilovsky, since Polovtsy were considered to be descendants of the Kipchak Kazakh clan, their culture did not feature any folk or courtly dances.

Silken Girl). Brusilovsky's career now depended on the recognition of the opera both among Kazakh people and the Soviet government. The opera belongs to the lyric-epical genre, which eventually became the Kazakh opera theater's "artistic credo."⁸⁰ The plot is based on Gabit Musirepov's eponymous play, which is in turn an adaptation of a sixteenth-century folk legend about two young lovers, Zhibek and Tolegen. The lovers cannot live in a happy union because they belong to competing clans. Bekezhan, who is from Zhibek's clan and also has feelings for her, murders Tolegen. The opera ends with Zhibek's tragic suicide.

The success of the opera greatly depended on Brusilovsky's ability to negotiate with Kazakh cultural figures and to effectively transpose folk music into the operatic genre. The ethnically Kazakh deputy director of the theater, Temirbek Zhurgenov, oversaw Brusilovsky's compositional process. The composer described the constraints that were imposed on him by Zhurgenov: "I had the right to employ the method of transforming the content of the song and varying its texture, but going beyond the boundaries of the folk song was categorically prohibited. This was the main base rule established by Zhurgenov."⁸¹ The compositional project was collective in nature, since each song had to be approved by Zhurgenov, Gabit Musirepov (the playwright), and each singer who would perform in the opera's premiere. Determined to triumph, Brusilovsky travelled nearly thirteen miles by foot to Aksai, a village close to Almaty where the theater troupe was spending recreation time. There, Kazakh singers Zhumat Shanin and Kanabek Baiseitov introduced Brusilovsky to Musirepov's play, and along with other local musicians from the theater assisted him in selecting songs from two of Zatayevich's collections.⁸² The process of song selection provoked heated debates, as Kazakh artists questioned the accuracy of Zatayevich's transcription and disagreed with each other on the authenticity of each song. Because there were few Kazakh singers who were

⁸⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁸¹ Brusilovsky, "Vospominaniia," *Prostor* 9, 67.

⁸² Ibid.

trained to perform an opera, Brusilovsky was forced to respect their opinions and acquiesce to their demands, which often restricted his compositional decisions. For instance, since Baiseitov was chosen for the role of Tolegen, he had ultimate authority over the final version of one of the songs, “Al Karai Kok.” Brusilovsky wrote that as a result of the debates over “Al Karai Kok,” the opera version preserved only “two or three notes” of Zatayevich’s transcription. Another singer, Dzhandarbekov, chose the songs for his role as Bekezhan and demanded the key of his aria to be F minor. This cooperation between Brusilovsky and Kazakh artists suggests that he was respectful of their agency. However, his claim to sole authorship of *Kyz Zhibek* and haphazard treatment of folk songs in his subsequent operas indicates that he had little concern for staying true to the source material.⁸³

After two months of searching for appropriate songs, Brusilovsky still could not find materials for Zhibek’s leit-theme and for the final aria that she sings before taking her own life.⁸⁴ The leit-theme from Act I was meant to characterize the heroine as “a youthful, feminine, naïve girl with a tender soul and a quivering heart,” while the final aria was to depict “the despair and sorrow of her broken soul and her mournful farewell to meaningless life.”⁸⁵ The song search team decided to return to Almaty and to consult other “experienced singers/song collectors” (*pesenniki*). Brusilovsky recalled that during the journey from Aksay to Almaty, on a horse dray full of fresh hay as transportation, the artists suddenly realized that they were all shouting the song “Gakku.” Instantly, everyone, including Kulyash Baiseitova, who was to sing Zhibek’s role, agreed that the leit-theme was found. Locating an “authentic” version of the song, however, proved to be an impossible

⁸³ According to Kazakh composer Gaziza Zhubanova, Brusilovsky, in his operas *Kyz-Zhibek* (1934) and *Er-Targyn* (1935), quoted songs and dances that did not correspond with the historical context of the plots. Zhubanova, *Mir moi muzyka: ocherki, stat'i, vospominaniia*, ed. Dina Mambetova (Almaty: Bilim, 2008), 55.

⁸⁴ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 9, 68.

⁸⁵ Eventually, the folk song “Dunie-ay” became Zhibek’s final aria. *Ibid.*, 72.

task. Kazakh musicians agreed that the author of the song was Ibray. The singer Isa Bayzakov had learned it from Kulmatambet, who had, in turn, learned it from Ibray. However, Zatayevich's transcription of "Gakku," which the ethnographer wrote from Ibray himself, sounded like "an entirely different song."⁸⁶ Brusilovsky expressed frustration with the existence of multiple irreconcilable versions of the song and attributed this misfortune to the non-acquaintance of Kazakh musicians with written notation: "When a person doesn't know notes and sings like a lark in the sky, he himself does not always understand what he sings, and whether he heard the song earlier or composed it just now."⁸⁷ In addition to expressing his irritation with the difficulty of finding a definitive version of the song, his remark reveals his belief in the inferiority of oral transmission.

The operation of translation that Brusilovsky employed while creating the national Kazakh opera was enmeshed in colonial assimilation. The process of translation posed formal and material challenges. Formal aspects related to the compositional treatment of ethnographic materials included the selection and subsequent conversion of monophonic folk songs into the harmonic texture and dramaturgical context of the operas. Material hindrances, on the other hand, emerged out of the incommensurability between the local aesthetic performance practices and the demands of the imported operatic performance style. Brusilovsky underscored two central qualities of Kazakh music-making that hindered the implementation of the generic conventions of European opera: the inherent bodily lack of metric grounding and the timbral difference of the ethnic voice. Brusilovsky's narration of Isa Bayzakov's interpretation of "Gakku" highlights both of these "shortcomings":

The main effect consisted of the accents, the jumping out shouts 'gi, gi, ga, ga, gok! gi, gi, gi, gak, gak, gok!,' the sudden shifts between forte and piano, the tensing of the vocal cords to limits, when the veins swelled on the highly stretched neck like thick ropes, and the voice became strained to the point of complete exhaustion [...] In the refrain, he extended his

⁸⁶ Many sources mistakenly claim that the written source for the song comes from Zatayevich's *1000 Songs of Kazakh People*, which the ethnographer collected in Orenburg from 1920 to 1923. For instance, N. Kuzhayev in "Kuandyk Dzhezdybayev i '1000 pesen Kazakhstskogo naroda'," 239, https://www.kunstkamera.ru/files/lib/978-5-88431-150-3/978-5-88431-150-3_68.pdf.

⁸⁷ Brusilovsky, "Vospominaniia," *Prostor* 9, 67.

neck surprisingly high like a swan and sang accenting the weak metric beats ‘Gakku, gakku, ga, ga, ga, ga, ga, ga, ga...’(69).

Brusilovsky’s comparison of Bayzakov to a swan is astoundingly similar to nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals’ descriptions of indigenous musicians as closely imitating animals and nature. For instance, Aleksei Levshin, in his *Opisanie Kirgiz-Kazach’ikh ili Kirgiz-Kaisakskikh ord i stepei* (1832), noted that the Kyrgyz-Kaisak people, when imitating nature, “depict the calls of different animals with their voices, [and] complement their descriptions with bodily gestures.”⁸⁸ As musicologist Adalyat Issiyeva notes, Levshin labeled the Kyrgyz-Kaisaks as “semisavages” (in-between the first two stages within the three-step evolutionary progress from barbarians, to savages, to civilization) and described their music-making in a manner consistent with the developmental theories of William Godwin, who claimed that “‘savages’ could imitate different sounds of nature better than ‘civilized men’.”⁸⁹ The nonhuman swelling of the veins and excessive stretching of the neck that Brusilovsky noted in Bayzakov’s performance thus point to the untamed, unruly nature of Kazakh musicking.

On multiple occasions, Brusilovsky referred to the peculiar “meterless” quality of Kazakh song as innate and natural, revealing the unspoken racial biases that necessitated an act of translation from what he perceived to be primitive folklore to the professional aesthetic realm. At times Brusilovsky commented on the absence of a strong metric orientation in Kazakh music in a positive way. He admired the “special, purely Kazakh beauty of song in the wide steppe” which does not obey “the narrow constraints of metro-rhythmic responsibilities.”⁹⁰ At other times, however, he criticized the “lack of a sense of meter” as “a purely national shortcoming.”⁹¹ “The Kazakh folk

⁸⁸ Issiyeva, *Representing Russia’s Orient*, 61. Kyrgyz-Kaisak was the nineteenth-century name given to the people who during the Soviet rule were renamed into Kazakhs.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 9, 56.

⁹¹ Ibid., 71.

song,” he wrote, “is first and foremost a kingdom of melody, absolutely free from the limitations of metro-rhythm. [...] Dance was absent from the popular *byt*, precisely due to the absence of the disciplining function of the rhythm.”⁹² One incident clarifies Brusilovsky’s attitude. During one of the rehearsals of Brusilovsky’s second opera, *Zhalbyr*, he witnessed how the choir could not march uniformly on stage: “I haven’t laughed so hard in a long time. Demonstrating their natural arhythmicity, anti-squaredness, our choristers could never walk in tact (*v nogu*).”⁹³ He followed his commentary on the natural inability of Kazakh people with claims about modernization: “The city with its aesthetics of squareness and square mindset re-educates the ‘unorganized’, asymmetrical psyche of the steppe son, teaching the person to perceive life as a square regularity.”⁹⁴ As a city dweller, Brusilovsky disciplined Kazakh musicians through assimilating their free treatment of musical time into the metric confines of Western music.

The adaptation of “Gakku” (“The Swan”) presented a double challenge, as the song existed in two variants notated by Zatayevich (Example 1). The first version was published in Zatayevich *500 Kazakh Songs and Kuis* (1931) and was notated from Alikey Utekin in Kzyl-Tuskiy province. The second version, preserved in an unpublished archival collection of songs, was notated using Fatym Beisembayev’s performance in Pavlodarskiy province.⁹⁵ The two versions reflect attributes of oral transmission as a practice which affords flexibility and plurality. While both songs are titled “Gakku,” their notated musical features display both similar and distinct elements. The most striking similarity is the opening of the song with an ascending perfect fourth leap, which in Zatayevich’s renditions suggests a $\wedge^5\text{--}\wedge^1$ motion in G major and C major, respectively. While the second version does not feature text throughout the entire song, its ending parallels the ending of the first version,

⁹² Ibid., 57.

⁹³ Ibid., 87.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Zatayevich, *500 pesen i kiniev kazakhskogo naroda* (Almaty, Dayk Press:1931); Zatayevich, *En-kui zhinagy: Notalar Kolzhazba* (folder 940), collection of songs from Bakhnoul’s village (*aul*) number 1.

undertook while deriving a “common denominator” of the two versions for his operatic rendition of “Gakku.” Through the act of reconstructing the formal translation of the folk song into the medium of opera, we can trace deep-rooted biases in Brusilovsky’s thinking and training, which suggest the superiority of Western culture. Although Zatayevich’s versions of “Gakku” are both mediated and filtered through his own Western-trained listening ear, they certainly capture divergences that we can attribute to the geographic and human factors. Aside from the melodic variation, these divergences are most apparent at the levels of musical form, modal content, and metric profiles.

Version one of “Gakku” consists of a main twelve-bar body and four-bar repeated coda. Marked *bodro* (cheerfully), the main body features the AAB bar form (each A section is four bars long, while the B section is eight bars long). The coda, marked *igrivo* (playfully), contains repetitions of the word “gakku.” In its entirety, including reprised sections, this version is 24-measures-long. Version two of “Gakku” also features a two-part structure. Here, each section consists of a repeated phrase. Section A contains 12 measures (6+6) and features a long expressive descriptor, “Moderately, clearly in time, with a good-natured jocosity.” Section B, marked *rovno* (evenly), introduces the “Gakku” text; it is subdivided into 3+3 bars which extend into a four-measure addition, marked “without delaying!,” that continues spanning over the repetitions of the “du” syllable. While the second version remains entirely within the G Ionian diatonic pitch collection, the first version deviates from its overall C Ionian diatonic collection in the B section of the song’s main body. Here, in the first two bars, the addition of the B-flat accidental transforms the mode into a C Mixolydian.⁹⁶ At first glance, the songs are so radically different that besides featuring the same title and emphasizing the word “gakku” in their texts the two versions do not seem represent the same song. However, their opening melodic profiles can be mapped one onto the other: the characteristic

⁹⁶ Zatayevich, interestingly, commented on the absence of “oriental” chromaticism in Kazakh music.

opening perfect fourth interval, present in both, is followed by a cascading scalar line. Thus, while the rhythmic profiles differ, there is nonetheless a parallel between the contours of the two melodies' opening phrases.

In the opera, "Gakku" is stated in F major and appears on three occasions, twice in Act I and once in the Act IV finale. In Act I, the aria remains within the F-major diatonic collection, with the exception of a chromatic D-flat that Brusilovsky employed to add chromaticism (Example 2). This D-flat appears in the orchestral accompaniment when a ii half-diminished seventh chord in third inversion is used to expand the F-major tonic triad. The parsimonious voice-leading (at least as it appears in the piano-vocal score) allows us to interpret this D-flat as a non-invasive chromatic accidental that slides down from D to C, rather than being a strongly iterated modal mixture harmony. Another notable instance of chromaticism is the appearance of an E-flat in the second iteration of "Gakku" in Act I. This deflection of $\hat{7}$ suggests a Mixolydian collection, indicating that Brusilovsky was consulting the first version of Zatayevich's rendition of the song.

Notably, in the draft of his first Kazakh song collection, *1000 Songs*, Zatayevich left the first seventy songs without bar lines.⁹⁷ This omission points to the ethnographer's hesitance to inscribe temporal divisions into the fluid flow of Kazakh songs. Zatayevich acknowledged the difficulty of dealing with notating metric and rhythmic aspects of the songs. He wrote that while a clear duple meter was apparent in songs from Eastern Kazakhstan (the Akmolinsk and Semipalatinsk provinces), in Western Kazakhstan, "the majority of the songs did not fit within a homogeneous (*odnorodnyi*) measure and allowed great liberty to the free meter, considering the absence of alteration between equally paced accents."⁹⁸ Despite the difficulties of representing Kazakh song metrically, in

⁹⁷ Zatayevich, *1000 pesen*, 481.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 15.

Соро

Гак - ку, гак - ку га - га - га - га - га - га - га - га.

а - ай. Гак - ку, гак - ку

га - га - га - га - га - га - га - га - га - га.

p

Example 2. Brusilovsky's adaptation of "Gakku" in *Kyrgyz Zhibek*.

the published collections, all of the songs appear with bar lines. As such, while initially Zatayevich acknowledged the distinctness of free meter in Kazakh song he chose to assimilate it by forcing it into bar lines.⁹⁹ The first version of "Gakku" follows the 2/4 meter signature with the exception of one three-beat measure. The second version features more frequent shifts between the 2/4 and 3/4 meters. Brusilovsky's rendition of the song in *Kyrgyz Zhibek* is ingenious: in the strophe of the aria, as shown in Example 3, he alternated between 5/4 and 6/4 meter signatures. He thus preserved the

⁹⁹ Kazakh musicologist Il'ias Kozhabekov, in the preface for the 2002 edition of *500 Pesen*, critiques Zatayevich's reliance on European "metro-rhythmic principles" as universally applicable. He writes that Zatayevich arrogantly strove to "regulate [...] the erratic whimsy of rhythm" in Kazakh music. See Kozhabekov, "Otrkytie muzykal'nogo kontinenta," in Zatayevich, *500 Pesen*, 17.

Жібек, Төлеген - бірге.

Ер-те-де аз-ған өл-де сар-нап-зар-лап- ай, үн қос-қан қо-бы. -зы-на тал-май сар-нап- ай.

Example 3. Alternating 5/4 and 6/4 meter signatures in Zhibek's aria "Gakku."

metric irregularity of the once orally transmitted folk song, yet he transposed it from an apparent surface-level irregularity into the deeper metrical level of half-note and dotted half-note pulses.

Brusilovsky's authorial version of "Gakku" in *Kyz Zhibek* is a product of a double mediation through which indigenous Kazakh identity was redefined in terms of national identity that aligned with the Party's vision of nationalism, i.e. packaging ethnic markers into Western forms. In this double mediation, the first step is presented by Zatayevich's transcriptions of the two oral versions of "Gakku" into Western notation. The second step was Brusilovsky's combination of Zatayevich's two versions of the song into the operatic aria. In producing a Soviet version of "Gakku," the composer and the ethnographer implemented metric transformations based on their racialized

understanding of meterlessness in Kazakh folk song. Their imposition of an approximate meter negated what they perceived to be a marker of innate, biological Kazakh difference—the inability to be metrical.

A brief comparison between Brusilovsky's and Zatayevich's approaches to meter and those of Kazakh ethnomusicologists will suffice to illustrate that the former's emphasis on the need of metric regularity reveals the myopic nature of claims about Western music's superiority and universality. In her *Ritmika kazakhskoi traditsionnoi pesni*, Asiia Baigaskina (1928–1999) stresses that the metro-rhythmic foundations of Kazakh song are inseparable from the structure of the Kazakh language and prosody.¹⁰⁰ Given that neither Brusilovsky nor Zatayevich spoke Kazakh, and that Zatayevich did not bother to include texts in most of his song transcriptions, it is not then surprising that they construed meter in Kazakh song to be irregular and irrational. Baigaskina's work reveals that even those musicologists who considered the role of prosody in their studies of rhythmicity in Turkic song still misrepresented its structure. One of the most esteemed Russian folklorists, Vladimir Beliaev, according to Baigaskina, developed a universalist method of rhythmic analysis and wrongly assumed that the foot-based prosody prevalent in Indo-European languages would apply to Turkic languages as well.¹⁰¹ Among specificities of the Kazakh language—which include vowel harmony and agglutination—Baigaskina indicates the unique mutable nature of stressing syllables. Unlike the fixed position of stresses in Indo-European languages, stress is flexible in the Kazakh language; as such, Western notions of “accent” or “stress” are not directly applicable, and categories such as “iambic trochee,” “octosyllabic choree,” or “heptasyllabic iambus” are not adequate means

¹⁰⁰ Asiia Baigaskina, *Ritmika kazakhskoi traditsionnoi pesni* (The rhythmicity of traditional Kazakh song) (1989) (Almaty: Kazstatinfo, 2003).

¹⁰¹ Baigaskina refers to Beliaev's monograph *Stikhotvornaia ritmika turkmenskogo muzykal'nogo fol'klora* (Prosody in Turkmen musical folklore) (Tashkent, 1943) and essay “O sootnoshenii slova i napeva v kazakhskoi pesne” (On the relationship between word and melody in Kazakh song). Baigaskina, 18.

for capturing the seven- or eight-syllable patterns in Kazakh poems.¹⁰² Instead, analysis should be based on the *bunak* (from the word “buyn,” joint)—the chief organizing principle in Kazakh prosody that groups “words of three-four syllables of different rhythmic values” into stable units.¹⁰³ The rhythmicity of Kazakh song, according to Baigaskina, does not obey any external metrical foot system but is intimately tied to the “internal [...] rhythmic nature” of the word(s).¹⁰⁴ The “anti-squaredness” of Kazakh musicians that Brusilovsky perceived as their “natural arrhythmicity” in need of Western cure is thus not a biological metric inability or disorder but an order of a different type. Performing acts of metrical regulation and standardization, both Brusilovsky and Zatayevich assimilated Kazakh difference, which their arrogance did not allow them to understand and appreciate, with the aim to render Kazakh folk song legible for a Western-trained opera listener and appropriate it for empire-building purposes.

“The Kazakh Nightingale”: Vocal Technique as Colonial Anthropotechnology

The composition of operatic pieces offered an initial step toward cultural and racial negotiation, in which composers like Brusilovsky “translated” folk songs from ethnographic collections into arias. The next step, the opera’s performance, presented the apex of the state-sanctioned national opera: local musicians were required to discipline their bodies to illustrate that the Soviet cultural revolution enabled them to partake in the most elaborate and demanding Western genre. In addition to overcoming metrical barriers, the performance of opera involved retraining the nasal vocal

¹⁰² Ibid., 151.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 152. Baigaskina notes that *bunak* is connected to *barmak* (“finger”)—the practice of counting syllables using fingers.

¹⁰⁴ *Ritmicheskaiia posledovatel’nost’ slogov v kazhdom ot del’nom sluchae zavisi ot slova (sloy), nakhodiashchikhsia vnutri analiziruemogo bunaka. Razlichnye konfiguratsii ritmov opredel’iautsia ne po kakoi-libo stopnoi sisteme, a v sootvetstvii s ikh vnutrennei, sobstvenno ritmicheskoi prirodoi.* Ibid., 152.

production of Kazakh folk singing because it did not meet the requirements of the operatic style.¹⁰⁵

The distinct timbral quality of nasal singing emerges when vocalists create resonance in the nasopharynx as opposed to letting the pressure freely escape the mouth. Brusilovsky highlighted the distinctive qualities of the nasal voice: “All of the Kazakh singers sang in the folk manner with white sound, and none knew notation.”¹⁰⁶ His description of the vocal timbre as “white,” however, does not imply proximity to the white operatic voice. Rather, by “white sound,” Brusilovsky likely referred to Manuel García II’s distinction between *voix blanche* (white voice) and *voix sombrée* (darkened voice).¹⁰⁷ García, a vocal pedagogue and inventor of the first laryngoscope, conducted physiological experiments that were influenced by his teacher François-Joseph Fétis’s claims that skull shapes directly influence vocal timbre. As Nina Sun Eidsheim argues, both García and Fétis promoted a theory of “timbral connection between race and voice.”¹⁰⁸ García’s anatomical experiments linked singing with a low larynx position with *voix sombrée*, while high with *voix blanche*. By the 1930s, García’s scientific vocal pedagogy influenced the perception of *voix blanche* as producing “flat,” “metallic,” “piercing,” and “barbaric” vowels—descriptions that, according to Eidsheim “render the singers inhuman, incomprehensible, and foreign.”¹⁰⁹ The Kazakh nasal vocal timbre, to the ears of operatic audiences, certainly aligned with *voix blanche* rather than *voix sombrée*. Brusilovsky was not the only listener who identified the “whiteness” of the Kazakh voice. In a

¹⁰⁵ Kira Thurman has written about the significance of retraining the voice in the context of African American singers who performed German lieder in Europe in the 1920s. See Thurman, “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race: Debating Blackness, Whiteness, and German Identity in Interwar Central Europe,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3(2019): 825–65.

¹⁰⁶ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 9, 66.

