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Review Of "Performing Russia: Folk Revival And Russian Identity"

By L. J. Olson

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Reviews

Laura J. Olson. Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity (BASEES/Routledge Curzon Series on Russian and East European Studies 7). New York and London: Routledge Curzon, 2004. Notes. Bibliography. Index. viii + 286 pp. \$114.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-415-32614-1.

Laura Olson's book, Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity, is primarily about folk music, particularly folk vocal music, but the book's implications may be as broad as its title suggests. Olson combines traditional scholarly research and citation with the results of extensive fieldwork, mainly attendance at concerts and interviews with folk revivalists in Russia today. Some sections reflect her conversations with village singers, whose role in the folk revival movement is as complex as the trends and approaches in the movement's philosophy.

From the first lines of the book, Olson creates her persona as a scholar who is first and foremost a participant-observer. This predetermines her relationship to informants and to the whole topic, allowing her a fortunate access to the material. As a singer concerned with her own repertoire and performance, she herself can request comments, correction and encouragement. Given the cultural distance many Russian folk revivalists must traverse to learn and perform traditional music, Olson is more like them than set apart by foreignness. Her implicated position in the research causes her distance from the material and her authorial presence to vary, moving between description, citation, and abstraction. As summaries, comments, or critical remarks interweave with information from interviews, it is not always clear who is talking and from what point of view.

The book ranges from the status and performance of folk music before the Revolution, through Soviet definition and manipulation of folklore, to the nascent folk revival movement of the later Soviet period and the flourishing schools, ensembles and collecting projects of the Soviet period, nearly up to the present. Olson outlines currents of thought and musical practice that parallel issues in many other cultural spheres – the status of peasants vis-à-vis urban intellectuals; ongoing echoes of the Soviet “folk chorus” approach versus revivalist demands for greater authenticity and autonomy for performers; ways of imagining or appropriating Russian culture as it is recreated in particular kinds of performance or “discovered” in research; focused cultivation of local styles versus selection of styles and songs from all over the country; and some continuing censorship of folk material, as with the song “Porushka Parania” (135). She addresses the particular popularity of Cossack songs and culture, which tend to engage more boys and men in performance ensembles than other stylistic definitions, and the gender-specific songs and crafts taught in some programs for young people. Olson can be refreshingly critical of the assumptions and behavior of some revivalists when they actually interact with villagers; she notes that village women may refer to the old traditional songs as “*fol'klor*” (‘folklore,’ a foreign word, learned from educated visitors) but call the Soviet-era songs they really love “*narodnye pesni*” (folk songs). The book is valuably grounded in a variety of disciplines, including ethnographic or musicological fieldwork and literary history and analysis, and situated by rich footnotes and bibliography. In places, it is the

footnotes that offer larger synthesizing observations, in order not to interrupt the flow in chapters on more specific topics.

Read as a whole, the book begins slowly and becomes much more engaging once Olson turns to the folk revival movement; the final chapter offers a few lively and thickly-described scenes in which genuinely creative encounters take place among members of current ensembles precisely backstage, for an optimistic vision of ongoing musical evolution. The difference in tone between sections may be hard to avoid: collectivization was a tragedy from many points of view, maintenance of folk tradition not least among them, and much of the Soviet material may simply be inherently turgid. A reader may regret that Olson's critical reactions do not kick in during the first section, or at least the second, devoted mainly to the "fakelore" of the Soviet-era folk choruses. If she can describe with such non-judgmental sympathy the point of view of village people who really love best to sing cruel romances or the Soviet popular songs of their youth, perhaps she could also have sought more space for potential resistance in the actual experience of the folk choruses. Her view of the "fakelore" period seems to be adopted rather uncritically from the revivalists she interviews – perhaps because of her identification with the work and perspective of the revivalists, or her caution as an "outsider" who avoids imposing her own Western musical background (and "Western" definitions of "folk music!") on the material she learns and studies.

As the book points out, there is also an additional CD available – though it is in fact not a CD, but a web site providing information and the possibility of listening to snippets of the recordings she describes; the entire recordings can be downloaded if the reader obtains a password from Olson. While this somewhat cumbersome arrangement costs the reader some effort and defers the possibility of listening to the tracks in sequence or for pleasure, it reflects Olson's concern for the integrity of the performances and for copyright protection. The wish to provide protection is entirely reasonable, given how Western or World music have appropriated and devoured fragments of "mysterious" traditional Slavic music for the past few decades. Some of the audio tracks are technically quite rough, with minimal editing and processing. Overall, it is a teaching tool rather than a recording for entertainment.

It is a great shame that Performing Russia is so expensive: the hard-cover edition seems aimed only at libraries or specialists with research budgets. But it would make a great text for a class: it is clearly written, full of engaging details, and suggestive of ways a North American could engage in an authentic, productive and sophisticated way with "someone else's" traditional culture – something we all hope our students will want to do.

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