**Music and Politics in the Soviet Union:
From Revolution to Reaction
(1917-1936)**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the interplay of musical and political life in the years immediately following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The primary argument presented here is that the term “formalism” in its application to music was defined in multiple, often contradictory, ways in the years 1917-1936. Opposing musical groups each offered an interpretation of the term that best supported their own approach. Under the leadership of Anatoly Lunacharskii, the government and the party followed a policy of non-intervention in the arts throughout the 1920s. This gradually changed to a policy of control and censorship following Stalin’s consolidation of power in 1928. Music was brought under State control in 1936, with the publication of the article “Chaos instead of Music” (Sumbur vmesto muzyki) in *Pravda*, condemning Dmitrii Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. With this article, the party adopted a definition of “formalism” that had been promulgated by the leftist musical organisation RAPM (Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians) in the 1920s, turning it into official government doctrine.

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Introduction

My interest in the interplay of politics and music in the Soviet Union was first sparked by reading *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov*. This book, first published in the United States in 1979, has been an ongoing subject of controversy in the musical world. It presented a new image of the Soviet composer Dmitrii Dmitriievich Shostakovich to the West. Rather than Shostakovich-as-communist (the common Western view of the composer until this time), the reader was presented with the image of Shostakovich-as-secret-dissident. Subsequent scholarly attacks on the book brought the authenticity of these “memoirs” into question, and this debate has continued to the present day.¹ In fact, the debate surrounding *Testimony* has itself become a subject of study in recent years.² The influence of *Testimony* on musicians can also be noted in recent interpretations of Shostakovich’s music, which draw on the image of the composer struggling against the all-powerful state.³

The debate surrounding Shostakovich and his legacy in turn gives rise to broader questions involving Soviet music. An examination of Soviet music history makes it clear that the Communist Party considered it necessary to exert control over musical creativity.

¹ The first of these came from Laurel Fay, who had been asked to review Volkov’s book. See “Shostakovich versus Volkov: Whose ‘Testimony’?”, *The Russian Review*, Vol. 39, No.4 (October 1980), pp. 484-493. Volkov has recently published a new book (*Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship between the Great Composer and the Brutal Dictator*, New York: Knopf, 2004). I was unable to obtain this book in Russia, but the title suggests that it will continue the Shostakovich debate along the same lines that have dominated discourse on the topic for the last twenty years.

² See Michael Koball’s article in *Shostakovich Studies*, Vol. 2, Schostakowitsch Gesellschaft e.V., 2000. A review is also available in *DSCH Journal*, No.14 (January 2001), p. 44.

³ See Richard Taruskin, “Writing about Shostakovich: the 2000 Cramb Lecture” printed in *DSCH Journal*, No. 14 (January 2001), p. 36.

On at least two occasions the government actively condemned and blacklisted composers who did not follow what was defined as the “acceptable” party line in music.⁴

Despite my initial interest, so much had already been written on the subject of Shostakovich and his relation to the Soviet government that it seemed unlikely that I could add anything new to this debate. It is virtually impossible to prove definitively the political stance of a composer who has been dead for over twenty-five years and whose legacy includes a large body of musical compositions rather than written texts. In comparison to other arts, music does not present the listener with concrete words or images. For this reason, it is the most difficult of the arts to define in terms of its external meaning. The debate over Shostakovich appeared to me to hinge upon this fact. As such, the legacy of Shostakovich could and should be interpreted by individual listeners on a personal level, but for a scholar to present conclusive evidence that would support one side or another in this debate was impossible.

Recognition of this problem of defining precisely the extra-musical meaning of a musical work gave rise to other questions, more general in nature. What kind of relationship (if any) exists between music and politics? How has this relationship been defined historically? Was there an historical precedent for the attention the Soviet government focused on music? Was it really possible for music to express or support political convictions? If so, in what way? What specifically was the role that the Soviet government envisaged for music? Was it to serve as a means for political propaganda and, if so, how was it to fulfil this task? Why did the Soviet government take such

⁴ In 1936, the anti-formalist campaign began with an article that appeared in *Pravda* condemning the opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mzensk District*. In 1948, the so-called *Zhdanovshchina* (literally, ‘era of Zhdanov’, a political campaign against writers, composers, historians, economists) began with a similar attack launched against V. Muradeli’s opera *Velikaia Druzhba*.

complex measures to control the arts in general and music in particular? Did they specifically fear the subversive potential of this form of expression and therefore seek to control it, or did musical life simply mirror the growth of totalitarian control that extended to all aspects of civilian life?

There is already a large body of biographical literature that focuses specifically on Shostakovich, his music, interpretation of his compositions and the question of the impact of politics on his life and work. These works are of varying quality, but most tend to reflect the political climate within which a given book was written as well as the personal bias of the writer. This bias may be clearly acknowledged or go unacknowledged by the author. In this area, works such as Ian MacDonald's *The New Shostakovich* (1990), Allan Ho and Dmitry Feofanov's *Shostakovich Reconsidered* (1998), Elisabeth Wilson's *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (1994), Kshishtof Meier's *Shostakovich: Zhizn', Tvorchestvo, Vremia* (1998) and Laurel Fay's *Shostakovich: A Life* (2000) all deserve mention. The primary Russian/Soviet biographer of Shostakovich is Sofia Khentova, who has published at least fourteen different books, offering a biographical description of the composer's life in minute detail. Not surprisingly however, any discussion of the more negative aspects of Shostakovich's interaction with the party is avoided.⁵

Numerous articles and book-length collections of articles are readily available, both in Russian and English. The Shostakovich Society publishes a bi-annual journal *DSCH* (named after the composer's musical signature), which is devoted to the study of the composer's life, work and legacy. This journal has also served as a battleground for

⁵ See also John Riley, "On Objectivity in Shostakovich's Biographies", *DSCH Journal* No. 12 (January 2000), p. 5 for a brief discussion of this problem in relation to Shostakovich.

the continuing Shostakovich debate. Valuable primary documents relating to Shostakovich and his life have recently become available also. Probably the most important single source is Isaac Glikman's *Pis'ma k drugu* (1993), in which the composer's letters to his long-time friend are published.

The situation regarding Shostakovich research is mixed. There is no shortage of material available. Rather, the researcher finds him- or herself overwhelmed by the amount of information. However, many of these sources are caught up in the "revisionist" – "anti-revisionist" debate, an area which this paper does not specifically address.

There are surprisingly few Western sources that specifically address the general topic of Soviet music. The best-known of these is Boris Schwarz's *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia* (1972), which was the first exhaustive account of Soviet music and has remained the primary English-language text in the field. Unfortunately, this book is now somewhat outdated and does not cover material from the last decade of the Soviet era. A more recent account by Frans Lemaire (1994) gives an updated account of Soviet music, both in Russia and the former Soviet republics. However, it suffers the fate of any scholarly account that attempts to cover too broad a topic in too limited a space, sacrificing depth for breadth of coverage. The Russian-language translation of this text is further marred by a complete absence of either footnotes or bibliography, leaving the reader with no way to confirm the information without a great deal of additional background knowledge.⁶ Richard Taruskin, one of the leading American musicologists, has published a book entitled *Defining Russia Musically* (1997), which is actually a

⁶ I am unclear if this is a fault in the original or only in the translation, as I was unable to obtain the French edition while in Russia.

collection of essays about various Russian/Soviet composers. Each essay focuses on a particular aspect of the composer in question, but fails to place this detailed glimpse into a broader social/political context.

I discovered that none of these sources really addressed the basic questions I had regarding the Soviet government and its control of music. They tended to focus exclusively on musical questions and biographical information, or else get bogged down in the ongoing arguments surrounding “secret dissidence”. A new approach to the question of the interrelationship of music and politics seemed necessary in order to avoid these potential pitfalls and to offer something new. The approach that is used in this paper was inspired not by the literature dealing with Shostakovich or with Soviet music in general, but by a theoretical musicology article by Bruce Horner.

In the introduction to his article “On the Study of Music as Material Social Practice” (1998), Horner criticises what he considers to be shortcomings in both traditional and modern musicological approaches in addressing the interrelationship of music and society. He argues that each of these approaches overlooks certain areas and is thus unable to give a well-rounded interpretation of music’s place in society.

“Traditional” musicology approaches the analysis of a musical work as a static “masterpiece” and musical history as a succession of styles without reference to the social circumstances surrounding the creation of a given musical work or style.

“Revisionary” musicology examines the promotion and affirmation of societal norms through music, but fails to question the role of the listener or the composer, who is also influenced by the society and circumstances in which he or she lives.

Drawing on Raymond Williams' book *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Horner offers an alternative approach for the study of music, which he calls "socially-grounded criticism". In his book, Williams names the following three points that should be considered in the analysis of literature:

- 1) Political economy of writing
- 2) Language, written conventions and notations (which are socially inherited)
- 3) Contents of the author's consciousness, which are socially produced.⁷

These points are as applicable to music as they are to literature. Horner argues that musicology has failed to take into account these three points concurrently. He believes that for a more complete understanding of the meaning of music within society, musicology must examine the historical, social and material specificity both of the composer and of the critic/listener. Every composer works within certain inherited musical styles, notates his composition according to currently accepted standards and chooses material according to the specific societal/cultural demands of the epoch in which he lives. The critic or listener also responds to the composition, interpreting it according to their own knowledge and experience, which in turn depends on their social/cultural environment and background.

Horner demonstrates the potential of these so-called "post-Marxist"⁸ critical techniques by applying them to two short compositions by the Renaissance British composer William Byrd. In conclusion, he states that this approach is valuable in shedding light on the political/social aspect that music plays within society:

If this means forsaking the authority afforded by pretensions to objectivity in musical analysis, it also means abandoning the need to fix the meaning of music,

⁷ Bruce Horner, "On the Study of Music as Material Social Practice", *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 16, No.2 (Spring 1998), p. 164.

⁸ Ibid., p. 162. Horner states that he is unaware of any previous attempts to apply this approach to Western Art music.

treating music, and specific instances of music, as the site of political and social struggle.⁹

Applying this approach to the Soviet context seemed to present an opportunity to address the evolution and role of music there in a new manner. Music in the early years of the Soviet Union had indeed served as a site for political and social struggle among various groups and government agencies. The basic problem of the Shostakovich debate (as this author views it) is the attempts by both “revisionists” and “anti-revisionists” to “fix the meaning” of Shostakovich’s musical work. The question has come to be framed in the following manner: does the music of Shostakovich express a secret dissident protest against the regime or support of the ideology of the regime? Horner’s approach offered a possible way to step outside of this particular way of thinking and approach the subject with new questions.

Both Western and Soviet interpretations of music reflect the political views dominant in each culture. Specifically, contemporary “art” music in the West was viewed by the Soviets as “formalist” and distant from the needs of the people. Western musicologists and performers have generally viewed the “proletarian” styles cultivated in the Soviet Union as little more than political propaganda, the musical language of which was simplified for the comprehension of mass audiences, thus losing its artistic merit. Differences in compositional style between the East and West were clearly visible, with Western composers pursuing more experimental compositional techniques, while Soviet

⁹ Ibid., p. 198.

composers, by and large, continued to write in a more traditional tonal idiom. This compositional discrepancy was given political import by both sides.¹⁰

Politics also inform the “revisionist” approach to music that can be seen developing in present-day Russia. Rather than being condemned (the dominant approach during the Soviet era), Russian avant-garde composers are presented as victims of the Soviet regime, whose legacy can only now be truly appreciated in their homeland.¹¹ Additionally, the search for “musical dissidence” against the Soviet regime now extends beyond the Shostakovich debate. Other Soviet composers are also discussed in these terms.¹² Both historical and current approaches to Soviet music are intimately linked to the dominant political trends of the time. As Horner suggests, this fact is not necessarily a problem, so long as scholars are aware of it. In fact, having recognised this, it is possible to formulate the question of musical and political interaction in a new way.

Drawing on Horner’s example, this thesis attempts to step outside of the “traditional” questions that have been asked by scholars in this area. Rather than focusing on score analysis, biographical details or government decrees, the intersection of political life, musical language/conventions and individual consciousness (as formed by society) will be explored. In political life, the individual viewpoints of key government figures who were involved in shaping cultural policy during these years will be examined. Major

¹⁰ Even among Western musicians, compositional shortcomings of Soviet musicians are blamed on their political situation. See Glenn Gould’s assessment of Shostakovich in his 1964 lecture delivered at the University of Toronto, published as “Music in the Soviet Union”, *The Glenn Gould Reader* (New York, 1990), pp. 177-78.

¹¹ For an example of this “re-interpretation” see Alexander Ivashkin, “Letter from Moscow - Post October Soviet Art: Canon and Symbol”, *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (1990), pp. 303-317.

¹² The following quote serves as an example: “Shostakovich, under the burden of Stalin’s dictatorship, was much more cautious, preferring to speak indirectly and symbolically. Schnittke’s generation grew up in a different situation and wanted to speak more openly and more directly... but it was still Shostakovich who made that kind of musical expressions feasible. . .”, S. Gimonov, “Alfred Schnittke”, *DSCH Journal* No. 10 (Winter 1998), p. 5.

party decisions/decrees relating to music will be highlighted. The existence and development of various musical groups in the 1920s and the relationship of these groups to the party will also be examined. The musical “language” that developed in the Soviet context was shaped by several factors: inherited musical tradition (particularly Russian classical tradition), debates over “correct” musical language that occurred between musical groups and party/government representatives, and the historical understanding of the interrelationship of music and politics that was inherited by the early Soviet state. Each of these factors will be touched upon. Finally, Shostakovich will be presented as an example of an individual composer living and working within this society. His early musical development will be examined within the context of the political position of the government and musical groups of the time and the debate over what musical language best served the goals of the revolution. It is hoped that by taking this approach, some light can be shed upon the formative years of Soviet musical style.

Soviet policy toward the arts changed in correspondence with broader political changes. This paper attempts to delineate Soviet musical policy between 1917 and 1936. These dates have not been selected at random. Nineteen seventeen marks the beginning of Bolshevik power and the founding of the Soviet state. The early writings and policies enacted by the government will help to demonstrate their view of music at this time.

The year 1936 marks the first official government attack on a major musical figure. In January 1936, Dmitrii Shostakovich’s opera *Lady MacBeth of the Mtsensk District* was severely censured by an anonymous article in *Pravda*. It will be argued that this attack was not a result of Joseph Stalin’s reaction to a musical work he personally

disliked, but marked the beginning of a new period in government policy towards music, when the latter came under greater government scrutiny and control. Literature had been brought under control in 1932, with the creation of the Writers' Union followed by the first Writers' Conference. In contrast, the first conference of the Composers' Union was not held until 1948. The year 1936 gave the party the opportunity to make a statement regarding what sort of music was acceptable from Soviet composers, and Shostakovich, as the most successful young Soviet composer of the time, served as a recognizable example for the musical world as a whole.

In academic examination of the years from 1917 to 1936, two fundamentally different interpretations of Soviet music are dominant: the official Soviet interpretation and the Western interpretation.¹³ Certainly these interpretations have themselves been influenced by the time in which they were written.¹⁴ A general summary of each position is given below:

- 1) Western view: the 1920s was a period of avant-garde experimentation, bold innovation and creativity. Increasing government control and radical leftist groups gradually smothered this creative voice, demanding music that corresponded to political ideology. The creation of the Composers' Union was the definitive step in bringing music under government control and marked the end of genuine creative freedom.¹⁵
- 2) Soviet view: the 1920s was a period of bourgeois-influenced decadence in music. Destructive "formalist" tendencies were expressed in the attempts by some composers to deny that musical compositions had social/political import. Destructive "leftist" tendencies led to an attempt to destroy the inherited nineteenth-century Russian musical tradition. This chaotic period was brought to an end by the creation of the

¹³ The emergence of discussion about "secret dissidence" in music could be listed as a third group. It has been omitted here as it is a more recent development, and most examples date from after 1936.

¹⁴ Currently (i.e., since *perestroika*), Russian musicologists have begun to adopt what has been the traditional "Western" interpretation of the 1920s.

¹⁵ See, for example, Larry Sitsky, *Music of the Repressed Russian Avant-Garde, 1900-1929* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) and Stanley David Krebs, *Soviet Composers and the Development of Soviet Music* (London: George Anwin and Unwin, 1970).

Composers' Union, which provided the foundation for fruitful development of a Soviet musical style.¹⁶

Both these interpretations agree on one basic fact: that a clearly recognizable shift in musical style occurs in the 1920s and 1930s. It is this shift in style that will be explored in greater detail, with reference to the political and cultural figures and events that shaped society at the time.

There is one concept that plays a key role in the development of Soviet music. This is "formalism". Beginning in the 1920s, this term was applied to certain composers whose work was deemed not to express appropriate political sentiment. In the official government attacks on musicians, which occurred in 1936 and 1948, this term is used as an epithet time and again.¹⁷ But what does this word actually mean? The official Soviet definition of "formalism" given in the *Entsiklopedicheskii Muzykalnii Slovar*, is "separation of form from content" with the additional comment that "formalism must not be confused with individualised original creativity, genuine innovations in terms of form as well as content, which constitute an indispensable trait of valuable realist art".¹⁸ Nicholas Cheliapov (1889?-1937), one-time president of the Union of Composers, offered the following definition of formalism in music:

Formalism is the sacrifice of ideological and emotional content of a musical composition in order to experiment with new procedures in the domain of musical

¹⁶ See, for example, V.S. Vinogradova, *Russkaia sovetskaia muzyka* (Moscow: Muzguz, 1958) and S.S. Skrebkov, *Muzykal'no-teoreticheskie problemy sovetskoi muzyki. Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Moskovskaia gosudarstvennaia konservatoriia, 1963).

¹⁷ The 1948 campaign is generally referred to as the "anti-formalist" campaign. In 1936, Ivan Sollertinskii, musicologist and close friend of Shostakovich, was denounced as "the troubadour of formalism" and accused of having exercised undue influence on the young composer. See Isaac Glikman, "O Stat'e 'Sumbur vmesto muzyki' i ne tol'ko o nei", *Pis'ma k drugu: Dmitrii Shostakovich-Isaaku Glikmanu* (Moscow: DSCH, 1993), p.321.

¹⁸ Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia: 1917-1970* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), p.129.

elements: rhythms, timbres, harmonic combinations, etc. . . . This is nothing but a general definition that must be adapted for each individual composition.¹⁹

There are some differences between these two definitions. The second stresses much more the importance of musical “content” of an ideological nature, whereas the first is more permissive of the possibility of creative and original use of musical elements, providing that experimentation with these elements is not the primary goal of a work. However, both equate formalism with a particular compositional approach. Both definitions are extremely general (as Cheliapov himself acknowledges) and provide little concrete guidance by which to recognise “formalism” as opposed to “creativity” within a given work. Clearly, when dealing with a concept so difficult to define, problems would arise.

“Formalism” as a concept is identifiable in all the arts, and counted among its most ardent twentieth-century supporters is the Russian émigré composer Igor Stravinskii. Probably the most famous slogan related to formalism is the phrase “art for arts’ sake”. But what specifically does formalism in music mean? Stravinskii described it in the following manner:

The majority of people love music, and hope to find in it some kind of feeling, like joy, grief, sorrow or descriptions of nature, or fantasy, or finally, simply want, in listening to it, to forget the “prose of life”. . . The essence of music is such, that in essence it does not need to express anything. If we associate music with such events like the rustling of the forest or the sound of the ocean, then we do so only conditionally. . . The essence of music is not in this. The phenomenon of music is only given to us to bring order to all existence, including, before everything, the relationship between human and time. It follows, so that this phenomenon may be realised, that it demands an indispensable and primary

¹⁹ Nicholai Cheliapov, “Le monde de la Musique”, n. 118, janvier 1989, p. XIX, quoted in Arnaud Desvignes, “Chostakovich et Le Pouvoir Soviétique (1926-1936)”, *Mémoire de Maîtrise, l’Université de Paris I*, 2001, p. 37. Cheliapov was removed from his post and disappeared during the purges of 1937. See Caroline Brooke, “Soviet Musicians and the Great Terror” in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 3, (May 2002), p. 400.

condition – defined construction. When construction is accomplished and order achieved, everything is already done.²⁰

Stravinskii attempts to offer an explanation of all music as fundamentally “formalist”, i.e., it derives its meaning through a clearly recognisable and definable method of construction. The form of a work is what gives it meaning. Any feelings, emotions or events that people hear in a musical work are “conditional” as this is not the basic meaning or goal of the composition, but their subjective experience of it.

In the Soviet Union, “formalism” came to be used as a term of condemnation, connected with the culture of the “decadent”, “bourgeois” West. But it is extraordinarily difficult to pinpoint the meaning of this term in its application to music by Soviet officials, i.e., what sort of music they classified as “formalist”. Musicians themselves often lamented the difficulty of clearly defining what “formalism” meant. Sergei Prokofiev once noted dryly that “Formalism is really the name that they give here to music which cannot be understood on the first listening.”²¹ In a similar vein, Dmitrii Shostakovich commented “Take a few lines of a poem and you have content – no poem, and you are a formalist.”²²

The Soviet battle against formalism went so far as carrying out scientific experiments at the University of Tiflis in 1948-49 to determine music’s effect on individual listeners.²³ These experiments were intended to demonstrate that a listener has an impression of actual material objects while hearing music. The researchers concluded

²⁰Excerpt from Igor Stravinskii, *Poetics of Music*, quoted by Frans Lemaire, *La musique du Xxe siècle en Russie et dans les anciennes Républiques soviétiques*, translated by G. A. Serova (Saint Petersburg: Giperion, 2003), p. 60.

²¹I. Nestyev, *Prokofiev*, translated by Florence Jonas (Stanford, 1960), p. 278.

²²Lemaire, p. 79. See also Schwarz, p. 76.

that there was in fact variation amongst listeners in what particular images or objects they envisaged, but argued that:

In denying the existence of content in music formalists give as their argument the subjectivity and individuality of obvious representations. However, the undoubted subjectivity of extra-musical images not only does not deny a general contentfulness of music as the aesthetics of the idealists tries to prove, but on the contrary affirms the presence of an objective content in music....²⁴

In this particular definition, “formalism” is equated to the denial of content in music. But from the perspective of these scientists, this lack of content in music is something that can either be proved or disproved. In exposing the “error” of formalism, they demonstrate that all music does in fact have content. In other words, “formalism” here refers to a philosophical aesthetic approach to listening to music, but bears no relation to the music itself. If music always has content, then formalism as an aesthetic concept is erroneous and thus cannot truly exist in individual compositions. In this way, the scientists attempted to fight against the “formalist” approach, but at the same time they unintentionally demonstrated the lack of a definitive concept of the meaning of the term.

It follows from the approach taken by these scientists in proving the existence of extra-musical content in a composition that labelling particular musical works as “formalist” is a contradiction in terms. Music might express concepts related to bourgeois Western culture and could therefore be considered to express the wrong content, but here “formalism” refers to an aesthetic approach to music rather than to any particular musical style. Further, if the musical experience is indeed subjective to a large degree, which this article asserts, then the formalist “error” is actually located within the listener, who

²³ Milos Valimirovic, “Recent Soviet Articles on Music Theory”, *Journal of Music Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter 1962), p. 291. This article gives an English-language summary of an article by G. Kechkhuashvili, “The Problem of Psychology of Perception of Music”, *Voprosy Muzikoznaniia*, Vol. III, 1960.

²⁴ Valimirovic, p. 292.

responds in a formalist manner when hearing the musical work, rather than in the music itself, which will affect different listeners in different ways.

However, an examination of government policy shows that particular musical works were in fact classified as formalist, demonstrating that the meaning of the term in its application was distinct from the theoretical debate regarding its relative usefulness as an aesthetic approach to music. In this sense, the research undertaken by these scientists missed the basic point that formalism in the Soviet Union came to refer in practice not to a philosophical or aesthetic approach to understanding music, but to a description of a particular musical style. But what sort of musical style was labelled as “formalist”? This question demands a closer examination of the term itself and the type of music to which it was applied.

The concept of formalism in music predates the Soviet Union. The idea was first officially formulated in 1854 by Eduard Hanslich in his book *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* in reaction to the increasing trend amongst Romantic composers of attaching programmatic titles and plots to instrumental works.²⁵ Within the Soviet Union, the term was first used in connection with a particular composer in 1927, but at this time the word still did not hold the same significance that it would acquire in the 1930s.²⁶ “Formalism” later acquired such notoriety within the Soviet context that today it is generally thought of in relation to its usage in the USSR. The present paper is concerned primarily with the different meanings assigned to the term within the Soviet context.