¹⁰⁷ While García’s *Traité complet de l’art du chant* was translated into Russian only in 1953, his ideas were certainly circulated in Russia by opera singers who were trained in Europe. García’s studies were addressed in Soviet works on vocal pedagogy. See as Igor Nazarenko, *Iskusstvo peniia: ocherki i materialy po istorii, teorii i praktike khudozhestvennogo peniia* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1968), 525–26.

¹⁰⁸ Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre,” in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, ed. Olivia Ashley Bloechl, Jeffrey Kallberg, and Melanie Diane Lowe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 349.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 354.

review of an ethnographic concert, a Russian commentator similarly described the nasal timbre as the “silver female voice.”¹¹⁰

On multiple occasions, Brusilovsky labeled the folk vocal technique as “the national manner of singing” and “the characteristic Kazakh manner of sound production (*zvukoi͡z͡vlecheniia*).”¹¹¹ According to Brusilovsky, the timbral distinction was an inherent part of the Kazakh folk song, which “lost half of its national beauty and character when performed by a professional vocalist.”¹¹² Yet despite this loss of “beauty and character,” opera demanded the adjustment of the folk voice. As Brusilovsky wrote, the “performance culture of singers” was among the central “creative and methodological challenges” of the “young Kazakh music theater.”¹¹³ He recalled that one of the Kazakh singers referred to the memorization process during opera rehearsals as *dressirovka*—the Russian word used to indicate animal training (67). The disciplining of the operatic voice thus acquired the potent status of an anthropotechnology. Theorized by Ana María Ochoa Gautier, who builds on the work of Argentinian philosopher Fabían Ludueña, an anthropotechnology is a vocal technique that European colonizers have long used “in the service of distinguishing the human from nonhuman in the voice.”¹¹⁴ As Ochoa Gautier writes, the “zoopolitics of the voice” configured “the relationship between the colonial and the modern,” while the anthropotechnologies “generated an ‘immunization’ of the voice in the name of the formation of the political community of ‘the people’ and in the name of an aesthetic of a proper mode of the voice.”¹¹⁵ The transformation of the

¹¹⁰ *Orenburgskaia zhizn'* (1915). Cited in Zhubanov, *Solov'i͡ stoletii*, 10.

¹¹¹ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 9, 66. He also claimed that when a Russian opera singer performs a Kazakh song in Russian translation “it certainly does not sound like a Kazakh song but, without any doubt, does not sound like a Russian one either. Kazakhs lose interest, while Russians don’t understand what it is.”

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press: 2014), 17.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9 and 20.

Kazakh folk voice into an operatic one would sonically manifest the success of cultural modernization: thanks to Soviet leadership, the exotic, untamed steppe voice is disciplined and able to partake in “high culture.” Here, “high culture” refers to the Russian operatic singing, which the Soviet state promoted as superior to that of Europe. In addition to pronouncing Mikhail Glinka to be the father of Russian classical music, Soviet historiography also presented him as “the founder of the Russian realist school of artistic singing.”¹¹⁶ As the Soviet vocal pedagogue Igor Nazarenko wrote, Glinka’s Russian school of singing transcended “the gloss” of Italian *bel canto* by “making the vocal-virtuosic means subservient to the realistic, psychological, and deeper qualities and thus laying out the path for future development of the entire vocal art.”¹¹⁷ It is crucial to note that in contrast to the “Othered” Kazakh folk voice, Russian folk song was interpreted by Russian musicologists as the progenitor of Russian national operatic singing. Voice pedagogue Antonina Iakovleva (b. 1963), for instance, highlights that, unlike the empty virtuosity of Italian singing, the “deep psychologism and the inseparable connection between word and music” and “the idiomatic embellishments and echoes” in Russian folk song contribute to the essence of the meaning.¹¹⁸ Even when citing remarks about Russian folk singing that could easily be interpreted as instances of “Othering” the folk voice—*vo vse rylo* (all the way from the snout) or *svistuloi, polegche* (lighter with your whistler)—Iakovleva interprets them in positive terms. While both expressions liken the

¹¹⁶ Igor Nazarenko in the preface to Mikhail Glinka, *Uprazhneniia dlia usovershenstvovaniia golosa: Shkola peniia dlia soprano. Uchebnoe posobie* (Moscow: GosMuzIzdat, 1951). On the Soviet appropriation of Glinka’s opera *A Life for the Tsar*, see Marina Frolova-Walker, “The Soviet Opera Project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. Ivan Susanin,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 181–216.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 6. “Podchiniv vokal’no-virtuoznye sredstva pravdivym, psikhologicheskim, bolee glubokim obrazam, russkaia shkola khudozhestvennogo peniia ukazala vsemu vokal’nomu iskusstvu istinnyi put’ dal’neishego razvitiia.”

¹¹⁸ Antonina Iakovleva, *Russkaia vokal’naia shkola: istoricheskii ocherk razvitiia ot istokov do serediny XIX stoletii* (The Russian vocal school: a historical sketch from origins to the middle of the 19th century) (Moscow: Globus, 1999), 6. See also Iakovleva, “Aktual’nye problem sovetskogo vokal’nogo ispolnitel’skogo iskusstva i vokal’noi pedagogiki” (Relevant issues of Soviet vocal performance art and vocal pedagogy), *Informatsionnyi tsentr po problemam kul’tury* 4, no. 18 (1976).

singer's mouth to non-human noise makers, an animal snout and a children's music instrument, Iakovleva does not read them as indications of inferior vocal production, but instead claims that such peculiar means of vocal expression aimed to enrich the content of the songs.¹¹⁹

As addressed above, because Kazakh vocal production, unlike the Russian one, was racialized and "Othered," it had to transform and develop the Russian national mode of operatic singing. "The first Kazakh professional opera singer," Kulyash Baiseitova (1912–1957), who premiered the role of Zhibek in 1934, received accolades from Soviet critics for the ability of her voice to grant Kazakhs "entry into the worldwide cultural environment."¹²⁰ Named "the Kazakh nightingale" by Kazakh people and Stalin himself, Baiseitova performed an astonishingly diverse repertoire that included Kazakh folk songs, as well as European, Russian, and Kazakh opera roles. Through the classical training with pedagogues K. A. Dianti and V. A. Smyslovskaya at the Kazakh Musical Theater's studio, Baiseitova's voice underwent a radical transformation: from the low contralto, which was considered the appropriate timbre for Kazakh women, she acquired the highly acclaimed tessitura of a Western lyrical coloratura soprano. The contemporary Kazakh musicologist Didar Kasymova provocatively asks, "How did this truly fairytale-like transformation from a Cinderella to a queen of the Kazakh Soviet opera scene take place?"¹²¹ Kasymova elaborates that the process by which Baiseitova trained her voice required "unbelievable labor," but allowed her to master the operatic art and become a true operatic diva in two short years (some commentators even state that the transformation occurred in two months). As Baiseitova's husband Kanabek Baiseitov recalled in his memoirs, she practiced at least ten hours a day and "proved that her amazing

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 8. Both expressions appear in a 1904 collection of Russian folk songs that were notated based on phonograph recordings collected by Yevgeniia Lineva (also known as Eugenie Lineff).

¹²⁰ "O pervoi opernoi pevitse-Kazashke Kulyash Baiseitovoi," *Literaturnyi Protsess*, last modified March 3, 2018, <http://88.204.166.7/ru/news/view/19830>.

¹²¹ Didar Kasymova, "Solovei v perelomnyi period," *Vestnik KazNU, Seriya istoricheskaya* 4, no. 83 (2016): 154.

endurance was equal to that of a steppe camel.”¹²² Praising his wife’s ability to “join the musical tradition of the Russian operatic school,” Baiseitov claimed, “armed with the technique of the European vocal school of singing, Kulyash Baiseitova’s ‘open’ sound raised the folk art of singing to a higher level.”¹²³ Baiseitov’s analogy of the camel hauntingly echoes the colonial zoopolitics of the voice: with persistent labor, aided by her pedagogues, Baiseitova mastered the anthropotechnology of the operatic voice that granted Kazakh music a ticket to modernity. For this achievement, the state endowed her with the most prestigious awards, including the People’s Artist of the USSR (1936) and two Stalin Prizes of second degree (1948 and 1949).

Not only did Baiseitova’s voice elevate Kazakh art in the ears and eyes of Western listeners, it also served as a tool that allowed her to make international music accessible to Kazakh audiences. A recording of Baiseitova’s interpretation of “Gakku” reveals that her voice preserved the timbral qualities of the traditional nasal singing. As one commentator noted, Baiseitova’s voice—“pure and soaring, with bright characteristic national timbre, so customary for the Kazakh steppe, was able to make the alien, unfamiliar music close and comprehensible.”¹²⁴ Notable in this description is the adjective “bright,” which most certainly alludes to *voix blanche*. The stakes, however, were higher than a purely aesthetic cultural exchange. The “soaring voice” promoted an ideological message. “The musical-visual representations” of Baiseitova’s operatic characters, Kasymova notes, were part of a “Kulturträger mission to alter the mental schemes of Kazakhs, including women, and to indicate the pathway for mastering cultural spaces.”¹²⁵ The voice was thus a multipurpose tool in the broader cultural modernization project within which “new art forms— theater, opera, ballet, and dance—

¹²² Kasymova, “Solovei,” 154.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ “O pervoi opernoi pevitse-Kazashke.”

¹²⁵ Kasymova, “Solovei,” 155.

were perceived as means of the revolutionary fight for the reorganization of Kazakh life and consciousness.”¹²⁶

Baiseitova’s hybrid voice displayed qualities of both realms: the archaic ethnic culture and the modern operatic tradition. Her ethnic voice contributed to her status as “the star of the whole delegation,” and similar to other ethnic voices was exploited for exhibition purposes implemented to showcase the multiethnic composition of the Soviet Union. During the train ride to the 1936 Moscow *dekada*, Brusilovsky recalls, Baiseitova was caught “holding a cold beer and coloraturely laughing.”¹²⁷ Her voice was so treasured that in order to preserve its integrity the director of the theater locked her in the hotel room and did not allow even her husband to enter. As Kasymova writes, “Kulyash [Baiseitova] was fully integrated into the Soviet system, as a pupil and mediator between the leadership and the people, and was engaged in government structures through her role as a Party member and a people’s elect deputy.”¹²⁸

The upward mobility that singers like Baiseitova experienced due to their vocal talent had a darker side: the state expropriated musicians’ bodies for its political purposes. Another Kazakh singer, the tenor Amre Kashaubayev, toured Europe in the mid 1920s to perform at ethnographic concerts. Formerly a coachman, Kashaubayev was ordered by Anatoly Lunacharsky to participate in the 1925 Paris Exposition Universelle. Brusilovsky comments on the effect that Kashaubayev’s performances produced on European audiences: “The man from wild Eastern steppes sings songs of his motherland.”¹²⁹ The link between Kashaubayev’s voice and nature echoes the contemporaneous neo-Lamarckian interpretations of racial difference being influenced by

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 9, 95.

¹²⁸ Kasymova, “Solovei,” 156.

¹²⁹ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 8, 72. As a consequence of these tours, singers often damaged their vocal cords due to overuse. As Brusilovsky noted, in Kashaubayev’s case, “nobody showed interest in the voiceless [singer]” when he returned to Kazakhstan, and “the pain of a lost and deceived life” has led to Kashaubayev’s heavy drinking.

environmental factors. Akhmet Zhubanov has documented descriptions of Kashaubayev's contemporaries who racialized his voice in terms of its affinity to the steppe nature:

Amre's voice grew up to thunderous mountain peals, then became as quiet as the rustling of steppe feather grass.

His voice soared upward, like a whirlwind, the melody became impetuous, like the running of a deer, and viscous, like the current of a mighty river.¹³⁰

Paris audiences highlighted their delight at hearing the music of Central Asia and Caucasus in its “untouched primitive state.”¹³¹ At the time of the Paris fair, the Soviet state allowed ethnic minorities to project their “primitive state” of development. As Zhubanov pointed out, the Paris ethnographic concerts, and later those organized in Frankfurt in 1927, “had enormous political role” as they “testified to the triumph of the Leninist national politics.”¹³² By Leninist national politics, Zhubanov means the Bolshevik's promise of rights to self-determination for all ethnic groups. However, in the 1930s, Stalin had forcefully organized ethnic groups into artificially constructed hierarchic administrative divisions, such as union republics and autonomous republics, regions, and districts. It was not until December of 1936 that Kazakhstan was transformed from an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Federative Republic (a status that included it as part of the Russian Federative Republic since 1920) into a Soviet Socialist Republic.

In May of 1936, a Kazakh *dekada*—a ten-day cultural festival—took place in Moscow. The festival thus tactically preceded the Kazakh republic's elevated political status: showcasing that they achieved the heights of European artistry, the Kazakhs would prove to the metropolitan audiences that they have made enough progress to be worthy of the highest administrative-political title. A special committee at the Kazmuzteatr selected two of Brusilovsky's operas, *Kyz Zhibek* and *Zhalbyr*

¹³⁰ Zhubanov, *Solov'i stoletii*, 320 and 330. “Golos Amre to ros do gromovykh gornykh raspadov, to stanovilsia tikhim, kak shurshanie stepnogo kovylia.” “Golos ego vzymal vvys', tochno vikhr', melodiia stanovilas' to stremitel'noi, kak beg lani, to tiaguchei, velichavoi, kak techenie moguchei reki.”

¹³¹ Ibid., 326.

¹³² Ibid.

(based on B. Mailin's libretto), to be featured at the *dekada*. Brusilovsky captured the anticipation of the public: "From afar, from thousands of kilometers away, not known to anyone, not resembling anyone, came very humble people and effortlessly perform on the big scene accompanied by a symphonic orchestra, singing in their own language without stumbling. They accurately followed rests, correctly entered, and confidently performed their parts without fearfully looking at the conductor."¹³³ His description reveals the stigma around Kazakh people as colonial, Oriental Others, incapable of partaking in high culture (similar to Zatayevich's remarks to Rolland). After the performances of his operas, Brusilovsky received many questions from the astonished Moscow audiences about whether or not Kazakh artists knew musical grammar. As he recalls, "for some reason, we were embarrassed, shy to openly and honestly declare that nobody knows notation" (96).

The voices of both Kashaubayev and Baiseitova were property of the Soviet state. The crucial difference between them lies in the fact that while the former was perceived by Western audiences as an uncultured singer of steppe folk songs, the latter was recognized as a professional musician, a true operatic diva. While Baiseitova's hybrid voice preserved hues of "Kazakhness," marking exotic difference that was alluring for the metropolitan audiences, its ability to project Europeanness by performing professional opera proved the success of the socialist cultural modernization. The Russian writer Aleksei Tolstoy, who attended the Kazakh Theatre's performance of *Er Targyn* in Leningrad in 1937, claimed that the Kazakh Theater overcame Europe. "There is beauty, there is power and youth of conviction, there is something that the cities of Europe have wasted and lost long ago, something that the best of the people yearn for: this golden, youthful, boiling blood of art."¹³⁴ The "shock factor" for the Moscow audience was produced by the

¹³³ Brusilovsky, "Vospominaniia," *Prostor* 9, 96.

¹³⁴ Cited in Kseniia Evdokimenko, "Bol'she, chem prem'era" (More than a premiere), *Vremia*, last modified January 8, 2021, <https://time.kz/articles/grim/2021/01/08/bolshe-chem-premera>. "Zdes' prisutstvuet krasota, zdes' sila i molodost' ubezhdeniia, zdes' to, chto goroda Evropy davno rastratili i rasteriali, o chem tak toskuiut luchshie liudi—ob etoi zolotoi, iunoï, kipiashchei krovi iskusstva."

Kazakh people's ability to achieve the high-quality performance standard of Western music. The 1936 *dekada* was thus an ultimate showcase of evolutionary teleology, endorsed by Soviet social anthropologists.¹³⁵ Yet Baiseitova's voice ultimately proved to be insufficiently professional for showcasing Kazakh cultural modernization. In 1956, the Party cancelled her participation in the Kazakh artists' tour to China. Baiseitova's daughter explains this decision as being provoked by a letter to the Central Committee, in which jealous colleagues accused the soprano of having alcohol issues. Not publicized in contemporary media, however, is another probable explanation—the rise of new professionally trained Kazakh singers whose voices have fully undergone the transition from *voix blanche* to *voix sombre*. A performance of “Gakku” by Bibigul Tulegenova (b. 1929), who replaced Baiseitova in the tour, displays a Western operatic style without a much more attenuated nasal timbre. Example 4 features recordings of “Gakku” by Baiseitova and Tulegenova.¹³⁶

<https://youtu.be/0eMi9IawqgQ?t=206> (3:26–4:52)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZXSePWY9DQ>

Example 4. Performances of “Gakku” by Baiseitova and Tulegenova.

The transformation of the folk voice marked the completion of the transition of Kazakh song unto the operatic stage. With this transition the Soviet leadership completed Imperial Russia's vexed centuries-long competition with European empires over modernizing Oriental Others. As Madina

¹³⁵ See Bruce Grant, “Missing Links: Indigenous Life and Evolutionary Thought in the History of Russian Ethnography,” *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 43 (2020): 119–40. Grant demonstrates how the Russian ethnographer Lev Shternberg's study of the Gilyak indigenous peoples established a firm foundation for the evolutionist thinking in Russian, and then Soviet, anthropology and ethnography. By 1930s, as Grant writes, Shternberg's evolutionist argument became “an important tool in the proletarian struggle against native backwardness.” *Ibid.*, 136.

¹³⁶ On the relationship between sound recording and constructions of race in opera, see Matthew Timmermans, “Opera, Sound Recording, and Critical Race Theory: Making a Sub-Field Audible,” *Current Musicology* 108 (2021): 1–25.

Tlostanova has argued, in the nineteenth century Russia had a “double-faced” political identity: while often being interpreted as “a colony in the presence of the West,” it was “a half-hearted and caricature ‘civilizer’ in its own non-European colonies.”¹³⁷ According to Soviet mass media propaganda, the success of Kazakh national opera illustrated how communists solved two problems at once: they eliminated racism and overcame the stagnation of Western art by enhancing it with fresh source material.

The Limits of the Soviet “Multidimensional Assimilation”

Brusilovsky’s hesitation to admit that Kazakh artists did not know notational grammar seemingly positions him as someone who believed in the inferiority of the oral tradition. However, he often expressed conflicting interpretations about the distinction between professional and folk music. He stated that his mission was to help build Kazakh professional culture. At the same time, he questioned whether it was “musical education that makes a composer professional.”¹³⁸ “Unwrittenness (lack of written notation), he wrote, “is a social evil, but not a mark of low spiritual culture. [...] What is a note? Only a sign. [...] And so a note is less than half of a kui.”¹³⁹ He frequently contemplated the project of notating songs that previously existed only as part of the oral Kazakh tradition, stating that no matter how precise an ethnographer attempted to be, the notated kui (instrumental composition) could not convey the originality of its musical meaning. Brusilovsky even listed elements of kui that were not translatable into the Western staff notation:

The techniques of sound production, the specific vibration of strings, the barely perceptible subtones-overtone, the characteristic tapping on the deck, the highlighting accents (the function of percussion instruments), the stone-like facial expressions (lively mimics and expressive gesticulation are considered bad manners, vulgarity), the temperamental *tremolando* of chordal progressions, the unexpected appearance of luft-pauses that are not indicated in

¹³⁷ See Tlostanova, “The Janus-Faced Empire,” 1.

¹³⁸ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 9, 57.

¹³⁹ Ibid. “Bespomis’mennost’—sotsial’noe zlo, a ne pokazatel’ nizkoi dukhovnoi kul’tury. [...] Chto nota? Tol’ko znak.”

the notated text—all of these create the national style, the Kazakh character of folk music-making.¹⁴⁰

Soviet critics praised Brusilovsky's contribution to creating the first Kazakh work in the European genre of opera. An article in *Pravda* from 1936 commended the composer: "The work of Brusilovsky is highly didactic for our youth. Two and a half years ago this young musician, following the orders of the Leningrad Union of Composers, moved to Kazakhstan, where he found his calling.

Brusilovsky courageously applied European art of instrumentation and harmony to Kazakh music, and did so correctly."¹⁴¹ The composer himself, however, doubted the rightfulness of his project.

Reflecting on performance matters, he pessimistically noted:

The nomadic lifestyle of the people has vanquished into the past; the way people live is changing radically. Sary-arka is already different; a modern Kazakh now needs an automobile more than a horse; the microphone is stronger than any voice; and all of the names of wonderful musicians of the past are gradually covered by the sand of coming years. And now, if we don't occupy ourselves with this important task, then, very soon, it will become too late. However, nobody can take over this feat. All of the musicologists seem to prefer empty (*pustovatyi*) theorization or stupid ethnography. Such naked ethnography was relevant thirty-fifty years ago but now ethnography has to be more scientific, deep, and historical. We need separate volumes dedicated to Birzhan, Mukhit, and others, as chapters of the future large historico-ethnographic work.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. "Tsimes [a Jewish word for a carrot dish, here used to mean "the specialness"] kiua v ego zvuchanii—v priemkah zvukoizvlecheniia, v spetsificheskoi vibratsii strun, v ele ulovimyykh prizvukakh-obertonakh, v kharakternom postukivani po deke, podcherkivaiushchem aktsenty (funktsiia udarnyykh), v kamennom vyrazhenii litsa (zhivaia mimika i vyrazitel'naia zhestikulatsiia schitaiutsia plokhim tonom, vul'garnost'iu), v temperamentnom *tremolando* akkordovykh posledovatel'nostei, v neozhidannom vozniknovenii kakikh-to liuft-pauz, ne imeiushchikh spetsial'nykh ukazanii v notnom tekste,—vse eto v tselom sozdaet natsional'nyi stil', kazakhskii kharakter narodnogo muzytsirovaniia."

¹⁴¹ *Pravda* (1936). "Kstati skazat', rabota kompozitora Brusilovskogo v vysshei stepeni pouchitel'na dlia nashei molodezhi. Dva s polovinoi goda nazad etot molodoi muzykant uekhal po pochinu Leningradskogo soiuz kompozitorov v Kazakhstan i tam nashel svoe prizvanie. Brusilovskii smelo primenil k kazakhskoi muzyke evropeiskoe iskusstvo instrumentovki i garmonii i postupil pravil'no."

¹⁴² Brusilovsky, "Vospominaniia," *Prostor* 9, 58. "Ushel v istoriiu kochevoi obraz zhizni, meniaetsia korennyim obrazom uklad zhizni naroda. Saryarka uzhe drugaia, sovremennomu kazakhu avtomobil' nuzhnei konia, mikrofon sil'nei liubogo golosa, i vse eti imena zamechatel'nykh muzykantov proshlogo postepenno zasypaet pesok griadushchikh let. I esli seichas ne zaniatsia etim vazhnym delom, to potom, i ochen' skoro, budet uzhe pozdno. Odnako, kazhetsia, nikto ne mozhet reshit'sia na etot podvig. Vse muzykovedy predpochitaiut zanimat'sia pustovarym teoretizirovaniem ili tupoi etnografiie. Takaia golaia etnografiia byla aktual'na 30–50 let nazad, a seichas etnografiia dolzhna byt' nauchnei, glubzhe i istorichnei. Nuzhny otdel'nye trudy o Birzhane, Mukhite i t.d., kak glavny budushchei bol'shoi istoriko-etnograficheskoi raboty."

His statements on the importance of launching a historically oriented project of preserving Kazakh culture reveals a degree of anxiety concerning his (in)voluntary participation in destroying it.

Kazakh people too understood the process of translating ethnic culture as erasure of “musical memory” that produced a “consequent loss of cultural identity.”¹⁴³ Even though he is not quite as essentializing as Prokofiev when it comes to molding folk melodies into operas, Brusilovsky is not able to preserve the integrity of ethnic culture. More critically, Brusilovsky seems to condemn the Soviet civilizing mission and its modernization project. His work reaches a limit that results from the inherent tensions within the Soviet civilizing mission which promises a culture “national in style, socialist in content.” Aside from displaying the formal limitations of integrating national and socialist ideologies, his operatic journey reveals the true political ambitions of establishing national Soviet Kazakh culture. The cultural revolution mandated the racialization of bodily difference and forceful assimilation of local idioms into “progressive” western forms in order to prove the civilizing power of the new ideology and to fuse the Soviet republics into a culturally uniform multiethnic state.¹⁴⁴

The use of ethnic songs in Brusilovsky’s operas provoked criticism from prominent Kazakh cultural figures, who accused the composer of appropriation and assimilation. The opera premiered on November 7, 1934, leaving the audiences “neither uncertain nor sluggish.”¹⁴⁵ Following the premiere, the prominent Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov condemned Brusilovsky for not crediting the many Kazakh composers whose songs he used in the opera. In his justification, the composer claimed that authorship of any of the songs is not determined: “Is this plagiarism or, as Russians would put it, theft? Theft from whom, the authors? Where are those authors, and how can we prove

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ As Tlostanova aptly notes, “In many ways it [the Soviet ideology] resembled the miseries of modern neo-liberal multiculturalism that also strives to confine difference to safe and predictable, packageable, museum forms.” Tlostanova, “The Janus-Faced Empire,” 6.

¹⁴⁵ Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 8, 73.

their authorship?”¹⁴⁶ Brusilovsky further continued to argue that ethnic culture can survive only through its transformation into professional art forms, even if the final product will only vaguely resemble the “old steppe song.” In the spirit of socialist dichotomization of the departing outdated past and the ever-coming progressive future, Brusilovsky conveyed to Auezov, “Only in our operas based on folk foundation, the Kazakh song will continue to live, because the steppe song, which is a product of the departing nomadic lifestyle, would not survive long in the conditions of the new sedentary city life; but on its basis appears the drastically transformed new Kazakh song of the Soviet Kazakhstan.”¹⁴⁷ The operation of translation erased ethnic identity markers beyond surface decorative elements, revealing what Homi Bhabha terms the untranslatability of cultures.¹⁴⁸

The racialization of metric inability and vocal inferiority are emblematic of the negotiation of Kazakh identity during the Soviet reign. The making of Soviet Kazakh national art demanded erasure of these racialized particularities that supposedly prevented the integration of folk culture into Western artistic standards. Yet, in practice, ethnographers and composers had to negotiate and select which features of ethnic culture should define the new Kazakh Soviet identity. Through the anthropotechnologies of metro-rhythm and operatic voice ethnic assimilation participated in the process of protection and preservation of colonial modes of making and being. As Ochoa Gautier writes, “In the history of Western zoopolitics of the modern, such a principle of protection becomes also one of alienation through a politics of purification that seeks to recognize something while denying the multiplicity and singularity of its construction.”¹⁴⁹ In the Soviet context, the so-called

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 227. Greg Castillo, for instance, points out the uneven hierarchy between Western and local cultural idioms when discussing architectural form in institutional buildings such as Opera and Ballet Theater in Tashkent: “Externally, the opera house is a neoclassical mass accented with exotic details.” See Castillo, “Soviet Orientalism: Socialist Realism and Built Tradition,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 8, no. 2 (1997): 40

¹⁴⁹ Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, 20.

“protection” of ethnic elements existed only in the form of state-sponsored artifacts of Kazakh culture. National operas recognized difference, yet at the same time denied multiplicity through the erasure of the diverse, flexible oral tradition. As such, the state produced a coherent version of Kazakhness that denied singularity and layered Kazakh identity with Soviet cultural standards.

The cultural ideology of racialization was enmeshed in the political strategizing of the state: erasure of the preconceived racial difference served the purpose of pacifying and eliminating the threat presented by local people who were more often than not suspicious of the communist government. According to the logic of the Soviet cultural revolution, the disappearance of the sonic color line was a necessary component of evolutionary development that represented the triumph of the state’s civilizing mission. At its core, however, the fundamental disregard for bodies exceeded the metrical and vocal training for the purposes of performing opera. Three of the local Kazakhs mentioned in this chapter—Zhurgenov, Shanin, and Kashaubayev—were repressed by the Soviet state following accusations of pan-Turkism and anti-Soviet affairs. Zhurgenov and Shanin were officially tried and executed in 1937. Kashaubayev, who was supposed to sing alongside Baiseitova at the 1934 premiere of *Kyz Zhibek*—was found dead on a street in Almaty a day before the premiere. Historians speculate that he was killed following official orders because he had met with the Kazakh émigré dissident Mustafa Shokay in Paris and had allegedly brought a letter that was meant to steer Kazakh revolts.

Opera’s adaptation of Kazakh culture proved to be a colonial assimilationist endeavor. Although the Soviet state presented cultural adaptation as a neutral, natural process, meant to foster inclusivity and unity, the forceful translation of folk culture into the operatic form reinforced the hegemonic structure of the Soviet nationality policies. A peaceful integration of the internal and external was an impractical theory. Many Kazakhs were dissatisfied with the transformation of their local traditions in a way that produced hybrid artifacts that did not preserve the integrity of their

cultural identity and historic memory. In the late 1950s, Auezov initiated a campaign against Brusilovsky, publishing an article in *Socialist Almaty* about the composer's appropriation of Kazakh songs and kuis.¹⁵⁰ The sentiment of this campaign shows that Kazakh artists felt that their culture was not valued on par with Western art. The Soviet state's projected equality of national cultures can be interpreted using Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry: "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*."¹⁵¹ Although Kazakh composers like Akhmet Zhubanov and Mukan Tulebayev received education in Russian conservatories and composed music in Western genres, including opera, they never received the same accolades as Prokofiev or Shostakovich. The hierarchy of difference between being Russian and merely "Russianized" prevailed in every cultural domain. Bhabha defines the maintaining of such difference as "metonymy of presence" and argues that it constitutes the objective of colonial mimicry, which turns from "a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite."¹⁵² The menace of maintaining difference reached beyond cultural production to realms of racialization that translated into hard-felt exploitation of human and environmental resources in Kazakhstan. The Kazakh anticolonial struggle against exploitation and desire for independent cultural identity is explored in the next chapter, which follows the path of the first professional Kazakh woman composer Gaziza Zhubanova.

¹⁵⁰ Brusilovsky, "Vospominaniia," *Prostor* 10, 103. Brusilovsky's second opera, *Er Targyn*, premiered in January of 1937. It was the first opera without spoken dialogues, "built entirely on folk songs [...], not an ethnographic collection or potpourri of folk songs;" in his description of the opera, Brusilovsky again emphasized the contrast between the old and new musical realms: "The folk songs, filled with new content, gained new life and sounded anew, conveying the feelings of the characters. Character songs lost their old meaning and gained new value that obeyed to the plot development." *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁵¹ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 126.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 132.

Chapter 4. Feminism, Modernism, and Anticolonialism in Gaziza Zhubanova's Operas

In an essay assignment, a seventh-grade Kazakh girl, Gaziza Zhubanova, wrote that she wished to be a composer when she grew up. In her memoirs, she later recalled that she was teased by her male classmates, who snapped: “Composition is a male profession!”¹ Yet, in 1975 a Soviet music critic noted: “The year of the woman is approaching. If I was asked whose portrait should be painted to symbolize our era and the profound changes in the fates of peoples, I would without hesitation name Gaziza Zhubanova among musicians.”² In 1981, Zhubanova (1927–1993) became the first female composer to receive the prestigious People’s Artist of the USSR award. She also became the first Kazakh composer to have an opera performed not only in Kazakhstan, but also on the stages of the most prestigious theaters in Moscow—the Bolshoi Theatre and the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre. Aside from being “the first woman composer among Kazakhs,” whose music was performed internationally, Zhubanova also occupied prominent leadership roles. She served as the head of the Kazakh Union of Composers (1962–1968) and the Dean of the Almaty Conservatory (1975–1987). In addition, she participated in Kazakhstan’s political and social life through her role as a governing member of the Committee of the Soviet Women.³

While Zhubanova’s accolades represent the self-professed success of the Soviets’ modernization campaign for liberation of the “oppressed Eastern woman,” her work challenges it.

¹ Gaziza Zhubanova, *Mir moi—muzyka* (Almaty: Bilim, 2008), 10.

² N. Yano-Yanovskaia, “Zrelost’” [Maturity], *Sovetskaia muzyka* 12, no. 445 (1975): 56. “The year of the woman” refers to the United Nation’s announcing of a World Conference on Women in 1975 in Mexico City. On the importance of the Conference in global women’s activism, see Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ This committee was established in September, 1941 as the Antifascist Committee of the Soviet Women, but it dropped “antifascist” from its title in 1956. The Committee was active until 1992. For an in-depth historical account of the committee, see Galina Galkina, *Komitet sovetskikh zhenshchin: stranitsy istorii (1941-1992)* (Moscow: Tonchu, 2013).

Framed within the socialist narrative of progress and modernization, the campaign, as I will discuss below, aimed to establish equal rights among men and women. On the one hand, the campaign created new opportunities for cultural development and artistic collaboration. On the other hand, these developments covered up the erasure of historical memory and indigenous culture, in particular, religious and familial traditions. Such erasure, as theorized by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, results in epistemicide, or “the death of knowledge” that occurs as a result of cultural exchange among groups with imbalanced political power.⁴ As decades of Soviet rule unfolded, the state’s exploitation of Kazakhstan proved de Sousa Santos’s claim that the death of knowledge is irretrievably connected with “death of social groups that possessed it.”⁵ Soviet state-sponsored projects, which provoked local resistance movements, have led to tragic consequences beyond epistemicide: mass famines induced by forced collectivization in the early 1930s; executions of Kazakh intelligentsia, including Zhubanova’s uncle, at the height of Stalinist terror;⁶ the devastating human and environmental impact of the Baikonur Cosmodrome and the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site (addressed below); and repressions of Kazakhs who participated in the 1986 Zheltoksan revolt (which led to the detention of Zhubanova’s husband). Zhubanova’s music, alongside her social and political activism, offers a window into understanding how Kazakh people countered subordination and epistemicide in the last two decades of Soviet rule. As I argue, she strove to decolonize the

⁴ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* [2014] (New York: Routledge, 2016), 92. Epistemicide, de Sousa Santos writes, “involves the destruction of the social practices and the disqualification of the social agents that operate according to such knowledge.” Ibid., 153.

⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁶ Zhubanova’s uncle, the Kazakh philologist and turkologist Kudaibergen Zhubanov, was declared an enemy of the people and executed on February 25, 1938. His death was a consequence of Nikolai Yezhov’s secret order from 1937, “On repressions of former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements” (O repressirovani byvshikh kulakov, ugolovnikov i drugikh antisovetskikh elementov).

Kazakh cultural and historical heritage by amplifying the voice of the woman as the ultimate bearer of indigenous memory and hence political resistance.⁷

This chapter examines the intersections between Zhubanova's compositional style, her musical representation of women, and her political stance on Soviet nationalities policies as they pertained to the state's broader cultural modernization project. After situating "the liberation of the Eastern woman" campaign within the broader historical context of Soviet feminism, I proceed with analyses of three operas. In my reading of Zhubanova's first opera, *Enlik and Kebek* (1975), I show that her heroic portrayal of the female protagonist, Enlik, differed from interpretations by official critics who situated the opera as emblematic of the Eastern woman's struggle for liberation.

Zhubanova's later operas, *The Twenty-Eight* (1981) and *Burannyi Yedygei* (The Steppe Yedygei, 1991), featured a more modernist musical language and became progressively more critical of the state. In my analysis of *The Twenty-Eight*, the libretto of which incorporated Zhubanova's interviews with veterans of World War II, I examine how she used textual and musical means to counteract official historiographic accounts of the War and the role of Kazakhs in the Soviet victory over fascism. In examining Zhubanova's unpublished opera, *Burannyi Yedygei*, I draw attention to her insistence on the preservation of memory as an act of condemning colonialism, cold-war nuclear armament, and environmental degradation. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that Zhubanova's foregrounding of the woman's voice—both literally and figuratively—in conjunction with her search for independent Kazakh musical modernism—placed her among the leading figures of the rising Kazakh resistance in the years leading to the dissolution of the USSR.

⁷ On theories of resistance, see M. Bahati Kuumba, "African Women, Resistance Cultures and Cultural Resistances," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 68 (2006): 112–21, and Robert Gutierrez-Perez, *Joteria Communication Studies: Narrating Theories of Resistance* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2021).

Soviet Feminism and the “Liberation” of Muslim Women

The history of Soviet feminism points at divergences between the Soviet government’s policies on the “women’s question” and colonial strategies practiced during the rule of Imperial Russia (continuities and discontinuities between the Soviet and Imperial Russian regimes are addressed in the introductory chapter). Although Russian rulers in Central Asia had made some efforts towards gender equality before Sovietization, these efforts, such as allowing women to receive an education, predominantly benefited Russian (and other Slavic) women inhabitants rather than indigenous women. The Imperial Russian regime was more concerned with “tax collection and military security” than with the modernization of its colonial peripheries.⁸ As a result, it allowed practitioners of Islam to maintain their religious, social, and cultural customs. Prior to the October Revolution, Russian revolutionaries of the Social Democratic Labor Party (who later split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) were skeptical about feminism because of its bourgeois associations. They followed the Marxist conception of feminism, which viewed gender inequality as a mere byproduct of the main enemy—class inequality under capitalism.⁹ Furthermore, as Tatyana Mamonova has argued, the Marxist view considered “only industrial work to be productive labor” and thus negated women’s domestic labor, including childbirth, as a mere responsibility rather than labor.¹⁰ As a result, Soviet feminism often neglected gender equality in favor of class equality. For example, one of the first woman revolutionaries in Russia, Alexandra Kollontai, argued that Marxist feminists should fight for

⁸ Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 19.

⁹ See Vincent Streichhahn, “Friedrich Engels: From the ‘Woman Question’ to Social Reproduction Theory,” *Engels @ 200: Reading Friedrich Engels in the 21st Century*, ed. Frank Jacob, 235–70 (Darmstadt: Büchner Verlag, 2020); Elisabeth Armstrong, “Marxist and Socialist Feminism,” Study of Women and Gender: Faculty Publications, Smith College (Northampton, MA, 2020), https://scholarworks.smith.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=swg_facpubs.

¹⁰ See Tatyana Mamonova, *Russian Women’s Studies: Essays on Sexism in Soviet Culture*, trans. Margaret Maxwell (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), 139.

“the interests of women of their own class, as opposed to the rights of all women.”¹¹ After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks spearheaded the emancipation of women as part of their modernization campaign. Seeking to prove to the bourgeois capitalist world the progressive nature of socialist ideology, the first Soviet constitution, established in 1918, immediately granted women equal rights in all civil and social matters.¹²

The Soviet state’s imposed policies of cultural homogenization erased cultural specificity in favor of normative gender roles. The Bolsheviks implemented sweeping changes in all domains of life with the goal of accelerating the “backward” Central Asian peoples’ path to modernization. However, due to the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of these people, egalitarian gender politics were not welcomed by local populations. The so-called “woman’s question” presented challenges in Muslim contexts, where, according to the Bolsheviks, women were particularly oppressed. As Greg Castillo states, the Soviet official line portrayed the male “Muslim traditionalist of Central Asia” as having “victimized his wife by keeping her sequestered behind veils and blind walls.”¹³ A set of binaries that juxtaposed old and new traditions was ubiquitous in propaganda on women’s emancipation. These binaries included reclusion vs. emancipation, “domestic slavery” vs. participation in social life, and barbarism/misanthropy vs. humanism, equality, and mutual respect.¹⁴

¹¹ Kollontai 1909, cited in Irina Iukina, “Na puti k marksistskomu feminizmu: deiatel’nost’ Aleksandry Kollontai” (Towards a Marxist feminism: the activity of Aleksandra Kollontai), *Sociology of Science and Technology* 5, no. 2 (2014): 85.

¹² Equality implied that women gained the right to divorce, to get abortions, and to have children outside of marriage. Ibid., 88.

¹³ Greg Castillo, “Soviet Orientalism: Socialist Realism and Built Tradition,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 8, no. 2 (1997): 35.

¹⁴ B. Pal’vanova, “Bor’ba KPSS za vovlechenie zhenshchin Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana v stroitel’stvo sotsializma i kommunizma” (The struggle of the KPSS for the integration of Central Asian and Kazakh women into the building of socialism and communism), in *Raskrepostshenie zhenshchin Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*, ed. K. Annakulieva et al (Ashkhabad: Ylym, 1971), 6 & 11; and Uraz Isaev, “Privetstvie Kazraikoma VKP(b) zhenshchinam v sviazi s dnem osvobozhdeniia kazashki” (Salute of the Kazraikom to the women on the occasion of Kazakh woman’s emancipation day) (January 1, 1926), in *Zhenshchiny Kazakhstana: aktivnye stroiteli sotsializma I 1918–1945*, ed. M. Abdulkadirova, M. Abilova, et al. (Almaty, Kazakhstan, 1981), 91.

The emphasis on the oppression of women within the old traditions thus depicted the Muslim woman as a symbol of the feudal past and archaic nomadic culture, both of which had no place in the new socialist order.

Among the stumbling blocks on the path toward gender equality was the familial system imbricated in Islam and the nomadic way of life prevalent in Central Asia.¹⁵ In addition to perceiving familial practices as backward, and therefore in need of modernization, Soviet authorities also realized the potential of families as ethnocultural collectives, the structure of which undermined their power. Through the tradition of *shezhire*, the memorization of the genealogical tree up to seven generations, Kazakh people preserved historical memory through oral accounts about their ancestors.¹⁶ Soviet leadership sought to erase culturally specific familial norms such as *shezhire* and polygyny to achieve its broader modernization agenda with the assistance of local women.¹⁷ It is not surprising then that 60% of all crimes under the legislation, “On the crimes that reflect vestiges of family life” (1928), concerned the status of women.¹⁸ As Gregory J. Massell has argued, women “in Soviet political imagination” came to represent the “surrogate proletariat,” the weakest and hence

¹⁵ On accounts of resistance among Muslim women and men see Northrop, “Subaltern Dialogues: Subversion and Resistance in Soviet Uzbek Family Law,” *Slavic Review* 60, no. 1 (2001): 115–39; Northrop, *Veiled Empire*; Adrienne Lynn Edgar, “Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: The Soviet ‘emancipation’ of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (2006): 252–72; and Edgar, “Emancipation of the unveiled: Turkmen women under Soviet rule, 1924–1929,” *Russian Review* 62, no. 1 (2003): 132–49.

¹⁶ Former president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has written about the importance of *shezhire* in Kazakh historiography “as a special form of people’s historical memory dedicated to history, a so-called ‘steppe oral historiography’.” See Nazarbayev, *V potoke istorii* (Almaty, 1999), 47.

¹⁷ See Abdirajamova, A.S., Rosa S. Zharkynbayeva, and Karlygash Bizhigitova. “The Image of the Kazakh Women in the Works of Russian Authors in the Context of Imperial Policy in the Steppes (the end of the 18th–beginning of 20th century),” *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences* 140 (2014): 671–76. The authors argue that already in the nineteenth century Russian authorities perceived Kazakh people to be “far from the influence of Muslim ‘fanatism’,” and hence more malleable for russification than other Central Asian peoples; crucially, Russian authorities relied on Kazakh women to bring about the process of russification (framed as Russia’s civilizing mission), which included dissemination of Orthodoxy.

¹⁸ Dina Amanzholova, “Iz opyta resheniia zhenskogo voprosa v Kazakhstane, 1920–1930” (From the experience of solving the woman’s question in Kazakhstan, 1920–1930), *Russian regions: looking into the future*, <http://futereruss.ru/worldculture/ethnic-groups/gender-v-kazaxstane.html>.

most malleable force for the “disintegration and the subsequent reconstitution” of society.¹⁹ Soviet reforms related to gender politics were thus conducted with the aim of gaining trustworthy allies in the liberated Muslim women.²⁰

New bureaucratic establishments and mass propaganda enforced changes in gender politics, which aimed to “emancipate women of the main nationalities in Central Asia and Kazakhstan and to include them in the rows of active builders of communism.”²¹ In 1919, the Central Committee established Zhenotdel (short for “Women’s Department”), a special task force that targeted solving issues related to gender inequality.²² This department, mostly comprised of women of Slavic origins, was responsible for ensuring women’s literacy, as well as educating them in matters of hygiene and motherhood. The socialist egalitarian efforts resulted in the prohibition of many key familial customs common in Islam: in 1920, polygyny and *amergenstvo* (the tradition according to which a widowed woman had to remarry a relative of her deceased husband) became forbidden; in 1920, *kaly*m (paying money for a bride) was forbidden, and in 1924 a holiday commemorating the day of the cancellation of *kaly*m was established in Kazakhstan. In 1926–27, a series of decrees issued by the Party introduced various establishments, including press, clubs, reading huts (*izby-chital’ni*),

¹⁹ Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), xxiii.

²⁰ M. Abdulkadirova, M. Abilova, N. Kriuchkova, *Zhenshchiny Kazakhstana—aktivnye stroiteli sotsializma (1918-1945)* (Women of Kazakhstan: active builders of socialism) (Almaty: Kazakhstan, 1981); Z. A. Astapovich, ed., *Velikii oktiabr’ i raskrepostshchenie zhenshchin Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana (1917–1936)* (The great October and the emancipation of women in Central Asia and Kazakhstan) (Moscow: Mysl’, 1971).