Numerous attempts have also been made by Western scholars to define the concept of “formalism”. These scholars do not attempt to define formalism in relation to

²⁵ Lemaire, p. 60

²⁶ Desvignes, p. 38.

its historical roots or philosophical basis, but according to observed practice in the Soviet Union. Nicholas Slonimsky, attempting to make sense of the “formalist” question in Soviet musical practice, wrote in 1950 that “in Soviet semantics, formalism stands for formulism, that is, adherence to formulas, particularly formulas of modern music. Linear counterpoint, dissonant harmony, syncopated rhythm, tricky orchestration, special instrumental effects, atonality and the twelve-tone technique, were the specific formulas condemned as formalistic”.²⁷ Perhaps the most insightful summary of “formalism” within the Soviet context is offered by Frans Lemaire:

No one knew exactly what was meant by “formalism”. One could think it clear that to a degree the term meant essentially the concern for form, but this is not precisely what one finds in the commentary of Soviet dictionaries which introduced the new key-word into their vocabulary. They prefer to talk of the “cult of atonality and of dissonance”, of “the adoption of confused combinations, neuro-pathology, which transforms music into cacophany, into chaotic agglomerations of sounds. . . . Finally, the word “formalist” comes to be added to those of “decadent”, “modernist”, “bourgeois”, “anti-popular” in the wide range of denouncements, one of the principal properties of new socialist ethics.²⁸

Within the Soviet Union, “formalism” and “modernism” in music come to be almost synonymous in the 1930s and 1940s, a development that is in stark contrast to the musical scene of the 1920s. This equation of “formalism” with “modernism” has been commented on by various scholars. Stanley Dale Krebs writes that “words tend to fall into value groupings and tend to fuse in meaning. . . . A musician experimenting with serial writing is classified, and cannot help thinking of himself, as “decadent”, “formalist”, “modernist”, and “anti-people”. The terms have a strong synonymous relationship.”²⁹ Martin Malia, in summarising the effect of this understanding of

²⁷Nicholas Slonimsky, “The Changing Style of Soviet Music”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (Autumn 1950), pp. 236-255.

²⁸ Lemaire, pp. 118-119.

²⁹ Stanley David Krebs, pp. 31-32

formalism comments that “concretely, this means that [composers] must write in the accessible realist style of the nineteenth century and not like the modernists and ‘formalists’ of the 1920’s.”³⁰ These scholars, while recognising that a shift in what is viewed to be acceptable musical style takes place between the openly experimental 1920s and the reactionary 1930s, do not examine the reasons for this shift in any depth.³¹

Two fundamentally different understandings of the term “formalism” can be identified in the 1920s. The first associates formalism with particular modernist compositional techniques (a definition based on musical style) while the second attempts to link formalism with the denial of extra-musical content in a musical work (a definition based on musical aesthetics). An examination of the struggle between these two definitions will form an important part of this paper. It will be argued that the musical debates of the 1920s between so-called “avant-garde” and “proletarian” musical groups, as well as the debates between government representatives and artists from both groups, laid the groundwork for the understanding of “formalism” as equivalent to “modernism”.

In contrast to “formalism”, the term “realism” was also applied to music in the 1920s by so-called “proletarian” musicians. In this context, “realism” referred to the depiction of real life or events in music. The question whether or not it was possible for music to express specific extra-musical ideas was hotly debated in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Many of the Russian avant-garde composers (who would later be branded “formalist”) argued against this idea: “Music is not ideology to be attached to it in some way; music is organised sound. Music does not express ideas nor represent ‘logical’

³⁰Martin Malia, *La tragédie soviétique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995), pp. 316-317.

structures: it exists in its own world of musical sounds, musical ideas, and purely musical logic.”³² In contrast to this stance, so-called proletarian musicians accused these modernists of representing bourgeois interests with their music and called for a greater degree of “revolutionary realism”.

Most scholarly literature refers to musical style in the Soviet Union according to the political spectrum of “right” and “left”. “Right” generally refers to the musical avant-garde (modernist) composers who show the influence of contemporary stylistic techniques such as serialism and atonality. “Left” refers to the so-called “proletarian” musicians, who tended to emphasize mass songs, music for marches and ceremonial events and a break with the continuity of Western musical tradition. However, these terms are somewhat confusing and even misleading when applied to the musical scene, particularly in the 1920s. Both the so-called “right” and “left” claimed to be the true representatives of proletarian music, though each group approached it in a different manner. In addition, there are at least as many differences between groups classified under one term as there are between groups classified under different terms.

The question of the break with tradition (i.e., destroying instruments, abandoning classical music styles, banning performances of classical works by Mozart, Tchaikovskii, etc.) is traditionally equated with the “left”, particularly the organisation Proletkul’t. The same trend existed, however, within the musical “right” – avant-garde composers who demanded that modern music abandon the heritage of the past. Furthermore, unlike Proletkul’t, RAPM (the primary “leftist” musical group of the 1920s) did not call for the

³¹ Schwarz also notes that the terms “formalism” and “modernistic directions” are used interchangeably, but does not develop or examine this in any detail. See Schwarz, p. 115.

complete abandonment of musical tradition. Instead, RAPM was far more selective, praising Beethoven while condemning Tchaikovskii. In this sense, RAPM was more “traditional” or “rightist” than either Proletkul’t or certain members of the musical avant-garde.

The terms “right” and “left” also do not adequately address the existence of a third group of composers, who continued writing music in the nineteenth-century nationalist style they had inherited. One of the key stylistic characteristics of these traditional composers was the utilization of folk or folk-like music in classical compositions, an approach that was also lauded by both Proletkul’t and RAPM. Should they be considered “leftist” from this perspective? Or should this aspect of RAPM policy be considered “rightist”? Yet another problem can be seen in relation to the composer, musical editor and government censor Nikolai Roslavets, who was an ardent supporter of modern techniques in the articles that he wrote, but whose compositional approach was quite traditional. Should he be classified according to his compositional output or according to his editorial commentaries?

This thesis will partially follow established tradition in referring to Proletkul’t and RAPM as “proletarian” musical organisations as opposed to the avant-garde/modernist and traditionalist composers. However, the terms “left” and “right” have been avoided as much as possible as they stem from political and ideological propaganda dating from the 1920s and later. It should be kept in mind that these terms delineate how the musical approach of each group was understood by their contemporaries and how it came to be viewed historically by the party. Thus, Anatoly Lunacharskii criticised the “musical left” (whose approach he opposed), while RAPM levelled attacks against the “formalists” as

³² Sabaneiev, *Muzykalnaia Kultura*, No.1, 1924, p.9, quoted by Schwarz, p.54.

representatives of the bourgeois right. The 1936 *Pravda* article “Sumbur vmesto muzyki” that attacked Shostakovich only further complicated the situation as it referred both to his “leftist” and “petty-bourgeois” compositional style within one composition. By bringing into question such politically laden terms as “right” and “left”, it is hoped that a clearer view of the actual role played by each group in the evolution of Soviet music will be reached.

The importance of questioning these basic distinctions became apparent in light of the numerous logical contradictions that arose from them in the course of researching this paper. The thought that the classifications themselves arose out of social/political factors existing at the time and are representative of the epoch in which criticism against both “left” and “right” trends was written was also influenced in part by Bruce Horner’s article.³³ An examination of the underlying social/political situation helps to explain this initially contradictory terminology. The terms themselves served to associate musical approaches with political ones. This was an attempt to give a clear ideological meaning to a particular musical style. This association between ideology and style then gradually came to be accepted as a factual definition of the musical style itself.

It is the argument of this thesis that the cultural/societal understanding of true “socialist” music was not initially clear. The relation of a particular style of music to a particular political position was not based on any inherent aspect of the music itself, but was a result of the struggle between various musical organisations that sprang into existence in the 1920s. Each group fought to define “socialist” music according to its

³³ In this delineation of “left” and “right” extremes, the approach advocated by the party becomes “central ground” by default.

own stylistic approach. This battle was most pronounced in the 1920s. Only in the 1930s (specifically in the year 1936) was there clear government condemnation of one style. The government came to equate “formalism” with “modernism” and connected both of these terms with Western bourgeois societies.

The understanding of the term “formalism” was shaped by the eclectic musical scene of the 1920s. Various definitions of this term were offered by different cultural figures, and initially conflicting interpretations of what constituted “formalism” in the musical realm existed. Different understandings of the place of music and culture in the new socialist state were presented by figures in government and in the arts. These multiple actors with their varying definitions each played a role in developing the understanding of music as a key aspect of the revolution.

The definition of formalism according to one particular compositional style was unrelated to the content of music itself, but derived from the political/ideological debates surrounding music. Because of music’s very nature, it is difficult (if not impossible) to delineate the extra-musical “meaning” of any particular composition. As the arts and music became politicised in the Soviet context, to be able to define clearly the ideological content of a work became increasingly important. Different methods for doing this were proposed, but the simplest and easiest to apply was the connecting of compositional style to ideological meaning.

This thesis is divided into five sections. In Chapter One, a brief overview of the theoretical interrelationship of music and politics is given, in order to place the Soviet context within a larger historical perspective. Specifically, the writings of Plato and

Aristotle on music are briefly examined, followed by a brief discussion of the interrelation of music and politics in the Russian perspective. Chapter Two focuses on early Bolshevik theory and policy towards the arts in general with particular focus on Anatoly Lunacharskii, Chairman of the Commissariat for Popular Enlightenment from 1917 to 1929. Chapter Three discusses Lunacharskii's stance in relation to music and examines the musical organisations that existed in the 1920s. Chapter Four deals with the growing dominance of "proletarianism" in the musical realm, the creation of the artistic unions in 1932 and the rise of "socialist realism" as a concept. Chapter Five explores the early career of Shostakovich within this historical context and discusses the condemnation of *Lady MacBeth of the Mtsensk District* as well as the implications this event had for the musical community in general.

It should be noted that the style of music that is dealt with in this thesis is primarily "classical" or "art" music. The individuals and groups discussed were connected to the symphony orchestras, conservatories, musical competitions and events of the classical musical world. The world of so-called "popular" music and its development within the Soviet Union is outside the focus of this thesis.

Any discussion of musical policy in the Soviet era necessitates a discussion of literary policy as well. Decisions regarding music and the other arts were generally modeled upon earlier decisions involving literature. This is due in part to the primary emphasis that was placed upon the written word and in part to the difficulty inherent in precisely defining extra-musical content in a musical work. For this reason, literary

policy is examined at some length as it establishes a basic framework for artistic policy in general and for musical policy specifically.

Chapter One: Music and Politics - The Roots of the Soviet Approach

And therefore... musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful.

Plato: *The Republic*, Book 3.

The Soviet Union was not the first political regime that saw a connection between the musical creativity of its artists and the functioning of the State itself. For centuries, philosophers, statesmen, musicians and writers have suggested connections between music and politics. Writings on this topic date back as far as Plato and Aristotle, who both considered music an important element of education and political life.

In *Politics*, Aristotle devotes one section specifically to the discussion of music and its role in society. He identifies music as a means to three separate goals: education, amusement and intellectual enjoyment. It gives pleasure, relaxation and enjoyment to those who hear it, which would classify it as a source of amusement. A deeper study and understanding of the art of music also leads to a more refined (and noble) intellectual enjoyment than can be appreciated by those untrained in the art.

Of the three things mentioned in our discussion, which does it produce?- education or amusement or intellectual enjoyment, for it may be reckoned under all three, and seems to share in the nature of all of them. Amusement is for the sake of relaxation, and relaxation is of necessity sweet, for it is the remedy of pain caused by toil; and intellectual enjoyment is universally acknowledged to contain an element not only of the noble but of the pleasant, for happiness is made up of both.¹

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Part 8, translated by Benjamin Jowett, for the *Internet Classics Archive*, <http://classics.mit.edu/>. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html>

Aristotle, however, devotes most of his discussion of music to the question of its use in education, and it is this area that is most closely related to the concept of music as it existed in the Soviet Union.

Aristotle argues that music has the ability to influence not only the mood but also the character of the listener:

In addition to this common pleasure, felt and shared in by all (for the pleasure given by music is natural, and therefore adapted to all ages and characters), may it not have also some influence over the character and the soul? It must have such an influence if characters are affected by it. And that they are so affected is proved in many ways, and not least by the power which the songs of Olympus exercise; for beyond question they inspire enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is an emotion of the ethical part of the soul. Besides, when men hear imitations, even apart from the rhythms and tunes themselves, their feelings move in sympathy.²

He goes on to discuss at some length the relative values of different melodies and rhythms, and their impact upon the listener. Those that produce a moral or noble response should be cultivated, whereas those that appeal to the lower or “base” instincts should be excluded from education. It should be noted that Aristotle does not exclude these more “vulgar” forms of music completely. He considers them suitable for the common people to listen to and enjoy, and for professional musicians to perform. They are not suitable, however, for forming the character of leaders and future leaders of society. In this view, music and the development of an individual’s character are closely linked.

Aristotle’s belief that different musical modes, rhythms and harmonies would have a noticeable influence upon the listener had been expressed earlier by Plato. In the *Republic*, however, Plato took this view farther than Aristotle, suggesting that modes, rhythms and harmonies that suggest inappropriate moods should be banned:

“We were saying, when we spoke of the subject-matter, that we had no need of lamentations and strains of sorrow?”

² Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 8

“True.”

“And which are the harmonies expressive of sorrow? You are musical, and can tell me.”

“The harmonies which you mean are the mixed or tenor Lydian, and the full-toned or bass Lydian, and such like.”

“These then, I said, must be banished...”³

Only modes which are able to arouse desirable emotions or evoke appropriate action should be permitted:

“Of the harmonies I know nothing, but I want to have one warlike, to sound the note or accent which a brave man utters in the hour of danger and stern resolve, or when his cause is failing, and he is going to wounds or death or is overtaken by some other evil, and at every such crisis meets the blows of fortune with firm step and a determination to endure; and another to be used by him in times of peace and freedom of action ... These two harmonies I ask you to leave; the strain of necessity and the strain of freedom, the strain of the unfortunate and the strain of the fortunate, the strain of courage, and the strain of temperance; these, I say, leave.”⁴

Thus, both writers agree that music has the ability to affect behaviour and character.

In addition to the influence that music has on an individual's mood, Plato also addresses the question of musical style and its relationship to government:

This is the point to which, above all, the attention of our rulers should be directed, --that music and gymnastic be preserved in their original form, and no innovation made.... for any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited. So Damon tells me, and I can quite believe him;--he says that when modes of music change, institutions of the State always change with them.⁵

The fear expressed here is the potential instability that could be introduced into society by music that allows too much licence to its listeners. This is the danger that other musical modes present, which is why Plato wishes to banish them:

³ Plato, *Republic*, Book 3, translated by Benjamin Jowett for the *Internet Classics Archive*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, Book 3. It is determined that the Dorian and Phrygian modes are the only two that should be permitted.

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, Book 4. It should be noted that Plato's broader definition of music (including poetry and other arts) is likely what is being referred to here. Thus, not only music as an art form, but literature would also fall into this category.

The lawlessness of which you speak too easily steals in.... in the form of amusement; and at first sight it appears harmless. ... and there would be no harm; were it not that little by little this spirit of licence, finding a home, imperceptibly penetrates into manners and customs; whence, issuing with greater force, it invades contracts between man and man, and from contracts goes on to laws and constitutions, in utter recklessness⁶

Music, with its ability to influence and shape the character of those living in society thus also has the potential to undermine the existing social order. It is this danger that Plato is most concerned with, and it is for this reason that he proposes a form of censorship.

According to both Plato and Aristotle, music is able to influence and form an individual's mood (in the short term) and character (in the long term). It is this ability which makes it an important tool for education. Aristotle focuses more on music's potential usefulness and positive effects, while Plato is more explicit about the inherent dangers that music poses for the State. This concept of music as an instrument that can shape character and influence behaviour and mood reappears in various guises in Russia and later in the Soviet Union.

Lev Tolstoi's story "The Kreutzer Sonata" portrays the potential negative impact that music may have on its listeners. In this story, a man murders his wife, who he suspects of having an affair. He claims to have been driven to this act as a result of hearing a composition by Ludwig van Beethoven:

They played the "Kreutzer" Sonata of Beethoven. Do you know the first Presto? Do you? – he cried. – Oh! That sonata is a dangerous thing. Particularly that part. And in general, music is a dangerous thing...Music forces me to forget myself, my true situation, under the influence of music it seems to me that I feel something that I really don't feel, that I understand that which I don't understand, that I may do that which I cannot do.⁷

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, Book 4

⁷ L.N. Tolstoi, "Kreutzer Sonata" in *L. N. Tolstoi: Povesti i rasskazy* (Paris: Bookking International, 1995), pp.176-77

Once again, the reader is presented with the image of music as a force that has a measurable impact upon an individual's character and action. There is little essential difference between the description given by Tolstoi and the philosophical outlook offered by Plato and Aristotle. The essential point that is stressed here is music's potentially harmful influence. Tolstoi's hero states that "because music is so dangerous, horrible things sometimes occur. In China music is a government matter. And this is as it must be."⁸

These examples demonstrate that the idea of an interrelationship between music and politics was not a creation of the Soviet regime, but a concept with its roots a lengthy history. In actual fact, this recognition of music's influential power was not immediately apparent in reference to the Bolshevik Party. Initially there were conflicting views within the Bolshevik leadership about the relative value of music and the arts and the question of their role within the revolution.⁹ However, several leading members of the party clearly saw art as a key part both in the revolution and in the struggle for the proletarian society they were trying to build. This idea was expressed by the writer Maxim Gorkii, who stated that "as science is the intellect of the world, so art – is its heart."¹⁰ In his view, both art and science were essential to building a new and better society. And eventually the Soviet government came to exercise great control over the arts, suggesting that in the end they considered them an important aspect of society to manipulate.

If there is some question of the recognition of the influential role that music could play in reference to the Bolshevik Party in general, there is no doubt that Anatoly

⁸ Tolstoi, p.177

⁹ This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two

Lunacharskii (chairman of Narkompros) was convinced of its importance. As a student of philosophy, Lunacharskii was both aware of, and in agreement with, the views of Aristotle in reference to music.¹¹ These views, and their place within the Soviet government in the 1920s, will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Two.

The theories about music expressed by Plato and Aristotle (and echoed by Tolstoi) may be summarised in the following manner. Music has the ability to influence the character and personality of the listener. Different melodies and harmonies affect the listener in different ways and are therefore useful in inspiring certain moods and actions in the populace. Other moods inspired by music have a potentially harmful effect and should be carefully controlled or avoided altogether. Plato is the most aggressive in his calls to ban certain musical modes as dangerous to the State and it is also he who goes farthest in developing the idea that musical expression can have an impact on the functioning of the State itself.

When Plato wrote the *Republic*, he was interested in building a stable political system that would withstand change. In contrast, the early Bolshevik government was vehemently revolutionary in its outlook. This suggests that the sort of music preferred in early Soviet policy would evoke different responses from its listeners than that desired by Plato. In other words, wishing to inspire drastic societal and political change, the Bolshevik Party would focus on music that would inspire the proletariat to such actions. But the question remains: what sort of music would accomplish this? Although the basic concepts expressed by the Greeks had kept their theoretical meaning, in practice music

¹⁰ Geir Kh'etso, *Maksim Gorkii, Sud'ba Pisatel'ia*, translated by L. Grigor'evoi, (Moscow: Nasledie, 1997), p.166

¹¹ See A. Lunacharskii, "Odn iz sdvigov v iskusstvovedenii" in *V Mire Muzyki* (Moscow: Vsesoiuznoe izdatel'stvo sovetskii kompozitor, 1971), p.214. Here he criticises an article by Gruber, accusing him of

had changed in such a way that the specific recommendations offered about musical modes were useless.¹² Thus, the Soviet Union inherited the idea of music as a potential instrument in influencing its population, but the definition of how particular music affected its listener and what sort of music would therefore be preferable, remained to be determined.

As an art form that developed from Western European models and styles, the Soviet concept of music is intimately linked to the European tradition. The question regarding the sort of music that would be appropriate is therefore inseparable from the more general philosophical development of Western musical aesthetics. As the Soviet system came to use the term “formalism” to refer to what was perceived as the most destructive tendency in contemporary music, it is the development of this concept that must now be examined.

The late eighteenth- early nineteenth-centuries saw a fundamental shift in the European view of music’s representative ability, particularly in relation to instrumental music. Prior to this time, the dominant aesthetic doctrine was *mimesis*. Composers attempted to imitate sounds or effects of nature by musical means. The general concept of music at this time was that it was a “language of emotions”, which was supposed to express some specific idea or emotion. There was a clear sense of a cause and effect pattern – specific musical sounds or phrases would cause certain, predictable responses in

coming close to a formalist stance in writing on music, and makes reference to Aristotle in arguing otherwise.

¹² Greek music utilised various musical modes. Modern Western music (until the twentieth century) is based on a major-minor tonal system that developed in the Renaissance and only gained dominance in the baroque era. Prior to this, Church modes were in use, which were named after the Greek modes, but the resemblance between the two is in name only. The choice of modes suggested by Plato and Aristotle therefore has no bearing on modern music.

the listener. Under this concept, music in general and instrumental music in particular was viewed as inferior to the other arts, as it was unable to express an idea or concept as clearly as literature, poetry or sculpture.¹³ The philosopher Immanuel Kant echoed this concept, referring to instrumental music as “more pleasure than culture” due to its inability to express ideas clearly. Jean-Jacques Rousseau had also recognised this shortcoming in music, but argued in its favour that the purpose of music was not to represent emotions directly, but to arouse the desired emotion within the listener.

The early nineteenth-century saw a dramatic change in the aesthetic concept of music. This change can be most clearly viewed in the writings of E.T.A. Hoffmann, but there were in fact many musicians and philosophers who contributed to this new concept of music. Rather than expressing specific images or ideas more or less effectively, music was conceived as mirroring an “absolute” concept.¹⁴ Because music was not expected to mirror nature but was considered to be a representation of a higher image or ideal, “commentators no longer felt compelled to engage in the futile (and inevitably trivializing) effort to specify objective “content” of instrumental music.”¹⁵ According to this interpretation, a listener did not respond to the work itself, but the ideal that the work expressed.

It was during this time that the practice arose of attaching poetic descriptions to instrumental works, giving them descriptive stories or images. This was fundamentally different than the earlier approach of mimicry of nature however – the author of the text felt free to attach meaning to music according to his or her experience of it. The idea that

¹³ Bonds, pp. 390-91.

¹⁴ This is in fact a return to the Platonian idea of an absolute, which gained currency in musical circles during Beethoven’s lifetime (1785-1827).

¹⁵ Bonds, p.392

music was attempting to express one specific image had given way to the idea that music was a mirror of an absolute idea that in no way bore a resemblance to the every-day world or common-life experiences of the listener. In this context, instrumental music gained in importance. Its lack of a clearly definable meaning, which had previously been viewed as a liability was now seen as its particular advantage over other forms of artistic expression. Rather than reflecting the real world, music offered an escape from it:

In contemplating the beautiful... I contemplate the object not as something within me, but as something perfect in itself, something that constitutes a whole in itself and gives me pleasure for the sake of itself....this forgetting of the self is the highest degree of the pure and unselfish pleasure that beauty grants us.¹⁶

This idealist approach to music (i.e., the idea that music mirrors an absolute) was key to the increasing importance that was placed on instrumental music. It was also a key factor in the development of the concept of “formalism” which occurred in the second half of the nineteenth-century.

The idealist concept of pure music abandoned the idea of music as the “language of emotions”. In this way, it could no longer be considered that a composer was expressing a particular emotion or mood. But was music to be conceived as completely unrelated to emotion? Schiller argued that “although the content of emotions cannot be represented” by music, “the form certainly can.”¹⁷ In this statement, a shifting of focus from the expressive content of a musical piece to its form can be seen. It should be noted, however, that there is no denial at this time that even pure instrumental music has extra-musical content. The reaction is against attempts to define that content in terms of every-day human reality.

¹⁶ Karl Philipp Moritz (1757-93), quoted by Bonds, p.397.

¹⁷ Bonds, p.400

The idea that form played a dominant role in a musical composition was first developed at length by Eduard Hanslick in 1854, when he published his book *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* as a response to the growing popularity of so-called “program” music of the time. Specifically, Hanslick objected to works such as Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* and Franz Liszt’s symphonic poems, which had detailed plot summaries of the story that the music depicted. Hanslick argued that by attaching specific stories to music, these composers robbed it of its true power:

A musical idea brought to its appearance is already autonomous beauty; it is already an end in itself, and in no way primarily a medium or material for the representation of feelings and thoughts... Sounding forms in motion are the sole and exclusive content and object of music.¹⁸

This represents the first true advocacy of musical form as an end in and of itself.¹⁹

By the 1870s, an ever-widening split is visible within the musical community between those composers who ascribed to Hanslick’s theory of form as the pre-eminent part of music and those who rejected it, insisting on music’s connection with some kind of external reality. One clear achievement of the nineteenth-century was the dominant role that came to be played by purely instrumental music. Earlier viewed as a less serious form primarily intended for entertainment, instrumental music came to dominate the classical music repertoire. With Beethoven, the symphony came to be considered the primary musical form that serious composers were expected to cultivate.