²¹ B. Pal’vanova, “Bor’ba KPSS za vovlechenie zhenshchin Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana v stroitel’svo sotsializma i kommunizma” (The struggle of the Communist Party for including women of Central Asia and Kazakhstan into the building of socialism and communism), in *Raskrepostshchenie zhenshchin Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*, ed. K. Annakulieva et al (Ashkhabad: Ylym, 1971), 5. “Raskrepostshchenie zhenshchin osnovnykh natsional’nostei respublik Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana i massovomu vovlecheniiu ikh v riady aktivnykh stroitelei kommunizma.”

²² In 1920, in Kazakhstan, a decree of the Party declared: “The department establishes the goal of attracting the workers and peasants to party-oriented and Soviet work, as well as educating in the active fighters for the ideals of their class. “Otdel stavit sebe zadachei privlechenie rabotnits i krest’ianok k partiinoi i sovetskoi rabote i vospitanie v nikh aktivnykh bortsov za idealy svoego klassa.”

technical schools, and professional unions, that would educate the *vostochnitsa* (literally a “female Easterner”).²³ On International Women’s Day, March 8, 1927, the Central Party launched a movement known as Hujum (literally, “To the Attack!”) to force women to remove their *paranji* (veils) in the presence of unrelated men.²⁴ Although Hujum began in Kyrgyzstan, it soon spread throughout Central Asia. The forced unveiling confronted aggressive retaliation and resistance from the local population, especially from Muslim clergy, which led to thousands of femicides as Muslim men attacked and killed unveiled women.²⁵ Despite the fact that Hujum resulted in heightened literacy among Muslim women, improved healthcare, and opportunities for women to work, much of the local population in Central Asia remained suspicious of the new regime and viewed its impact as indigenous erasure.²⁶

Beginning in the early 1930s, the women’s liberation movement was “liquidated ‘from above’ as one that has already fulfilled its role.”²⁷ The fate of one of the movement’s central proponents, Kollontai, is telling: Soviet male leadership did not approve of her radical advocacy of a woman as

²³ The decrees included “On more goals of the Party in work among workwomen, peasants and toilers of the East;” “On the service of press to the female working masses;” “On the role of clubs in the Soviet East;” “On the work for emancipating (*raskreposhcheniie*) the woman of Central Asia;” Full decrees in Davydov I.D. and Klabunovsky I.G., eds, *Директивы ВКП(б) по вопросам просвещения*, 335. http://elib.gnpbu.ru/text/directivy-vkpb--prosvescheniya_1931/go,326;fs,1/

²⁴ Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974). Unveiling also took place in Azerbaijan, where in 1960 the Statue of a Liberated Woman was erected to celebrate the cultural transformation. See also Northrop, “Hujum: Unveiling Campaigns and Local Responses in Uzbekistan, 1927,” in *Provincial Landscapes: Local Dimensions of Soviet Power, 1917–1953*, ed. Donald J. Raleigh, 125–45 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001).

²⁵ The tragic fate of two Uzbek unveiled performers was publicized by the state: the dancer Nurkhon Yuldashkhojayeva and the actress Tursunoy Saidazimova were killed by their brother and husband, respectively, for appearing on stage without their veils.

²⁶ The fact that the “liberated” women mostly worked in collective farms raises the question of who benefitted from these women’s labor, the women themselves or the state. In Kazakhstan, forced collectivization resulted in particularly gruesome famines, which some scholars interpret as genocide intentionally implemented by the Soviet leaders.

²⁷ Iukina, “Na puti,” 88.

“a privileged partner in the creation of new forms of community and a new communist structure.”²⁸

Stalin’s new constitution of 1936 reasserted the equal rights of women, but it also rejected the earlier radical Bolshevik gender politics: abortions were prohibited in 1936, and only officially registered marriages were considered legal beginning in 1944.²⁹ According to these new sets of laws, women could no longer live in undocumented civil unions and instead had to fulfill their duties as married wives and exemplary mothers. These changes were implemented as reactions to the government’s inability to establish institutional support that would provide proper childcare, as well as the drastic decline in birth rate.³⁰ Although these changes were reversed yet again during the Thaw, and equal rights were yet again affirmed in the 1977 Brezhnev Constitution, the woman’s question remained solved only on paper. In actuality, the difficulty of balancing the double role of women as a *truzhenitsa* (laborer) and *mat’* (mother) remained an inconvenient truth that the socialist system simply dismissed as no longer existent.

Central to Zhubanova’s public persona were her accomplishments in both public and domestic spheres: in addition to being a successful composer and state official, she was also a loving mother of four children. Zhubanova’s double success, however, positions her as an outlier rather than a representative of a common Kazakh (or Soviet) woman of her time. Zhubanova was born into the family of Akhmet Zhubanov (1906–1968)—an established first-generation Kazakh composer. Growing up in a family of intelligentsia, she had the social and financial means to pursue musical education and the elite career of a composer. The difference between her lifestyle and that of most proletarian women, who toiled in factories and farms, reveals the disparities between Soviet

²⁸ Ibid., 90.

²⁹ On the social ambivalence toward these policies see Part II, “The Stalin Era,” in Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women’s Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–1953* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

³⁰ Svetlana Aivazova, *Russkie zhenshchiny v labirinte ravnopravii: ocherki politicheskoi teorii i istorii* (Moscow: RIK Rusanova, 1998).

citizens that persisted despite grand official claims about the effective implementation of gender and class equality. For instance, Zhubanova's leadership positions afforded her access to world travel and exposure to new musical developments at a time when few Soviet citizens had a passport. In addition to enjoying privileges not afforded to most Soviet women, Zhubanova's career as a composer was also unusually prolific when compared to other Soviet woman composers, scientists, and writers. Even though by the 1970s women were allegedly equal participants in social and political life, their prominence in these spheres remained dubious. In sciences and technology, for instance, Valentina Tereshkova (b. 1937), who became a world legend after becoming the first and youngest woman in space in 1963, shortly after her trip became a "wife, mother, and cultural ambassador"—all roles that were more traditional for Soviet women than being a scientist or astronaut.³¹ In literature, Zhubanova's contemporaries such as Natalya Gorbanevskaya (1936–2013) and Liudmila Ulitskaia (b. 1943) all experienced censorship that precluded their works from being published and performed on theater stages.³² Like women in other intellectual professions, Soviet woman composers usually occupied a precarious position within their industry. Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931) was censored along with the other composers active in the 1960s. Later, in 1979, Gubaidulina and Elena Firsova (b. 1950) were included in the banned group of composers, the so-called Khrennikov seven, for their avantgarde musical language.³³

³¹ Roshan P. Sylvester, "She Orbits over the Sex Barrier: Soviet Girls and the Tereshkova Moment," in James T. Andrews, James and Asif A. Siddiqi, eds., *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 197.

³² Gorbanevskaya, for instance, was arrested and confined to a psychiatric ward for her involvement in the demonstrations against the Soviet invasion of Prague. Ulitskaia, having formal education in biology, was fired from the post of research scientist at the Institute of General Genetics for distributing *samizdat* literature.

³³ The Khrennikov seven were condemned at the sixth meeting of the Union of Soviet Composers in a speech by Tikhon Khrennikov, the head of the Union. Aside from Gubaidulina and Firsova, the group included Vyacheslav Artyomov, Edison Denisov, Aleksandr Knaifel, Dmitry Smirnov, and Viktor Suslin.

Women's relatively low political presence contradicted the inflated official rhetoric about their equal participation in socialist life. Despite the glorification of revolutionary leaders such as Nadezhda Krupskaya, the highest Party governing positions were occupied predominantly by men.³⁴ In 1966–67 for instance, women constituted 54.2% of the total USSR population. Women, however, represented 20.9% of the Party members, only 2.8% of the Central Committee and were completely absent from the politburo and secretariat of the Central Party, which was 100% governed by men.³⁵ As Choi Chatterjee argues, to compensate for the actual lack of equality the state remembered and focused on women only once a year around the International Women's Day celebrations.³⁶ During massive festivities, discourse around heroic deeds of women was promoted through plays, performances, and media publications which showcased socialist egalitarianism.

Given this context, Zhubanova's prominent musical career and official recognition are truly extraordinary. While she was involved in leadership circles, she was not a major political player. Her relatively marginal political capacity thus fits with the dismal statistics of Soviet women's power discussed above. Yet, precisely because she was not a major government leader, she was able to inconspicuously create music that communicated political resistance. There are three reasons for her success in pursuing resistance. First, geographically, her career unfolded mainly in Kazakhstan—occasional performances of her compositions in Moscow and Saint Petersburg did not give her enough visibility or prominence as a public figure across the Soviet Union. Second, as a true

³⁴ Several publications were dedicated to the legacy of revolutionary women. See A. V. Artiukhina, A. I. Vakurova, et al., *Zhenshchiny v revoliutsii* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1959) and Lidiia Stishova, ed., *Zhenshchiny russkoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1982).

³⁵ Aivazova, *Russkie zhenshchiny*, accessed online. As evidence to the insincere nature of the official Soviet feminism, Aivazova points out that the renaissance of feminist movement in Leningrad in 1981, which was accompanied by an establishment of a magazine titled *Maria*, was shut by the government, leading to the halt of *Maria*'s publication in 1982 and to forced emigration of the feminists involved in the movement.

³⁶ See Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture, and Bolshevik Ideology, 1910–1939* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).

strategist, she wrote many official pieces that glorified the state, including large-scale works such as two oratorios, *Lenin* (1969) and *The Letter of Lenin* (1978), and two cantatas, *Lenin is With Us* (1970) and *A Cantata About the Party* (1971). Third, and perhaps most paradoxically, it was her gender that allowed her to pursue resistance in her music. Despite the purported gender equality in the Soviet Union, women were never treated as equal members of the communist society. Only 10 to 15 percent of the Gulag prisoners were women, which shows that the Soviet state simply did not see women as being as ideologically dangerous as men. It is for this reason that Zhubanova was able to overcome censorship while her uncle, father, and husband were subjected to government persecution. As such, the “regionality” of her activities, her ability to produce works that satisfied socialist realist artistic demands, and her gender itself allowed her to write a handful of compositions that masked anticolonial political themes without drawing too much unwanted attention from state censors. Zhubanova thus deployed gender biases to articulate subversive anticolonial resistance, proving that gender equality was never achieved in the Soviet Union.

Music and a New Kazakh Nationalism

Zhubanova’s confrontation of the Soviet colonial exploitation of Kazakhstan went hand-in-hand with her disapproval of the officially sanctioned Kazakh national music style. Beginning in the 1930s, each republic’s national music was expected to abide by socialist realist artistic norms: attract masses, communicate socialist ideology, and cite folk melodies to convey the diversity of the multiethnic Soviet Union. Zhubanova had received thorough training in writing music in the socialist realist tradition. After graduating from the Gnesin Academy in 1949, she studied composition at the Moscow Conservatory, where she pursued undergraduate and graduate degrees under Yuri Shaporin. While her formal training involved writing music in the socialist realist style, she joined a group of students who secretly studied European avantgarde music banned in the

USSR. Kazakh music scholar Dina Mosienko writes that Zhubanova belonged to the new generation of “non-conformist” composers referred to as the *shestidesiatniki* (the sixtiers).³⁷ Among “non-conformist” composers were Edison Denisov, Alfred Schnittke, Arvo Pärt, Leonid Hrabovsky, and Sofia Gubaidulina.³⁸ These composers distanced themselves from officially sanctioned artistic requirements that continued to reflect the remnants of socialist realism—a style which was promoted during Stalin’s rule and bolstered art that appealed to the masses and imposed communist values. The “non-conformist” composers, instead of creating music accessible to the masses, pursued their own idiosyncratic ways of integrating and developing modernist European compositional tools. Zhubanova, however, in her pursuit of modernist musical language, sought to make her music appealing to Kazakh audiences. She strove to cultivate her audience’s appreciation for contemporary Kazakh music that went beyond the mere quotation of folk melodies.

In 1958, she returned to Almaty, where she directed the Kazakh Union of Composers from 1962 to 1968.³⁹ According to contemporaneous critics, she initiated “a new epoch in Kazakh musical culture” which was not welcomed by the older generation of composers who did not approve of her modernistic inclinations.⁴⁰ One of them, Yevgeny Brusilovsky—who was a Russian-Jewish composer commissioned by the state to write the first national Kazakh opera—stated that Zhubanova’s oratorio *The Fiery Nights on Ural* was “Moscowly hypertrophic.”⁴¹ Brusilovsky’s sarcastic language here would have been understood by contemporaneous readers as an allusion to

³⁷ Dina Mosienko, “Kazakhskaiia opera: 80 let spustia” (Kazakh opera: 80 years later), *Muzykovedenie* 2 (2005): 62–9.

³⁸ On the music of *shestidesiatniki*, see Levon Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era: 1917–1991* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); Valentina Kholopova, “Secrets of the Moscow Composition School in Vladislav Shoot’s ‘Pure Music’,” in *Music of the Repressed Russian Avant-garde, 1900–1929*, ed. Valeria Tsenova (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994); and Peter Schmeltz, *Such Freedom if Only Unseen: Unofficial Soviet Music During the Thaw* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁹ She claimed, in her memoirs, that she was appointed against her will, following “Party orders.” Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁴¹ Ibid., 14. “Moskovskoi gipertrofirovannoi.”

formalism, an artistic practice (never precisely defined) that was condemned by the state for being overly complicated and inaccessible to the masses.⁴² Zhubanova, however, continued to be an advocate for contemporary music through her compositions, teaching, and participation in festivals of contemporary music that took place in Central Asian republics.

Zhubanova's desire to revise the role of folklore in art music was central to her understanding of musical modernism and symptomatic of the growing discontent of Kazakh intelligentsia with the Soviet state's ongoing subjugation of Kazakh national and ethnic identity. In 1916, under Imperial Russia's rule, the Central Asian Revolt marked the first large-scale anti-Imperialist uprising led by the non-Russian population.⁴³ After the October Revolution, the so-called *basmachi* initiated guerrilla wars to resist Bolshevik anti-Muslim propaganda across Central Asia; this movement lasted until the early 1940s. In the 1950s, as part of new purges against "Kazakh nationalists," the Soviet leadership targeted Kazakh intelligentsia, including Zhubanova's father. An anonymous article in *Sovetskaia muzyka* condemned Zhubanov's 1942 book, *Life and Art of Kazakh Composers*, for being "deeply infused with the poison of bourgeois nationalism."⁴⁴ The article's author claimed that "the whole book is full of reactionary nationalist ideology and is geared towards the idealization of the feudal past and wild nomadic customs, as well as the glorification of sultans and *bays*—the worst enemies of Kazakh and Russian peoples."⁴⁵ The unforgivable "mistake" of Zhubanov and the rest of the Kazakh "bourgeois nationalists" was the fact that they refused to perpetuate the fabricated Soviet historiography according to which "the unification of Kazakhstan with Russia was voluntary and

⁴² See Iosif Ryzhkin, *Russkoe klassicheskoe muzykoznanie v bor'be protiv formalizma* (Russian classical musicology in its struggle against formalism) (Moscow and Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Muzykal'noe Izdatel'stvo, 1951).

⁴³ Hafeez Malik, *Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 101.

⁴⁴ "Vykorchevat' do kontsa ostatki burzhuaznogo natsionalizma" (Uproot to the end the remnants of bourgeois nationalism), *Sovetskaia muzyka* 12 (1951): 33.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

peaceful” and continued to remind Kazakh people of a past in which they were free from Russian and Soviet rule.

Zhubanova expressed her own political agenda of Kazakh resistance in numerous essays and musical works. Central to this agenda was her search for a renewed musical nationalism and the role of folklore within it.⁴⁶ She expressed discontent with the old citational method of incorporating folklore that was promoted by composers such as Brusilovsky during the early years of the establishment of the so-called Kazakh musical classicism. Specifically, she was dissatisfied with the state of Kazakh classical music and argued that while in the early stages of development it was acceptable to employ folk material in operas on fabular subjects, this compositional approach was no longer sufficient, especially in operas that narrated contemporary events. For instance, she described Brusilovsky’s opera *Zhalbyr* (1935) as featuring “a simple weaving of folk songs one after another” which resulted in dramaturgical weakness and a lack of through-composed development of musical material.⁴⁷ Comparing Brusilovsky’s operas with those by local composers—specifically, Akhmet Zhubanov and Latif Khamidi’s *Abay* (1944) and Mukan Tulebayev’s *Birzhan and Sara* (1946)—she concluded that the latter’s musical means reflected the “social might” of the content “powerfully, distinctively, and uniquely.”⁴⁸ According to Zhubanova, Brusilovsky, in his operas *Kyz-*

⁴⁶ As musicologist Valeriia Nedlina points out, many Kazakh intellectuals beginning in the 1970s began to critically reexamine the relationship between Kazakh indigenous (what she calls “traditional”) art and Western art forms. This reexamination subsequently led to the revival of many folk genres that musicians and scholars began to cultivate independently, as opposed to employing them as springboards for classical genres. Kazakh composers of classical music, on the other hand, began to align more closely with Western avantgarde developments. See Nedlina, “Puti razvitiia muzykal’noi kul’tury Kazakhstana na rubezhe XX–XXI stoletii” (The paths of development of Kazakh musical culture in 20th–21st centuries) (PhD diss., Moscow Conservatory, 2017), 40. Also see Aktoty Raimkulova, “Razvitie na kazakhstanskata kompozitorska shkola v ramkite na evraziiskii mezhdukulturen dialog” (The development of Kazakh compositional school in light of the Eurasian intercultural dialogue) (PhD diss., Panko Vladigerov National Academy of Music, 2018).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 55. *Zhalbyr* narrated the events of Kazakh uprisings in 1916 and the subsequent Sovietization of Kazakhstan in the following two years, all led by Amangeldy Imanov. The librettist, Beimbet Mailin (1894–1938), was repressed as an enemy of the Soviet people.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 56. In 1944, as a young girl, Zhubanova attended the rehearsals of Zhubanov’s opera *Abay*.

Zhibek (1934) and *Er-Targyn* (1935), quoted songs and dances that did not correspond with the historical context of the plots. By contrast, Zhubanov, Khamidi, and Tulebayev avoided such *meshchanina* (“philistinism”) and used folk musical material that was chronologically consistent.⁴⁹ This more authentic approach, she claimed, gave their operas “greater integrity and intonational unity.” Kazakh folklore, according to her, “is an encyclopedia of Kazakh life—hence those who do not know this life should not undertake arranging *kyys*” (a traditional Kazakh instrumental music genre).⁵⁰ Zhubanova thus challenged Brusilovsky’s role as the national Kazakh composer: since he was an outsider and did not possess indigenous knowledge, his music could not represent true Kazakh nationalism. Her recurring critique of Brusilovsky’s music suggests a departure from the outdated socialist realist vision of Kazakh national art. Embodied in Brusilovsky’s operas, this vision treated folk material as merely offering “nationalist form” for the “socialist content.”

When Zhubanova became the dean of the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory in 1975, her goal was “to renew the quality” of music education to ensure that composers did not rely on citational methods in their work. She believed that education was halted at a “provincial” level and thus sought to disentangle folk music from classical music.⁵¹ While she recognized that the citational approach was acceptable in the early development of Kazakh operas, she wished for Kazakh composers to follow contemporary modernistic techniques of composition as developed by the Soviet classics and European avantgardists. “At one point,” she stated, “Kazakh, Turkmen, Kyrgyz operas developed based on the citational method of using folk melodies. Now, we must seek a new interpretation of folklore, its deepening; here we often face the misunderstanding by the listener [...] who does not understand the ‘modern intonations’.”⁵² To cultivate the listener’s

⁴⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁰ Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 49.

⁵¹ Ibid., 15–17. Zhubanova served as dean for twelve years.

⁵² Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 23–24.

appreciation for “modern intonations,” Zhubanova suggested programming music by Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Shchedrin, and Slonimsky into the Almaty Opera Theatre’s repertoire.

Beyond her attempts to reform Kazakh classical music, Zhubanova also sought to recover historical truths, cultural memory, and indigenous identity. Her work thus stood in contrast to earlier Kazakh operas, such as those by Brusilovsky, which revised historical facts to downplay Russian colonialism. As my analyses below explore, in addition to her public writings about the enhancement of the quality of Kazakh music, Zhubanova’s operas (and other works) also implicitly condemned the official interpretation of Kazakh history—which effaced traces of Russian and Soviet colonialism—and resisted Russification and the continued exploitation of human labor and natural resources.

Gender in *Enlik and Kebek*

Zhubanova’s first opera, *Enlik and Kebek*, is of twofold significance for this study. Not only did it diverge from operatic norms by emphasizing symphonic development, but it also used musical means to confront communist representations of pre-Soviet Muslim women’s inferior status in Kazakh society. She recalled that critics were skeptical about the reception of her opera’s complex musical language; specifically, one critic juxtaposed her work with Brusilovsky’s *Kyz Zhibek* and claimed that Zhubanova’s opera was more of a symphony than an opera.⁵³ The audience, however, accepted the opera, even though, as Zhubanova stated, it featured an unconventionally “rich orchestra with big symphonic episodes.” In addition, her representation of the female protagonist Enlik as a determined and forceful woman diverged from previous interpretations of the legend in which Enlik is submissive and oppressed. Zhubanova’s efforts to complexify the musical language

⁵³ Ibid., 145.

of *Enlik and Kebek* thus reflect her wish to “de-provincialize” Kazakh music and revise the perception of a Kazakh woman.

Enlik and Kebek premiered on January 24, 1975, at the Abay Theatre of Opera and Ballet in Almaty. It was later performed in Semipalatinsk, Kuryev, Karaganda, and eventually at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow (1978) and in Leningrad (1981). The libretto, written by Saga Zhienbaev, is based on an eighteenth-century legend in which two young people from competing clans, Enlik and Kebek, fall in love with each other. They rebel against the customs that do not permit them to be together, and escape to lead a life in isolation. A wiseman from Enlik’s tribe attempts to convince the angry tribesmen to forgive the lovers and let them live in peace. However, Esen, another man who is in love with Enlik, convinces the crowd to find the lovers and shed their blood in revenge. Discovered by an angry crowd, Enlik and Kebek embrace for one last time before they fall under the bowmen’s arrows. The legend of Enlik and Kebek had been adapted into a play by prominent Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov in 1917. The play was revised numerous times across decades. The Soviet Encyclopedia justified these revisions, stating that “If in the first versions, the author criticized intertribal affairs, in the later versions the play condemned the entire feudal-hierarchical system and gained highly civic pathos.”⁵⁴ Auezov’s play was adapted into a 1932 music-theatrical rendition, which, according to Soviet musicologist Semen Ginzburg, addressed the quintessential “question of the fight for liberating the Eastern woman.”⁵⁵ Crucially, this reading of the legend from an official music critic diverges from the way Zhubanova and Kazakh audiences interpreted the legend—in particular, Enlik’s role.

⁵⁴ *Kazakhskaia kratkaia entsiklopediia: Iazyk, literatura, fol'klor, iskusstvo, arkhitektura* (Short Kazakh encyclopedia: language, literature, folklore, art, and architecture), volume 4 (Almaty, 1991), 225.

⁵⁵ Semen Ginzburg, *Iz istorii muzykal'nykh otnozhenii narodov SSSR* (From the history of musical relations of the USSR peoples) (Leningrad & Moscow: Sovetskii Kompozitor, 1972), 57.

In Zhubanova's opera, Enlik does not appear to be an oppressed Muslim woman as Ginzburg's interpretation reflected. Instead, she is a heroic, brave young woman, whose arrow-shooting skills are superior to men's and who accepts death rather than submission to the elders of her tribe. Enlik sings in a highly dramatic, emotional tone, accompanied by extended dissonant harmonies. Her agency powerfully drives the opera: from her first appearance dressed as a hunter to her tragic final aria right before she is killed. In Act I, Enlik displays her arrow shooting skills twice. First, during her emergence in front of a young shepherd, Zhapal, whom she mockingly attacks; and then during the hunting scene when she shoots an antelope.⁵⁶ Both appearances feature a leitmotif, played by the trumpets, that symbolizes her bravery (Example 1a). A later appearance of this motive, shown in Example 1b, features a palindromic intervallic structure (a perfect fourth, two major seconds, a perfect fourth) and a steadfast rhythm. The leitmotif's continued development throughout the opera defies Enlik's previous interpretations as meek and oppressed.

If in Act I Enlik projects youthful bravery, in Act III she transforms into a caring mother, awaiting the crowd's revenge. Zhubanova dramatically transforms Enlik's Act I key, F major, into F minor for her final aria, where Enlik asks to be granted three final wishes. First, Enlik asks to be left alone with Kebek so that they can part; second, she requests that they be buried together, and third, she begs for her child's life to be spared. Enlik's requests are featured in two 11-bar phrases, the music of which is nearly identical. Shown in Example 2, this music features a harmonic progression that abounds with seventh chords and chromaticism. The misalignment between the vocal and orchestral cadences produces an unsettling effect that is a prominent feature of Zhubanova's compositional language. The vocal line, F-G-F-G \flat -F, at the end of the phrase does not provide an opportunity for a traditional authentic cadence. Zhubanova harmonizes this cadential moment with

⁵⁶ Unfortunately, in this performance, the trumpets blunder and the leitmotif is somewhat hard to be distinguished aurally.

Enlik's first appearance: <https://youtu.be/CcQx8W-18FU?t=585> (9:49–9:57) (23:54–23:58)
 The hunting scene: <https://youtu.be/CcQx8W-18FU?t=1430>

Example 1a. A video recording of Enlik's leitmotif of bravery in Act I.⁵⁷



Example 1b. Enlik's leitmotif of bravery in Act I.

a tonicization of the Neapolitan chord, which instead of proceeding to the dominant moves to a chromatic chord, built on B $\flat\flat$, and produces an unexpected effect as the melody resolves to F. The chord built on B $\flat\flat$ can be interpreted as an enharmonic F-major triad. But its effect is far from a Picardy third resolution since it is preceded by the root position \flat II harmony. Retrospectively, we can hear the G \flat - B $\flat\flat$ in the bass as a double-neighbor gesture around the A \flat on the downbeat of m. 22 (the chordal third of the F-minor tonic). But upon a first hearing, the cadential moment with the misaligned melody and chromatic harmonies produces a disorienting effect. The continuation of Enlik's aria, where she bids farewell to her child, is based on another parallel structure (6+6 bars) and similarly features chromaticism and seventh chords (Example 3 provides a harmonic reduction of this passage). Beyond illustrating Zhubanova's wish to rebuild the Kazakh national musical style,

⁵⁷ The recording is based on the opera's 2020 production at the Abay Kazakh State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater in Almaty.

Recording of the first half: <https://youtu.be/CcQx8W-18FU?t=5325> (1:28:45–1:29:55)

12 **160**
Енл.
Тре-тья е-ще про-сба есть: уж-коль в-чем н-аша-сь об-ви-нишь-нас

16
Енл.
Пусть жн-вет он, наш ма-льш... Пусть вер-нут е-го мо-ня роа-сь нок мой ме-

20
Енл.
-ня 38 - ме-нит ил... (К ребячцу) Мой бес-цен-ный...

Example 2. The second phrase in the first half of Enlik's final aria, the three wishes.

Recording of the second half: <https://youtu.be/CcQx8W-18FU?t=5396> (1:29:56–1:30:33)

The image displays a musical score for the second half of Enlik's final aria, divided into two phrases: the antecedent phrase and the consequent phrase. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The antecedent phrase consists of six measures, and the consequent phrase consists of seven measures. Roman numeral chord analysis is provided below each measure.

antecedent phrase

Chord analysis: Fm: i, i², VI⁷, VI⁷, (bI), iv⁷, iv⁴, vii⁶, VI⁶

consequent phrase

Chord analysis: i, i⁷ - 6, i, (bI), VII, ii⁷₃ - 6, vi⁶, V⁶, i

Example 3. The second half of Enlik's final aria, the farewell to her child.

chromaticism here also foregrounds the heroic and tragic character of Enlik. Even in her final moments, Enlik asserts her freedom, stating that she would not have changed her decisions.

Enlik and Kebek presents a counter-narrative to Soviet representations of gender in Muslim cultures. In her description of Bibgul' Tulegenova, the soprano who premiered the role of Enlik, Zhubanova defied the image of the oppressed Muslim woman, stating that Tulegenova is "beautiful, marvelously feminine, tremulous and masculine."⁵⁸ As historian Timur Kocaoglu points out, the image of Muslim women as oppressed had roots in Lenin's statement: "the women of the East were the most oppressed of the oppressed and the most enslaved of the enslaved."⁵⁹ However, as

⁵⁸ Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 140.

⁵⁹ Timur Kocaoglu, "Past as Prologue? Challenging the Myth of the Subordinated, Docile Woman in Muslim Central Eurasia," in *Gender Politics in Post-Communist Eurasia*, ed. Katherine O'Sullivan and Linda Racioppi, 169–208 (Michigan State University Press, 2009). Lenin, *The Emancipation of Women: From the Writings of V. I. Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1984), cited in Kocaoglu, 171.

Kocaoglu's historical evidence proves, Muslim women in Central Asia, alongside Jadidist men, participated in advancing gender reforms prior to the 1917 Revolution.⁶⁰

Beyond resisting the fabricated Soviet image of the oppressed Muslim woman, Zhubanova's *Enlik and Kebek* also rejects the dichotomization of past and present that was prevalent in Soviet historiography. While Ginzburg projected a singular teleological narrative of a Kazakh backward past that had to be overcome, Zhubanova's remarks about the opera exhibit ambiguous, at times contradicting, views on the relationship between past and present. She acknowledged that she "wanted to write an opera not only about love, but a people's drama." Describing the historical setting of the opera, she wrote, "The steppe's feudal lords kept simple people in fear and obedience. They brutally executed those who broke their laws."⁶¹ This interpretation parallels official Soviet historiography about the steppe being steeped in the feudal system—a political and economic regime associated with the Medieval times. However, Zhubanova's acquiescence to official Soviet narratives in her public writings is challenged by the opera's presentation of tragedy. In the opera, as well as in Auezov's play, the tragedy does not appear to be a consequence of feudal customs. The wiseman who personifies the tradition advises people to forgive the lovers. It is the evil Esen who convinces the crowd to kill Enlik and Kebek. The people's disobedience to the wiseman's advice appears to be an allegory for the break from the tradition. The tragedy of the opera does not merely consist of the death of two lovers but of the extinguishing of the "old" way of life. As Zhubanova wrote, "The October Revolution is controversial in the lives of many peoples. [...] The direction of

⁶⁰ Adeeb Khalid has also pointed out that progressive Jadidist Muslims in Central Asia have contributed to women's emancipation in pre-Soviet times. See Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 292.

⁶¹ Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 144. The connection of *Enlik and Kebek* to Sufism has been addressed in recent scholarship. Mosienko, for instance claims that the opera's rich symbolism conceals hidden Sufistic meaning. See Mosienko, "Kazakhskaiia opera."

this contemporary power had many negative aspects... Including here in Kazakhstan. And if we speak of the development of culture, it was reconsidered after the Revolution. Even though it was studied and written down, it was treated as a culture of the past, of pre-October feudal life of Kazakh people. Special attention was dedicated to post-October culture, i.e. socialist culture.”⁶² The “people’s drama” then lies in the negotiation between indigenous past and socialist present. Zhubanova’s musical representation of Enlik and her insistence that the tragic fate of the lovers is linked with people’s drama demonstrate her resistance to the center’s narratives about oppressed Muslim women.

Challenging Official Historiography in *The Twenty-Eight*

In her second opera, *The Twenty-Eight*, Zhubanova confronted the falsification of history that concealed the Soviet state’s exploitation of ethnic minorities. First, she reclaimed the significance of the Kazakh Army as an integral force in World War II victory. Second, she opposed the idolization of Kazakh artists whom the state exploited as mouthpieces for propaganda. *The Twenty-Eight* recounts war-time events that took place in 1941, focusing on the heroic deeds of the twenty-eight soldiers from the 316th division of the Soviet Army. Formed in Almaty, Kazakhstan, under the leadership of General Ivan Panfilov, the division actively participated in preventing fascist invasion of Moscow in the fall of 1941. Of the division’s eleven thousand soldiers, who were referred to as *panfilovtsy*, 90% were Kazakh and Kyrgyz, while only 10% Russian.⁶³ Despite the apparent predominance of non-Russian human forces, journalistic, literary, and cinematographic accounts

⁶² Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 19.

⁶³ David M. Glantz, *Colossus Reborn: The Red Army at war, 1941–1943* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 594. The ethnic division of soldiers is stated to be different in Russian accounts: only 3.5 thousand are indicated to be ethnically Kazakh, with as many as 4.5 thousand Russians (2 thousand Ukrainians). “Nastoiashchaia istoriia panfilovskoi divizii” (The real story of the Panfilov division), Life.ru, last modified November 27, 2016, <https://life.ru/p/937288>.

about panfilovtsy skewed the ethnic balance to diminish the labor and sacrifices of non-Russian ethnic minorities. By undermining the contributions of Kazakh soldiers, war-time (and post-war) propaganda aimed to increase the Soviet nations' trust in Russian military might, appreciation of Russians' sacrifice for the good of everybody else, and Stalin's leadership role as the father of the peoples. Focusing on Zhubanova's subversive use of diegetic music, as well as highlighting the changes requested by the director of the production for the opera's premiere in Moscow, I show the increasing discordance between official and local visions of Kazakh national history and ethnic identity.

By the time Zhubanova began her work on the opera, the story of the twenty-eight panfilovtsy was ubiquitous. Initial newspaper reports claimed that all twenty-eight soldiers from Panfilov's division who participated in the Battle of Dubosekovo on November 16, 1941, were killed.⁶⁴ The first published account of the story appeared in an article in *Krasnaia zvezda* and was developed in subsequent accounts that featured additional details, including the names of the 28 panfilovtsy, all of whom allegedly died.⁶⁵ However, this account was later challenged by public inquiry into the matter. An investigation led by the Chief Military Prosecutor's Office in 1948 revealed that five of the panfilovtsy had, in fact, survived. Moreover, contradicting the legendary sacrificial deed of the twenty-eight men, it became known that one of the surviving soldiers, Ivan Dobrobanin, joined the German police after being captured as a war prisoner.⁶⁶ The investigation's report concluded that "the deed of the panfilovtsy was a fiction" fabricated by the journalists; it also

⁶⁴ Vasilii Koroteev, "Panfilov's Guardsmen in the Battle for Moscow," *Krasnaia Zvezda* (November 27, 1941); Aleksandr Krivitskii, "Zaveshchanie 28-mi pavshikh geroev" (The testament of the 28 deceased heroes), *Krasnaia zvezda* (November 28, 1941). Dubosekovo is located in eastern Moscow Oblast and is part of the Volokolamsky District.

⁶⁵ Krivitskii, "O 28-mi pavshikh geroiakh" (About the 28 deceased heroes), *Krasnaia zvezda* (January 22, 1942).

⁶⁶ Georgii Safonov, "TsK VKP(b): Tov. Zhdanovu A. A" (To comrade Andrei Zhdanov), (June 11, 1948), 1–4, The State Archive of the Russian Federation, accessed online at <https://statearchive.ru/607>.

assured the public that the many literary works about the twenty-eight soldiers—including those by Nikolai Tikhonov, Aleksandr Bek, Vladimir Stavsky, and others—merely replicated the false claims of the journalists.⁶⁷ However, the full investigation report was released to the public only in 2015. Thus, the heroism of the twenty-eight panfilovtsy and their status as national heroes (all received The Hero of the Soviet Union award) was memorialized in paintings, films, and monuments throughout the decades leading to Zhubanova's interest in the story.⁶⁸

Before writing the music for the opera, Zhubanova conducted meticulous research on the topic to demystify the contested apocryphal narrative about the twenty-eight panfilovtsy. Aware that some of the panfilovtsy had survived, she visited and interviewed one of them, Ivan Shadrin, to collect accurate information about the events.⁶⁹ This documentary approach allowed Zhubanova to reconstruct facts and foreground the ethnic diversity of the Soviet Army. To this end, one of Zhubanova's original ideas for the opera was to supplement the predominantly Russian-language libretto with the languages of the non-ethnically Russian soldiers. When singing monologues, as opposed to addressing each other, soldiers sung in their native tongues, including Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Ukrainian. Zhubanova's commitment to emphasizing the diverse ethnic composition of the twenty-eight panfilovtsy thus challenged the inflated rhetoric about Russia's—as opposed to the multi-ethnic Soviet Union's—victory in the War.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Nikolai Afanasiev, “Spravka-doklad ‘O 28-mi panfilovtsakh’” (A note-report ‘on the 28 panfilovtsy’), (May 10, 1948), 11, The State Archive of the Russian Federation, accessed at <https://statearchive.ru/607>.

⁶⁸ Examples include Dmitry Mochal'skii's painting “Podvig 28-mi geroev panfilovtsev” (The deed of the 28 heroes) (1942); the 1967 film “Za nami Moskva” (Moscow is behind us), directed by Mazhit Begalin; the public park, the 28 Panfilov Guardsmen, in Almaty, Kazakhstan; and a monument in Dubosekovo, Russia (1975). The most recent film version, directed by Kim Druzhinin, “Panfilov's 28,” was released in 2016.

⁶⁹ Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 148.

⁷⁰ All-Union conscription was introduced in the 1936 Constitution.

The three-act opera is designed as a series of flashbacks, through which a panfilovets named Ivan Natarov reminisces about events leading up to the November 16 battle. Act I foregrounds events in Almaty prior to the Kazakh soldiers' departure for war. At the train station, the soldiers bid farewells to their loved ones; they vouch to return victorious after the most famous Kazakh *aqyn* (folk singer), Zhambyl Zhabauly, urges them to protect their land.⁷¹ Act II turns to the everyday life at the front-line, where soldiers reminisce about their beloveds and praise the leadership of Vasilii Klochkov, the political leader of their platoon. Lastly, Act III builds up to the climactic Battle of Dubosekovo. From the onset, the opera departs from canonical account of the story by omitting contested details. In the introduction to Act I, Valia, General Panfilov's daughter who courageously joined the army as a nurse, is treating Natarov—supposedly, the last surviving soldier among the twenty-eight. As Natarov begins to list the names of his deceased friends, the orchestra interrupts him with a brief interjection after he names only ten of them. Valia dramatically recites: "The twenty-eighth, Ivan Natarov. He lived three more days and did his second heroic deed: he told of the immortal deeds of his comrades..."⁷² Even though Valia's words suggest that all twenty-eight soldiers died, the cast of *The Twenty-Eight* lists only eleven soldiers (including Natarov). Zhubanova's omission of the remaining soldiers indicates that she was not willing to follow the initial journalistic accounts which claimed that all soldiers lost their lives. The opera's refusal to merely reproduce the official narrative is thus illustrative of the growing dissatisfaction among Kazakh intelligentsia—most prominently, writers such as Murat Auezov and Olzhas Suleimenov—who resisted the falsification of their history.⁷³

⁷¹ Aqyns are indigenous Kazakh poet-singers who improvised performances of epics. The Russianized spelling of Zhambyl Zhabayuly is Dzhabul Dzhabayev; he is often referred to as simply Dzhabul or Zhambyl.

⁷² Zhubanova, *Enlik and Kebek*, 18.

⁷³ Suleimenov, for instance, stated, "I refuse to trust textbooks that degrade our history. We will ourselves find the roots and, with the depth of the past, will gain the breadth of the present and the height of the future." Suleimenov, *Stikhotvoreniia* (Poems), vol. 1 (Almaty: Atamyra, 2004), 31. Both

Central to the opera's revisionist account is Zhubanova's addition of the scene with Zhambyl's monologue, in which the old aqyn calls soldiers to mobilize for the War. As Zhubanova claimed, this scene was based on a historical event.⁷⁴ To fully grasp her musical decisions in this scene we must first understand the historical significance of the old aqyn. By the time of Zhubanova's work on *The Twenty-Eight* in the early 1980s, Zhambyl (1846–1945) rose to exceptional prominence, both in Kazakhstan and across the Soviet Union. His public status as the most authoritative Kazakh folk musician—whom Soviet press hailed as “the Homer of the great age of Stalin,” “the prophet who leads his nation”—originated in 1936.⁷⁵ In the month of March, amidst the preparations for the Kazakh cultural festival in Moscow (the same *dekada* addressed in Chapter 3), a letter from Levon Mirzoyan, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kazakh SSR, requested that a Kazakh aqyn, named Maimbet, attend and perform a new ode to Stalin.⁷⁶ Maimbet became popular after a Russian poet, Pavel Kuznetsov, translated and published one of his poems in *The Kazakhstan Pravda* in 1935. Because Kuznetsov failed to find Maimbet for the trip to the Moscow *dekada*, contemporaries like Brusilovsky speculated that Kuznetsov had invented the persona of the aqyn and was himself the author of the propaganda poems. As Brusilovsky reminisced, “finding an experienced, authoritative aqyn became an emergency-urgency.”⁷⁷ The search continued until someone suggested to invite Zhambyl—an eighty-nine-year-old aqyn who lived in the nearby Kastek village. Zhambyl was delivered to Almaty and successfully participated in the 1936 *dekada*.

Suleimenov and Auezov were members of “Zhas tulpar” (the young horse), a student group formed in 1963 that organized events around promoting Kazakh history and culture.

⁷⁴ Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 147.

⁷⁵ Yevgenii Dobrenko, “Ideologicheskie arabeski,” in *Dzhambul Dzhabayev: priklucheniia kazakhskogo akyna v sovetskoi strane* (Zhambyl Zhabayev: adventures of a Kazakh aqyn in the Soviet state), ed. Konstantin Bogdanov, Riccardo Nikolozi, and Yurii Murashov (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2013), 29.

⁷⁶ Yevgeny Brusilovsky, “Vospominaniia,” *Prostor* 10 (1997): 93.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 93. “Avariino-srochno byl nuzhel opytnyi, avtoritetnyi kazakhskii akyn.”

Media accounts celebrated Zhambyl's transformation from a poor villager to an esteemed musician: "Only yesterday, Zhambyl was barefooted, an old man in a tattered chapan [traditional coat], who in his 55 years did not have even a pinch of salt to throw in his pot. But today, this hundred-year-old youth in a hat, trimmed with marten fur, dressed in a brocade robe (the likes of which he hasn't seen in the old times even on sultans), ascends the [subway] stairway to receive [...] the Order of Lenin."⁷⁸ After 1938, when lavish celebrations of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Zhambyl's creative activity took place, the state honored him with unforeseen recognition: his name was given to the Kazakh National Philharmonic and a district in the Almaty region. In addition to becoming a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh SSR, Zhambyl also received prestigious awards such as the Order of the Red Banner of Labor, two orders of Lenin, and the Stalin Prize of the second order.⁷⁹

By 1941, the year when, according to Zhubanova, Zhambyl urged the Kazakhs to mobilize for war, the *aqyn* had acquired the ultimate respectability, becoming the voice of wisdom for the Kazakh people. His poem, "Leningradtsy, deti moi!" (Leningraders, my children!), was widely circulated in 1941 during the siege of Leningrad. Like most of Zhambyl's poems, "Leningradtsy" reminisced about the dire conditions that Zhambyl witnessed under the Russian Tsarist regime and contrasted them with the new-found hope and happiness brought by the socialist revolution. Zhambyl vouched for Kazakh people's unwavering support for Leningrad: "Closer than a brother, / Closer than a sister / Is Almaty to Leningrad;" he also promised that all necessary resources—rivers of oil, black copper, lead, bread, "the best offspring of horses," and "piles of apples sweet as honey"—will be sent from Kazakhstan to help Leningraders withstand the enemy. In the poem that

⁷⁸ Dobrenko, "Ideologicheskie arabeski," 31–32.

⁷⁹ The Stalin Prize came with an honorarium of 50,000 rubles, which as historian Yevgenii Dobrenko notes, were equivalent to 100 salaries of a regular factory worker. Dobrenko, "Ideologicheskie arabeski," 29–30.

Zhubanova chose for her opera, Zhambyl inspires the Kazakhs to join the Red Army in protecting the fatherland (“Otchizna”). Here, instead of emphasizing generous shipments of natural resources and food supplies to Leningrad, Zhambyl calls the Kazakh people to themselves become resources when he asks them to sacrifice their lives for protecting the land. Addressing soldiers as “my sons,” Zhambyl declares, “It is better to give up your life in battle / Than to give up your land!”