Where did Russian composers fall in this debate? In comparison to Western European countries, “classical music” as such had a relatively late beginning. Like other

¹⁸ Eduard Hanslick, *On the Beautiful in Music* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957).

¹⁹ In his article, Bonds develops the idea that for Hanslick, this did not limit music’s role in expressing the “infinite” and is actually more of a continuation of the Idealist approach of the early nineteenth-century than a reaction against it. Over the course of twenty years and several editions of his book, these idealistic aspects in Hanslick’s theory of music were gradually cut by the author.

specialists, musicians and musical works were initially imported from the West. Mikhail Glinka is generally considered the first important Russian composer. But Russian musical compositions in general tended to be dominated by a more programmatic approach, with programmatic symphonies and compositions bearing descriptive titles dominating the output of most composers like Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Mussorgskii and even Tchaikovskii. The use of folk and folk-like melodies was also a dominant aspect of many nineteenth-century Russian compositions. It is therefore hardly surprising that music with programmatic content would continue to play a large role in the Soviet Union.

Additionally, the importance of folk melodies continued to be stressed by the Soviet government. What is perhaps more surprising is the emphasis that comes to be placed on the further development of the symphony, one of the most recognisable forms of absolute music. The musical debates of the Composers' Union seem to have been dominated by this very issue: the application of "socialist realism" to the symphonic form.

The Soviet problem of defining musical content was by no means a new one. Throughout history, different aesthetic approaches to the understanding of music have been suggested by musicians, theoreticians and philosophers. What makes the Soviet case unique is the fact that the government itself came to play a dominant role in defining an "acceptable" and "unacceptable" musical aesthetic. Thus, in addition to the typical actors that shape the understanding of music in a given society (composer, performers, critic and audience), there is the additional influence of an active government policy that gave preference to one particular style or approach over another. In the case of Russia, composers also inherited a relatively short history of classical music and a distinctive

national style. All of these aspects intermingled in the 1920s and it was this mixture that eventually gave rise to an officially defined concept of music.

Chapter Two: The Founding of Soviet Artistic Policy - Theory and Practice

*I have always stood and still stand on the point of view
that government regulation of art is a harmful thing.*

- Anatoly Lunacharskii

Most scholarly accounts of early Soviet policy in the arts focus on the work of one man: Anatoly Lunacharskii. In *La musique du XXe siècle en Russie et dans les anciennes Républiques soviétiques*, Frans Lemaire paints a very sympathetic image of Lunacharskii, referring to the ten years of his service as chairman of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (henceforth Narkompros) as “ten years of utopia” for music.¹ Nor is Lemaire alone in his belief that Lunacharskii exercised a vast and overwhelmingly positive influence on the arts in the 1920s. I. A. Sats, editor of the second edition of Lunacharskii’s writings on music, comments on “his accomplishments as People’s Commissar, who led the politics of the party in art.”² In 1928, Viacheslav Polonskii wrote that “while Bukharin and Trotsky were passing their judgments on art and literature, Lunacharsky was carrying out its practical work through his personal activities. He personally had to decide on practical matters . . . , about the problem of our cultural heritage, about reaching the proletariat, about the revolutionary intelligentsia . . . , about the problems of literature in a proletarian society...”³ In 1967, E. Ermakov wrote that “One cannot overemphasize the role of Lunacharskii... [in working out] the basic interrelationships between the party, the government, and the arts.”⁴ Lunacharskii’s

¹ Lemaire, p. 40.

² Lunacharskii, *V Mire Muziki*, p. 9.

³ Howard R. Holter, “The Legacy of Lunacharsky and Artistic Freedom in the USSR”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (June 1970), p. 263.

⁴ E. Ermakov, “Revoliutsionnyi talant”, *Izvestiia* (May 16, 1967).

daughter argues that his resignation from Narkompros in 1929 was a result of his recognition of the loss of his prior influence over government policy in culture and education.⁵ Boris Schwarz states that “Lunacharskii succeeded in reconciling the heterogenous demands of artists, audiences, and politicians.”⁶ In contrast to these accounts, the historian Sheila Fitzpatrick argues that, in reference to Lunacharskii’s personal influence on party policy toward the arts, “I think it is fairly clear that his influence on policy was minimal.”⁷

The death of Stalin and the Twentieth Party Congress, which opened discussion of the “cult of personality”, also led to a surge in publications by and about Lunacharskii. Western scholars have generally interpreted the 1960s debate and reinterpretation of this leader of the “third front” as reflecting a more general debate between would-be liberalisers of the arts and traditional party elites who wished to maintain tighter artistic control. According to this interpretation, each of these groups used the figure of Lunacharskii to strengthen their own viewpoint regarding the role of the Communist Party in leading and censoring the arts. It was in the interest of party traditionalists to emphasise Lunacharskii’s demand for art that would serve the purposes of the revolution, whereas those desiring a more liberal policy focused on his support of various and often contradictory artistic groups and approaches.⁸ Both sides agree, however, on the importance of Lunacharskii’s role in the shaping of cultural policy.

⁵ Irina Lunacharskaia, “Why Did Commissar of Enlightenment A. V. Lunacharskii Resign?”, *Russian Review*, Vol. 51, No. 3, (July 1992), pp. 319-342.

⁶ Schwarz, p. 12.

⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “A.V. Lunacharsky: Recent Soviet Interpretations and Republications”, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (January 1967), p. 280.

⁸ For discussion of this “reinterpretation” of the 1960s, see Fitzpatrick, “A.V. Lunacharsky: Recent Soviet Interpretations and Republications” and Holter, “The Legacy of Lunacharsky and Artistic Freedom in the USSR”.

How influential was Lunacharskii in the years following the revolution? Is Fitzpatrick's dismissal of his role in shaping party policy justified? What approach did he favour in relation to the arts and music? Lunacharskii's philosophical and theoretical beliefs were somewhat at odds with those of other members of the Bolshevik Party (most notably Lenin and Trotskii). A brief overview of his life, political and philosophical career will serve to address these questions and place his approach to the arts within the appropriate historical context.

Anatoly Lunacharskii was born in the town of Poltava in 1875. He received his university education in Zurich, where he studied philosophy, sociology, psychology and physiology. Upon his return to Russia, he was soon exiled for revolutionary activity. Lunacharskii's first personal meeting with Lenin took place in 1904, at which time the Bolshevik leader was apparently quite struck with the young revolutionary's potential. Between 1904 and 1909, Lunacharskii was a member of the editorial board of the Bolshevik journal *Proletarii*⁹. In 1905, together with the writer Maxim Gorkii, Lunacharskii founded the journal *Novaia zhizn*, which dealt with questions of art and their connection to the revolution.¹⁰

In 1908, difficulties arose between Lenin and Lunacharskii. Lenin disagreed with the philosophy of A. A. Bogdanov, with whom Lunacharskii was closely connected at the time.¹¹ Lenin also reacted with hostility to Lunacharskii's 1908 book *Religion and Socialism*, which drew parallels between religious belief of the past and Marxist

⁹ Lunacharskii, *V mire muzyki*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Lemaire, p. 40.

¹¹ Lunacharskii, *V mire muzyki*, p. 6. Lunacharskii had married Bogdanov's sister in 1902. See also Lemaire, p. 40.

philosophy.¹² Lenin accused both Lunacharskii and Bogdanov of holding a theory of *Bogostroitel'stva* or god-building.¹³ What began as a philosophical debate developed into an open break in relation to the so-called “Vpered” group founded by Bogdanov, which counted Lunacharskii among its members. The specific issue in contention was the “Capri” school intended for underground party workers.¹⁴ According to John Marot, the basic disagreement between Lenin and the Vperedists (which was brought into the open with reference to this proposed school) was a different interpretation of the role of the intellectual in educating the workers.¹⁵ Bogdanov held that education was an essential element in preparing the workers to fulfil future positions of leadership, a calling for which they were not currently prepared. In contrast, Lenin held that the 1905 revolution proved that the worker would be able to gain a full “class consciousness” through the act of revolution itself. There was no need for the intellectual and political education of workers as they would acquire all necessary knowledge in the process of the revolution. Bogdanov and his followers considered Lenin’s stance erroneous, emphasising the role of the intellectual and the importance of developing “proletarian culture” in order to advance the cause of socialism. They felt that without leadership by intellectuals and without an increased focus on cultural development, the revolution would be doomed to failure. The split itself occurred at the June 1909 Conference of the Extended Editorial Board of *Proletarii* held in Paris. At this meeting, the Bolshevik party distanced itself

¹² Lunacharskii suggests that Marxism will fulfil the basic need of humanity for some form of religious belief in socialist society. See James C. McClelland, “Utopianism versus Revolutionary Heroism in Bolshevik Policy: The Proletarian Culture Debate”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (September 1980), pp. 403-425, for a brief synopsis of Lunacharskii’s idea.

¹³ Lenin voiced this attack in his work *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*.

¹⁴ See Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Bolshevik’s Dilemma: Class, Culture and Politics in the early Soviet Years” in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Winter 1988), pp. 599-613.

¹⁵ John Eric Marot, “Alexander Bogdanov, Vpered, and the Role of the Intellectual in the Workers’ Movement”, *Russian Review*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (July 1990), pp. 241-264.

from Bogdanov and his plans for establishing workers schools, and disclaimed responsibility for Bogdanov's future political actions.

Lunacharskii's support of Bogdanov at this time suggests that he shared the latter's belief in the importance of providing education to workers in order to create a "socialist consciousness" amongst them¹⁶. It is important to note that this sort of education was not to be limited purely to understanding the economic basis of the class struggle, but was to establish a true proletarian culture in contrast to the existing bourgeois culture:

The socialist consciousness of the working class must embrace its entire existence and not just the working class's direct economic and political struggle.... Against bourgeois culture, a new proletarian culture must be disseminated among the masses, a proletarian science developed... a proletarian philosophy worked out. Art must be oriented toward proletarian aspirations and experiences.¹⁷

In contrast, Lenin opposed the idea that socialist consciousness could be awakened in the workers by means of education, stating that "experience in the struggle enlightens more rapidly and more profoundly than years of propaganda"¹⁸.

The attempts of *Vpered* to create worker schools in which to put its theories about the development of proletarian culture into practice were short-lived. Bogdanov, the founder and primary force behind the group left in 1911, and *Vpered* collapsed the following year.¹⁹ However, the rift between Lunacharskii, Bogdanov and Lenin remained.

Although Lenin distanced himself and his faction from such attempts at ideological propaganda supported by the Vperedist group in 1909, he agreed in a 1910

¹⁶ Maxim Gorkii was also involved in this effort. See McClelland, p. 407.

¹⁷ Marot, p. 260.

¹⁸ Marot, p. 259.

¹⁹ For a more detailed analysis of this split within the Bolshevik Party, see Marot, p. 261.

conversation with Maxim Gorkii that Lunacharskii was a man of definite merit.²⁰ In the summer of 1911, Lunacharskii was invited to lecture at a workers' school founded by Lenin.²¹ It therefore is not entirely surprising that after the February 1917 revolution, Lunacharskii again moved closer to Zinoviev and Lenin, who introduced him into the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Thus, after the October 1917 revolution, Lunacharskii was in a position to be appointed the chairman of Narkompros, a post that he held for the next twelve years.²² During this period, he referred to himself as an "intelligent among Bolsheviks and Bolshevik among the intelligentsia"²³ believing it was his task to provide a bridge between these two disparate worlds.

Shortly after the Bolshevik seizure of power, Lunacharskii published an article in *Pravda* that outlined the goals he intended to accomplish as head of Narkompros: to fight against illiteracy, disseminate knowledge to the masses, and establish contemporary general education.²⁴ To Lunacharskii, an important aspect of developing knowledge was to be played by establishing a "proletarian culture". This idea, first attempted with Bogdanov in 1911, continued to play a major role in Lunacharskii's work as Commissar of Enlightenment. His first influential step in this direction (which he took even prior to his appointment to Narkompros) was to found an independent organisation dedicated to the development of proletarian culture.

²⁰ Lemaire, p. 41, also Lunacharskii, *V mire muzyki*, p. 6.

²¹ David M. Mallette, "Under a Different Banner of Bolshevism: A.V. Lunacharskii's Career as a Revolutionary and his Relationship with V.I. Lenin, 1898-1917", unpublished M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1999, p. 127. The fact that Lenin also established party schools emphasizes that he considered the struggle with Bogdanov's group more a question of political control of the Bolsheviks than a debate over philosophical differences.

²² Lemaire, p. 41. In 1929, Lunacharskii was removed from this post and appointed head of the Committee for Education and Educational institutions. See Lunacharskii, *V mire muzyki*, p. 6.

²³ Lunacharskii, *V mire muzyki*, p. 6.

Da zdravstvuet iskusstvo, svobodnoe ot politiki!
Long live art free of politics!

- Vladimir Maiakovskii, 1917

In October 1917, Lunacharskii, Bogdanov and other former “Vperedists” co-founded the “Proletariat Organization for Cultural Education” (Proletkul’t)²⁵. The existence of this organization would soon after be approved by Narkompros²⁶. Later scholars have tended to villainize this organisation as representing the worst extreme of “leftist” tendencies in the arts. However, the tendencies which would eventually come to dominate Proletkul’t were in stark contrast to the stated aims of both Bogdanov and Lunacharskii, the generally recognised “founders” of the concept of proletarian culture.

In his article on Proletkul’t, James McClelland argues that within the Bolshevik camp, two separate trends can be identified, both of which are “leftist” in nature: “utopianism” (reflected by Bogdanov and Lunacharskii) and a “revolutionary heroic outlook” (primarily represented by Trotskii). What distinguishes these two approaches is not their goal, which is identical (i.e., the rapid and radical change of society), but the method by which this goal is to be reached. The “utopians” stressed the importance of culture in bringing about the new socialist society, whereas the “revolutionary heroic outlook” focused on purely economic means.²⁷ In other words, Bogdanov and Lunacharskii both considered culture as a tool in building socialism. Lunacharskii expressed this view of art and culture, stating “Art is a weapon, and a weapon of enormous value”²⁸. Trotskii, however, considered culture to be of secondary importance

²⁴ “K grazhdanam Rossii, ko vsem uchiteliam, uchenikam i studentam”, *Pravda*, (November 13, 1917).

²⁵ Fitzpatrick, “The Bolsheviks’ Dilemma”, p. 601.

²⁶ Lemaire, p.41

²⁷ McClelland, “Utopianism versus Revolutionary Heroism in Bolshevik Policy”, pp. 403-425.

²⁸ A. V. Lunacharskii, “Pis’mo o proletarskoi literature” in his *Sobronie sochinenii v vos’mi tomakh: Literaturovedenie, kritika, estetika* (Moscow, 1963-67), Vol. 7, p. 171.

– an end result rather than a means of achieving the desired goal: “The place of art is in the rear of the historic advance”²⁹

Although Trotskii seems to have placed great importance on the concept of culture, as his book *Literature and Revolution* written in the midst of the turmoil of the early 1920s demonstrates, he opposed the idea that culture could serve as an impetus to revolution. In fact, Trotskii argued that the very existence of “proletarian culture” was in itself impossible as it dealt with a transitional period on the path to socialism. The victory of the proletariat would come through revolutionary change of the economic base of society. Cultural transformation would follow at a later time as a reflection of this new base. True socialist culture would eventually develop only after the socialist society had been founded.³⁰

In stark contrast, both Bogdanov and Lunacharskii considered culture in general and the building of a proletarian culture in particular as a key part in the establishment of socialism, which it was essential to pursue in tandem with economic development. This was the belief that had led to the founding of the Capri school for underground party workers and which had brought about the initial rift with Lenin, and it continued to play a major role in their actions in 1917. Both Bogdanov and Lunacharskii viewed art as an instrument to bring about cultural change. It was this belief which led them to found Proletkul't, which was intended to serve as an independent organisation in the area of

²⁹ Trotskii, *Literature and Revolution*, Transcribed for the Leon Trotsky Internet Archive by N. Vaklovsky in June 2000 from an uncopyrighted 1957 Russell & Russell, New York edition of *Literature and Revolution*. Originally published by the Soviet government in 1924.
http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1924/lit_revo/index.htm.

³⁰ See also Trotskii, “Communist Policy Toward Art”, “The Social Roots and the Social Function of Literature, and “What is Proletarian Culture, and is it Possible?” from *The Marxist Writers Archive*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky> for more information on Trotskii's views. Initially important, these works would later be suppressed by the Soviet government.

culture.³¹ As previously discussed, Lenin had opposed the actions of Bogdanov and Lunacharskii in 1909, calling their interpretation of Marxist philosophy “reactionary”³². Since their theories about the importance of culture are rooted in this so-called “deviation” from orthodox Russian Marxism, it is hardly surprising that Proletkul’t would eventually come into conflict with Lenin.

Already division within the Bolshevik Party regarding the role of culture is seen in the stated views held by Trotskii and Bogdanov/Lunacharskii. However, the situation was in reality even more complex. Within Proletkul’t itself, separate factions can also be identified, which differed in their approach to the kind of art that was called for by the revolution. Both Bogdanov and Lunacharskii emphasised the importance of cultural legacy and appreciation for the accomplishments of bourgeois culture. This view was not shared by all members within Proletkul’t, many of whom called for a complete break with the past in order to create a proletarian culture without links to a bourgeois heritage.³³ It is this extremist faction that developed within Proletkul’t that is generally remembered today.³⁴ Bogdanov eventually resigned from the group in protest against the growing influence of this faction³⁵ and Lunacharskii continually argued against this tendency in the arts, as later examination of his writings on music will demonstrate.

³¹ Bogdanov believed that with 1917 conditions, it was imperative to have autonomous organisations to act as the vanguard in the areas of politics, economics and culture respectively. See McClelland, p. 409.

³² McClelland, p. 423. At the same time, McClelland argues that Lenin never argued against the concept of proletarian culture itself.

³³ McClelland suggests in passing that this may be due to the influence of the Futurists, a modernist movement in the arts that also called for a complete break with the past, but was not specifically concerned with involvement of a mass audience. See McClelland, p. 415.

³⁴ Unlike Lunacharskii and Bogdanov, Bukharin seems to have supported this extreme leftist movement within Proletkul’t. See Bukharin’s review of a production by Pletnev in *Pravda*, (December 16, 1919). Lunacharskii replies in *Vestnik teatra*, No. 47 (1919).

³⁵ Marot, p. 263. Marot states that Bogdanov was disappointed in Proletkul’t moving away from the concept of “intellectual tutelage”, which is in essence equivalent to breaking with cultural heritage of the past.

Although Bogdanov did not rejoin the Bolshevik Party in 1917, his philosophical ideas continued to have influence, a fact that apparently concerned Lenin.³⁶ Among those who admitted to having been influenced by Bogdanov's writings was Bukharin, generally considered to be the primary Bolshevik theoretician.

Bukharin supported Proletkul't in its quest to create a new, truly proletarian culture. In fact, Bukharin aligned himself most closely with the iconoclasts within Proletkul't, who called for a clean break with traditional culture. Thus, three separate viewpoints relating to Proletkul't and the development of proletarian culture can be identified within the Bolshevik Party:

- 1) The denial of the very existence of "proletarian culture" (Trotskii)
- 2) The recognition of "proletarian culture" as a tool of the revolution where "culture" is to be based on the achievements of the past (Lunacharskii)
- 3) The recognition of "proletarian culture" as a tool of the revolution where "culture" is to involve a complete break with the past. (Bukharin)

The position of Lenin still remains to be clarified within this debate.

Like Trotskii, Lenin considered the building of culture to be of secondary importance. Here he differed from both Lunacharskii and Bukharin. In May 1919, he wrote that the true goal of "proletarian culture" was the "fundamental, elementary, and extremely simple task of organisation; and that is why I am so strongly opposed to all these intellectual fads and 'proletarian cultures'. As opposed to these fads I advocate the ABC of organisation. Distribute grain and coal in such a way as to take care of every pud – this is the object of proletarian discipline... the fundamental task of proletarian culture, of proletarian organisation."³⁷ However, unlike Trotskii he does not deny the possibility of the existence of such a thing as "proletarian culture". When discussing culture, he

³⁶ See John Biggart, "Bukharin and the Origins of the 'Proletarian Culture' Debate", *Soviet Studies*, Volume 39, No. 2 (April 1987), pp. 229-246 for a discussion of this.

emphasised its gradual development, which was to be built upon the accomplishments of the past:

Only a precise knowledge and transformation of the culture created by the entire development of mankind will enable us to create a proletarian culture. The latter is not clutched out of thin air; it is not an invention of those who call themselves experts in proletarian culture. This is all nonsense. Proletarian culture must be the logical development of the store of knowledge mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist, landowner and bureaucratic society.³⁷

On the question of attitude towards the heritage of the past, his opinion is in accord with that of Lunacharskii, though he does question the value of an organisation like Proletkul't, consisting of "experts" and devoted to the creation of a proletarian culture. However, Lenin's primary interest in Proletkul't focused upon political control of the organisation rather than the question of culture.

Regardless of the factional divisions within Proletkul't over the definition of "proletarian culture", its growing influence and autonomy from the Bolshevik Party seems to have caused Lenin the greatest concern. Lenin was preoccupied by the potential threat (real or imagined) of Bogdanov and his non-orthodox interpretation of Marxism. The continuing influence of Bogdanov's ideas (which were shared to some extent by Lunacharskii and Bukharin), together with the possibility of a rival power base, drew Lenin's attention to Proletkul't in 1920.

On August 14, 1920, an article appeared in *Izvestiia* announcing the formation of a Provisional International Bureau of the Proletkul't to be formed under Lunacharskii

³⁷ Quoted in Biggart, p. 231.

³⁸ Biggart, p.233. As this speech appeared in *Pravda* on October 5th, 1920, the opening day of the first Proletkul't conference, it is clearly intended as a critique of the organisation itself, which claimed to be building proletarian culture.

(president) and Valerian Lebedev-Polianskii (Secretary-General).³⁹ By this time Proletkul't enjoyed ever-growing success: it numbered over 400,000 members, was printing sixteen journals and had now moved to form an international organization.⁴⁰ Lenin's response to this development is demonstrated in a request for information addressed to Deputy Commissar for Education, M. N. Pokrovskii, in which he asked:

- 1) What is the legal status of Proletkult?
- 2) Who is in charge of it?
- 3) How are they appointed?
- 4) What else is there of importance to be known about the status and role of the Proletkult and the results of its work?⁴¹

The First All-Russian Congress of Proletkul't was to be held from October 5-12, 1920. At this time Lenin moved to establish party control over the organisation, subordinating it to Narkompros under Lunacharskii's leadership. Lunacharskii's response to this move was lukewarm at best, as he apparently considered the autonomy of Proletkul't to be of primary importance⁴². He had already voiced this belief in 1919:

In 1917 when I attended the conference on Proletkult activities . . . [I saw its value] in the task of raising the intelligence, ethics, and aesthetics of the proletariat, in its independent activity, working out its own proletarian norms I began to promote a parallelism: the party in politics, the unions in economics, and Proletkul't in culture.⁴³

Lenin's first move was to send Lunacharskii a note suggesting that the conference pass a vote that would incorporate Proletkul't within Narkompros. However, at the conference Lunacharskii argued against this motion, suggesting instead a "convergence" which

³⁹ Ibid., p. 231.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 232. See also Lemaire, pp.44-48.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 232.

⁴² In contrast, Bukharin opposed Proletkult's complete autonomy while advocating the concept of a clean break with bourgeois heritage. See Biggart, p. 230.

⁴³ "Proletkul't i sovetskaia kul'turnaia rabota", *Proletarskaia kul'tura*, No. 7-8 (1919), p.1, quoted in Holter, p. 276.

would leave the cultural autonomy of Proletkul't intact.⁴⁴ This in turn prompted an angry Lenin to write "From the October 8th number of *Izvestiia* it is apparent that at the Proletkul't session Comrade Lunacharskii said the exact opposite of that on which we agreed yesterday."⁴⁵ In response, Lenin forced the motion through the Central Committee after which he sent a letter to Proletkul't informing them of the decision.⁴⁶

Forcing through this motion was in itself not an easy task. Bukharin, also a member of the Politburo, was involved in the discussions held on October 9, 11, and 14, 1920. These discussions demonstrated that the question surrounding Proletkul't actually involved two separate aspects: the question of the organisation's place within the system of Soviet institutions and the form cultural development was to take during the "dictatorship of the proletariat".