On the surface, Zhambyl’s participation in mobilizing the Kazakhs is consistent with the state’s “mobilization” of prominent public figures for promoting war propaganda. Zhambyl is distinct, however, in that he was an invented celebrity. Kazakh and Russian readers alike knew that his poems were fake—aside from his first translator, Kuznetsov, Zhambyl had several other literary secretaries who were credited as his translators but were factually the authors of poems. Figures like Dmitry Shostakovich, whose son memorized Zhambyl’s “Leningradtsy” in school, were well aware that Zhambyl’s dithyrambs to the Soviet regime were a huge fraud, or, as Shostakovich put it, “chicanery on an epochal level.”⁸⁰ Zhambyl did not speak Russian, while his “translators” did not speak Kazakh. Zhambyl’s call for the Kazakhs to join the Red Army, as it appears in *The Twenty-Eight*, thus exposes a double exploitation. First, the Party’s exploitation of Zhambyl as a mouthpiece for ideological propaganda and manipulation of Kazakh people. Second, Zhambyl’s ardent summons points to the exploitation of ethnic minorities within the Soviet military system. Recent historical studies have shown that non-Russian soldiers experienced discrimination based on cultural stereotypes prevalent in the allegedly equal socialist society. Besides being subjected to racial slurs, such as “curly-heads” and “the black ones” (*kucheriaven’kie* and *chernen’kie*), non-Russian soldiers, especially those from the Caucasus and Central Asia, were generally treated with “disdain and

⁸⁰ Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitry Shostakovich* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 209. While the authenticity of Volkov’s documented memoirs is widely contested, Shostakovich’s narration is consistent with other accounts about Zhambyl, and, as Konstantin Bogdanov states, challenges the reception of the *Testimony* as “sheer hoax.” Bogdanov, “Avatar Dzhabula” (The avatar of Zhambyl), in *Dzhabul Dzhabayev*, 8.

distrust.”⁸¹ Moreover, there is evidence that based on ethnic and racial discrimination, some commanders protected Slavs by first sending the non-Slavic soldiers “for slaughter.”⁸²

Zhubanova’s scene with Zhambyl critiqued both forms of exploitation. Through her musical language—which stages a clash between folk and modernist idioms—she questioned the legitimacy of Zhambyl and resisted idealized accounts of World-War-II history. She specified that Zhambyl’s diegetic monologue was intended to exemplify the opera’s display of what she termed “musical tokens of the epoch.”⁸³ With these historical tokens she aimed to recreate the sonic reality of the early 1940s. One of the songs that she mentioned to be such a token was “The Farewell of Slavianska” (*Proshchanie slavianki*). This marching song is played by the orchestra at the end of Act I, Scene 1, when the soldiers are parting with their loved ones.⁸⁴ While it appears without its accompanying text, Zhubanova’s instrumental rendition replicates the song without adding any harmonic, melodic, or metric changes. Similarly, when in Act II the soldiers and Valia sing *chastushki* (a popular four-line Russian song genre that often features sarcasm), Zhubanova provided the traditional oom-pah accompaniment with purely diatonic harmonies, only occasionally inserting a 5/4 or 3/4 measure to produce a humorous effect (in these *chastushki* the soldiers are ridiculing the fascists).⁸⁵ Since in both of these numbers the diegetic music replicates historical counterparts, they indeed exemplify pertinent “musical tokens of the epoch.”

⁸¹ Konstantin Drozdov and Vitalii Tikhonov, “Sovetskaia armiia v 1920–1940-e gody” (The Soviet Army in the 1920s–1940s), in *Sovetskii natsional’nyi proekt v 1920–1940-e gody: ideologiya i praktika* (The Soviet national project in 1920s–1940s: ideology and practice), ed. Dina Amanzholova, Drozdov, Tamara Krasovitskaia, Tikhonov (Moscow: Novyi khronograf, 2021), 528.

⁸² Ibid., 520–21. Drozdov and Tikhonov cite one such commander, who in 1942 stated: “May the tanks crush and the enemy shoot them [the non-Slavic soldiers]; then we will reach the rear for formation sooner. We need to preserve the Cossacks and the Russians, we will need them.”

⁸³ Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 147. “Muzykal’nye primety vremeni.”

⁸⁴ Zhubanova, *The Twenty-Eight* (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1988), 86–7.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 115–23.

The musical style of Zhambyl's monologue, however, does not follow the traditional representational mode of diegetic music. Here, Zhubanova's music, instead of aiming for authentic sonic representation, surrounds Zhambyl with ambiguity and discordance.⁸⁶ Since Zhambyl was an *aqyn*, a simple diegetic solution for the scene would have been to feature him performing a folk-like song while playing the *dombra*. As shown in Figure 1, visually Zhambyl appears to be doing exactly that. His vocal part is also consistent with the diatonic folk music style: his melodies consist of short



Figure 1. Zhambyl pretending to be playing the *dombra* in Act I, Scene 2.⁸⁷

fragments that predominantly revolve around stepwise motives. Yet Zhambyl does not actually play the *dombra*, aside from briefly faking playing the instrument when he first enters the stage. It is the orchestra in the pit that accompanies his singing throughout the scene. My analysis below aims to

⁸⁶ Ibid., 70–79.

⁸⁷ This recording was made during the opera's performance in Kazakhstan on May 15, 1985. Accessed online <https://www.net-film.ru/>.

show that through the discordance between Zhambyl's diatonic singing and the orchestra's chromatic accompaniment Zhubanova stages the incongruity between official lies and historical facts, as well as the cultural incompatibility between opera and folk song.

It is not the harmonic dissonance per se that produces a cognitive dissonance but the mismatch between the expectation of what Zhambyl's diegetic music ought to sound like and Zhubanova's subverting of that expectation. As a lens into the harmonic language of Zhambyl's monologue, Blair Johnston's theorization of "hyperdissonance" offers a productive entryway into understanding what he terms "irresolvable incongruity."⁸⁸ Defined by Johnston, a hyperdissonance is a dissonance of higher order that occurs "between the different well-formed components of the compound melodic/harmonic environment."⁸⁹ In Richard Strauss's *Salome*, which is the focus of Johnston's analysis, hyperdissonance marks the terrifying climax at the end of the opera. It is materialized through the clash between the plagal cadence, "the amen space," and the highly "dissonant/chromatic space." While hyperdissonance occurs only once in *Salome*, it pervades Zhambyl's entire scene. Even before the diatonic voice and the chromatic orchestral accompaniment collide, the brief instrumental introduction signals something unsettling. The four-bar buildup to the triumphant theme, as shown in Example 4, features an arpeggiation of a D-minor triad in the treble parts, while an ambiguous descending scale in the bass line counteracts it with an F \sharp on the downbeat of m. 3. The split third (F and F \sharp) in the tonic triad persists in the theme itself: in mm. 5 and 9, the orchestra suddenly shifts from D major to D minor. The orchestral theme evokes a typical heroic melody with a *maestoso* dynamic marking, where the broad sweeps of half- and dotted-half-note values are anticipated by syncopated triumphant anacruses (the dotted eighth-

⁸⁸ Blair Johnston, "Salomé's Grotesque Climax and Its Implications," *Music Theory Spectrum* 36 (2014): 24–57.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

The musical score consists of three systems of piano notation. The first system (measures 1-6) is marked 'Moderato' and 'poco cresc.'. The second system (measures 7-11) is marked 'Maestoso'. The third system (measures 12-12) is labeled '12 ДЖАМБУЛ'. The score shows a chromatic introduction with a split-third Neapolitan sixth chord in measure 8. Measure 12 is labeled '12 ДЖАМБУЛ'.

Example 4. Chromaticism in the orchestral introduction to Zhambyl's appearance.

and sixteenth-note rhythm). The D-major theme, which is structured as a traditional eight-bar period, is quickly inflected by more chromaticism. The downbeats of mm. 7 and 11 feature a D[#]-minor first inversion triad in the accompaniment. The melody above this chord, however, features a G and B^b. While the B^b can be explained as an enharmonic equivalent to the A[#] within the D[#]-minor triad, the G on the downbeat presents another split chordal third. The harmony in this bar can thus be interpreted as a Neapolitan sixth chord with a split third. In m. 8, what could have been a regular vii^o4/2 harmony (with an omitted chordal fifth), features an E^b in the tremolo accompaniment that is resolved to E[♮] in the bass register on the final eighth note of the bar. In the consequent phrase of the theme (mm. 9–12), the split-third Neapolitan sixth chord resolves to a V4/2, which abruptly yields to the D-major tonic—at this moment, Zhambyl enters with a vocalization of “A.”

pitches of a D-minor scale, the bass chromatically fills in a descending line from B \flat to F, landing on a dissonant sonority in m. 22. This sonority consists of two three-note chromatic clusters (E-F-G \flat and A-B \flat -B \sharp). Above this dissonant harmony an ethereal descending melody (mm. 22–25) retracts the dissonance by foregrounding A to transition to the next phrase that begins in A minor. In the next instance of hyperdissonance, as shown in Example 6, the vertical sonority played by the orchestra is mostly in accord with Zhambyl's diatonic pitch collection (D-E-F-G in mm. 30–34). Here, hyperdissonance is achieved by the addition of a melodic line in the orchestra that introduces a different pitch collection, A \flat -B \flat -C-D \flat -E \flat , creating a polytonal harmonic setting. The moment of consonance, when the orchestra reaches an A-minor triad in mm. 34, is overturned yet again: as Zhambyl vocalizes E-D-C-B-A in mm. 34–36 toward closure in A minor, the orchestra enters with G \flat -B \flat right as he reaches A in m. 36.

30

Zh.

Встань-те же, сы-ны мо-и, на-шу за-щи-ти-те честь! А - - - -

35

Zh.

- - - - - А

Example 6. Polytonal effect between Zhambyl's part and the orchestral melodic line.

While in the two instances analyzed above Zhambyl's vocal part consisted of subsets of the natural minor scale, in the next passage leading to hyperdissonant closure, his part outlines a B \flat Locrian scale (mm. 61–64 in Example 7). The sigh-figure gestures in the chorus and the orchestra gradually introduce pitches that do not belong to this scale—A (B $\flat\flat$), C, and E $\flat\flat$ (D)—until m. 65 produces a hyperdissonant rupture. Zhambyl's high A on the downbeat is itself an unexpected arrival as it diverges from the course of the Locrian scale. The harmony in m. 65 consists of a six-note subset of the octatonic collection (OCT_{0,2}). Within this hyperdissonance, the orchestra outlines the D-major triad in mm. 65–66, alluding back to the D-major tonic from the opening of the scene. However, there is no closure, again. The triplet figure at the end of m. 66 yields to an F-major downbeat that serves as the dominant to the forthcoming B \flat major.

In the final instance of hyperdissonance, Example 8, there is one more attempt to restore the D tonic toward the end of the scene. This time, hyperdissonance occurs in the chorus that represents the people who are convinced by Zhambyl's speech. The chorus's chant—"It is better to give up your life in battle / Than to give up your land!"—is initiated over a D \sharp -minor harmony (as in the orchestral introduction, here, too, a minor Neapolitan chord makes an appearance functioning as an upper-neighbor embellishment to D \sharp minor in m. 124). M. 127 states the familiar D triad with a split third. This time, however, unlike in the orchestral introduction, a simple V–I cadence proves to be impossible. Instead, the D triad collapses unto the hyperdissonance in m. 127. There are two possible interpretations of this sonority. First, we can conceive of the chorus and the orchestra as two distinct layers, where the chorus presents a subset of the whole-tone collection (D–E–G \flat –A \flat), while the orchestra plays a B \flat dominant seventh chord in second inversion. Alternatively, we can interpret the entire sonority of m. 127 as forming an extended dominant chord, where E is a $\sharp 11$ and

59

Zh. Кго все э - то ви - деть мог и От - чи-зне не по - мог?! А - - -

Soprano

Alto

62

Zh.

S.

A.

65

Zh. Мно-го про-жил лет Джам-бул,

S.

A.

Example 7. Zhambyl's Locrian scale leading to an OCT_{0,2} cluster chord in m. 65.

124

Zh. Чем от-дать зем-лю сво-ю,

S. A. Чем от-дать зем-лю сво - ю, лу-че от - дать жизнь сво - ю!..

T.B. Чем от-дать зем-лю сво - ю, лу-че от - дать жизнь сво - ю!..

Example 8. The hyperdissonance between the chorus and the orchestra.

G \flat a \flat 13. Whether we choose the first or second interpretation, the structural and dramatic function of hyperdissonance prevails. Structurally, it prevents the phrase from reaching a cadence on a stable consonant harmony and effectuates a sonic incongruity between the people and the orchestra. Dramatically, the hyperdissonance exemplifies the incongruity between two realms: the official discourse, where Zhambyl is an old aqyn who supports the ideology of the new state, and the reality (familiar to contemporaries), where Zhambyl was subjected to state exploitation for propaganda purposes.

Given that Zhubanova distinguished Zhambyl's monologue from other diegetic scenes by permeating it with hyperdissonant sonorities, it is telling that during the opera's production in Moscow this scene was omitted. While the opera premiered in its original version in Almaty on November 29, 1981, a year later it was produced with significant revisions on the stage of the

Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre in Moscow. For the premiere in Moscow, the director, Ioakim Sharoyev, added many spoken dialogue scenes, against Zhubanova's wish. Moreover, he changed the opera's title to *Za nami Moskva* (Moscow is behind us). This title, according to the apocryphal journalistic accounts addressed above, is based on a phrase by the commander Klochkov: "Grand is Russia but there is nowhere to retreat—Moscow is behind us!"⁹⁰ The title was popularized by the 1967 film that addressed a three-day resistance of the same 316th division, though it focused on a different battle than that described in the press.⁹¹ The film's production was temporarily halted after the Russian writer Aleksandr Bek, whose literary account was used to write the screenplay, allegedly stated: "It 'smells' of a national spirit here; in the film it appears that it was only the Kazakh division that saved Moscow."⁹² The Russian-Kazakh tension was also present during the rehearsals of the opera in Moscow. The entire text was translated into Russian. While it was part of the performance practice of the time to translate foreign texts into Russian, and while the translation may be attributed to the mere desire on behalf of Sharoyev to enhance the audience's understanding of the libretto, there were more revisions by Sharoyev with which Zhubanova disagreed but was forced to accept. As she recalled, this was the first time an opera by a Kazakh composer was performed in the capital. Her agitation and excitement led her to

⁹⁰ Iurii Riabtsev, *Voennaia istoriia Rossii XX–nachalo XXI v.: uchebnoe posobie* (A military history of Russia in the 20th–21st centuries: an educational guide) (Moscow, Berlin: Directmedia Publishing, 2019), 119.

⁹¹ A postal stamp with Klochkov's portrait that featured the phrase was also issued in 1967.

⁹² Aleksei Azarov, "Vtoroi proryv fil'ma 'Za nami moskva' sluchilsia spustia bolee 40 let" (The second breakthrough of 'Moscow is behind us' will happen in over 40 years), Radio Azattyk, last modified November 7, 2011, https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan_baurzhan_momyshuly_world_war_begalin_kazakhfilm/24383139.html. "Zdes' pakhnet natsional'nym dukhom: mol, po fil'mu vykhodit, chto Moskvu spasla tol'ko kazakhskaiia diviziia." According to witnesses who were present during the filming, Bek also allegedly claimed: "There is no need to magnify the heroism of other nations, the war was between the Russians and the Germans." "Ne nado vypiachivat' geroizm drugikh narodov, eto voina mezhdru russkimi i mentsami."

agree with Sharoyev's suggestions, one of which she regretted and felt particularly embarrassed about: the elimination of the scene with the Kazakh *aqyn* Zhambyl. "Suddenly," Zhubanova recalled, "Sharoyev decided to omit the part of Zhambyl. He said that if in Almaty it was effective, in Moscow, Zhambyl won't change the weather."⁹³ Although Zhubanova wrote that she felt incredibly embarrassed for excluding the singer who put so much effort into learning the part, she did not openly confront the political significance of this forced omission: namely the fact that the role of the satellite republics in World War II was significantly underplayed for the sake of elevating Russia's leading role in the victory and bolstering Stalin's image as the preeminent military leader. Brusilovsky's remarks about Zhambyl's poetry are illustrative of this sentiment. Expressing his regret about the forgotten Kuznetsov, Zhambyl's translator, Brusilovsky asked: "Didn't Zhambyl's poetry become an asset of the entire nation thanks to the Russian language? [...] Perhaps, it was the successful Russian translation that raised the poems' quality?"⁹⁴ These kinds of demeaning remarks were ubiquitous among non-Kazakh commentators who promoted Russia's messianic role in enlightening the steppe people.

The Woman's Voice in the Anticolonial and Antinuclear Struggle

If *The Twenty-Eight* contests historical erasure of the Kazakh Army's participation in World War II and the exploitation of Zhambyl as a mouthpiece for communist ideology, Zhubanova's last opera,

⁹³ Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 152.

⁹⁴ The Central State Archive of Kazakhstan, R-999, 4, "Brusilovskii o Dzhambule." Cited in Sergei Kibal'nik, "Mif o Dzhambule" (The myth about Zhambyl), *Izvestiia ural'skogo federal'nogo universiteta* 2, no. 139 (2015): 97. Curiously, in the post-Soviet publication of Brusilovsky's memoirs in 1998, the passage where the composer doubts Zhambyl's talent was omitted without even indicating ellipses. Zhambyl's reception remains contested among the Kazakhs to this day. His family sued the magazine *Svoboda slova* (Freedom of word) for publishing an essay in which Zhambyl was interpreted as an "ideological fetish." Ibid., 91.

The Steppe Yedygei, is a holdout against heedless technological developments that harmed the Kazakh people and their natural environment. Amidst the Cold-War arms race and cultural and scientific rivalry, the Soviet state sponsored two major projects on Kazakh soil that had devastating effects on the environment and local people: the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site, which operated from 1949 to 1991, and the Baikonur Cosmodrome, which was established in 1955 and is now leased by the Russian Space Agency. In the latter half of 1980s, growing public discontent with the Soviet regime resulted in two major protests that served as precedents for national movements in other republics. First, in 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev ordered the replacement of the First Secretary of the Kazakh SSR Dinmukhamed Kunaev, who was ethnically Kazakh, with the Russian politician Gennadiy Kolbin. This event was met with the public's frustration over the wider cultural Russification prevalent in Kazakhstan, evolving into the Zheltoksan revolt in December of 1986, which the state quickly suppressed by sending troops. Second, public awareness about the nuclear tests' negative impacts led to major protests in Almaty. After the poet and political activist Olzhas Suleimenov called for nuclear disarmament on television, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement was formed in February 1989. Though the Soviet Union collapsed two months after Zhubanova completed *The Steppe Yedygei* in October of 1991, her opera, as well as many of her late compositions, can be read as an archive of decolonial struggle.

In Zhubanova's compositions from the 1980s, the woman's voice becomes firmly embedded in anticolonial resistance. In several compositions leading to her final opera, she continued to develop the theme of preserving memory as a decolonial act. We can trace this move in her Second Symphony, initially planned as an oratorio, that was composed in 1983. Titled "The Island of Women," it is inspired by Dagestani writer Rasul Gamzatov's eponymous poem. The symphony also incorporates poems by Soviet female writers such as Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva, who

were persecuted by the Soviet regime. Gamzatov's poem primarily condemns Columbus's colonial endeavor:

... And what next? New endeavors
Of Columbus. Fortifications of the settlers,
Exchange, deception, cruelty, humiliation
Of free tribes, their extermination. [...]

Oh, Christopher Columbus, why have you
Ripped off the veil off the virgin continent?
Why have the pirates, who came
following you, tormented this flesh?

...Что было дальше? Новые походы
Колумба. Укрепления поселенцев,
Обмен, обман, жестокость, унижение
Племен свободных, истребление их. [...]

О Христофор Колумб, зачем покровы
Сорвал ты с девственного континента?
Зачем пираты, за тобою следом
Пришедшие, терзали эту плоть?

In addition to addressing colonization of Latin America, certain passages of the poem also condemn Russian colonialism: "I have heard from my fathers many times / About how back in the day our *auls* [villages] were turned into ashes / By Persian khans and Russian tsars." Gamzatov refers to silenced women as a force capable of resisting injustice and preserving the memory of the oppressed:

Ankhlil Marin, whose mouth is sewn by the naib,
A mountaineer from the village of Rugudzha,
Choking on blood, moaning, wheezing,
Tearing the thread, cherishing her free song.
My island is the center of all misery,
All joys. Here, Cinderella, working,
Wants to forever wash off the whole planet
Injustice, oppression, dirt.

Анхил Марин, чей рот зашит наибом,
Горянка из аула Ругуджа,
Захлебываясь кровью, стоном, хрипом,
Рвет нити, вольной песней дорожа.
Мой остров всех страданий средоточье,
Всех радостей. Тут Золушка, трудясь,
Со всей планеты смыть навеки хочет
Несправедливость, угнетенье, грязь.

Ankhlil Marin was a rebellious young woman who in the latter half of the nineteenth century improvised songs that exposed the despicable behavior of rich naibs' (deputies) and denounced those who do not oppose subjugation. According to the legend, which is recounted in Gamzatov's poem, Ankhlil Marin did not succumb: her willful, free song broke through the threads that sewed up her mouth and continued to resound. In Zhubanova's symphony, the woman's voice bears a function similar to Ankhlil Marin's song. Even though composers featured voice in symphonic

works ever since Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, her placement of the voice in the very opening of the symphony is rather unconventional. Although the soprano vocalizes on an "A" syllable and does not feature any text, those who were familiar with Gamzatov's poem would have recognized the condemnation of colonialism that looms behind the soaring vocalizing voice and the percussion accompaniment that surrounds it with its steady rhythms (Example 9). In Zhubanova's symphony, the voice has the same anticolonial power. Without relying on language, the vocalizing voice represents Zhubanova's own discontent with the regime, which becomes apparent through the transformed reappearances of the soprano that conclude the second and third movements (the symphony has three movements). In the second movement, the voice emerges after an exuberant piano solo interrupts the tutti climax (Example 10). Here, the soprano commences with a dramatic ninth leap, F-G \flat , proceeding to a sorrowful melody in B \flat minor that contrasts with the soprano's nonchalant A-major folk-like melody in the symphony's opening. Similarly, at the end of the third movement, the soprano reemerges with a pensive melody. Toward the end of the movement, the solo soprano transfigures into the ethereal timbre of the piccolo, which concludes the melody in A minor. The repetition of the chord (A-minor over a G \flat bass) and the unusual timbre produced by the piccolo and vibraphone will become key elements in Zhubanova's representation of the woman in her Third Symphony, *The Metaphors of Saryozek* (as will be addressed below).

Decolonial struggle figures prominently in Zhubanova's *Burannyi Yedygei* (or *The Legends of Aitmatov*)—an opera based on Chingiz Aitmatov's novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (1980) and a short story "The White Cloud of Genghis Khan" (1991). While she finished the opera's vocal score in 1991, Zhubanova had contemplated writing the opera since 1984, when she provided the incidental music for an eponymous play based on Aitmatov's novel. The play was produced at

The soprano's opening: <https://youtu.be/uT'ZUoDGa7Ys?t=2> (0–1:08)

The musical score consists of five systems, each with a Soprano Solo part and a Timpani part. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 4/4.