The question of organisational control seems to have concerned Bukharin less than it concerned either Lunacharskii or Lenin, perhaps because he considered its loss of independence as inevitable under the increasingly centralised party system. Instead, he focused his energy on the question of the form that proletarian culture was to take. At the Politburo meeting on October 9, 1920, he wrote to Lenin that "I personally consider that to 'conquer' bourgeois culture in its entirety, without destroying it, is as impossible as 'conquering' the bourgeois state . . ."⁴⁷ He recognised, however, that his beliefs about proletarian culture conflicted with those held by Lenin. For this reason he refused the latter's request for him to present the Politburo decree subordinating the organisation to party control at the Proletkul't conference, stating:

⁴⁴ Biggart, p. 233.

⁴⁵ V. I. Lenin, *Polnaia Sobraniia Sochineniia*, 5th ed., Vol. 41, p. 336..

⁴⁶ For discussion of this event, see Holter, pp. 275-276 and V.V. Gorbunov, "Bor'ba V.I. Lenin s separaticheskimi ustremleniiami proletkul'ta", *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, No. 1 (1958), pp. 33-34.

I have definite opinions on the following: 1)the definition of “culture”, 2)the definition of communist culture (“proletarian culture”) 3)the nature of the “transformation process” in this domain. I have not had the opportunity to discuss these matters in any detail either with you or with any other member of the Central Committee. If I have to speak I shall naturally say what I think and what I am theoretically convinced of. But, for all I know, perhaps you will denounce me as a heretic?”⁴⁸

Lenin responded to this, attempting to simplify the question down to a basic formula: “1)

Proletarian culture=communism 2) it is carried out by the RCP 3) the proletarian

class=RCP=Soviet power. We are all agreed on this aren’t we?”⁴⁹

Bukharin’s response is important for the light it sheds on the contradictory beliefs regarding proletarian culture that existed within the party at this time:

Yes, we are agreed on all of this. But if I go they will ask for detailed “theoretical justification”, that is, they will drag the matter out. This is the problem. They will not insist on an explanation of the elementary truths, which they accept. What they will do is raise a host of other questions in all their ramifications. It will be impossible to avoid a discussion. We cannot have it both ways: either the matter is dealt with in its organizational aspects, in which case Krestinskii should go; or else there will have to be a “general debate”. In my view the latter would be premature.⁵⁰

On this issue, Bukharin was victorious. At the time, Lenin was content with gaining party control over Proletkul't without addressing the theoretical question of defining proletarian culture.

The theoretical problem of proletarian culture would later be addressed within the party. A resolution of the Politburo, dated August 31, 1922, opened a debate in the pages of *Pravda* relating to the question of definition of proletarian culture and the form its development should take.⁵¹ The Proletkul’t organisation would play an increasingly

⁴⁷ Biggart, p.234.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 234.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 234.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 235

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 229

minor role in these debates however,⁵² as newer organisations came to the fore, including, in the field of music, RAPM - Russian Association of Proletarian Music (Rossiskaia Assotsiatsiia Proletarskoi Muzyki) and ASM – Association of Contemporary Music (Assotsiatsiia Sovremennoi Muzyki).

Why is the debate over “proletarian culture” important to a discussion of Soviet music? There are several answers to this question. First, music is one aspect of “culture” and the role that was envisaged for music specifically was a reflection of the role that would be assigned to culture in general. In musical terms, then, the debate over proletarian culture gave rise to numerous questions. Did music reflect the existing economic base of the society in which it was produced? Or was it to serve as a means of creating the proletarian (and eventually socialist) society for which the revolution had been fought? The members of Proletkul’t (and Lunacharskii) would favour the latter choice. This in turn leads to the question of the sort of music that best served this purpose. Should musicians follow in the footsteps of Bukharin and reject the music of the “bourgeois” past? Or should they embrace this heritage and attempt to work within it? And finally, was it really possible for music to have political meaning and influence? In the 1920s numerous musical groups and circles appeared, each with their own answers to these questions. As already mentioned, RAPM and ASM were the two most influential organisations at this time. These two groups will be examined in more detail in Chapter Three, but first a closer examination of cultural policy in the early years of the revolution will be given, with particular focus on the approach toward literature.

⁵² In 1925, Proletkul’t ceased to exist as a separate organisation, merging with *Profsoiuz*. See Lemaire, p.48

Sheila Fitzpatrick supports her assertion that Lunacharskii actually exercised very little political authority (beyond personal influence) in the area of the arts with reference to events surrounding the subjugation of Proletkul't to party control. However, in itself this incident does not give a full image of the struggle for control of the arts and artists. In contrast, Holter argues that he did not find a single instance where Lunacharskii's judgements which overturned decisions by *Glavrepkom* were so much as questioned by senior party officials, suggesting that Lunacharskii generally enjoyed a good deal of influence and power in decisions surrounding artistic policy.⁵³ Lenin clearly felt that Proletkul't posed a threat to the Bolshevik Party, a fear that was linked to the influence of Bogdanov and his philosophy. Thus, with reference to Proletkul't, Lunacharskii was unable to prevent Lenin's move to control the organisation. On this point, Fitzpatrick is correct in her assessment of the Commissar's impotence. But how much influence did Lunacharskii have more generally?

The early 1920s was a period in which the role and rights of artists within the new society had still not been clearly defined. Recently released government documents attest to a struggle between the Cheka (secret police) and Narkompros over control of movement of artists in the early to mid- 1920s. These documents also attest to the fact that initially Lunacharskii (particularly in the early 1920s), wielded sufficient influence – be it official power within the government or personal influence with Lenin – to resist the ever-growing strength of the Cheka. They counterbalance the image of Lunacharskii's powerlessness in relation to Proletkul't, giving a more well-rounded view of his role within the government.

⁵³ Holter, p. 280.

In a note dated April 19, 1921, Felix Dzerzhinskii⁵⁴ addressed the Central Committee with his concerns over permitting artists to leave the country under any pretext:

The Vecheka, on the basis of earlier experience, categorically protests against this. To this time, not one of those individuals permitted to leave . . . has returned, some of these . . . carry out an evil campaign against us . . . Travel for rest and recuperation by no means is convincing, as artists may easily spend their holiday time travelling in the provinces.⁵⁵

Dzerzhinskii further commented that “these petitions are systematically supported by comrade Lunacharskii”.⁵⁶ Dzerzhinskii maintained that it was a mistake to allow artists to leave Russia as it led both to “a stealing of our cultural values and a strengthening of the ranks of our enemies”.⁵⁷ In order to prevent this, the Cheka insisted that “As long as the Central Committee does not have special reasons to consider the presence of one or another literary figure outside Russia more desirable than in Soviet Russia – the Cheka on its side does not see the basis for permitting them to leave in the near future.”⁵⁸ Further, the Cheka made the request (which was granted) that in future, questions regarding the travels of literary figures be turned over to the Orgburo if the Cheka deemed such a measure advisable.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ First commissar of the Cheka.

⁵⁵ “Zapiska predsedatelia VCHK F. Dzerzhinskogo v TsK RKP(B) s vozrazheniiami protiv khodataistv narkomprosa RSFSR o vyezde za granitsu deiatelei iskusstva”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty 1917-1953* (Moscow: Demokratiia, 2002), p.15.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.15.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.15.

⁵⁸ “Pis'mo nachal'nika inostrannogo otdela VCHK L. Davydova v TsK RKP(B)”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 21.

⁵⁹ “Pis'mo nachal'nika inostrannogo otdela VCHK L. Davydova v TsK RKP(B)” i “Pis'mo V.M. Molotova v inostrannyi otdel VCHK”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 20-21.

In opposition to the Cheka, Lunacharskii insisted that such forceful methods would not result in the retention of artists in Russia, but would actually have the opposite impact:

An entire group of negative decisions, which have now been taken by the Central Committee on the question of travel abroad, can only bring about one result, namely a massive flight abroad. The Cheka, of course, easily (it is in general easy to do) refuses to give out papers, but it cannot truly detain artists I am completely in agreement with the truly reasonable point of view of Narkomvneshtorg [People's Commissar of External Trade] Krasin, who says that the scandalous flight abroad will only stop when we will cautiously give artists the ability to travel abroad for a period of time.⁶⁰

Lunacharskii supported an alternative precautionary measure, first suggested by Oleinikov to Narkompros – that three to five artists be allowed to leave at any one time, with the next group allowed to leave only after the previous group had returned. This would help to ensure that artistic organizations would only agree to trips abroad by those they know to be loyal, or else risk losing the future possibility of their own travel abroad.⁶¹

The desire of the Cheka to hold artists forcefully in the country was also opposed by Maxim Gorkii, who states in a letter addressed to Vladimir Lenin “I know that Soviet power will not suffer from this, [i.e., the slander of artists having left the country], I would wish that all who try to go abroad would be permitted”⁶² Despite the demands of the Cheka, the early years of the revolution saw a large outflow of talented artists and

⁶⁰ “Pis'mo A.V. Lunacharskogo v TsK RKP(B)”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 20.

⁶¹ “Zapiska narkoma prosveshcheniia RSFSR A.V. Lunacharskogo v Politbiuro TsK RKP(B) s predlozheniem o poriadke vypuska deiatelei iskusstva za granitsy”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 17 and “Pis'mo A.V. Lunacharskogo v TsK RKP(B)”, p. 19.

⁶² “Pis'mo A.M. Gor'kogo V.I. Leninu”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 26.

musicians, several of whom later stated explicitly that they received travel documents from the government only through Lunacharskii's direct assistance.⁶³

These political maneuverings between the Cheka and Narkompros demonstrate a conflict between two fundamentally different approaches to control of the arts that developed in early Soviet society. Lunacharskii wished to win artists over to support of the party through persuasion whereas the Cheka favoured forceful prevention of artists leaving the country, both in order to keep artistic talent at home and in order to prevent anti-Soviet propaganda. Both sides, however, recognized the benefits and dangers to be derived from the artistic community. Artists raise the value of a country's cultural worth internationally, and therefore it was to Soviet Russia's benefit to win the support of its artists. Lunacharskii believed that the way to do this was not through force, but through promoting and encouraging artists. This belief is reflected in his support of several artists against the demands of the Cheka.

Two specific examples of Lunacharskii's efforts in support of artists relate to Feodor Shaliapin and Aleksandr Blok. It was due to the personal support of Lunacharskii that the Politburo agreed to permit the singer Shaliapin to leave Russia in 1921⁶⁴, and it was only after the intervention of both Lunacharskii and Gorkii (and their direct appeals to Lenin and the Central Committee) that the poet Aleksandr Blok was permitted to travel to Finland for medical treatment.⁶⁵

⁶³ For example, the memoirs of Shaliapin, Grechaninov and Prokofiev all attest to Lunacharskii's aid.

⁶⁴ *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 733, note 8 – Shaliapin's departure was approved May 31, 1921 by the Politburo. This corroborates Shaliapin's own accounts of having received personal assistance from Lunacharskii on numerous occasions. See Shaliapin, "Maska i Dusha" in Fedor Shaliapin, *Vospominania*, (Moscow: Lokid, 2000), p. 409.

⁶⁵ "Pis'mo A.M. Gor'kogo V. I. Leniny", p. 25-27 and "Pis'mo A. V. Lunacharskogo v TsK RKP", p. 27-28 as well as "Postanovlenie politbiuro TsK RKP(B) o predlozhenii L.B. Kameneva peresmotret' prezhnee postanovlenie o zaprete na vyezd za granitsy A.A. Bloka", p.29. All documents appear in *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*.

In reference to Blok, Lunacharskii reminded the Central Committee of the importance of world opinion: “Who is Blok? A young poet, exciting great hope... a person of whom the magazine *Times* wrote a large article not long ago, naming him the most outstanding poet of Russia and showing that he recognizes and praises the October Revolution.”⁶⁶ For this reason, Lunacharskii maintained, the actions of the Central Committee were counter-productive. Here they had a world-renowned literary figure who was recognized in the West as a supporter of the revolution, and they refused to allow him to travel abroad for medical treatment:

I can tell you the result in advance, which will follow as a result of your decision. The greatly talented Blok will die in two weeks, and Feodor Kuz'mich Sologub will write a desperate, fully abusive and damning article in reference to this, against which we will be defenseless, as the basis of this article, i.e., the fact that we killed the most talented poet of Russia, will neither be doubted nor excused.⁶⁷

Lunacharskii appealed to the party concerning the impression its actions would make on the world community. Additionally, he brought up the fear that artists who leave the country might carry out anti-Soviet propaganda, a concern which was often expressed by the Cheka. He suggested that the strong-arm tactics of the Cheka were unevenly applied, without properly evaluating the relative merit or political stance of those individuals involved. The Cheka as an organisation was unable to discriminate in relation to artistic merit and its decisions were unreliable and not in the best interests of the party.

Lunacharskii's defense of Blok provides a striking contrast to the situation of Dmitrii Shostakovich in 1936. Although the young composer also had various people speak in his defense, it had no impact on party policy. In the 1920s, such intervention was

⁶⁶ “Pis'mo A.V. Lunacharskogo v TsK RKP(B)”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 28.

still possible. By 1936 the flexibility in government policy towards musicians had almost vanished⁶⁸. The Shostakovich affair will be examined in depth in Chapter Five of this thesis.

One of the most striking examples of Lunacharskii's influence in relation to specifically musical matters concerns the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. In this particular instance, Lunacharskii's opposition was not the Cheka, but Lenin himself. As early as 1917, Lenin called into question the value of funding theatres such as Bolshoi, stating "It is not fitting to support such a luxurious theatre for so much money, when we do not have enough means to support the most simple schools in the countryside."⁶⁹

On January 12, 1922, Lenin sent a note to Molotov in reference to a motion accepted by Sovnarkom (The Council of Peoples Commissars). This motion had approved Lunacharskii's proposal to preserve the Bolshoi opera and ballet. Lenin requested Molotov to commission *VtsIK* (The All-Russian Council of Workers, Peasants and Soldiers' Deputies) to change Sovnarkom's decree, dismiss most of the artists working both in Moscow and Petrograd, reallocate at least half of these funds to combating illiteracy, and finally "Call Lunacharskii for five minutes to listen to the last word of the accused and reproach him, as well as all People Commissars that the carrying and the voicing of such decrees, like the one now being reversed by the Central Committee, will entail more strict measures from the Central Committee in the future."⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 28. Sologub is another Russian writer, who was permitted by the Central Committee to leave Russia at the same time that Blok was denied permission, which Lunacharskii considered "the product of clear misunderstanding".

⁶⁸ Any sort of flexibility had disappeared in the other arts long before.

⁶⁹ Lenin, V. I. *O literature i iskusstve*. (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1957), p. 589..

⁷⁰ "Zapiska V.I. Lenina V. M. Molotovu", *Vlast' i khydozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 31.

On the same day, the Central Committee issued a decree overturning the decree of Sovnarkom which had preserved the Bolshoi Theatre and opera.

Lunacharskii's response to this, dated January 13, 1922, is a lengthy letter to Lenin objecting to the decision of the Central Committee, both in terms of this method of decision making generally as well as the particular decision regarding the Bolshoi Theatre. He argued that the Central Committee took this action without appealing to the expertise of those closely connected with the organization in question (in this case, Lunacharskii himself). He then goes on to argue for the preservation of the Bolshoi, demonstrating that the economic value of closing this institution was far less than had been assumed.⁷¹

In this particular episode, Lenin initially seemed to suggest that Lunacharskii and Narkompros had overstepped their jurisdiction by passing a decree in support of the Bolshoi Theatre. Lunacharskii was quick to object to the measures taken by the Central Committee, showing that he considered this question to fall within his sphere of influence. This belief appears to have been confirmed by Lenin's response, which requested the Central Committee to read Lunacharskii's letter and review the decision. The end result of this interchange was that the party accepted Lunacharskii's arguments and the Bolshoi continued to operate. Thus, in this particular case, Lunacharskii played a decidedly major role in political decision making.

In relation both to the Cheka and the Bolshevik Party in general, Lunacharskii clearly was a mitigating influence on behalf of artists, particularly in the early 1920s. The conclusion that can be drawn from these examples is that Lunacharskii enjoyed a good

⁷¹ "Pis'mo A.V. Lunachaskogo V.I. Leninu", *Vlast' i khydozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, pp. 31-33.

deal of influence, so long as Lenin did not feel that his political power was immediately threatened. In the case of Proletkul't, when this was indeed the case, Lunacharskii's attempts at moderation failed.

It should be noted that most of the debates between Narkompros and the Cheka refer to literary figures. Those most able to publish and write anti-Soviet propaganda were, naturally, literary figures and it is to this field of the arts that the government first turned its attention with the intent of influencing and controlling its development.⁷² The first official decree of the Politburo relating to the arts was specifically directed towards literature⁷³. This decree focused specifically on the question of publications and what topics were acceptable.⁷⁴ The decree that has attracted the most attention from historians was issued on June 18, 1925⁷⁵, and again dealt with literature, but this time specifically addressed the relationship of the government and of the party to different artistic groups. It was prepared by Bukharin, Kamenev, Lunacharskii and several other party members⁷⁶ and demonstrates the first clear official party stance in the realm of cultural policy. As such, it is an important document for establishing the party's relationship to all the arts at this time.

Lunacharskii had supported the idea of independent cultural organisations, as the example of Proletkul't demonstrated. In this decree, the concept of artistic groups being

⁷² Boris Schwarz also notes the focus of the party on literature. See Schwarz, pp. 109-110.

⁷³ February 27, 1922, "On the battle with petit-bourgeois ideology in the field of literary publishing" ("O bor'be s melkoburzhuaiznoi ideologiei v oblasti literaturno izdatel'skoi").

⁷⁴ Kshishtof Meier, *Shostakovich: Zhizn' Tvorchestvo, Vremia*, translated by E. Guliaevoi, (Saint Petersburg: Kompositor, 1998), p. 70.

⁷⁵ "On the politics of the party in the field of artistic literature" ("O politike Partii v oblasti khudozhestvennoi literatury").

⁷⁶ "Postanovlenie politbiuro TsK RKP(B) 'O sozdanii komissii po voprosu ob otnoshenii partii k proletarskii pisateliam'", *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 48 .

independent of party control was reiterated. Some clarification of the role of the party was given. It was the party's duty to support proletarian writers and help them to gain dominance: "Hegemony of proletarian writers still does not exist, and the party must help these writers to establish their historical right to this hegemony"⁷⁷. The relationship of the party to other writers – the so-called peasants and "fellow travellers"- was to create conditions "to make possible their joining the side of communist ideology more quickly"⁷⁸. This was not to be done forcefully – instead the party must "patiently" work with these artists to bring about change. In other words, it was the duty of the party to promote and encourage proletarian art, not via direct intervention but through creating a conducive environment for this art to develop.

Of more immediate interest for the present paper is the stance of the party on the questions of cultural legacy and artistic style. Here the decree was quite explicit: "Leading literature in its entirety, the party can as little support one faction of literature (classifying these factions by different outlooks on form and style), as it can decide questions of the form of a family with resolutions . . . , A style, corresponding to the epoch, will be founded, but it will be founded with other methods"⁷⁹ This offered no definition of the artistic style most appropriate for the expression of proletarian ideals. On the contrary, it left open the possibility for multiple groups to develop and express their ideas independently: "For this reason, the party must speak out for free competition of different groups and tendencies in this areaThe party cannot give a monopoly to one

⁷⁷ "Postanovlenie politbiuro TsK RKP(B) 'O politike partii v oblasti khudozhestvennoi literatury'", *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia dokumenty*, p. 55.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 56-57.

or another of these groups, even the most proletarian in its ideological content: this would mean the immediate destruction of proletarian literature. ”⁸⁰

During the 1920s, this more open approach to expression in the arts was supported not only by Lunacharskii, but by Bukharin and Trotskii as well, though the reasons that each of these individuals had for supporting artistic freedom were different.⁸¹ Despite numerous unclarities, the 1925 decree on literature stated the approach of the party in relation to artistic groups and artistic expression: one of non-partisanship. The party should work to create suitable conditions for artistic development, but nothing more.

This official decree concerning literature was soon followed by a request from a group of artists to Stalin that they be given similar guidelines to follow in their art.⁸² This request and the 1925 decree itself both reflect the growing problem of conflicts between artistic groups. The official decree came in part as a response to members of the literary group RAPP - Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (*Rossiiskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei*), who in 1924 were campaigning for recognition as official representatives of the party in the literary realm.⁸³ At this time, the arts in general suffered from fierce competition between rival groups, some of which tried to achieve hegemony through support from the party. Historians have referred to party policy towards culture and the arts at this time as a “soft-line” approach.⁸⁴ This describes the

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 57.

⁸¹ Schwarz, p. 48.

⁸² “Pis'mo Gruppi Khudozhnikov I. V. Stalinu”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intellighentsiia dokumenty*, p. 59.

⁸³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Emergence of Glassiskusstvo. Class War on the Cultural Front, Moscow, 1928-29”, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (October 1971), p. 236.

⁸⁴ See Fitzpatrick, “The Emergence of Glassiskusstvo” and also Michael S. Fox “Glavlit, Censorship and the Problem of Party Policy in Cultural Affairs, 1922-28”, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (1992), p. 1045-

government policy of non-interference that supported the development of different artistic groups.⁸⁵ In contrast, leftist members of Proletkul't as well as later organisations like RAPP and RAPM – Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (Rossisskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh muzykantov) favoured a “hard line” approach, believing that the government should actively support proletarian organisations in the arts, granting them a hegemony in that sphere that would correspond to the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” in political life. It was this demand of RAPP that the 1925 decree was intended to condemn.

From his speeches and articles relating to literature and music, it is clear that Lunacharskii consistently supported the soft-line approach to artistic policy. He continually stressed the value of a multi-faceted artistic life, defending numerous artists against political attacks.⁸⁶ This approach was reflected in the actions of the party itself, which refused to allow the government to support one artistic organisation at the expense of others.

Lunacharskii himself seems to have personally favoured the avant-garde movements in the arts, as his attempts to win over such figures as Maiakovskii, Meierhold, Blok and Prokofiev to support the aims of the revolution attest.⁸⁷ His personal ability to influence government policy decreased over time and varied according to the

1047. Fox questions Lunacharskii's assertion that his particular policy towards the arts was “official” policy.

⁸⁵ There is some contradiction in this line that has been pointed out by numerous scholars. Lunacharskii seems to have favoured the idea that the government itself would remain objective, while it would be natural for the party to show preference to those following proletarian ideology. But in general, the policy at this time continued to be one of non-intervention.

⁸⁶ Lebedev-Polyanskii, head of Glavlit (the government censorship organ) once dryly noted that “everybody knows that comrade Lunacharskii is more disposed to defend a litterateur than to wash his own hands.” See Fox, p.1050.

relative importance with which the government viewed artistic developments. In the early 1920s, Lunacharskii seems to have enjoyed a good deal of power politically (either officially or through personal influence), which he did in fact exercise in what must be interpreted as an overwhelmingly liberal approach to artistic control.⁸⁸ This relatively lenient approach became gradually less in tune with political developments in the 1920s, a fact that was eventually recognised by Lunacharskii and which was a likely cause of his resignation from Narkompros in 1929.

Although the general trend in the 1920s cultural scene was one of relative freedom, it would be erroneous to overlook the existence of an opposing trend that was already emerging within the government. Although Lunacharskii claimed that his policy towards the arts was the “official” party policy, he also admitted privately that officials working within Glavlit were attempting to pursue a policy in direct opposition to his own, i.e., one of stringent censorship.⁸⁹ Those demanding greater party control would gradually gain influence over the course of the 1920s.

While this background provides an overview of the political situation within which artists found themselves in the 1920s, it does not answer specific questions relating to the form of musical expression that Lunacharskii favoured. The question of government involvement in music also remains to be addressed. How was government encouragement of a multi-faceted artistic approach, together with so-called “proletarian” or “leftist” demands for a dominant position in the cultural realm, reflected in musical life

⁸⁷ Lemaire, p. 41 See also Schwarz, p. 13-14.

⁸⁸ This power was often exercised through direct clashes with numerous other party organs, including the Cheka, GPU and Glavlit. See Fox and also Cheka documents in *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia*.

⁸⁹ Fox, p. 4. Fox maintains that cultural policy at this time was not a government-endorsed approach of compromise, but an ongoing struggle between conflicting approaches. In this case, the role of Lunacharskii in maintaining a general air of freedom becomes even greater.

of the 1920s? It is to an examination of the musical community in the early years after the Revolution that we now turn.

Chapter Three: Soviet Musical Life in the 1920s

“That was back in the twenties, right after the Revolution. The spirit of freedom, so to speak, was still flying over our heads...”

- Rotislav Dubinsky, *Stormy Applause: Making Music in a Worker's State*

Although the Bolshevik government concerned itself with artistic and literary production from the beginning, the status of music, particularly so-called “absolute music”, was less well-defined. The power and importance of the written word were well-known to Russian revolutionaries, who had for years printed various political journals and pamphlets in order to undermine support for the tsar and gain public support for their own political views. It is therefore not surprising that literature should continue to serve as the main focus of attention when these revolutionaries had seized power. The request received by Stalin from a group of artists in 1925, requesting that the party issue a statement about its support of particular groups in the visual arts, showed that the struggle between conflicting tendencies was occurring not only in the literary realm, but also in the other arts.

It is far easier to pinpoint the specific subject or meaning in the written word than in other arts. This makes literature the most obvious and natural vehicle for political propaganda.¹ It is interesting to note the manner in which Lunacharskii framed his arguments regarding literature and music, respectively. In contrast to his support of Blok discussed earlier, which focused on the poet's artistic worth, support of the revolution and

¹ Fox comments that there was more censorship in the mass media and public performance arts than in literature, but fails to consider that Glavrepertcom was responsible for theatre, film and music. It is therefore hardly surprising that it was responsible for more censorship statistically than Glavlit, which was responsible solely for literature. See Fox, p.1057

the potential of negative literary propaganda, the arguments both for and against the preservation of the Bolshoi Theatre dealt primarily with financial considerations.

Lunacharskii stated that closing the theatre would not save as much money as Lenin expected, would put numerous individuals out of work (who, together with their families would turn to the government for assistance), and demonstrated that net losses were now much less than during the tsarist era, suggesting a more effective functioning of the theatre.² The idea that music itself could function as an instrument for strengthening political power was not expressed.

But why was Lunacharskii so concerned about preserving the Bolshoi Theatre? Did he really just want to enable workers to hear “good music”? From reading his letter, the benefits to be gained from music were quite simple: it was a valuable asset for the opinion of the world community (i.e., positive propaganda), offered amusement to the people and allowed musicians to continue to earn a livelihood with their particular skills. There was no question of the political nature of music in all of this. Unlike literature, music was not discussed as an art with a clear political position (either revolutionary or bourgeois). In the early 1920s, the Cheka had shown little interest in the creative output of musicians and how this output reflected on the Soviet government. The success of performers and composers internationally and at home was desirable as it brought added prestige to the Soviet regime, but there was little or no questioning of political content of music by the party as a whole.³

² “Pis'mo A.V. Lunacharskogo V.I. Leninu”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intellektualnaia dokumenty*, pp. 31-33.

³ Exceptions to this would be opera performances in the Bol'shoi Theatre, which were attacked by Glavrepkom as “monarchist propaganda”. Fox, p. 1057. However, even here the issue in question was not the music itself, but the plot of the opera.

Despite relative unconcern on the part of the government at this time regarding the potential political implications of music, closer examination of the musical community shows that some musicians were in fact defining themselves in terms of politics and the relation of music to the revolution. In September 1918, musicologist Nadezhda Bryusova stated that “Music should give capacity to live and a capacity to build life”⁴. This idea of music offering a capacity to “build life” is related to Bogdanov’s and Lunacharskii’s concept of the role of proletarian culture. When addressing Lenin and the Central Committee, Lunacharskii focused primarily on monetary considerations, but this is only part of the picture. When dealing with the musical community, he did in fact stress the interrelationship of music and politics.

Lunacharskii was firmly convinced of the importance of music as an educational tool. The oft-repeated idea that the Marxist approach used music as a means of political propaganda does not adequately describe Lunacharskii’s approach in the 1920s. His vision of music’s role was both subtler and more artistically discerning than this. It is true, however, that his understanding of the sort of impact that music should have (and, it follows, the sort of music that should be encouraged in order to produce the desired result) was strongly influenced by his Marxist convictions.

There are several recurring themes in Lunacharskii’s articles and speeches that are central to his philosophy on music. The first of these was a constant reaffirmation of the value of the arts in general and music in particular. Secondly, he refuted extremist positions, such as over-complication/over-simplification of music and the idea that art should break cleanly with the past. Closely related to this was Lunacharskii’s

⁴ Neil Edmunds, “Aleksandr Davidenko and Prokoll”, *Tempo*, New Series, No. 182, (September 1992), p. 2.

understanding of the concepts of formalism and programmatic music. These writings are not purely theoretical documents (Lunacharskii himself acknowledged that he was not a specialist in this field),⁵ but rather show his reactions to existing social, political and artistic trends.

Lunacharskii was unwavering in his affirmation of the value of the arts in general and music in particular in shaping the new revolutionary order. His connections with Bogdanov have already been looked at in some detail, and his convictions certainly derive from a similar view on the importance of developing a “proletarian culture” to assist in the revolution. On numerous occasions he refuted the accusations that the Bolsheviks considered music an unnecessary luxury, stating that as the internal turmoil in Russia calmed, arts would play an increasingly important role in the new society.⁶ As has been demonstrated, this was not a view shared by all members of the Bolshevik Party, and some acknowledgement of this dissension within party ranks was surely involved in his assertion that the arts would gain in importance as immediate political and economic concerns decreased.

Lunacharskii emphasised different points when writing about music for practitioners rather than party members. He did not feel it necessary to offer explanations of the intrinsic value of music, as he was preaching (as it were) to the already converted:

I do not think that there are people here among us who would repeat dry words that a working people do not seriously need art or that it presents itself exclusively as an object of luxury.⁷

In contrast, when interacting with government officials, he tended to focus more on economic questions. Despite this, and despite his statement that music would grow in

⁵ A.V. Lunacharskii, *V mire muzyki*, p. 29.

⁶ Lunacharskii, “Osnovy khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniia”, *V mire muzyki*, p. 177.

importance in a peaceful society, Lunacharskii considered music an area that could play a role in the revolution even during the most difficult economic times, stating that the claim that “generally the proletariat in a time of war cannot have its own art” was mistaken and misguided.⁸ Even in the hard year of 1919, together with Maxim Gorkii, he began a project of translating and printing the works of Wagner in Russian as a source of artistic stimulus for the country.⁹

The debate within the Bolshevik party about “proletarian culture” and the role of art in revolutionary development has already been examined. Lunacharskii defined his concept of the mission of art clearly:

Art does not only provide information, it also educates. Of course, information also has an educational meaning – for itself and in relation to other classes. But truly the strength of art of this or another class always leads in the end to confirmation of the basic principles of its culture. Art battles, sometimes conquers, changes, influences the psychology of the surrounding classes, enemies, friends and subjects. And in this is its extremely important historical mission. For this reason, art serves not only as a weapon of knowledge, but also organises ideas and, in particular, emotions. It organises through the means of form (also through the means of musical ideas). It organises emotions as fighting strength, as educational strength.¹⁰

Music was to serve not only as a method of instruction, but as a means of educating the people¹¹ and as a way of organising certain ideas and emotions in support of the revolutionary struggle. Even after accepting the fact that music was an important aspect of society from Lunacharskii’s point of view, the question remains: how specifically was music to assist in the building of socialism?

On several occasions, Lunacharskii voiced his views of the goal of Communism:

⁷ Lunacharskii, “O muzyke”, *V mire muzyki*, p. 378.

⁸ Lunacharskii, “Osnovy khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniia”, *V mire muzyki*, p. 179.

⁹ Lemaire, p. 50.

¹⁰ Lunacharskii, “Osnovy khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniia”, p. 179.

¹¹ Lunacharskii differentiates between instruction and education. Instruction refers to the transmission of knowledge, whereas education is a creative and on-going process of shaping an individual’s character.

The final goal is the founding of a cultural society, that is such people, such a humanity, which has an unusually gratifying resonance for every authentic work of art, which has a rich earth, where every forsaken seed will give us unusually magnificent fruit, where brotherly interaction between all collections of creative-human activity will achieve the character of an unusual arduous and shining experience. Thus, this is the real, authentic cultural problem, which communism presents to itself.¹²

He goes on to state that “The general work of communism consists not in the destruction of aristocracy, but in the transformation of all humanity to its (communism’s) own type of aristocracy.”¹³ In pursuit of this goal, music has unique abilities. It serves both as a means of “oblivion” or forgetfulness of the current ills of society and as a means of preparing the character to withstand further trials. In this sense, he considered that music alone offered a sort of “oblivion” that was nurturing rather than harmful to one’s soul¹⁴:

To forget yourself in music is no sin. Music – it is an oblivion from which the head will not ache later, like from the oblivion of a glass of wine . . . Musical oblivion always makes the soul stronger, more prepared for life.¹⁵

Because of its potential to positively influence the listener, music could also serve as an influence in the development and strengthening of desired character traits and thus (by extension) the gradual development of the “Soviet” individual. In reference to the potential impact of music on the listener, Lunacharskii went on to state that “maybe it is true, that very keen and fragile music of a pessimistic soul may fall on the soul of the listener with a harmful blast”.¹⁶ It was also possible for music to have a negative impact on the listener.

This is fundamentally the same concept of music to which Plato and Aristotle gave voice. Music has the potential to influence its listeners either positively or

¹² Lunacharskii, “Osnovy khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniia” in *V mire muzyki*, pp. 182-82.

¹³ Ibid., p.183.

¹⁴ In using the term “soul”, Lunacharskii is careful to define it in a purely non-religious sense.

¹⁵ Lunacharskii, “K 40-letiiu deiatel’nosti A.K. Glazunova” in *V mire muzyki*, p. 100.

negatively, depending on the emotions it stirs. It is not surprising to find such a continuity of thought in an individual like Lunacharskii, schooled in philosophical traditions. This concept of music naturally leads to the conclusion that certain types of music are preferable to others. Plato had suggested banning certain kinds of harmful music from the Republic. Aristotle was quite explicit in defining which modes were most appropriate for educational purposes. What sort of music did Lunacharskii consider to be beneficial in promoting the aims of the revolution? What did he encourage in his writing, and, equally important, what did he condemn?

At this point it is extremely important to clarify Lunacharskii's understanding of the terms "programmatic music" and "formalism". From Lunacharskii's point of view, the concept of "programmatic music" which depicted specific, recognisable events was impossible. According to Lunacharskii, music's strength was that it "mirrors inner life, dynamics of emotion, mood and passion in another form."¹⁷ Unlike all the other arts, music has no external reference. Music consists of identifiable and definable materials (tone, scales, harmony, form), but these bear no specific relation to external reality, except in their ability to influence emotions or to express general internal states. For Lunacharskii, it was important to remember that music was first conceived of as a science rather than an art (an idea which he also borrowed from the Greeks). Like other sciences, music must be studied and approached by understanding the internal laws that govern it. From this idea, it follows that simply by setting a revolutionary text to music or giving a revolutionary setting to a ballet, a musical composition will not be more closely linked to

¹⁶ Ibid., p.100

¹⁷ Lunacharskii, "Kul'turnoe znachenie muzyki Chopina", *V mire muzyki*, p. 32.

the development of revolutionary or socialist ideals. Music and text are not intimately linked in this way. For this reason he reproached Komsomol members of the Conservatory for their vehement condemnation of “bourgeois music”, stating “it is definitely not easy to draw a border here which strictly would differentiate one class tendency from another. Thus, for example, a march written by Imperialists, may also serve revolutionaries in wonderful form. Ol’minskii writes in one of his articles that ‘by itself the ‘Marseillaise’ may be a great symbol of monarchy, if the words are simply changed.’ This is proof of how much less perceptible music is than literature.”¹⁸ Lunacharskii thus dismissed calls for more blatantly programmatic music. The goals of the revolution would not be achieved with the help of such a simplistic approach of musical propaganda.

Lunacharskii defined formalism as the tendency to deny that art has any content. He condemned this idea as bourgeois reactionism as all art reflects the society from which it springs. The very act of denial was characteristic of bourgeois culture – the emptiness of the culture being reflected by the apparent emptiness of the art it produces. It was therefore impossible for art not to have content, even if that content only demonstrated the lack of depth of the society that produced it.¹⁹ He did suggest that some contemporary composers distanced themselves too much from the people by writing pieces that were overly complex and therefore did not meet the needs of the workers. Lunacharskii, however, did not connect “formalism” with the employment of either traditional or contemporary technical compositional devices. He recognised these devices as an intrinsic basis for the art of music itself. The principal criteria for judging a piece of

¹⁸ Lunacharskii, “Otvét Komsomol’tsam Konservatorii”, *V mire muzyki*, p. 306.

¹⁹ Lunacharskii, “Sotzial’nyi istoki muzykal’nogo iskusstva”, *V mire muzyki*, pp. 373-74.

music was not the compositional means/devices through which a composer expressed himself, but the general emotions/ideas expressed in the music. For this reason, Lunacharskii believed that it was possible for composers of the 1920s to utilise new compositional devices developed in the West without being condemned as “enemies of the revolution”²⁰. What he considered important was that composers should be encouraged to express sentiments closer in spirit to the revolution. The composer was free to choose the form in which he expressed his ideas. In order to encourage musicians to express the correct revolutionary sentiments, it was important to raise their political awareness through education in Marxist thought. This would lead naturally to music that sought to express the proper socialist character.

In summary, formalism for Lunacharskii did not truly exist in individual musical works. This understanding of formalism echoes the definition offered by the Soviet scientists who attempted to disprove formalism by measuring the response of listeners to musical works. The sort of music that Lunacharskii viewed as dangerous to the goals of the revolution was that which expressed a lack of revolutionary sentiment and instead expressed the banal simplicity of the bourgeois class. The solution for this problem was to raise the political awareness of musicians, making them more responsive to the goals and accomplishments of the revolution. Once musicians came to understand these ideas, they would naturally be expressed in the music that was written and performed. There was no outright condemnation of particular musical styles, as every musical style or form had the potential to express socialist content. This was a fundamentally different concept than that which would gain currency by the late 1920s, as RAPM and its ideas gradually

²⁰ Although some of the debates in musical journals at this time are extremely politicized and employ such terminology, it is musical groups and not the Party who employ these terms.

gained predominance. It is also drastically different than the practical realisation of “socialist realism” that appears in the 1930s.

“We are building diversity now. We know that the edifice of culture must be built with many sides, simultaneously, and in various stages. This must be done so that some day the great plan of building socialism will be fulfilled.”

- Anatoly Lunacharskii

The contradictory “hard line” and “soft line” policies towards the arts that existed in the 1920s have also been identified in the musical world.²¹ The “soft-line” approach involved a more liberal policy towards the arts, maintenance of “bourgeois” heritage, and co-existence of conflicting approaches and trends. Lunacharskii’s writings on music fall into this category. In contrast, the “hard-line” approach was that advocated by the iconoclasts in Proletkul’t, as well as later artistic organisations, most notably RAPM in the field of music. These groups demanded direct support from the government and the party (at the expense of other artistic approaches) in their struggle to found a “proletarian culture” that would be easily accessible to the workers.

Fitzpatrick demonstrates that in the course of the 1920s, a “soft-line” policy was generally preferred until 1928, at which time, in correspondence with Stalin’s winning of power, a “hard-line” approach was victorious.²² This would remain true until the formation of the artistic Unions in 1932. While useful for examining government policy

²¹ For a discussion of this concept in relation to literature, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The “Soft” Line on Culture and its Enemies: Soviet Cultural Policy, 1922-27”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2, (June 1954), pp.267-87. Michael S. Fox argues against this division, suggesting that even during NEP government policy was not clearly defined, but had aspects of both “hard” and “soft” policies. However, for the purposes of this paper the delineation is valuable as it reflects two diverse trends within the musical community, each of which fought to receive government recognition..

²² Fitzpatrick also argues that this was most likely not due to any personal preference of Stalin, but offered him the most convenient means of gaining support.

in general terms, this division of “hard” and “soft” lines in music does not offer an adequate explanation of the actual musical trends themselves. The “soft” line was more permissive, but what results did this have in the musical world? What sort of musical organisations appeared under this policy? What kind of music did they support and what views did they express regarding music and politics?

Lunacharskii preferred to argue polemically against what he perceived as errors or shortcomings in the approach of each side rather than imposing government control or demanding a certain type of music. He saw himself as taking a middle road between two extreme positions that he identified in the field of music: the “musical left” and the “musical right”²³. The problem with this application of political terminology to music has already been discussed. However, this division is maintained as it demonstrates Lunacharskii’s own interpretation of the existing musical trends of the 1920s.

On the “musical left” are found such organisations as Proletkul’t, Prokoll (Production Collective of Student Composers) and RAPM. At their most extreme, these groups called for a clean break with the musical traditions of the past, production of music that would be readily accessible to the masses (such as mass songs) and collective work efforts (such as composition by groups of musicians rather than individuals)²⁴. The “musical right” consisted of two primarily separate streams: the traditionalists (who continued to write in the style of nineteenth-century Russian nationalism) and the modernists, represented primarily by the musical organisation ASM (Association of

²³ Lunacharskii himself does not seem to have used the term “musical right”. This comes from RAPM journals. He did differentiate the approach taken by these musicians from that of the “musical left”, however.

²⁴ This idea of collectivism is another concept that was experimented with by both proletarian and avant-garde groups. Arguably the most impressive of these experiments was the conductorless orchestra *Persimfans*, which performed both classical and contemporary compositions with great success. See Schwarz, p. 46-48, for a description of this orchestra’s relatively brief but successful career.

Contemporary Music). In addition to these groups, there were many small musical circles that were formed, particularly in Moscow and Leningrad, that survived for only a brief period of time. Only the longest lasting and most influential groups will be discussed in this paper, but they existed side by side with many others and it was not uncommon for musicians to belong to several groups at one time.

"What is this? Music or politics?"

"Both."

- Rotislav Dubinskii, *Stormy Applause:
Making Music in a Worker's State*

The so-called "musical left" called for a clean break with earlier music, rejecting the heritage of the classical musical tradition. Among these groups may be found members of Proletkul't, Prokoll (formed 1925) and RAPM. As the longest lasting and eventually most influential group in the musical field, RAPM deserves the most attention. It was founded in 1923 and originally consisted of a group of composers who worked for the propaganda department of Agitotdel (the state publishing house). Beginning in 1924, the group began to publish its political platform regarding the role of music in a workers' state.²⁵ In short, the goal of RAPM was the "extension of the hegemony of the proletariat to the music field."²⁶ This echoed the goal of RAPP in the field of literature, a desire that was suppressed by the 1925 Decree on Literature. Most of the composers who belonged to RAPM and Prokoll, particularly in the early years, are forgotten today. Two exceptions

²⁵ Schwarz, p. 54. The publication history of RAPM was inconsistent and its official journal went through a series of name changes: *Muzykalnaia Nov* (1923-24), *Muzyka i Oktiabr* (1926), *Proletarskii Muzykant* (1929-32) and *Za Proletarskuiu Muzyku* (1930-32). See Schwarz, p. 56.

²⁶ Schwarz, p. 56.

are Dmitrii Kabalevskii and Aram Khachaturian, both members of Prokoll, who later joined RAPM.²⁷

A common trait of all three “leftist” groups was the rejection of the musical heritage of the past. Aleksandr Davidenko, a musician and member of Proletkul’t (and later a member of both Prokoll and RAPM), wrote in reference to Tchaikovskii that “He is not understandable to the proletarian masses and belongs for all time to the past, we don’t need anything in him”²⁸. The stance of RAPM (similar to that of Proletkul’t)²⁹ was that much of this music was tainted by bourgeois culture and was therefore useless for the new proletarian class.

Lunacharskii was adamant that this approach was misguided, as much that was of value was to be found in the music of the past, particularly in the music of Beethoven. He insisted that although culture grows out of the class and period when it is produced, it does not necessarily reflect the values of that culture:

It must not be thought that an artist always expresses the bourgeois soul. By his very existence, an artist searches for the resolution of a number of so-called objective problems. Nine-tenths of his emotional life is the same as that of every person. For this reason a work of art, if it is noble and high, touches people of every nation and every class.³⁰

Of course, Lunacharskii goes on to say, the remaining one-tenth of an artistic work can spoil the rest if it strongly depicts a character in opposition to the goals of socialism. It often happens, however, that artists express protest against the bourgeoisie, even when

²⁷ Meier, p.69.

²⁸ Lemaire, p.44.

²⁹ Unlike Proletkul’t, RAPM did accept Beethoven as a legitimate influence, but rejected Tchaikovskii, Scriabin, and most of the Russian nationalists as representatives of bourgeois tendencies. See Amy Nelson, “The Struggle for Proletarian Music: RAPM and the Cultural Revolution”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 59, No.1, (Spring 2000), p. 107 for details.

³⁰ Lunacharskii, “K 40-letiiu deiatel’nosti A. K. Glazunova”, *V mire muzyki*, p .97.

they themselves belong to this class. Therefore, "the proletariat cannot and does not want to deny such art in its entirety"³¹

The theory of Marxism accepts as a fundamental truth the process of gradual historical evolution of society. Each society builds upon the accomplishments of the previous one in order to achieve new levels of development. Thus, at first glance it would seem that the same would hold true with music. There is a complication with this view, however. Lunacharskii argued that as Marxists, they did not recognize an independent development in art or music. Culture is intimately connected to the class from which it springs and reflects the conditions of that society. For this reason, the music that is closest in essence to genuine socialist music is not that which is most contemporary (i.e., recent developments in the West such as atonality and serial music), but that which springs from a time of social upheaval. Lunacharskii argued that the music of Beethoven was closer to true socialist music than current music being written in bourgeois societies as it reflected cultural and societal upheaval.

What was most important to Lunacharskii was not the specific formal techniques of composition that were employed, but the character that the music represented to its audience. He considered the music of Beethoven to be of fundamental importance, as the essence that Beethoven expressed in his music is the struggle (and eventual victory) of humanity against the forces that oppress it.³² Lunacharskii also affirmed the importance of other composers (Scriabin, Chopin, Schumann, etc.) condemning attacks on them from the left.³³ He argued that because of music's unique form of expression, reactionary

³¹ Ibid., p.98.

³² Lunacharskii, "Pochemu nam dorog Betkhoven", *V mire muzyki*, p. 388.

³³ See, for example his essay "Taneev i Skriabin", *V mire muzyki*, pp. 129-145, in response to Artyr Lur'e's attack on Scriabin.

trends were less dangerous than in any other art form. In fact, in this specific case they lose all danger:

But there is such a region, in which all that is harmful . . . , whose strength is not so much revolutionary, but in large measure reactionary (stepping from the bourgeois not forward, but backward or to the side), loses its harmfulness. This is the region of music.³⁴

The essence of the conflict between Lunacharskii and the “Musical Left” over classical musical heritage was not related to the question of the source of the music. Both agreed that it was a product of bourgeois society. Lunacharskii’s point was that great artists may step beyond their class background and create works that are universal in their meaning and appeal. In addition, reactionary trends were not a threat to the aims of the revolution itself because of music’s lack of definable external content. There was much to be gained from the music of the past and relatively little danger from its subversive influence.

The second aspect of Lunacharskii’s struggle with the musical left was opposition to their over-simplification of music. Their goal was to create music that was clear and accessible to the masses. Specifically, Lunacharskii condemned their attempts to attach specific, clearly definable political programs to music. Of course it was important that music be accessible (he accused the musical right or modernists of over-refining music to the point of incomprehensibility), but that did not mean that music should be reduced to the singing of mass songs of propaganda. In Lunacharskii’s view, music was unique among the arts as it “expressed the inner condition of man”³⁵ and offered to its listener a “score of real life”³⁶. Music’s representative ability was fundamentally different than that of the other arts. It did not describe specific images or ideas, but general emotional states

³⁴ Lunacharskii, “K 40-letiiu deiatel’nosti A.K. Glazunova”, *V mire muzyki*, p. 98.

³⁵ Lunacharskii, “Sotsial’nye istoki muzykal’nogo iskusstvo”, *V mire muzyki*, p. 366.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

or character traits. In this sense, he drew close to the interpretation of Plato, Aristotle and also Lao Tzu (whom he quoted): music could help to moralize man.³⁷ It was a mistake to simplify the interpretation of music to the representation of real things or events – instead music offered the listener a general representation of the world in motion.³⁸ The demands of the leftist groups for “realism” in music were therefore pointless:

What is realism in literature and painting? It is, first of all, a language of form, borrowed from direct reality. If we were to approach music so specifically and declare that music must be realistic, then this would mean that we wanted music to be closer to musical noise. Our reality is non-musical. Music stylises it from the very beginning.³⁹

Lunacharskii was also opposed to the idea of simplification of music for a mass audience, recognising that immediate comprehension of the meaning of a work was not a sign of its quality:

... but remember that you should never say “I don't understand, God knows who gives a damn about Beethoven”. You must try to understand. If someone says: I don't like this – he must do everything that is dependent on him so as to hear it a second time – and then will like it. It is the same as if you open *Das Kapital* of Marx and say: I don't understand, I don't like this. This does not mean that he is lower than your level.⁴⁰

In short, Lunacharskii called for the continued study of classical music and composition of complex works, in direct opposition to the beliefs of the musical left, even drawing a comparison between reading Marx and listening to Beethoven.