- System 1 (Measures 1-8):** The Soprano Solo part has whole rests. The Timpani part plays a steady eighth-note pattern: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4.
- System 2 (Measures 9-14):** The Soprano Solo part begins its melody in measure 9. The Timpani part continues with the eighth-note pattern.
- System 3 (Measures 15-20):** Both parts continue their respective lines.
- System 4 (Measures 21-26):** Both parts continue their respective lines.
- System 5 (Measures 27-32):** The Soprano Solo part concludes with a half note G4 in measure 27, followed by a whole rest. The Timpani part continues with the eighth-note pattern.

Example 9. Top: recording of Symphony No. 2, *The Island of Women*, performed by the Kazakhstan State Symphony Orchestra; bottom: transcription of the Symphony's opening.

The soprano's appearance after a tutti climax at the end of the second movement:

<https://youtu.be/uTZUoDGa7Ys?t=809> (13:30–15:13)



The soprano's appearance at the end of the third movement:

<https://youtu.be/uTZUoDGa7Ys?t=1351> (22:32–24:48)

Three staves of musical notation. The first staff is labeled 'soprano' and shows measures 1-8. The second staff shows measures 9-15, with 'piccolo' and 'piccolo & vibraphone' markings above the notes. The third staff shows measures 16-18, with a 'vibraphone' marking above the notes. The key signature is three flats and the time signature is 4/4. The soprano part continues with long, flowing lines, while the percussion parts feature more rhythmic patterns.

Example 10. The soprano's transformation at the end of the second and third movements.

the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow. It was directed by Zhubanova's husband, Azerbaijan Mambetov, who later co-authored the opera's libretto with Saga Zhienbaev. Zhubanova's fascination with the novel also led to the composition of her Third Symphony, *The Metaphors of Saryozek*, which premiered in 1989. The title of the symphony is based on Aitmatov's own phrase in reference to his novel. While Zhubanova did not provide an explicit program for the symphony, she mentioned that her musical rendition of the plot aimed to show how "the present day was replete to

the core with the same collisions and cataclysms that existed many centuries ago.”⁹⁵ On the surface, Aitmatov’s novel followed the conventions of socialist realism by addressing the lives of everyday steppe inhabitants and showcasing Soviet techno-scientific advancement in the realm of space exploration.⁹⁶ As such, the novel was approved by the then leader of the USSR, Leonid Brezhnev, who, having most likely not read the work, praised it for its “evocation of rural themes and honoring the common man.”⁹⁷ On a closer look, however, Aitmatov rendered the misery of the exploited and oppressed people of the steppe. Having composed the opera during one of the most turbulent periods of Soviet history, Zhubanova decided to postpone its premiere, writing: “I am not giving this opera to the theater yet. It’s not time [yet]...”⁹⁸ Her husband’s involvement in the 1986 revolt may have influenced her decision to hold off the score in order to not attract unnecessary interrogation from the state.⁹⁹ Since the opera was not published, my analysis below is based on Zhubanova’s *The Metaphors of Saryozek*, some of the music of which was featured in the opera.

Aitmatov’s novel narrates the story of Yedygei, an old Kazakh man who works at a remote train junction in the Saryozek Desert. The narrative unfolds in a single day during which Yedygei undertakes a journey of thirty miles to bury his deceased friend. It turns out that the indigenous land on which the burial is to take place was overtaken by the Soviet rocket station (an allusion to the Baikonur Cosmodrome) and is now a restricted zone. During Yedygei’s journey to the burial site, many interwoven narratives unfold as he reminisces about the past. One of them recounts a legend

⁹⁵ Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 185.

⁹⁶ Katerina Clark, for instance, interprets the protagonist of the novel, Yedygei, as an archetypal Soviet hero. See Clark, “The Mutability of the Canon: Chingiz Aitmatov’s *I dol’she veka dlitsia den’*,” *Slavic Review* 43, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 573–87.

⁹⁷ Martha Olcott, “Literature and Culture,” in *The Soviet Multinational State: Readings and Documents*, ed. Olcott (London: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), 291.

⁹⁸ Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 178.

⁹⁹ Nedlina also notes that Zhubanova doubted whether the artists in the opera theater would be able to handle “the difficulties of the production and scenography, the contemporary vocal-choreographic decisions, and the depth of the philosophical conception of the opera.” Nedlina, “Puti razvitiia,” 98.

according to which brutal conquerors of lands erased the memories of enslaved war prisoners named *mankurts*. These conquerors covered the heads of *mankurts* in camel skin and let them wander in the desert until the scorching sun burned the camel skin into their heads, causing erasure of memory. In the legend, a *mankurt* shoots and kills his own mother, Naiman-Ana, because he is unable to recognize her.

In the preface to the novel, Aitmatov foregrounds erasure of memory and forgetting of the past as the main themes of his work:

The person without the memory of the past, faced with the necessity to newly define his place in the world, bereft of the historical experience of his people and other peoples, ends up being outside of the historical perspective and can live only in the present day. [...]

The denial—or falsification—of the past and the conceited, arrogant chauvinism necessitate building the Chinese wall, as only behind the wall the myth of superiority of one nation over others can be sustained.¹⁰⁰

While the latter statement is presented as a critique of Maoist China, Aitmatov uses the context of Chinese communism to condemn Soviet communism's historical revisionism that aimed to erase people's indigenous identities. Zhubanova interpreted Yedygei in a similar manner: "Having buried his best friend, Yedygei contemplates the meaning of human life. Across centuries man exterminates man, the stronger [exterminates] the weaker. And in all centuries, there existed disobedient, stormy (*burannye*) people, who did not want to be slaves..." Yedygei, according to Aitmatov and Zhubanova, is the character who asks questions about the past and thus resists erasure.¹⁰¹

The initial title of Aitmatov's novel, *Obruch* (the title means "band" or "ring"), did not pass censorship. However, the mysterious ring features prominently in the narrative: it enfolds the planet

¹⁰⁰ Aitmatov, *I dol'she veka dlitsia den'* (Frunze: Kyrgyzstan, 1981), 6–7.

¹⁰¹ In Act II of the opera, Zhubanova interweaved the story of Abutalip that Aitmatov expounded on in the sequel to the novel, "The White Cloud of Genghis Khan." Abutalip was a school teacher, who after being a prisoner of war during WWII, was arrested for alleged espionage. "The character of Abutalip," Zhubanova wrote, "became multidimensional and more tragic" in the sequel. Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 177.

Earth as a consequence of the rocket launch, the ominous force of which threatens the indigenous local people. The set decorations for the play at the Vakhtangov Theatre prominently featured the ring on the stage (Figure 2). In Zhubanova's re-telling of Aitmatov's novel, the effect of environmental devastation on the people of the steppe has additional meaning. For her, the ring does not only encapsulate what comparative literature scholar Anindita Banerjee terms "the parabola as the trail left by the cosmic rocket."¹⁰² As Zhubanova's son Alibi Mambetov noted: "The thing is, there was an incredible coincidence: the novel's action unfolds in the Saryozek sands in the 1950s; yet in the end of the 1980s, in these steppes of the Kazakhstan, the USSR, in the presence of international experts, began to liquidate nuclear missile warheads. The entire country then was caught into the euphoria of *perestroika* and denuclearization."¹⁰³ The opera thus foregrounds not only the threat posed by the Baikonur Cosmodrome but also of the dire environmental and human impact of the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site.

The central conflict of the opera is thus the collision between people and modernity. This collision becomes apparent through Yedygei's encounters with technology that disrupt the familiar order of things: the radio announces cryptic messages; a tractor accompanies the funeral procession so that it can be used to accelerate the digging of the grave pit; the rocket terrifies humans and animals alike; and the nuclear weapons, alluded to in Zhubanova's symphony and opera, produces invisible radiation. Aitmatov achieves the omnipresence of the train in the novel by using a recurring refrain: "Trains in these parts went from east to west, and from west to east." Yedygei—

¹⁰² Anindita Banerjee, "Atoms, Aliens, and Compound Crises: Central Asia's Nuclear Fantastic Author(s)," *Science Fiction Studies* 45, no. 3 (November 2018): 459.

¹⁰³ Alibi Mambetov, "Rol' Gazizy Zhubanovoi v mirovom iskustve" (The role of Gaziza Zhubanova in world art), Gaziza Zhubanova, accessed May 14, 2021, <https://sites.google.com/site/gazizazhubanova/home/info-by-festiv-conferenc-etc-/g-zubanova-i-vrema-hh-veka>.



Figure 2. A photograph from the Vakhtangov Theatre production of Aitmatov's *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*, for which Zhubanova wrote the incidental music.

who adheres to his job duties at the train junction through blazing summers and brutally cold winters—embodies the ultimate victim of the Soviet extractive expansionism, as Banerjee puts it.

The forced modernization is symbolized by the many trains that

carry timber, coal, and uranium from somewhere over the eastern horizon toward the metropolitan heart of European Russia. Simultaneously, they also transport myriad human resources—workers, soldiers, convicts, bureaucrats, and a conspicuous number of geologists and biologists—in the opposite direction, toward the open frontiers of the North Pacific.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Banerjee, “Atoms,” 464.

The encounter between the steppe inhabitants and the train was a prominent theme that was captured in many Soviet paintings that celebrate industrialization. Kazakh artist Abilkhan Kasteev (1904–1973) turned to this subject matter in two works, both titled “Turksib,” dedicated to the Trans-Siberian Railway that connected Siberia and Central Asia. As shown in Figure 3, while the later painting is executed with more pictorial realism, both works foreground an approaching train that is enthusiastically greeted by humans. As products of modernization and industrialization propaganda, Kasteev’s paintings mostly undermine conflict between old order and Soviet modernity, aside from pushing camels into the background (especially in the later painting).

By contrast, Zhubanova’s music centers the conflict between the colliding realms. In *The Metaphors of Saryozek*, the many climactic buildups convey the destructive force of Soviet “extractive expansionism.” The climax at the end of the third movement, for instance, features an aggressive rhythmic buildup in the percussion that emulates the rumble of an approaching train. In this buildup, the train’s whistles and rumbles are deafened by explosive percussion strikes that erupt like rocket launches or missile blows. As the strings reach their registral peak, they iterate an accelerating dissonant cluster-chord above which the brass section initiates an ominous fragment that embeds two tritones, E-B \flat and G \sharp -D (Example 11). A final percussive strike terminates this chaos, yielding to a subito piano in the strings. Here, the quiet eerie tremolos of the strings produce shimmering harmonies evoking the spread of radiation that penetrates the air.

In the clash between the old and the new, the elderly Yedygei represents the oppressed indigenous Kazakh person, whose memory is on the verge of being erased. Although he seeks answers to questions about history, Yedygei nonetheless is confined to the vanishing past. It is the woman’s voice that rises in opposition to oppression. In Aitmatov’s novel, the woman’s voice is



Figure 3. Abilkhan Kasteev's "Turksib" (1932, top) and "Turksib" (1969, bottom).

The approaching train, followed by the ominous tritones theme:
<https://youtu.be/VAtakwBBAuA?t=873> (14:35–15:12)



Example 11. The climax at the end of the third movement in *The Metaphors of Saryozek*.¹⁰⁵

personified by a white bird—the “spirit animal of the legendary mother” killed by her *mankurt* son.

The bird appears amidst the chaos of the rocket launch:

Quite close, somewhere very close at hand, within the zone, a great burst of terrifying flame was riding up like a column into the sky.... It was the first of the missile-bearing rockets for the trans-space defensive system Operation Hoop, lifting off.... The sky seemed to be falling about their heads, opening up in swishing clouds of flame and smoke.... The man, the camel, the dog, those three most simple of creatures, ran off, terrified out of their wits. Across the steppe they ran, their frantic progress lit up by the pitiless, gigantic, enslaved son who shoots down his own mother, terrifying flames.... And suddenly it seemed to Yedygei that out of nowhere, there appeared the white bird that, once upon a time, had formed from Naiman-Ana’s [the mother’s name] white scarf when she fell from the saddle, pierced by the arrow fired by her *mankurt* son. The white bird was flying up fast, calling to him amidst all the maelstrom of noise and light: Whose son are you? What is your name? Remember your name! Donenbai, Donenbai, Donenbai, Donenbai ...! (Aitmatov, 384)

The persistence of memory is materialized in the bird’s repetition of *mankurt*’s father’s name—

Donenbai. It is crucial that Naiman-Ana, instead of repeating her son’s name, Zholaman, repeats his father’s name. This detail stresses that remembering one’s origins is more important than knowing one’s own name. In Zhubanova’s symphony the “recitation” of the name is played by the glockenspiel, which represents Naiman-Ana’s voice materialized through the white bird (Example 12). If in *The Island of the Women* the solo soprano performed resistance by vocalizing without words, in *The Metaphors of Saryozek* the woman’s voice is further abstracted and represented by a percussion

¹⁰⁵ Recording from a performance by the Kazakh National Philharmonic in Astana (2017); conducted by Berik Batyrkhan.

instrument. With the piercing surreal timbre of the glockenspiel, the woman's voice decolonizes indigenous memory by enchanting "Remember your name."

Audio recording of the emergence of the glockenspiel:
<https://youtu.be/VAtakwBBAuA?t=1323> (22:03–23:48)

Example 12. The finale of *The Metaphors of Saryozek*.

Describing the moment of the rocket launch in Aitmatov's novel, the film director Levon Mkrtchian wrote that it was "a natural catastrophe, no work of man, and a catastrophe which, alas, *is* the work of man..."¹⁰⁶ Zhubanova's rendition of this cataclysmic moment most certainly alludes to the many nuclear explosions that the Soviet state conducted over the forty-two years of its tests in Semipalatinsk. Of the more than 700 nuclear tests, 450 were carried out in Semipalatinsk.¹⁰⁷ It is not impossible that she was aware of witness accounts, whose memories of the blasts are strikingly similar to the passage from the novel. A teacher from a nearby village, Mutan Aimakov, stated that during the first detonation from August 29, 1949, the villagers were told to lie down and face the ground with their eyes closed. "Village dogs," Aimakov hauntingly recalled, "suddenly started to howl [...]. The cows began to moo. The camels howled [...]. The horses came back from pastures at full gallop and grouped in fright in the center of the village."¹⁰⁸ In similar terms, another witness, a

¹⁰⁶ Levon Mkrtchian, "Discussing Aitmatov's Novel 'A Blizzard Waystation' (The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years)," in *The Soviet Multinational State*, ed. Olcott, 308. The essay first appeared in *Literaturnoe obozrenie* 10 (1981): 36–43.

¹⁰⁷ Togzhan Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), chap. 2, Kindle. Outside of Kazakhstan, over 100 tests took place in the northern archipelago of Novaya Zemlya—the indigenous land of Nenets people who were forcefully relocated to mainland Russia. Other world powers similarly exploited their colonies to advance nuclear developments: the United Kingdom carried out tests in Australia and the Pacific Islands, France in Algeria and French Polynesia, the US—in addition to the Nevada Test Site—in the Pacific Ocean, and China in the Xinjiang Region, populated by Uyghurs. See also Fred Pearce, "Semipalatinsk: Secrets of the Steppe," in *Fallout: Disasters, Lies, and the Legacy of the Nuclear Age*, 38–44 (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

¹⁰⁸ Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe*, chap. 1, Kindle.

Kazakh soldier who participated in the relocation of the 12 thousand people during the first thermonuclear test on August 12, 1953, described the chaos among the locals: “Why? Where? Neither the soldiers nor the shocked locals knew. Panic reigned in the steppe; bewildered people waited for something terrible [to happen].”¹⁰⁹ Such accounts were circulating among the Kazakh public in the late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev’s administration initiated the era of *glasnost*’ in February of 1986. Originating from the Russian *glas* (literally, voice), the term is most often interpreted as signifying transparency between the government and the Soviet citizens. In this political climate, Zhubanova’s confrontation of human and environmental exploitation through *The Metaphors of Saryozek* and the subsequent *The Steppe Yedygei* does not appear to be as radical. Yet placed in the broader trajectory of her life and work, these late compositions emerge as a culmination of her long-term resistance to cultural erasure, indigenous assimilation, and exploitation of human and environmental forces. Zhubanova thus belonged to the leading Kazakh artists who strove to resuscitate their history from communist falsification. However, while those whose sole medium of expression was language were prone to censorship, Zhubanova’s operas produced a multimedia archive of decolonial art. Suleimenov’s *AZ and IA* (1975), which reconstructed the story of the Medieval Russian Prince Igor from a Turkic vantage point, was censored, leading to the poet’s being banned from publication for eight years.¹¹⁰ Zhubanova’s operas and symphonies, on the other hand, were performed on major stages even though they were just as subversive and revisionist as Suleimenov’s text.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ See Harsha Ram, “Imagining Eurasia: The Poetics and Ideology of Olzhas Suleimenov’s *AZ i IA*,” *Slavic Review* 60, no. 2 (Summer, 2001): 289–311.

Zhubanova exemplifies the select few women, like Tereshkova, who were elevated in cultural discourse in order to create the illusion of equality. She received a prime education, travelled extensively, and achieved professional success perhaps partly due to the fact that her father was a prominent established Kazakh composer.¹¹¹ Ultimately, the Soviet liberation of Muslim women was not truly liberational because it functioned to assist the Soviet colonialization of Kazakhstan. Although Zhubanova was a state agent through her official positions, she managed to protest against the state through her work and writings. She was a clever strategist who knew when and how to compose works that would please the state (such as her trilogy dedicated to Lenin), and when and how to write music that would resist the regime. She contested political and cultural subordination to the center through embedding themes of resistance into her modernist musical style. Refusing to comply with the norms of composition dictated by the center and established in Kazakhstan by Brusilovsky—who was the ultimate representative of the center—she disrupted hegemony with her vision of Kazakh national music. Her idea of new music mirrored her vision of Kazakh nationalism: through her work, life, and social activism she resisted the unilateral socialist claims that the future must replace the past. The future of being Kazakh, for Zhubanova, did not exclude the past, but necessitated “decolonizing memories,” to use Madina Tlostanova’s words. As Tlostanova states, “Decolonizing memories and existence through art entails a restoration of the artist’s and the audience’s agency—their right and ability to finally make their own choices and decide what to remember and how.”¹¹² Zhubanova’s work asserted that the indigenous culture and historical past were not there to be altered or falsified in service of the state’s ideological purposes, but were integral and inefaceable foundations of Kazakh identity.

¹¹¹ See Zhubanova, *Mir moi*, 92.

¹¹² Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet?: Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 120.

In addition to experiencing suppression and indoctrination like all Soviet citizens, as a Kazakh woman she was entangled in two additional layers of racial and gender subjugation. Yet she was not a silent “subaltern.” The woman’s voice in her music answers Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the subaltern speak?” affirmatively: the subaltern speaks through the character of Enlik, vocalizes in the soaring operatic soprano, and pierces memory through the utterances of the glockenspiel.¹¹³ As Aitmatov wrote, “The most tragic contradiction of the end of the twentieth century is the impossibility to realize the boundless human genius due to the political, ideological, racial barriers that are begotten by imperialism.”¹¹⁴ However we interpret the phrase “boundless human genius,” Aitmatov’s statement does indeed characterize Zhubanova’s life and work: she contested the “political, ideological, and racial barriers,” eternalizing her people’s struggle for independence through the female voice in her music.

It is curious that Zhubanova’s final opera was never performed, even after the dissolution of the USSR. The reason might be that its message of resistance to exploitation remains politically charged even in today’s independent Kazakhstan. The mass anti-nuclear movement in 1989 led to the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear polygon that operated for 40 years. But it is the Kazakh government, not the Russian one, that pays compensations to over one million people who still experience health issues after decades of exposure to radiation. Those people affected by radiation from smaller test sites, like the one in Azgir, do not receive any compensation at all. To this day, traces of radiation permeate air, soil, and water in areas where nuclear tests were conducted in the past. Not surprisingly, the Kazakh people strongly protested Vladimir Putin’s proposal in 2019 to open a Russian-sponsored nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan. While the Kazakhs were able to resist new nuclear developments, the Soviet built Baikonur Cosmodrome is still operated on Kazakh soil.

¹¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313 (London: Macmillan, 1988).

¹¹⁴ Aitmatov, *I dol’she veka*, 6.

It is leased by the Russian Space Agency, which launches up to 40% of the world's space rockets. Studies have shown that toxic propellants dumped onto land result in endocrine disease and blood disorders in people who live in the rocket's launch path. Yet the international community does little to combat this. In fact, both NASA and the European Space Agency also lease Baikonur for their rocket launches. And while this exploitation happens with the approval of the Kazakh government, it nonetheless proves that even today, just as in the Soviet period, not all human lives are treated as equally valuable. Examining Zhubanova's music as an anticolonial archive, we can thus expose her resistance to what appears to be continued injustice toward ethnic and racial minorities in service of imperial powers.

Epilogue. The Aftermath of the Soviet National Opera Project

The impact of Soviet policies on the present-day cultural, social, economic, and political developments in the satellite republics can hardly be overemphasized. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the newly independent nation states have taken distinct stances on their relations with Russia.¹ On the one hand, states such as Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan continued alliances with Russia, joining the Eurasian Economic Union which was established in 2015. On the other hand, the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—initiated a determined de-Russification policy. Proclaiming their former inclusion into the USSR as an illegal occupation, these countries joined NATO and the European Union. In Central Asia, Turkmenistan undertook one of the radical processes of de-Russification. While some states have preserved cultural and educational institutions established during the Soviet times, others have demolished them in an act of sweeping decolonization. As Marina Frolova-Walker notes, in Turkmenistan, the capital Ashgabat “acquired an ‘Asian’ architectural face, university education was narrowed, conservatoire and opera house closed down, and the symphony orchestras disbanded.”² Turkmenistan’s and the Baltic nations’ submissiveness to the USSR was thus temporary, since they distanced themselves from Russian influence after the Soviet collapse. We can retrospectively analyze their temporary compliance using Homi Bhabha’s notion of “sly civility.” Though on the surface these nations succumbed to Soviet rule, their cooperation nonetheless contained a form of the natives’ resistance, “a refusal to satisfy

¹ See Mark Steinberg and Catherine Wanner, eds., *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Edith W. Clowes, *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Kathryn E. Graber, *Mixed Messages: Mediating Native Belonging in Asian Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

² Marina Frolova-Walker, “Musical Nationalism in Stalin’s Soviet Union,” in *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 354.

the colonizer's narrative demand."³ In the case of Turkmenistan, the assimilation into Western culture—in the form of establishing a conservatory and assembling a professional orchestra—proved to be what Bhabha calls “a temporary frenzy,” which was rejected as soon as the Soviet governance vanished.