Lunacharskii's disagreement with the path pursued by the musical left is clear. But what about the so-called “right” – the composers who pursued compositional techniques and ideas more closely connected with developments in the West? It is to this group that we now turn our attention.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 369.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 370.

³⁹ Lunacharskii, “Otvét Komsomol'tsam konservatorii”, *V mire muzyki*, p. 306.

"Music is music, not ideology."

-Nikolai Roslavets, 1920s Russian avant-garde composer

In contradiction to the musical left, there were two fundamentally different approaches that come to be associated with the "musical right": traditionalists, who continued to compose in the manner of the nineteenth century (specifically in the tradition of the Russian nationalist school), and the avant-garde, interested in contemporary musical developments in the West. This term seems to have first appeared in attacks by RAPM and other proletarian groups against both the avant-garde and the traditionalist schools. The primary group for contemporary music was ASM. In terms of rhetoric, the members of ASM connected themselves with the revolution just as the members of RAPM did. They claimed to represent "revolutionaries" in music and as such, considered themselves closest in spirit to the Bolshevik Party.⁴¹

ASM was formed in Moscow in 1923. It was originally conceived of as a national branch of the ISCM (International Society of Contemporary Music), which had been formed a year earlier. A Leningrad branch of the ASM was later formed in 1926, which is generally referred to as LASM. Although there were some differences between these two groups (the Leningrad group, under the leadership of musicologist, music critic and composer Boris Asafiev was generally more radical in the music it promoted), the basic purpose of the two groups was the same: the promotion of contemporary music, both Soviet and Western. Their support of contemporary music made it possible for the works of modern composers such as Hindemith, Bartók, Satie, Schoenberg, Berg, Milhaud and others to be played in the Soviet Union. Many of these composers also visited the country

⁴⁰ Lunacharskii, "Pochemu nam dorog Betkhoven", *V mire muzyki*, p. 391.

⁴¹ This claim was vehemently opposed by RAPM. See Nelson, p. 106.

during the 1920s.⁴² ASM also published a journal, entitled *Sovremennaiia Muzyka*, aimed at exploring new musical trends. Among the Soviet composers who had contact with ASM and had pieces premiered by this group were Miakovskii, Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

Within the avant-garde group, certain “leftist” trends (i.e., the desire to break completely with the musical traditions of the past) also appear. This is particularly true in relation to the Leningrad branch of ASM, which was more radical in its experimentation.

A 1927 LASM brochure states:

What is closer to the proletariat, the pessimism of Tchaikovskii and the false heroics of Beethoven, a century out of date, or the precise rhythms and excitement of Deshevov’s *Rails*? During the playing of Beethoven, the workers were utterly bored, and patiently, with polite endurance, waited for the music to end. But contemporary Soviet compositions aroused contagious emotions among the audience.⁴³

Lunacharskii’s call for a continuation of musical traditions was directed as much against this tendency within the avant-garde as against the representatives of RAPM.

Both the musical right and left recognised that the proletariat was in need of a new and revolutionary kind of music. Each group believed itself to be the true representative of proletarian culture although the musical language advocated by each of these groups was diametrically opposed. The idea that revolutionary ideas in art and revolutionary politics were interrelated was first expressed much earlier than 1927: “The revolution destroys old forms of life. And we destroy old forms of art. It follows that we are revolutionaries and may keep in step with the revolution.”⁴⁴ This concept had also been expressed by Lunacharskii at one point to Prokofiev, when the former was leaving

⁴² Meier, p. 68.

⁴³ Schwarz, p. 53, excerpt from brochure *October and Music*, published by LASM in 1927.

⁴⁴ Tairov, quoted in Meier, p. 64.

Russia: "You are a revolutionary in art. We are revolutionaries in politics. We should work together."⁴⁵ In fact, as Lemaire states, Lunacharskii's policies in music generally gave preference to the avant-garde representatives at the expense of the musical left.⁴⁶

The traditionalists are another clearly definable group within the musical realm of the 1920s.⁴⁷ The most important representatives of this approach were Glazunov and Glière. Although Lunacharskii's approach was generally supportive of this trend also, he did warn against the possibility of music becoming too academic and caught up with classical heritage, thus becoming distant from the people:

We have, so to say, aristocratic musical circles . . . which confirm with great spirit, that this is the only true authentic music, that it not only is not exhausted, but is inexhaustible, that new and great compositions may be created only from the accomplishments of the glorious past.⁴⁸

Although Soviet music had its roots in music of the past, it should not become an aristocratic pastime in the Soviet Union. It had to be linked with the present as well as the past and be comprehensible to the people.

One of the difficulties with Lunacharskii's understanding of formalism is that it is not a particularly useful definition from a bureaucratic point of view. How was music to be correctly judged in relation to its character? Both sides of the debate claimed to be promoting the ideals of the revolution in their music while attacking their opponents, either for "bourgeois formalism" or "banal simplification". Lunacharskii did, however, offer some general suggestions as to the future musical path he believed to be most

⁴⁵ Schwarz, p. 19.

⁴⁶ Lemaire, p. 59.

⁴⁷ These individuals did not actually form a "group" like RAPM or ASM, but their distinctive approach to composition was clearly recognisable and distinctive from either of the other two groups. In this sense, they are referred to as a group, though they did not actively form any musical circle and took no part in the political debate surrounding music.

suitable to Soviet life and comprehensible to the Soviet people. It should also be noted that Lunacharskii himself said that “to hint at some correct line and narrow path of music is not my job”.⁴⁹ The following description of his image of music has been compiled from a number of his speeches and essays. It is not a clearly stated agenda that he attempted to forcefully bring into practice.

The type of music that Lunacharskii suggested as most closely related to the needs of the revolution is surprisingly traditional. He called for composers to combine inspiration from classical musical heritage and from the music of the people, particularly folk songs.⁵⁰ With this, Lunacharskii did in fact differentiate his own view both from that of the proletarian RAPM and the avante-garde ASM. But in actuality, this belief about the path that music should follow corresponded with the inherited tradition of Russian nationalism in music, exemplified by the music and writings of the “Mighty Five” – Balakirev, Cui, Rimskii-Korsakov, Borodin and Mussorgskii.⁵¹ Lunacharskii aligned himself with the Russian traditionalist school rather than either the proletarian or avant-garde groups, particularly as he made a distinction between genuine folk songs (valuable as a source of material) and popular music of the day, such as the tango and foxtrot, which he vehemently condemned.⁵² Thus, he continued to see folk music as a valuable source for future inspiration, while seeking to distance Soviet music from Western influence. In the nineteenth century, Russian folk music was also considered a valuable source for discovering a national musical tradition untainted by the West. In the latter

⁴⁸ Lunacharskii, “Osnovy khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniia”, *V mire muzyki*, p. 186.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 188.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 187.

⁵¹ The influence of the Russian nationalist school continued to be very strong in the early twentieth century, with numerous adherents to this style of composition (most notably Glazunov, professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and composition teacher of the young Dmitrii Shostakovich), which emphasised the incorporation of Russian folk melodies as an inherent part of a national style.

case, it was the development of nationalist sentiment and in the former the development of socialist sentiment that was stressed, but the means that were to be employed were the same.

Lunacharskii did offer suggestions for a future path that Soviet music should follow. He defined it as a middle road between what were seen as “left” and “right” extremes. But in actuality, he showed little originality of thought within Russian cultural tradition and his concept was basically an extension of the approach of the Russian nationalist school, though garbed in Soviet ideology.

As long as Lunacharskii maintained some measure of influence in the political realm, musicians were relatively free in the expression of their ideas, both musically and in print. Throughout the 1920s, however, both ASM and RAPM came to express their musical ideology with increasingly strident political terminology. One of the main defenders of the modernist approach was the composer Nikolai Roslavets. Roslavets was also a writer for the journal *Muzykal'naia kul'tura* and in the pages of this journal he repeatedly attacked the approach of RAPM. He framed his criticism in political terms, reflecting both the increasing politicisation of the musical debate as well as an attempt to question the particular political labels that RAPM was attaching to musical styles:

I am an active proletariat in intellectual work. But I am not a proletariat composer in the sense that I write bad music “for the masses” in the style of Bortnianskii. On the contrary, in this sense I am “bourgeois” in that I consider the proletariat the rightful heir of all previous culture, worthy of the best in music.⁵³

⁵² Lunacharskii, “Sotsial'nye istoki muzykal'nogo iskusstva”, *V mire muzyki*, pp. 374-75.

⁵³ Lemaire, p. 61.

Roslavets goes on to make explicit his distaste for the simplified view of “political music” that RAPM called for:

If we cross out the title “Hymn of Thanksgiving” in Beethoven’s Quartet Op.132 and substitute “Festive Victory Celebration of the Red Army” or “Opening of the Streetcar Line in Baku” – does this in any way change the content of the quartet?⁵⁴

This is almost identical to Lunacharskii’s argument against Komsomol members regarding music’s lack of definable meaning.

RAPM members were equally vehement in their responses, attacking both the musical avant-garde and Lunacharskii, whom they accused of creating government policies that favoured their rivals. In 1927, *Muzyka i Revoliutsiia* (the voice of RAPM) wrote in reference to a concert of new music that “We consider these measures like attacks of musical reactivism, using conditions of NEP in order to create appropriate conditions for a bourgeois rebirth.”⁵⁵ RAPM representatives were particularly vitriolic in their attacks on Roslavets, referring to him as a “petit-bourgeois reaction hiding behind leftist phraseology”⁵⁶ Eventually, changes in the political climate would lead to government partiality toward the proletarian artistic groups. This development was fought by Lunacharskii and their victory came to symbolise the end of artistic freedom in the Soviet Union.

⁵⁴ Schwarz, p. 54.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Lemaire, p. 63.

⁵⁶ Schwarz, p. 54. Roslavets disappeared from musical life after 1929. Even 40 years after his death, an attempt to create an archive of his work at the Glinka museum in Moscow was turned down on the grounds that Roslavets was an “enemy of the people”. Perhaps most ironically, the musical works of Roslavets that have recently come to light show that he was compositionally traditional in his approach. His support of the avant-garde movement was therefore unrelated to his own work as a composer. See Lemaire, p. 62.

"The left has conquered. It proved better to leave."

-Anatoly Lunacharskii, excerpt from diary
(November 16, 1930)

Music as an art was discussed in increasingly political terms in the course of the 1920s. Representatives of both the musical avant-garde and proletarian groups allowed their discourse concerning music to be expressed with reference to political ideology. It was during this time that the terms "left" and "right" clearly emerged in common usage in reference to particular musical styles. Lunacharskii, by and large, supported the avant-garde stream and condemned the over-simplification and iconoclasm of the "musical left". He also insisted that music had emotional meaning or content that, while not strictly political, could influence individuals and was therefore of political import. This idea was shared by many composers who would later be declared formalist. Thus, the dominant concept of music at this time was closely linked to the idea that music expressed certain emotional states of being, but did not express specific events. Formalism was understood as the denial of extra-musical content.

Lunacharskii initially enjoyed a fair degree of influence in political policy toward the arts. This, combined with the fact that music was not considered by the government to be a region of priority in which to establish control, allowed composers a great deal of freedom for experimentation. The 1920s musical scene was thus marked by a great deal of activity and close contact with developments in Western music.

In parallel with the development of avant-garde music, the proletarian representatives developed their own organisations, which tended to be extremely virulent in their condemnation of so-called "bourgeois" attitudes in music. They associated this "bourgeois" attitude with both the avant-garde and the traditionalists. These groups had

relatively little influence initially, but with the change in government policy which saw the end of NEP, the introduction of the first Five-Year plan in the economic realm, and the resignation of Lunacharskii in the cultural realm, the left gradually emerged as the dominant voice in the artistic community.

Chapter Four: Cultural Revolution and the Establishment of a New Artistic Order

“You have unleashed the young comrades of RAPP, giving such rights and privileges to them that they have lost all sense of proportion, lost humility”

-Krasnaia Nov, 1927.

Open letter to Central Committee press department

In 1928, Stalin introduced the first Five-Year Plan, which brought an end to NEP, introduced rapid industrialisation and saw the first of the collectivisation drives in agriculture. At the same time, a struggle within the party leadership was occurring, with attacks on the so-called right faction headed by Bukharin. In tandem with these developments, a demonstrable shift in cultural policy occurred. Between 1928 and 1931, a so-called “cultural revolution” took place. During this time, RAPP succeeded in achieving the dominant position in literature for which it had been striving.

The proletarian groups took the 1928 *Shakhinskoe delo* as a signal that their ideological beliefs were on the ascent. In the spring of 1928, 55 mining specialists and engineers from the Shakhty area of Donbas region were accused of sabotage and conspiracy against the Soviet government. Sheila Fitzpatrick considers this particular incident as a “turning point in Soviet policy toward the intelligentsia.”¹ This event coincided with a change in official government policy towards grain procurement. On a 1928 visit to Siberia, Stalin realised that despite a good harvest, the grain procurements in the region had been small. To combat this hoarding, a more forceful government

¹ Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution in Russia: 1928-32”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (January 1974), p. 39.

approach was required. The idea of class warfare against the rich peasantry (*kulaks*) was re-introduced, despite opposition from the right faction within the party.

The Shakhty trial was viewed as an attempt by Stalin to discredit the right faction within the party. In proving that a conspiracy in fact existed amongst bourgeois specialists, the position of Bukharin in defending the bourgeoisie and (by extension) the peasantry would be discredited.² It was against this political backdrop that the party reopened the question of cultural policy, repudiating in part the 1925 “Decree on Literature” (which had been formulated by Bukharin among others) and reinterpreting the form that the so-called “cultural revolution” was to take. Rather than a gradual approach building upon the accomplishments of the past, the necessity of class warfare and a rejection of bourgeois heritage was to be stressed.³ In May 1928, a decree was issued by the Central Committee’s agitprop department detailing how the new policy would affect culture. Narkompros was criticised for its pandering to the intelligentsia and for promoting bourgeois culture, and a call was issued to give increased control of literary and artistic organisations to proletarian groups.⁴

One decree from this period defines the role of literature as “an instrument for mobilisation of the masses, for actively educating workers in class knowledge in the war against bourgeois influence and petty-bourgeois remnants.”⁵ The approach to cultural policy had shifted from one of encouragement of diversity to one defined in terms of class warfare. The betrayal of the avant-garde movement and the increasing influence of proletarian organisations like RAPP is exemplified by the life of the poet Maiakovskii.

² See Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution in Russia”, pp. 39-41 for a discussion of this trial

³ Ibid, p. 41.

⁴ Fitzpatrick, “The emergence of Glassiskusstvo”, p. 243.

⁵ Lemaire, p. 65.

An ardent supporter of the revolution, Maiakovskii was also one of the leading avant-garde literary figures in the country. In 1929, he abruptly switched artistic loyalties, joining RAPP and openly criticising his previous work as well as the work of other avant-garde writers. Maiakovskii's personal "betrayal" of the avant-garde was short-lived, as on April 14, 1930, he committed suicide. According to Lemaire, "This shot from a revolver brought to an end the utopian hopes, humanitarian and artistic daydreams of the 1920's."⁶ Maiakovskii's fate became symbolic of the fate of the entire avant-garde. His early death, however, saved him from the fate that awaited many of his contemporaries: suppression by the party. Instead, Maiakovskii was christened by Maxim Gorkii as "one of the best, most talented poets of the Soviet era."⁷

Fitzpatrick, who has written at length about cultural policy during this period, asserts that a more leftist approach in the area of culture was not necessarily an inherent aspect of Stalinist policy at this time. Instead, the leftist cultural organisations provided convenient support against the rightist faction with which Stalin was struggling.⁸ These pre-existing proletarian groups suited the ideological approach favoured by Stalin in 1928 and served as useful tools in achieving his goals. RAPP and RAPM had well-established ideological positions in regard to literature and music, respectively. Original party policy had been one of non-involvement, but this changed in 1928 to a more active support of proletarian organisations.

In reference to RAPP, Fitzpatrick is probably correct in her interpretation that this change in cultural policy had more to do with political expediency than any deep-seated

⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

⁷ Meier, p. 163.

⁸ See her "Cultural Revolution in Russia", "Culture and Politics under Stalin: A Reappraisal", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (June 1978), pp. 211-223.

change in ideological approach to culture by the party. In 1932, steps were taken to reign in the leftist forces personified in RAPP. Artistic unions were formed that included former members of both the avant-garde as well as proletarian writers and musicians. A more conciliatory approach in relation to “bourgeois specialists” was again adopted. This suggests that radical proletarianisation of culture was not in itself a goal. Although Fitzpatrick writes at some length about literary policy, she does not address the question of the musical situation between 1928 and 1932 in detail.

Little attention has been paid to RAPM’s dominance in music.⁹ In general, this organisation has simply been viewed as the counterpart of RAPP in the musical realm. The common interpretation in music history textbooks has been that during this time RAPM gained hegemony, smothering the voices of avant-garde musicians.¹⁰ In support of this, comparisons are generally made between RAPP and RAPM. The actual situation surrounding RAPM, however, is more complicated than such an interpretation suggests. As has been demonstrated, the party tended to be less concerned with activities in music than in literature. This attitude is even shown by the manner in which the proletarian organisations were dissolved. A Politburo decree from March 3, 1932 called for a committee consisting of Stalin, Molotov and others to “discuss the questions of RAPP”. No mention is made of other proletarian groups.¹¹ The fate of RAPM has generally been assumed to run parallel to that of RAPP, but the lack of direct party involvement brings this theory into question. If Fitzpatrick is right that proletarian groups provided Stalin

⁹ Schwarz gives no period for RAPM’s dominance, simply stating that the proletariat musicians become increasingly powerful until the founding of the Composers’ Union.

¹⁰ Lemaire, Meier and Schwarz all offer this interpretation.

with convenient allies, this search for supporters does not seem to have extended into the musical realm. A more detailed examination of RAPM's activities during the years of the "cultural revolution" demonstrates that in actual fact, it was never comparable to RAPP in terms of power and influence. The amount of power it exerted over musical life even during the height of the "cultural revolution" is debatable.

The most common view of RAPM as dominating musical life is based on such incidents as the gradual suppression of the two musical journals published by ASM,¹² the "dissolution" of ASM, and the appointment of RAPM representatives to such institutions as the Moscow Conservatory. These events gave rise to an image of musical life suffering under extremist control. Barbara Makanowitsky and Robert Rothstein both describe these years in some detail, emphasizing RAPM's aggressive policies. In 1929, the RAPM representative Pshibueshevskii took control of the Moscow Conservatory, where he banned the music of Chopin, Tchaikovskii, Scriabin and Rachmaninoff.¹³ Pshibueshevskii also called for the banning of chamber music and solo performance and the encouragement of "mass" forms of music making.¹⁴ Jazz and popular music were officially banned or suffered serious censorship.¹⁵ RAPM went so far as to advise composers to write music only in 4/4 time as it was more suitable for marching. Such examples of RAPM's excesses are often repeated in the scholarly literature, both Western and Soviet.

¹¹ "Postanovlenie Politbiuro CC VKPB ob organizatsii komissii Politbiuro po rassmotreniiu voprosov deiatel'nosti RAPPa", *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia*, p. 168.

¹² *Muzykal'naia Kul'tura and Sovremennaia Muzyka*

¹³ Tchaikovskii and Chopin were "degenerate aristocrats", Scriabin an "obscurantist" and Rachmaninoff a "white guard bandit". Stravinskii was also attacked as a "brutal fascist". See Lemaire, p. 66, and Barbara Makanowitsky, "Music to Serve the State", *Russian Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July 1965), p. 266.

¹⁴ Makanowitsky, p. 268.

One of the reasons for this view of RAPM is the influence of personal memoirs and recollections of musicians who personally suffered attacks by RAPM during this period. The continuation of bitter feelings between the rival groups is marked. One musician commented about those years that “all works written by non-members of VAPM [RAPM] were anathematised and declared harmful from a class viewpoint.”¹⁶ The image of RAPM that dominates scholarly literature is thus based primarily on comparisons with the activities of RAPP, personal memoirs and later comments by musicians, RAPM’s ideological pamphlets and journals, and Soviet musicology, which has tended to villainize RAPM excesses that were only brought to an end by “timely” government intervention. Western scholars have often confused the musical-political platform of RAPM with that of other leftist groups, including Proletkul’t and Prokoll. This has led in turn to a confusion as to what RAPM’s ideological platform actually was.

There is no question that RAPM was vehement in its condemnation of both avant-garde and popular music. It was in fact the first group to use the term “formalism” as an epithet against its musical rivals.¹⁷ A recent article by Amy Nelson, however, brings into question the actual amount of influence that RAPM had at any point in its history. Through examination of historical evidence, she contradicts the dominant interpretation of RAPM as RAPP’s musical equivalent. If correct, this interpretation has particular bearing in relation to the question of government policy toward music at the time. It suggests that a coherent approach in the musical realm had still not been defined and that

¹⁵ For a discussion of popular music in the 1920s, see Robert A. Rothstein, “The Quiet Rehabilitation of the Brick Factories: Early Soviet Popular Music and its Critics”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (September 1980), pp. 373-388.

¹⁶ Evg. Gershuni, *Rasskazyvaio o estrade*, (Leningrad 1968), pp. 45-46. Quoted by Rothstein, p. 373.

¹⁷ By the late 1920s and early 1930s RAPM applied this term quite freely to “musicians who did not share their artistic approach”. See *Istoriia Sovremennoi Otechestvennoi Muzyki, Vypusk 2* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Muzyka, 1999), p. 28.

the musical avant-garde still had not been officially condemned by the party. This in turn would place even greater importance on the 1936 *Pravda* article attacking Shostakovich as the source of the first coherent government policy toward music. For this reason, RAPM's activities during the years 1928-32 need to be explored in greater detail.

In her article, Amy Nelson describes RAPM's lack of support from the party and its general weakness in terms of numbers and resources. At best, Nelson argues, RAPM's dominance in the musical world was incomplete. Evidence supporting this claim is quite strong. Although RAPM's modernist rival ASM is often referred to as having been "dissolved" in 1928, in actuality it was reorganised under the name VOSM – The All-Russian Organisation of Contemporary Music (Vserossiiskaiia organisatsiia sovremennaia muzyka) - in July of that year, acquiring Vladimir Blium, a party member and former supporter of RAPM, as its leader. VOSM continued to exist until the formation of the creative unions in 1932.¹⁸ During the years of the cultural revolution, RAPM looked unsuccessfully for support from the recently formed Central Arts Administration (Glaviskusstvo) . Glaviskusstvo consistently called on RAPM to "win over" the avant-garde "fellow travellers" rather than condemn them. Stalin's policy of class war was thus not quickly adapted to musical life.

RAPM was a largely marginalised group during the early 1920s. Not only did it struggle against the avant-garde composers, who had considerably more power and influence under Lunacharskii's policies¹⁹, it also lost a portion of its own members in 1924 when differences in ideological approach led to the formation of ORK – The Union

¹⁸ Nelson, p. 111 VOSM did, however, lose its journal in 1929.

¹⁹ Nikolai Roslavets, discussed in Chapter Three as being a vocal defender of the avant-garde, edited several avant-garde musical journals and also worked as censor in the State Publishing House until losing his position in 1930.

of Revolutionary Composers and Musicians (Ob'edinenie revoliutsionikh kompozitorov i muzykalnikh deiatelei). Nelson explains the causes for this split as RAPM's unacknowledged elitist bias in music. RAPM continued to value the influence of Beethoven and called for music that would abandon popular and modernist styles, but would keep a relatively complex style, inherited from Beethoven. In contrast, ORK believed that mass music should be immediately appealing and understandable to people. In other words, RAPM felt that the masses had been polluted by "petty-bourgeois" taste and they needed to be re-educated to appreciate true proletarian music. ORK believed that the initial response of workers to a song dictated whether or not it was proletarian.²⁰ This splinter group continued to oppose RAPM until October 1929. Even as late as March 1929, a new musical organisation called Muzyka-massam was formed, with the self-defined mandate of popularising music among the workers. RAPM also fought against this group (which contained far more members), attempting to define itself as the ideological leader of Muzyka-massam, a claim that was vehemently denied by the latter.²¹ RAPM's position was further weakened by the fact that even after the beginning of the cultural revolution, it did not receive official party support. This is a striking contrast to the position of RAPP in literature, as in December 1928 the Central Committee issued a resolution that gave official preference to the publication of works by proletarian writers.