What role did the products of Soviet cultural modernization play in the post-Soviet Armenian and Kazakh identity formation?⁴ What is the significance of the national opera project in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse? Comparing the repertoires of these theaters with any other opera house around the globe, we will notice that the only difference is the prominence of several works by national composers. The Western classics staged at the Speniaryan Armenian National Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet, Abay Opera and Ballet House in Almaty, and the newly built State Opera and Ballet Theatre “Astana Opera” (2013) include Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Verdi's *La Traviata*, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, Puccini's *Tosca*, *La bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Turandot*. However, these theaters continue to stage works by ethnic composers that cannot be experienced in Western theaters. Below, I briefly address the presence of operas written by Armenian and Kazakh composers, highlighting the continued negotiation of ethnic identity, territorial conflict, and historical revisionism.

Staging Soviet Armenian History on Contested Grounds

The most performed Soviet-era operas at the Speniaryan Theatre are Armen Tigranyan's *Davit Bek* (1950), Avet Terteryan's *The Ring of Fire* (1967), and Alexander Speniaryan's *Almast* (1930). Operas that were appropriated by the Soviets, including Tigran Tchoukhajian's *Arshak II* (1868) and

³ Homi K. Bhabha, “Sly Civility,” *October* 34 (1985): 77–78.

⁴ For a general historical account about post-Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia, Sophie Hohmann, Claire Mouradian, Silvia Serrano, and Julien Thorez, eds., *Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Migration, Democratization and Inequality in the Post-Soviet Era* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

Tigranyan's *Anush* (1912), similarly remain as staples in the theater's contemporary repertoire.

Examining the reception of operas with plots that are based on Soviet history presents a compelling way of understanding how Armenians reconcile their Soviet past.

Andrey Babayev's *The Eagle's Fortress* (1957) and Terteryan's *The Ring of Fire* (1967) were revived in Shushi, Nagorno-Karabakh, in 2013 and 2014, respectively. The productions took place under the same initiative led by artistic director Sarina Avtandilyan and sponsored by Rita Sargsyan, then First Lady of Armenia. There was a symbolic meaning in the choice of these two works. Babayev was born in Nagorno-Karabakh, and Terteryan's ancestors were from Shushi. Moreover, Terteryan's opera ended a decade-long stagnation in Armenian opera composition since Babayev's opera. As shown in Figure 1, both premieres took place under an open sky near historic landmarks—*The Eagle's Fortress* was staged near the ruins of the Realni School (est. in 1881), while *The Ring of Fire* at the Shushi Fortress (est. in 1751). The promotional materials for both productions recognized Babayev and Terteryan for their contributions to the enrichment of the Armenian operatic heritage.

While the plots of both operas feature events from Soviet history, their critical reception did not address their political significance. Babayev's *The Eagle's Fortress*, as addressed in chapter 2, recounted collectivization while avoiding explicit references to its dire consequences for village life. While this avoidance, originally motivated by censorship concerns, could have been used to reexamine Soviet history, marketing materials around the opera's 2013 premiere barely alluded to any political overtones. Instead, the opera was presented in terms of generic universal narratives. Writing about *The Eagle's Fortress*, one critic noted, "The plot of the opera features the eternal theme

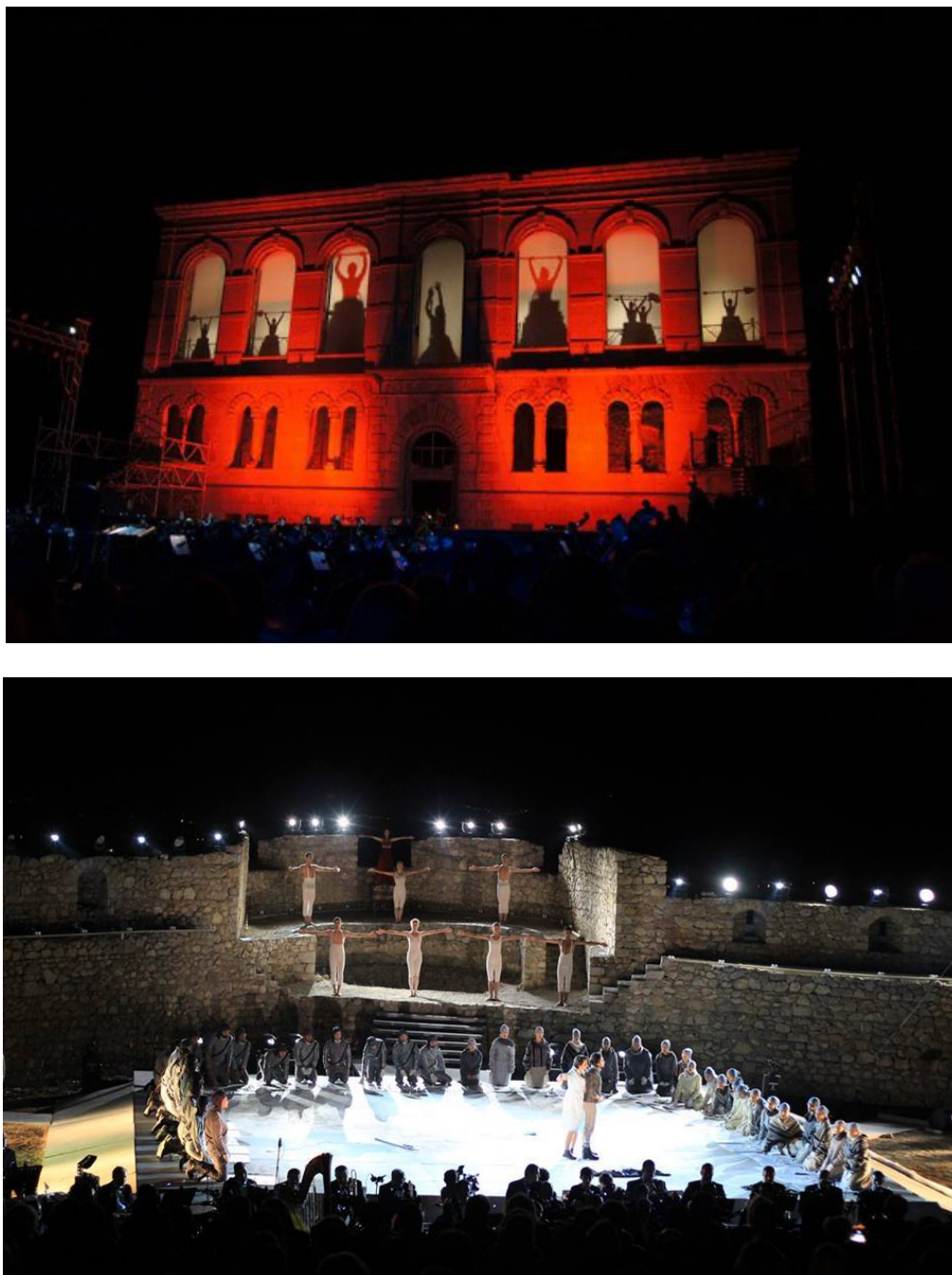


Figure 1. *The Eagle's Fortress* at the Realni School, photo credit Gohar Aramyan (top); *The Ring of Fire* staged at the Shushi Fortress, photo credit Vahagn Navasardyan (bottom).

of the struggle between good and evil, the theme of the inevitable victory of justice.”⁵ Another commentator similarly stated, “Although the opera was created in a specific epoch, it praises common human values—love, patriotism, belief in future. This is a history about the struggle between light and dark, new and old, and the immanent victory of good over evil.”⁶ While in a sense these descriptions capture the overall gist of *The Eagle’s Fortress*, they can indeed characterize almost any other operatic plot.

The press materials for the 2014 premiere of *The Ring of Fire* also alluded to the historical significance of the plot in rather vague terms. The opera is based on Russian author Boris Lavrenyov’s novella *The Forty-First* and Armenian poet Yeghishe Charents’s poems “Soma” and “Mad Crowds.” These literary works feature revolutionary themes. The plot of the opera unfolds in Turkmenistan during the Russian Civil War of 1917–1920. Amidst the fighting between the Red Bolsheviks and the White Guardsmen, who opposed the Revolution, a young girl disguised as a male White guardsman is captured by the Reds and falls in love with a Red soldier. While the two develop a romantic relationship, eventually the Red soldier shoots his beloved to death. Commenting on the relevance of *The Ring of Fire*, Avtandilyan generalized the revolutionary theme around the idea of war and peace: “The goal of the composer and the librettist was to display against the broad political background the clash of incompatible human characters, worldviews. At the foundation of the opera is [the idea] that war changes not only the history of people [and] nations, but also breaks into

⁵ Iuna Oveyan, “Prem’era opery *Artsvaber* v Shushi” (The premiere of *The Eagle’s Fortress* in Shushi), Sobesednikam, last updated August 8, 2013, <http://sobesednikam.ru/5-kultura/>. “V osnove siuzheta opery lezhit izvechnaia tema bor’by dobra i zla, tema neizbezhnogo torzhestva spravedlivosti.”

⁶ Magdalina Zatikyan, “‘Artsvaber’ prozvuchit pod nebesami Shushi” (*The Eagle’s Fortress* will be performed under the Shushi skies), Yerkramas, last updated July 27, 2013, <https://yerkramas.org/article/61595>. “Nesmotria na to, chto opera sozdana v opredelennuiu epokhu, ona vospevaet obshchechelovecheskie tsennosti—liubov’, patriotizm, veru v budushchee. Eto istoriia o bor’be svetlogo i temnogo, novogo i starogo i o neizbezhnoi pobede dobra i spravedlivosti.”

personal lives, changing the fates of people.”⁷ Though this comment gestures toward a condemnation of war, it nonetheless provides little specificity about the impact of the Russian Civil War or the October Revolution either on Turkmenistan, where the plot is set, or on Armenia. Commentators could have at least mentioned that the poet Charents, who was initially enthusiastic about the Revolution, perished as a victim of Stalinist purges in 1937. Instead, they use language that echoes Soviet propaganda: “Charents’s revolutionary spirit inspired Terteryan” and his poetry “broke into the plot thanks to its revolutionary pathos and breath.”⁸ Why are Armenians hesitant to reexamine their Soviet history?

The geographic locale of the two premieres might offer an answer. At the eve of the Soviet Union’s dissolution, Armenia was caught in a rising territorial conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh’s independence.⁹ Though the population of this mountainous region had an Armenian majority, the Bolsheviks decided to include it into the Azerbaijani SSR as an autonomous oblast in 1923. In the following decades, ethnic and religious clashes continued to grow, leading to the Nagorno-Karabakh Regional Soviet’s vote to join the Armenian SSR in 1988. Azerbaijani leaders refused this decision, as well as the outcome of the subsequent 1991 referendum, according to which nearly 99 percent of the voters expressed desire to form a sovereign state, independent from Azerbaijan. A full-scale war erupted in the early 1990s, leading to the emergence of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (which Armenians call the Artsakh Republic)—*de jure* part of

⁷ Susanna Balaian, “Prem’era opera A. Terter’iana ‘Ognennoe kol’tso,’” *Azat Artsakh*, last updated August 29, 2014. <https://www.artsakhtert.com/rus/index.php/culture-and-education/item/10264>. “Tsel’iu kompozitora i librettista bylo na shirokom obshchestvenno-politicheskom fone pokazat’ stolknovenie nesovmestnykh chelovecheskikh kharakterov, mirovoztrenii. Osnovnoi smysl opery v tom, chto voina izmeniaet ne tol’ko istoriiu narodov, natsii, no i vryvaetsia v lichnuiu zhizn’ cheloveka, meniaet sud’by liudei.”

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ For a historical account of this time, see Maïke Lehmann, “Apricot Socialism: The National Past, the Soviet Project, and the Imagining of Community in Late Soviet Armenia,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 1 (2015): 9–31.

Azerbaijan, *de facto* with an independent government backed by the Armenian state. Russia played a central role in negotiating the ceasefire in 1994 and became Armenia's main trade partner and military ally. After decades of relative stability in Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation escalated into another full-scale war in 2020. Russia once again mediated ceasefire, dispatching its peace-keeping forces for a five-year period to ensure stability in the region.

Considering that Russia plays a central role in Armenia's economic development and military stability, it is apparent why Armenians cannot openly critique the Soviet or Russian governments. The pro-European sentiment in early 2010s was short-lived. Following Russian pressure, the Armenian President Serzh Sargsian abandoned the planned joining of the EU-Armenia Association Agreement and instead signed to become a member of the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Union. Given Armenia's ties with Russia, most of the critical historical investigation is pursued by scholars from the diaspora. Richard G. Hovannisian, Ronald Grigor Suny, and George Bournoutian were among the first diasporic historians to reconstruct Armenian history using primary sources.¹⁰ Revisionist approaches to the history of Armenian music are also largely taking place in the diaspora.¹¹

¹⁰ See Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, vols. 1–4 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, 1982, 1996); Hovannisian, ed., *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998); George Bournoutian, *Armenia and Imperial Decline: The Yerevan Province, 1900–1914* (New York: Routledge, 2018) and *From the Kur to the Aras: A Military History of Russia's Move into the South Caucasus and the First Russo-Iranian War, 1801–1813* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Suny, Ronald Grigor, ed., *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

¹¹ See, for instance, Sirvart Poladian, "Komitas Vardapet and His Contribution to Ethnomusicology: Komitas the Pioneer," *Ethnomusicology* 16, no. 1 (1972): 82–97; Vrej Nersessian, ed., *Essays on Armenian Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1998); Brigitta Davidjants, "Identity Construction in Armenian Music on the Example of Early Folklore Movement," *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 62 (2015): 175–200; Knar Abrahamyan, "Navigating Post-Soviet Armenia: On the Decolonial in Tigran Mansurian's *Requiem*," in *Analytical Approaches to 20th-Century Russian Music: Tonality, Modernism, Serialism*, ed. Inessa Bazayev and Christopher Segall, 91–109 (New York: Routledge, 2020).

Brusilovsky's Ambiguous Reception in Today's Kazakhstan

While Kazakhstan is an ally of Russia, its economic and military stability are not as fragile and as dependent on Russia as Armenia's. The country's rich oil, metal, and mineral reserves make its economy the largest in Central Asia. While Russian troops were sent to Kazakhstan to stabilize the situation during the political unrest in January 2022, the state's overall military stability does not rely on Russia. Ideologically, the Kazakh state has departed from its Soviet history by moving the capital from Almaty to Astana in 1997 and renaming it to Nursultan after the nation's long-term president Nursultan Nazarbayev.¹²

To display the cultural fruition of Kazakhstan—independent from former Soviet developments—Nazarbayev founded the State Opera and Ballet Theatre “Astana Opera” in 2013 in the new capital. As a material display of prosperity and might, Astana Opera is larger than the Soviet-built Abay Opera and Ballet House in Almaty. The new theater features 1250 seats while the old one has only 800. Both theaters prominently showcase operas written during the Soviet period: Yevgeny Brusilovsky's *Kyz Zhibek* (1934), Akhmet Zhubanov and Latif Khamidi's *Abay* (1944), Mukan Tulebayev's *Birzhan and Sara* (1946), and Gaziza Zhubanova's *Enlik Kebek* (1975).

What distinguishes the reception of Soviet operas in Kazakhstan is the absence of operas that were based on Soviet historical plots on the two main operatic stages. However, outside of Almaty and Nursultan, Brusilovsky's *Dudarai* (1953) was revived in 2011 at the Karaganda Academic Theater of the Musical Comedy. This opera emphasizes the friendship and solidarity between Kazakh and Russian fishermen in the years leading to the October Revolution. Similar to the reception of Soviet-themed operas in Armenia, contemporary commentary on *Dudarai* does not reevaluate the historical significance of the plot. In the opera, a Russian girl and a Kazakh man fall in

¹² See Nari Shelekpayev, “Astana as Imperial Project?: Kazakhstan and Its Wandering Capital City in the Twentieth Century,” *Ab Imperio* 1 (2018): 157–89.

love and withstand attempts by Muslim *mullahs* (clergymen) and feudal *bays* (landowners) to sow enmity between Russians and Kazakhs. Rather than assessing the impact of expropriation of Kazakh lands by Russian settlers—which is the reason why Maria lives in a Kazakh village—contemporary critics mimic Soviet rhetoric about the friendship of the peoples. The theater’s webpage, for instance, claims that “the power of feelings [between Maria and Duman] does not take into consideration national or religious prejudice” and cites passages from the libretto such as: “The flame of friendship lit up in the hearts of Russians and Kazakhs.”¹³

While the marketing of *Dudarai* at the Karaganda theater is largely consistent with Soviet rhetoric, the reception of Soviet operas in Almaty and Nursultan illustrates a more critical stance. Describing the production of Brusilovsky’s *Kyz Zhibek* at the Abay Theatre, Olga Vlasenko points out that the director Mikhail Pandzhavidze departed from the plot’s Soviet interpretation. Vlasenko states that Pandzhavidze presented the opera as a Medieval romantic legend, distinct from the Soviet framing of the Kazakh epos that “read it as a social-political critique of traditionalism and confrontation between fathers and sons.”¹⁴ While Vlasenko recognized this departure, her interviewees, who participated in the production of the opera, made statements that present an ambiguous stance toward Brusilovsky’s role as a Kazakh composer. The choreographer for the production, for instance, stated, “In the production of this legendary opera, our main goal was to preserve the spirit of the opera—our traditions, mentality, [and] those characters that were envisioned by the composer and librettist—giving it a new vision with the use of contemporary

¹³ “Dudarai,” The Karaganda Academic Theater of the Musical Comedy, accessed on March 5, 2022, <https://www.katmk.kz/hcelso10/repertuar-read/id/241>. “O sile chuvstva, ne schitaishcheisia s natsional’mymi i religioznymi predrassudkami;” “No v serdtse russkikh i kazakhov zagorelos’ plamia druzhby.”

¹⁴ Olga Vlasenko, “GATOB im. Abaia osushchestvil novuiu postanovku opery ‘Kyz-Zhibek,’” InBusiness.kz, last modified December 27, 2020, <https://inbusiness.kz/ru/news/gatob-im-abaya-osushchestvil-novuyu-postanovku-opery-kyz-zhibek>. “Kazakhstskii epos, pročitannyi v sovetskoe vremia bol’she v sotsialisticheskoi politicheskoi kliuche kritiki traditsionalizma i protivostoianiiia ottsov i detei.”

technology, scenography, and interesting directorial decisions.”¹⁵ Though this statement suggests that the new rendition of the opera aims to preserve the Kazakh cultural heritage, it does not question whether Brusilovsky’s use of folk songs and dances is a legitimate representation of that heritage. The production of the opera, after all, was meant as a celebration of Brusilovsky’s 125th birthday anniversary. Thus, even within the prevailing Kazakh reevaluation of Soviet history, Brusilovsky’s opera is still recognized as the first national opera and is included in the Golden Fund of Kazakh national music.¹⁶

Drastic Hybridity as a “Political Praxis”

In the contemporary age of globalization, when different musical traditions and genres are blended across geographies, the assimilationist nature of the Soviet national opera project loses its historically radical character.¹⁷ While during the nineteenth century, Russian audiences glimpsed the Orient predominantly through representations by the *kuchka* composers, during the Soviet period local composers were given their own voice to create national musical classics. However, these works molded folk songs into Western forms, thus preserving only surface-level ornamental traces of local musical traditions. Russian and Western superiority continued to loom in the background even though it was not always blatantly articulated. After the collapse of the USSR, attempts to counter Soviet Russification led to the reinstatement of the Armenian and Kazakh languages as the main

¹⁵ Ibid. “V novoi postanovke legendarnoi opery nashei osnovnoi zadachei bylo sokhranit’ dukh spektaklia, nashi traditsii, mentalitet, te obrazy, kotorye byli zalozeny kompozitorom i avtorom libretto, predav emu novyi vzgliad, novoe videnie posredstvom sovremennykh tekhnologii, stsenografii, interesnykh rezhisserskikh reshenii.”

¹⁶ For an account of post-Soviet Kazakh identity, see Shelekpáyev, “Public Spaces and Nation-Building in the post-Soviet Kazakhstan (1991–2001),” in *Materializing Identities in Socialist and Post-Socialist Cities*, ed. Jaroslav Ira and Jiří Janáč, 82–98 (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2017).

¹⁷ See Shelekpáyev, “Vostok vnutri ‘Vostoka’? Tsentral’naia Aziia mezhdu ‘strategicheskimi essentsializmom’ global’nykh simvolov i takticheskimi essentsializmom natsional’nykh narrativov” (‘An East within ‘the East’? Central Asia between the ‘Strategic Essentialism’ of Global Symbols and a ‘Tactical Essentialism’ of National Narratives), *The Russian Sociological Review* 19, no. 3 (2020): 70–101.

official languages with the respective states.¹⁸ However, Russian popular media, along with Soviet-era artworks, institutions, and architecture, prevail in both countries.

Ironically, the Russification of culture can largely be understood as Westernization. Since Peter the Great's government reforms at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries, many of Russia's own cultural developments and modernization efforts were oriented toward Western European models. Even the preeminent Russian national composer Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov admitted that Russian music as a "new, unique kind of music" has never existed:

Both harmony and melody are pan-European. Russian songs introduce into counterpoint a few new technical devices, but to create a new, unique kind of music—this they cannot do. Russian traits—and national traits in general—are not acquired by writing according to specific rules, but rather by removing from the common language of music those devices which are inappropriate to a Russian style.¹⁹

Thus, Russia followed not only the colonizing practices of the West but in fact ended up transforming local musical cultures—along with its own—into pan-European epigones.

The theory of drastic hybridity proposed in this dissertation presents an analytic tool for future postcolonial studies of music and other art produced by colonized subjects. It complements the prevalent analytic focus in humanistic studies on artistic and cultural negotiation with an emphasis on imperial history and material realities that surrounded the creation of these works. Drastic hybridity thus presents a gesture toward transforming postcolonial studies into what Rumina Sethi terms "a political praxis within material history."²⁰ If we want to resist reifying postcolonialism into an abstract tool of critical theory within "western academic imperialism," we must pursue an

¹⁸ In Kazakhstan, Russian is the second official language.

¹⁹ Nasser Al-Taei, *Representations of the Orient in Western Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 231.

²⁰ Rumina Sethi, *The Politics of Postcolonialism: Empire, Nation, and Resistance* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 25.

incessant reevaluation of historical injustices—such as cultural erasure, racialization, and human and environmental exploitation—that surrounded the making of colonial works.²¹

²¹ Makarand Paranjape, “Coping with Post-colonialism,” in *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, ed. Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee, 37–47 (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1996).

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