The All-Russian Musical Conference was held June 16-20, 1929, with the intention of establishing proletarian guidance in music as it had been in other cultural areas. It was greeted by musicians with demands that the government clarify its policy

²⁰ See also Schwarz, p.56-57.

²¹ Nelson, p.112-113

towards music. RAPM's victory at this conference was muted at best. One of the government representatives, while admitting that the policy of RAPM was "close" to that of the party, warned that they must not identify themselves with any one group. RAPM's attacks against both the avant-garde and ORK were also censured by party representatives, who once again called for a more conciliatory approach.²²

Although RAPM's victory at this conference was far from clear, it did emerge with the clearest party mandate of any musical organisation. Shortly after the conference, ORK and Prokoll both ceased to exist, as their members chose to merge with RAPM. In this way, RAPM gained valuable support from several talented musicians and composers, which it had previously lacked.²³ Despite its victory over its proletarian opponents, RAPM still faced criticism from the avant-garde, which continued to fight against the former's dominance.

One example of the contradictory policy pursued by the party in the musical realm is demonstrated by the modernist opera *The Nose* by the young Leningrad composer Dmitrii Shostakovich. This piece, based on the short story of the same name by Nikolai Gogol and composed in 1928, was premiered in Leningrad at the State Academic Mali Opera Theatre on January 18, 1930.²⁴ This opera is unabashedly modernist in its musical language. Not surprisingly, it was virulently attacked by RAPM representatives, who considered the work to be saturated with the "bourgeois influence" against which they were fighting.²⁵ Despite their objections, the work was premiered and quickly

²² Nelson, p. 114.

²³ One of RAPM's continuing difficulties was its lack of talented composers to create suitable proletarian music. While extremely effective at criticizing other groups, its members had produced very little music of their own.

²⁴ Levon Hakobian, *Dmitrii Shostakovich: Nos*, in Mariinskii Theatre program publication, April 2004.

²⁵ Meier, p. 110

became the subject of heated debate within the musical community.²⁶ Even such a major party figure as Sergei Kirov attended one of the performances of the opera. Although he did not personally like the work, he refused to censure its modernist tendencies, stating that “you cannot be afraid of taking risks if you are striving towards a large goal”, i.e., the creation of Soviet opera.²⁷ This surprisingly open approach by a prominent party member toward a musical work that RAPM was actively propagandising against shows that the latter’s influence in 1930 was not as strong as many accounts of the period would suggest. The very fact that the opera was performed at all was in contradiction to demands made by RAPM for its cancellation. The opera was performed a total of sixteen times in the course of 1930, after which it was removed from the theatre repertoire. Official condemnation of the work only came during the 1936 attacks on Shostakovich, when it was condemned as “the embodiment of the most damning extremes of bourgeois ‘contemporaneity’ in the Soviet musical culture of the 1920’s.”²⁸ The opera continued to hold this dubious distinction until its 1974 revival in Moscow. In spite of its fate, *The Nose* remains an important example of the fact that RAPM dominance was not powerful enough to prevent the preparation and performance of a work that they vehemently opposed.

It is only during the course of 1930 that RAPM can truly be considered to have gained dominance in the musical realm. Until this time, Glassiskusstvo had pursued a relatively traditional policy, preferring to encourage a conciliatory approach between

²⁶ Attacks on the opera appeared in the journals *Rabochii i teatr* and *Proletarskii Muzykant*, while one of the most avid defenders of *The Nose* was the musicologist Ivan Sollertinskii. For a discussion of “The Nose”, its composition and the musical discussion surrounding the opera, see Meier, pp. 98-115, and Lemaire, pp. 66-70.

²⁷ Lemaire, p. 67.

²⁸ Mariinskii Theatre program publication, p. 18. Its second production in St. Petersburg and its premiere at the Mariinskii Theatre did not occur until April 10, 2004.

RAPM and the avant-garde rather than confrontation.²⁹ In 1930, however, official policy became more supportive of RAPM's ideology in music, due in part to a redefinition of the role of art by the Communist Party.

During the Sixteenth Party Congress, which was held in June-July 1930, it was resolved that the arts should be a utilitarian tool for the party. As the group whose ideological platform was best able to support this approach, it was natural to expect RAPM to gain more power and political support. The literary avant-garde was already suffering under RAPP domination. Additionally, the official representative of the avant-garde VOSM, Vladimir Blium, abandoned the idea that Soviet music should reflect the sentiment of the revolution in mood and character if not in clearly defined content. He criticized RAPM's ideological approach, arguing that music without text was nothing more than mathematical relationships, without political import.³⁰ This did not fit well with party demands that music should be an instrument of the revolution. This definition of formalism was closer to that offered by RAPM than to that supported by Lunacharskii.

Internal problems within RAPM, however, made it extremely difficult for the organisation to fulfill its self-proclaimed task of providing true "proletarian" music. An official denunciation of Blium and VOSM by the party in 1931 turned into an attack on RAPM also, with political leaders criticising the latter for producing large amounts of ideological pamphlets but very little music. Calls for RAPM musicians to work with their "fellow travellers" in creating a true proletarian musical art form rather than continuously

²⁹ Nelson, p. 111.

³⁰ V. Blium, "Ob odnom levom zagibe" in *Vechernaia Muzyka*, No. 151 (July 3, 1930), p. 3, quoted in Nelson, p. 123.

squabbling with them over political ideology were also repeated.³¹ In March 1931, the first official All-Russian Conference of RAPM was held, where the shortcomings of the organisation were again discussed. The failures of the musical organisation were stressed through comparisons with the far more successful RAPP.

Like RAPP, RAPM was officially disbanded on April 23, 1932 by the Central Committee's resolution on Artistic Organisations. In actual fact, however, and in contrast to RAPP, RAPM's position had been far less dominant throughout the years of the cultural revolution. There are various possible explanations for this failure. As Nelson points out, RAPM never received official party support in the way that RAPP did. This limited RAPM's influence in musical circles. Nelson suggests that the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the party stemmed from RAPM's failure to produce a noticeable body of "proletarian compositions" that could be used by the party. However, this argument goes both ways. If the party had more actively supported RAPM, it is possible that more talented musicians and composers would have tackled the problem of composition of "proletarian" works that suited the group's ideology. Additionally, a consensus about what kind of music was appropriate might have been reached. In the existing situation, RAPM members expended most of their energy battling against modernist and popular musical styles without support from the party. The main criticism that was aimed against RAPM by the party at this time was not the low quality of compositions it produced, but rather the lack of compositions. It is true that the ideological demands of RAPM limited both the type of music that could be written and the potential for creativity within an approved style. But it seems more likely that what stifled musical creativity at this time

³¹ Transcripts of portions of this debate were published in *Proletarskii muzykant*, No.1 (1931). See also Nelson, p. 127.

was the combination of RAPM's aggressive attacks on both modern and popular music, and the lack of a clear compositional approach that was supported by the party.

RAPM critics were as outspoken in their attacks on compositions by their own members as those of their rivals, so that even within the organisation there was no clearly defined musical approach that was acceptable. A work could be attacked for its poor choice of text (or lack of text) or for its setting of an appropriate text in a mood that was too "light-hearted" and showed a lack of respect for the revolutionary message. A further complication was that RAPM judgements on these issues were sometimes accepted and sometimes ignored by government organisations. Musicians thus received mixed messages from RAPM and from the government itself, which only served to further complicate the situation.

Relative government indifference towards musical life at this time certainly played a role in the continuing struggles between compositional approaches. Ironically, in the 1932 decree and other documents referring to the dissolution of RAPM, the group consistently was referred to erroneously as RAMP.³² The lack of a clearly defined "proletarian" style was not due only to a lack of government support that would have allowed one group to gain hegemony and dictate what was an appropriate style. The fundamental difficulty was related to music itself and returns to the questions surrounding formalism and programmatic music.

Music as an art form is extremely difficult to define in terms of ideology. RAPM's attempts to define "proletarian" music foundered on this very problem. Like

³² See "O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii" no. 6 and no. 9 in *Vlast' i khudozhestvenaia intelligentsiia*, pp. 172, 175.

Lunacharskii, RAPM drew on the Platonian/Aristotilean understanding of music as something that influenced character and behaviour. Jazz music was condemned because it had a harmful effect on character while contemporary Western art music was suspect as the product of a bourgeois society.

This condemnation of jazz music differs little in essence from Plato's condemnation of certain modes and rhythms. However, RAPM failed to clearly define any acceptable genres within which composers could work. Ideology was most clearly expressed by means of a text, so mass songs were among the most prolific genres cultivated by RAPM. This is a far cry from the major instrumental works of Beethoven, which RAPM held up as inspiration. Thus, while supporting theoretically the concept that it was music itself that influenced character, in practice RAPM members found it easier to employ texts that would give their work political import than to create a genuinely proletarian instrumental genre.

The difference between RAPM's and Lunacharskii's approaches came not from the understanding of music's goal or power, which they agreed upon, but in attempting to pinpoint the moods and ideas expressed. Because RAPM attempted to precisely define the political meaning of a work (an approach Lunacharskii had considered futile), it needed some clear method with which to do this. The linking of specific styles with clearly definable ideological meaning was far easier to do than Lunacharskii's approach, which required every musical work to be assessed on its own merits regardless of its compositional style.

From the beginning, RAPM had a tendency to simplify the debate surrounding music to the approval of a few genres, primarily mass songs with revolutionary texts.

Music of the nineteenth century, such as that of Beethoven, Brahms and Mussorgskii, was also made acceptable due in part to the possibility of drawing biographical parallels demonstrating that the political/ideological views of these composers were acceptable. Composers who were politically “suspect” such as Tchaikovskii, Scriabin and Rachmaninoff were rejected despite the fact that they continued to write in the same Romantic tradition of composition employed by the first group. This approach left composers extremely limited in their choice of both subject and style as anything that could not be clearly defined as revolutionary in subject or that showed the influence of contemporary Western music was immediately suspect. Under such restraints, the relative lack of productivity of RAPM composers is not surprising.³³ Their sources of inspiration and choice of subject matter were too limited to allow creativity to develop.

Like Lunacharskii, RAPM started from the belief that music should express appropriate moods or sentiments. Here any similarity between the two approaches ends. With RAPM the idea that “modern” and “bourgeois” were synonymous gained currency. This idea eventually became entrenched within Soviet thought, RAPM’s legacy to its musical descendents.³⁴ One of the distinguishing characteristics between contemporary Soviet and East European music and contemporary Western music is the more traditional musical language employed by the former. This preference for a more traditional style was likely a result of this linking of the concepts “bourgeois” and “decadence” with

³³ RAPM composers avoided larger genres entirely. The few attempts that were made to compose larger-scale works (operas, symphonies) also met with vehement attacks from RAPM’s musical critics. See Nelson, p. 124 .

³⁴ This point is also recognised by Sheila Fitzpatrick, who writes that “RAPM was but the first articulation of puritanical, anti-western, anti-modernist tendencies in Soviet musical life that resurfaced with more official support during the 1936 ‘Lady MacBeth’ campaign and the ritualized ‘anti-formalist’ witchhunt of

modernist compositional techniques. During RAPM's time, this understanding had not yet become official party line but the basis upon which later policy would be built had been laid.

Even at the height of its powers, RAPM fell victim to the problem of defining true "proletarian" music. Attempts to delineate what was acceptable as "Soviet music" would plague the organisation that replaced RAPM in the musical world: the Union of Composers. In the course of the 1930s, the term "socialist realism" was coined to refer to the creative style to which Soviet art should adhere.

But shall our superintendence go no further, and are the poets only to be required by us to express the image of the good in their works, on pain, if they do anything else, of expulsion from our State? Or is the same control to be extended to other artists, and are they also to be prohibited from exhibiting the opposite forms of vice and intemperance and meanness and indecency in sculpture and building and the other creative arts; and is he who cannot conform to this rule of ours to be prevented from practicing his art in our State, lest the taste of our citizens be corrupted by him?

- Plato, *The Republic*, Book III

The formation of the artistic unions in 1932 marked the end of the "cultural revolution" and its call for class war. Instead, cooperation between proletarian and modernist artists was to be the official policy. Both these groups were represented in the unions. These unions soon came to be the dominating force in artistic life. They were responsible for deciding what would be published and performed. When a composer had completed a new work (or was in the process of composing it), he would perform it for

1948", *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 189.

union members. It was their responsibility to decide if the work was acceptable or not. Because of the controlling position the unions came to have, the fact that their formation was initially welcomed as heralding an era of greater freedom of artistic expression is somewhat surprising. However, if one considers the extreme limits on creative expression imposed by the ideology of artistic groups like RAPP and RAPM, this attitude is far more comprehensible.

In order to aid artists in creating what would be considered appropriate or suitable works, some sort of concept was required to clarify what Soviet art should strive toward.³⁵ This concept was defined by Andrei Zhdanov at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, which took place in Moscow in August 1934. The model for this approach in the literary realm was Maxim Gorkii. The concept of “socialist realism” drew on the tradition of “critical realism”, where writers described the existing injustices of society. Although “critical realism” included many works that were high artistic achievements, its focus on depicting the negative could not meet the needs of the new socialist society. The depiction of the shortcomings of society had to give way to a more positive vision of the socialist future:

The basic and main theme of pre-revolutionary literature was the drama of the individual, to whom life seemed cramped, who felt himself as superfluous to society... or made peace with the society that was hostile to him, or sank into drunkenness or suicide... In the USSR, the leadership of the worker-peasant calls for the building of a new culture of the entire mass population – from this it follows that responsibility for mistakes . . . is laid upon each and every one of us.... Socialist Realism confirms events like acts, like creations . . . , joy in its victory over the strength of nature . . . , joy in the great happiness to live on the earth, which it wants to completely rework, in conformity with the continuous

³⁵ Although they had lost influence, one aspect of the proletarian concept remains: art should be utilitarian, i.e., it should serve to promote the goals of the revolution. Of course this idea had also been promoted by some avant-gardists in the 1920s. The idea that art could exist separately from political ideology had been completely abandoned by this point.

growth of its demands, as the wonderful dwelling of humanity, united in one family.³⁶

In practice, this meant that the duty of Soviet writers was to glorify the accomplishments of the Soviet government. Rather than focusing on negative aspects of life, the positive should be stressed. In this way, literature would aid in the building of socialism. The oft-repeated slogan of Stalin, that “Writers are the engineers of the human soul”³⁷ reflects the role that was assigned to literature at this time. The idea that “socialist realism” should reflect positive images of life was the fundamental concept that composers attempted to apply to music. The Composers’ Union soon came to struggle with the same difficulties that RAPM had: the difficulty in precisely defining musical content.

Throughout the 1930s the government focus continued to be overwhelmingly centred on literature. The other artistic unions were expected to follow the lead of the Writers’ Union, adapting the concept of socialist realism to their particular art forms. The first official congress of the Composers’ Union was only held in 1948 – sixteen years after the organisation had been founded and fourteen years after the first congress of the Writers’ Union. But in the absence of such a meeting, how was expression of this new, positive outlook to be found?

RAPM’s virulent attacks against modernism gave way to a more permissive environment. The idea that “formalism” and “modernism” were interrelated terms was not yet dominant within the Soviet view, at least amongst the musical community. The new officially advocated artistic approach was that of “socialist realism”. Early attempts to define “socialist realism” in the musical context dominated the discussion on the pages of *Sovetskaia Muzika*. These early attempts failed to establish any concrete guidelines,

³⁶ Geir Kh’etso, pp. 274-75.

however. Some composers favoured a more modernist approach linked to the contemporary music of the West, while others continued to support RAPM – like approaches. The confusion over the term was noted by the Western musicologist Slonimsky in 1944:

In practical composition, it is still very difficult to determine what constitutes Socialist Realism, and lengthy discussions on the subject at the meetings of the Union of Soviet Composers, and in the musical press, underline the uncertainty of the term.³⁸

The Composers' Union faced the same difficulty as that encountered by musicians in the 1920s – the problem of expressing ideological ideas in a musical context. There was, however, one fundamental difference in the early 1930s – the absence of a powerful government figure to recognise music's independence from, and stylisation of, non-musical reality. As Lemaire notes, "This was an insolvable problem, which had been clearly identified by Lunacharskii ten years ago . . . but Lunacharskii had died two years prior to these musical conferences . . . and had long been laid in the ground and forgotten."³⁹

Ironically, the topic that musicians most concerned themselves with at this time was arguably the most abstract of musical forms – the symphony. Discussions regarding the creation of new, programmatic symphonies were the centre of attention. Many union members spoke out against the harmful impact of Western art music on the symphonic form, but there were still dissident voices to be heard. One of the most vocal of these was Dmitrii Shostakovich, who suggested in 1935 that rather than condemning contemporary

³⁷ Ibid., p. 272.

³⁸ Nicholas Slonimsky, "Soviet Music and Musicians", *Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, (December 1944), p. 7.

³⁹ Lemaire, p. 79.

Western music, seminars should be arranged so that Soviet musicians could familiarize themselves with recent musical developments.⁴⁰

Up to January 1936, no clearly defined musical style had received government approval. Some scholars have suggested that the 1935 proposal of Shostakovich that Soviet musicians study contemporary Western music was naïve and showed a failure to recognize that government policy in the arts had already irrevocably changed. This assessment seems unfair. Shostakovich was not the only musician to make such statements at this time. Additionally, the 1936 *Pravda* article seems to have been intended as a message not only to the musical community but to the cultural intelligentsia as a whole. As this incident was a turning point in Shostakovich's personal career, the article and its impact must be examined within a biographical context.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.79.

Chapter Five: Dmitrii Shostakovich and the Tightening of Government Policy

There is no music without ideology as a composer always expresses political concepts in his music either knowingly or unknowingly.

D. Shostakovich, *New York Times*, 1931.

The first four sections of this thesis introduced the problem of the interrelationship of politics and music, both in a general historical sense, and in the specific Soviet case of 1917 to 1936. This section re-addresses the Soviet case, this time from the viewpoint of one composer, Dmitrii Shostakovich, who was born and educated during the years in question. Due to the overwhelming number of biographical studies of Shostakovich that are available, a detailed overview of his life would be redundant.¹ A very brief summary is therefore sufficient to situate the composer in the context of the musical world of the 1920s and 1930s. More detailed information regarding the composer's life can be found by consulting one of the biographies listed in the bibliography to this paper.

Dmitrii Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg on September 12, 1906 (old style). His father, Dmitrii Boleslavovich, was a chemist who worked as an assistant to the famous Mendeleev. His mother, Sofia Vasil'eva, had been a piano student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Dmitrii's family had a history of political involvement – his grandfather (Boleslav Petrovich) had been exiled to Siberia for revolutionary activity and had encouraged his children to be politically involved while they were studying at the St.

¹ Sofia Khentova, the primary Soviet/Russian era biographer of Shostakovich has published at least fourteen different volumes dealing in great detail with practically every period of the composer's life. For purely factual reference about events in the composer's life, these remain the primary reference sources.

Petersburg State University.² One of Boleslav's friends wrote of him that he continued to "consider himself connected with the 1860s" and the revolutionary activity of that time.³

Shostakovich showed an early aptitude for music and was soon enrolled as a piano and composition student at the conservatory. The young composer's first works were decidedly influenced by the revolution and events he witnessed in Petrograd. One of his first compositions was a piece entitled "Funeral March in Memory of a Victim of the Revolution" and referred to an incident that he witnessed in July 1917 – the killing of a child by a police officer on Nevskii Prospekt.⁴ Shostakovich also personally witnessed Lenin's speech given at the Finland Station upon his return to Russia in April 1917, an experience that the composer later declared to have had a strong impact upon him.

Life in Petrograd (later Leningrad) during the early 1920s was extremely difficult for the young musician and his family, particularly after the death of Dmitrii Boleslavovich in 1922. As a result of his extraordinary talent, Shostakovich's teacher Glazunov personally requested Anatoly Lunacharskii and Maxim Gorkii to intervene and include his name on the list of "workers in science and the arts" who would receive a living stipend from the government. Shostakovich's name was duly included.⁵ At this time, Shostakovich also took work as a theatre pianist, providing music for silent movies. Although he hated this work, it undoubtedly exposed him to a wider range of musical styles than his studies at the conservatory alone could have done.

Shostakovich was propelled to international recognition (if not fame) with the premiere of his first symphony on May 12, 1926 at the Large Hall of the Philharmonic in

² S.M. Khentova, *Shostakovich v Petrograd-Leningrad*, (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1979), pp. 5-8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Leningrad.⁶ The German conductor Bruno Walter gave the European premiere of the work in Berlin almost one year later (May 5, 1927), and Leopold Stokovsky conducted the North American premiere in Philadelphia in November 1928.⁷

This success unquestionably drew the attention of the Communist Party to the young composer, as he received an official commission to write a work to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Revolution in 1927. This piece became Shostakovich's Second Symphony, which bore the subtitle "To October". While still a student at the conservatory, Shostakovich's compositional style began to grow more and more experimental, reflecting the influence of Western contemporary music, a fault that was criticized by his composition teacher Maximilian Steinberg. On January 24, 1924, Steinberg noted in his diary that Shostakovich "has begun to write in a leftist style".⁸ Two such experimental pieces are his Piano Sonata No.1 and *Aphorisms* (both composed for piano). The Second Symphony continued the experimental phase of Shostakovich's compositional development that had come to the fore in the *Aphorisms* and included the use of a factory whistle in the symphony. It also incorporated a proletarian text that had been provided with the commission to write the symphony. Shostakovich complained about the lack of artistic quality of the text by Aleksandr Bezymenskii, but dutifully included it in his work. The Leningrad premiere was attended by such party luminaries as M. I. Kalinin, V. V. Kuibyshev, A. V. Lunacharskii and G. V. Chicherin. It was also this

⁶ Ibid, p.41

⁷ Ibid, pp.42-43.

⁸ M. Steinberg, "Shostakovich v dnevnikakh M.O. Shteinberga", publikatsiia i komentarii Ol'gi Dansker in *Shostakovich: Mezhdue mgnoveniem i vechnost'iu*, (Saint Petersburg: Kompositor, 2003), p.86. For Steinberg, unlike Lunacharskii, "leftist" refers to the modernist rather than the proletarian style.

symphony that first brought Shostakovich to the attention of Leningrad Party leader S. M. Kirov.⁹

Shostakovich's major compositions of the late 1920s and early 1930s include his first opera (*The Nose*), based on the short story by Gogol, and several *ballets* (*Zolotoi Vek*, *Bolt*) which have decidedly proletarian story lines. There is no question at this time of conflict between Shostakovich and the party. In fact, several party members took an active interest in the creative development of the young composer, most notably Kirov and Marshal Tukhashevskii. By the end of the 1920s, Shostakovich had already established himself as one of the leading young composers of the Soviet Union.

Shostakovich has sometimes been cited as having been a member of ASM or LASM (the Leningrad branch) in the 1920s. In actual fact, Shostakovich never belonged to either one. This confusion stems from the fact that it was ASM that was responsible for the premiere of several of Shostakovich's compositions.¹⁰ But as Laurel Fay points out in her article "Shostakovich, LASM and Asafiev", if Shostakovich was not a member, this was most likely due to his youth and the fact that ASM was originally centred in Moscow. Shostakovich's membership (or absence thereof) does not alter the undeniable impact that ASM had on the young composer. It was due to the activities of ASM that many contemporary works by Soviet and foreign composers were performed in Soviet Russia. Acquaintance with this music had a definite influence in the development of Shostakovich's compositional style.

Despite an affinity for ASM and modern compositional techniques in general, it is difficult to place Shostakovich definitively into one musical "camp" or another. He drew

⁹ Khentova, p.49.

¹⁰ Including the experimental *Aphorisms*. See Khentova, p. 47.

close to RAPM for a time, while composing music for film and later orchestrated two choruses by Davidenko (a composer and member of Prokoll/RAPM).¹¹ The very diversity of approaches in Shostakovich's early music makes it difficult to classify stylistically. He had written pieces that were praised by the modernists (*The Nose*, *Bolt*), by RAPM (the Second "*October*" and Third "*May Day*" Symphonies) and by traditionalists (the Cello Sonata).¹²

Nevertheless, the diversity of his compositional style could only have led Shostakovich to view the increasingly stringent demands of RAPM in the early 1930s negatively. For this reason, it is not surprising that he expressed satisfaction with the 1932 decree that dissolved the organization and saw the creation of the Composers' Union. At the time he criticised RAPM's failure to support its "fellow-travellers" (a term which RAPM members had applied to Shostakovich), and called for "the removal of the primacy of mass songs" and for "battle with leftist vulgarism".¹³ Shostakovich's satisfaction soon led to frustration as he, like other composers of the time, struggled to define the concept of "socialist realism" in music.

In the years following the creation of the union, Shostakovich was outspoken in his opinion that it was necessary for Soviet composers to study the music being written by contemporary Western composers rather than condemning what they did not understand. He also criticized the predilection shown by Soviet composers for "programmatic" music, or works connected with film or theatre. While admitting that he

¹¹ Meier, p. 69.

¹² Schwarz, p. 120.

¹³ Meier, p. 153.

himself was equally guilty of this fault, Shostakovich dismissed the importance of much of his work in this field:

The only composition, that may, in my opinion, pretend to “occupy a place” in the development of Soviet musical culture is the May 1st Symphony, not looking at the numerous shortcomings of that work. I don’t want to say that all of the rest of what I have written is not suitable for anywhere. But all the rest is connected with the theatre and does not have an independent form.¹⁴

This was not an isolated problem that Shostakovich saw in his own work, but something he considered to be a crisis in Soviet music in general:

It is no secret to anyone, that in the 14th year since the October Revolution, the musical front is in a catastrophic condition. For this situation, it is we composers who must answer.¹⁵

The solution offered by Shostakovich for this problem was to turn away from the dominant musical approach of the time, which was immediately connected with the theatre. Instead, composers should adopt a musical form with fewer extra-musical connotations - the symphony:

Thus, I clear the road for myself to a large symphony, dedicated to the 15th anniversary of the October Revolution. And I announce to all my future “commissioners” from dramatic theatre and film that I have broken away from this musical front for the next five years.¹⁶

This was an important moment as it marked Shostakovich’s stance in regard to the question of programmatic and absolute music in the early 1930s. He called for a moving away from the simplistic approach inherited from RAPM that connected political ideology with a few simple formulas (i.e., the setting of revolutionary texts and the use of folk songs). Instead, he called for composers to turn their attention toward more “serious”

¹⁴ “Deklaratsiia obiazannosti kompozitora”, *Rabochii i Teatr*, reprinted in full in Meier, pp. 138-140.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 140.

musical forms. This renewed involvement with symphonic forms also saw an increased interest in the compositional accomplishments of contemporary Western composers.¹⁷

Shostakovich's admiration for contemporary Western composers was indisputably influenced by his close friendship with Ivan Sollertinskii, a musicologist/linguist/historian and truly one of the most dynamic figures of the Leningrad musical scene of the late 1920s- mid-1930s. A polyglot who knew over 50 languages, Sollertinskii worked for the Leningrad Philharmonic, choosing concert programs, writing articles and giving lectures on music history.¹⁸ His close friendship and the high regard in which he was held by Shostakovich was acknowledged by the latter in an obituary written after Sollertinskii's death in 1944: "There is no longer among us a musician of such talent, no longer a comrade so cheerful, honest, well-wishing, no longer do I have a best friend."¹⁹ Shostakovich dedicated his second Piano Trio to the memory of Sollertinskii.

Sollertinskii's particular area of interest was Western music, especially symphonism. He held Brahms and Mahler in great regard, and was in fact responsible for introducing Shostakovich to the music of the latter. In addition to giving lectures, Sollertinskii wrote a vast number of articles relating to musical history, form and style.²⁰ They reflected Sollertinskii's view of the path that Soviet music should take. Of particular interest in this regard is his 1935 speech relating to the development of Soviet symphonism.

¹⁷ This view had already been voiced by musicologist Boris Asafiev in 1927, but appears with renewed vigour in the early 1930s after the dissolution of RAPM.

¹⁸ D. Shostakovich, "Vospominaniia", *Pamiati Sollertinskogo: Vospominaniia, materialy, issledovaniia*, (Leningrad: Sovetskii Kompozitor, 1978), p. 104.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 104.

²⁰ These remain, for the most part, untranslated into English.

In this speech, Sollertinskii attacked the idea that he feared was coming to dominate the Composers' Union:

I would like to talk about one tendency that seems to me to be dangerous and which has slipped into discussions. This is the striving towards subject, anecdotal, programmatic, literary and other such symphonic music: "All the same, somehow, sometime, at some higher stage, we need programmatic symphonic music!"... It seems to me that there is a sickness here, that within the connection with vocal, anecdotal elements, pure instrumental forms will seem to be abstract.²¹

Sollertinskii argued that the connecting of instrumental and vocal music was actually not new at all, but had appeared at numerous times in musical history. For this reason, it was erroneous for Soviet composers to claim this as their own particular invention, as some were wont to do. Sollertinskii was also concerned that this over-fascination with programmatic content would lead to instrumental forms that did not have a specific external meaning being considered as "abstract".

Under debate within the Union of Composers at this time was the question of how music was to serve the revolution. In particular, the question of how the concept of "socialist realism" should be applied to music was openly discussed. The old question of the relationship between music and party ideology again came to the forefront. The approach of RAPM, whereby meaning was imparted to music through a revolutionary text or topic, did not disappear with the dissolution of the organization. Sollertinski criticized the tendency to equate formalism with "abstract" musical form that had earlier appeared in RAPM attacks against the avant-garde.

In contrast to connecting symphonies with clearly defined programs, Sollertinskii called for increased study of the achievements of the great symphonists of the West: Beethoven, Berlioz, Brahms and Mahler, as well as those directly influenced by the latter:

And finally, a large number of the Western compositional intelligentsia draw from Mahler and his methods. One of the most notable representatives is Alban Berg, the creator of the great, tragic, socially rich opera “Wozzeck”. This is a very important moment, which should not be scorned. We must enlarge the frame of the very narrow ring within which we work. Of course, Tchaikovskii. Of course, Beethoven. But we must also question the fate of West European symphonism.²²

This same thought was echoed by Shostakovich on numerous occasions:

We, unfortunately, know Western symphonism very poorly I think that . . . the Union of Composers must organise a seminar. We need to become more deeply and more seriously acquainted with the musical culture of the West, for there is much that is instructive and interesting there!”²³

Soon after this 1935 speech, this stance taken by Sollertinskii came under attack by the party, in combination with the condemnation of Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth*.

Sollertinskii himself was labelled the “troubadour of formalism”.

Like Sollertinskii, Shostakovich was skeptical about the approach of defining music according to specific, external meaning:

When a critic, in *Rabochii i teatr* or *Vechernaia krasnaia gazeta*, writes that in such-and-such a symphony Soviet civil servants are represented by the oboe and the clarinet, and Red Army men by the brass section, you want to scream!²⁴

Shostakovich did set revolutionary texts to music and used ideologically “acceptable” stories as the basis for his ballets, but his stance on the question of the relationship between ideology and music remained much closer to that of ASM than to that of other groups; music could reflect certain moods or characters, but should not be reduced to simple depiction of extra-musical elements. It should be noted that this was not equivalent to the concept of formalism as defined by RAPM, but was closer to the idea of

²¹ I. Sollertinskii, “Vystuplenie na diskussii 1935 goda o sovetskom simfonizme”, *Pamiatii Sollertinskogo*, pp. 191-92.

²² Ibid., p. 193.

²³ Meier, p. 168.

²⁴ Dmitrii Shostakovich, “Sovetskaia mizikalniaia kritika otstayot” in *Sovetskaia Muzyka*, No. 3, (1933), p. 121.

absolute music (or Lunacharskii's definition of formalism). Shostakovich never denied that music had political and/or ideological implications, rather he objected to the simplification of musical meaning to a clearly definable extra-musical content.

"This musical tragedy will become the first classical Soviet opera."
Marshal Mikhael Tukhashevskii
about *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, 1934

The fate of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* marked the beginning of a new era in Soviet music. It resulted in the first blatant interference of the Communist Party in musical life and for this reason deserves special attention. Shostakovich began work on the opera sometime during 1930 and completed it on December 17, 1932. Its creative genesis thus overlaps the end of RAPM dominance and the formation of the Composers' Union. Originally conceived as the first part of a series of operas that would celebrate Soviet heroines²⁵, *Lady Macbeth* was based on a short story of the same title by Nikolai Leskov. Several aspects of the plot were altered in order to make the heroine, Katerina Ivanovna, a more palatable character and to turn the story into a condemnation of tsarist-era society and values. The opera was simultaneously premiered in both Leningrad and Moscow in January 1934. The premiere aroused a great deal of interest amongst the musical public, as Shostakovich had gained a certain reputation as the "enfant terrible" of Soviet music, due in part to the vigorous debates that had surrounded his earlier works.²⁶ Shostakovich's music had both been condemned as "bourgeois" and lauded as the future path of Soviet music. Thus, the premiere of *Lady MacBeth* could not but be a major cultural event.

²⁵ Shostakovich: "Lady Macbeth is the first part of a trilogy I have conceived, dedicated to the situation of Russian women in different eras of Russian history." Quoted in Meier, p. 149.

²⁶ Meier, p. 155.

Both the Leningrad and Moscow premieres met with great success. With the triumph of this opera, Shostakovich's role as the leading Soviet composer of his generation seemed assured. Both audiences and critics responded positively to the work. *Lady Macbeth* was hailed as opening "a path for the founding of a new, genuine Soviet realist opera."²⁷ Nor was the opera's success limited to the Soviet Union. The directors Artur Rodzinskii (from America) and Herbert Sandberg (from Sweden) both came to Leningrad with the express purpose of becoming acquainted with the new opera.²⁸ By the end of the year, excerpts from the opera had already been performed in New York. Full-fledged premieres of *Lady Macbeth* took place in 1935 in Buenos Aires, Zurich, New York, Cleveland, Stockholm, Bratislava, Philadelphia and other cities. With this success, Shostakovich's world reputation was firmly established. It also aroused international interest in Shostakovich's other compositions, which began to be performed with greater frequency. No longer simply a member of the first rank of Soviet composers, Shostakovich had made his mark as one of the foremost contemporary composers in the world.

The unbelievable success of *Lady Macbeth* was already a well-established fact when Joseph Stalin attended a performance in January 1936. For this reason, the official condemnation of the opera, which appeared in *Pravda* on January 28, 1936,²⁹ came as a

²⁷ Meier, p. 158.

²⁸ Rodzinskii told his friend Artur Rubenstein that "I came specifically for this [i.e., to see *Lady Macbeth*]! In New York, it is much talked about, and for this reason I dream of being the first to show it there... I would like only to get the score. And since I don't know Russian, I beg of you to be my translator!" See Meier, p. 159.

²⁹ There is an ongoing debate about the identity of the author of the *Pravda* article. Different theories that have been advanced regarding the authorship are Stalin (Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*), Zhdanov (Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, p.187), David Zaslavskii (Elisabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, p.109, Meier, p.188). According to the most recent documentation, it appears likely that it was Kerzhentsev (chairman of the Committee for Artistic Events) who actually wrote the article. See Leonid Maksimenkov, *Sumbur vmesto muzyki: Stalinskaia kul'turnaia revoliutsiia, 1936 – 1938*, (Moscow: Iuridicheskaiia Kniga, 1997), p.110.

shock to the musical community as a whole.³⁰ Not only Shostakovich, but all the musicians and critics who had praised his work suddenly found themselves in the dangerous position of having supported what turned out to be “bourgeois formalism” in music. The fact that the article appeared in *Pravda*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, made its impact all the more devastating as it was immediately understood as representing the official party stance. As the poet Zenkevich commented at the time, “If this had not been published in *Pravda*, it might have been possible to protest, but now it is impossible to protest. And the funniest part is that in this instance, the point of view of the leadership coincides with the point of view of all counter-revolutionaries in art, condemning Shostakovich.”³¹ As things stood, even this remark by Zenkevich was noted by the NKVD and filed as an “anti-soviet” comment.

The *Pravda* article, entitled “Chaos instead of Music” (“Sumbur vmesto muzyki”), redefined the concept of what was officially acceptable “Soviet” music.³² The opera was criticized for a lack of lyricism, for “vulgar naturalism” in its portrayal of sexuality, for “petit-bourgeois innovation” and for “leftist deformity”. All these terms demonstrate the difficulty of assigning a political position to music. *Lady Macbeth* was here classified as leftist as it used modern compositional innovations, but at the same time it was criticized for demonstrating rightist, or bourgeois values.³³ However, despite this confusion in terminology, the fundamental message of the article was clear:

³⁰ See also Glikman, “O Stat’e Sumbur vmesto Muzyki” i ne tol’ko o nei” in *Pis'ma k Drugu*, pp. 315-323 for a description of Shostakovich’s reaction. Upon seeing the article in *Pravda*, Shostakovich (who was in Arkangelsk) telephoned Glikman and read the article aloud to him over the phone.

³¹ “Spravka sekretno-politicheskogo otdela GUGB NKVD SSSR ob otklukakh literatorov i rabotnikov iskusstva na stat’i v gazete *Pravda* o kompozitore D.D. Shostakoviche” in *Vlast’ i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia*, p. 292.

³² For the interest and convenience of the reader, the entire article (in Russian and English translation) has been attached as Appendix One.

Shostakovich's modernist innovations made the work incomprehensible for a mass audience and was therefore unsuitable.

Shostakovich himself described his impression of the performance that was attended by Stalin in a letter dated January 28, 1936 to Sollertinskii:

Comrade Stalin, and Comrades Molotov, Mikoyan and Zhdanov were all present. The show went very well. At the end I was called out (by the audience) and took a bow. I only regret that I did not do so after the third act. Feeling sick at heart, I collected my brief-case and went to the station.... I am in bad spirits. As you can guess, I kept thinking about what happened to your namesake, and what didn't happen to me.³⁴

The reference which Shostakovich makes to Sollertinskii's "namesake" is to the young composer Ivan Dzerzhinskii. A short time before, Stalin had attended a performance of Dzerzhinskii's opera *Tikhii Don* and publicly congratulated the composer for his work and success.³⁵

The *Pravda* article vehemently condemned Shostakovich, both in terms of compositional style and choice of topic. Its criticism was not limited to Shostakovich alone, however. The larger influence of this article on the Soviet musical and artistic community cannot be overemphasized. As noted by one student, a professor at the Leningrad Conservatory, lecturing on Shostakovich's compositional development thirteen years after the article was published, stated that "the composer Shostakovich, in writing the opera 'Chaos instead of Music', committed an unpardonable error."³⁶ The very name of the condemning article had become synonymous with that of the opera.

³³ Ironically, one of the complaints of critics in the West had been the clear representation of Soviet values or "socialist realism" that they saw in the opera.

³⁴ Letter to Sollertinskii, quoted in Mikheeva, *The Story of A Friendship*, Part 2, p. 79. Also appears in Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994).

³⁵ Ironically, Shostakovich had helped in the revision of *Tikhii Don* and supported it at the meeting of the Union of Composers against criticism from his colleagues. See Khentova, pp. 90-91.

³⁶ Glikman, p. 323.

The first *Pravda* article was soon followed by a second, published February 6, 1936, entitled “Baletnaia fal’sh’”, which attacked Shostakovich’s ballet *Svellaia ruch’ia*. Clearly the first article had not been accidental, but was intended as a policy statement on Shostakovich’s creative work. On February 5 and 7, the Leningrad branch of the Composers’ Union held special meetings, the sole purpose of which was to discuss (and condemn) Shostakovich in general and *Lady MacBeth* in particular.³⁷ Overall, the musicians condemned Shostakovich’s “modernist” approach. Even Shostakovich’s former teacher Maksimilian Steinberg discredited him: “When Shostakovich came to me with his *Aphorisms*, I told him that I understood nothing in them, that they were foreign to me. After that he stopped coming to see me.”³⁸ Almost no voices were raised in defense of the young composer.

Shostakovich’s immediate response was to turn to his acquaintances who enjoyed a certain amount of influence in the party, and to ask for their assistance. Marshal Tukhashevskii personally wrote a letter to Stalin on Shostakovich’s behalf, stressing the young composer’s talent and commitment to the Soviet cause.³⁹ Since Tukhasheskii was himself soon be arrested and shot⁴⁰, this letter could have had little positive effect.

³⁷ Meier, p.189.

³⁸ Quoted in Meier, p.189.

³⁹ Glikman, p. 317.

⁴⁰ Tukhachevskii was arrested in May 1937, condemned as a Nazi spy and executed in June 1937. This incident would only have increased Shostakovich’s fears, as several other musicians who had been connected with Tukhachevskii were also arrested, namely the director of the Moscow Philharmonic, Nikolai Kuliabko, and the musicologist Nikolai Zhilaev (later shot). Shostakovich did write to Kerzhentsev (Chairman of the Committee for Artistic Events) on July 11, 1937, after Tukhashevskii’s execution, describing their relationship: “I have known Tukhachevsky for about eight years. During all the time of our acquaintance he has been to my place four or five times and I have visited him about ten times. It could not be considered a close comradely acquaintance. All the more so, because we always visited one another in the company of other guests, for lunch or dinner and so on. He was a great music lover, and all of our conversations touched exclusively on this subject.” Kerzhentsev responded on July 14, advising the composer to focus his attention on his creative work and thus rehabilitate himself. Both letters are kept in the Russian State Archive of literature and art. See also Caroline Brooke, “Soviet Musicians and the Great Terror”, footnote no. 60. According to some sources, Shostakovich was himself questioned by the NKVD

The recent release of government documents makes it possible to fill in more of the details of the *Lady Macbeth* incident. In addition to seeking assistance from Marshal Tukhashevskii, Shostakovich also approached his acquaintance P.M. Kerzhentsev, the chairman of the Committee for Artistic Events, requesting the latter to arrange a personal meeting between him and Stalin⁴¹. Kerzhentsev described this visit in a letter to Stalin and Molotov, dated February 7, 1936:

Comrade Stalin
Comrade Molotov

Today (by his own initiative), composer Shostakovich came to see me.

In response to my question as to what conclusions he had drawn from the article in *Pravda*, he answered that he wants to show in his work that he has accepted the instructions of *Pravda*.

In response to my question whether he fully admits the criticism of his work, he said he admits it for the most part but he still did not recognize everything. He asked whether I considered it necessary for him to write some kind of letter. I said that the most important thing for us is that he reform, reject formalistic mistakes, that he strive for his works to be understandable to the broad masses. I said also that his letter reappraising his creative past and undertaking some new commitments would have political value, but only if it was not just a formal gesture, but resulted from a genuine recognition that he must follow a different path.

I indicated to him that he must free himself from the influence of several accomodating critics like Sollertinskii who encourage the worst aspects in his works, that have arisen as a result of the influence of Western expressionists. I advised him to follow the example of Rimskii-Korsakov, to travel around the countryside of the Soviet Union and write down folk songs of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia, and to choose the best 100 of these and harmonize them. This suggestion interested him and he said that he would do it.

I suggested to him that before he write any opera or ballet, he send us the libretto and in the course of his work that he check selected completed sections before an audience of workers and peasants. He asked me to tell you that Soviet composers would very much like to meet with Comrade Stalin for a conversation.
Kerzhentsev⁴²

at this time, though it is difficult to confirm this story. See Brooke, "Soviet Musicians and the Great Terror", Meier, pp.193-95, and MacDonald, "You must remember! Shostakovich's alleged interrogation by the NKVD in 1937", *DSCJ Journal* No. 6 (Winter 1996), pp. 25-27.

⁴¹ Kerzhentsev would lose his position in January 1938. See Brooke, "Soviet Musicians and the Great Terror".

⁴² "Pis'mo P.M. Kerzhentseva I.V. Stalinu", *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia*. Since the letter does not seem to have appeared in English translation in its entirety, it has been included here.

This letter gives some hint of what the government (or at least Kerzhentsev) was willing to accept as “socialist realism” in music. Shostakovich should abandon his interest in contemporary Western musical styles and focus instead on folk songs, in order to bring him closer to the people. In actual fact, Shostakovich did not take Kerzhentev’s advice about collecting and harmonizing folk songs. Nor did he receive an opportunity to meet with Stalin. The two articles in *Pravda* marked only the beginning of Shostakovich’s fall from grace. Criticism of the young composer spread quickly to the musical community as a whole, as people scrambled to recant their earlier praise of the opera.

The official response to Shostakovich in musical circles was one of almost unanimous censure. The impact this had on Shostakovich was devastating. He withdrew almost entirely from public life and took interest in little apart from collecting the numerous condemnations of his music that appeared in various papers and journals, compiling them in a scrapbook. A letter from Shostakovich to one of his friends, dated February 15, 1936, demonstrates this obsession:

Dear Lev,

Thank you for your letter. Write soon. Don’t forget. I feel well. I carefully read the journal clippings, which I receive in great numbers. Tomorrow they will bring the piano. This will bring unfettered happiness. I will play and compose the 3rd part of the symphony. From all the articles I have read, those that upset me most of all are the declarations of G. Neigaiz. However, to hell with him. For the most part I sit at home. Become familiar with the apartment. Meet almost with no one, as I want to be alone and relax a little bit...⁴³

As noted by one of his friends, prior to the *Lady Macbeth* affair, Shostakovich had shown very little interest in critical reviews of his work. The period immediately following the

⁴³ “Pis’mo k L.T. Atovmianu” in *Dmitrii Shostakovich v pis’makh i dokumentakh* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennii Tsentral’nii Muzei Muzykal’noi Kul’tury imeni M.I. Glinki., 2000), p.229.

attacks in *Pravda* was a time of great isolation in the composer's life. Understanding the gravity of the charges, he went so far as to give his friend Sollertinskii permission to vote in the most politically expedient manner on the resolution that was passed by the Leningrad Composers' Union against Shostakovich.⁴⁴ Eventually, the resolution was passed with only one abstention.⁴⁵

Although Shostakovich considered himself more or less abandoned, the actual response to the *Lady Macbeth* article by the cultural intelligentsia was carefully monitored by the NKVD. This is apparent in a secret report prepared for Iagoda, dated no later than February 11, 1936:

The article "Chaos instead of Music" that was published in *Pravda* has met with a positive response from the majority of Muscovite literary and artistic workers. But together with these, negative and anti-soviet comments by individual writers and composers have been noted by us. Below are listed the most characteristic of these⁴⁶

The document goes on to list names, professions and statements by 34 different artists, including Meierhold and the composer Miakovskii. The response of each of these individuals to the music of Shostakovich varied from laudatory to dismissive, but they all agreed on the harmful tendency the article showed towards art in general. Several connected it with a return to the negative aspects of RAPP:

V. Kantorovich (prose writer): I consider that the article about Shostakovich is a very threatening sign. And because there is a comment about "meierholdism" and of leftist tricks in poetry, I think that this is a signal of a return to the RAPP times. Under the flag of war for simplicity will be founded some kind of secret censor even worse than RAPP....

⁴⁴ Glikman, "O stat'e "Sumbur vmesto muzyki i ne tol'ko o nei", *Pis'ma k drugu*, p.321.

⁴⁵ Composer Vladimir Vladimirovich Shcherbachev. Glikman writes that he was undoubtedly too frightened to vote against the resolution, but at the same time refused to support it. See Glikman, p.322.

⁴⁶ "Spravka sekretno-politicheskogo otdela GUGB NKVD SSSR ob otklikakh literatorov i rabotnikov iskusstva na stat'i v gazete *Pravda* o kompozitore D.D. Shostakoviche," *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia*, p. 290.

A. Gatov (poet and translator) . . . The RAPP representatives in all the arts rub their hands in joy that the end of freedom of writers and artists is coming...

Perhaps the most insightful comment comes from the composer Shaporin:

This article is worse than RAPM criticism. If in the time of RAPM it was possible to complain, for example, to the Central Committee of the party, then now there is nowhere to appeal. The opinion of “one” person – it still is not such that it should define the path of creativity. They will drive Shostakovich to suicide; it is said that on the radio they have prohibited the playing of Shostakovich.⁴⁷

Shaporin makes the point that even at the height of RAPM’s influence, the party itself had maintained its independent stance, not supporting one group or another. The condemnation of *Lady Macbeth*, however, together with the approval of *Tikhii Don*, served to provide an official definition of “appropriate” Soviet music. The freedom of Soviet composers to choose their own mode of creative expression had become far more limited. To choose to write in a modernist idiom now signified going against not just the ideological views of a small group of artists (such as RAPM), but against the wishes of the party itself.

Unbeknownst to Shostakovich, Maxim Gorkii also acted as an advocate on his behalf, personally writing to Stalin in reference to the *Lady MacBeth* affair. Gorkii was concerned both about the personal welfare of Shostakovich and about the lack of clarity the *Pravda* “message” sent to musicians:

The basic goal of my letter is to speak openly to you of my attitude toward these questions. I still have not bothered you in this regard, but now, when we must proceed to unite the European intelligentsia in a broad scope, these questions must be put forward and clarified.

You said numerous times in your speeches (as did articles in *Pravda* last year) that a “cautious attitude towards people” is necessary. This was heard in the West, and this raised and broadened sympathies toward us. But then this scandal with Shostakovich broke out.

Laudatory reviews of his opera were published in both papers of the central press and also in many regional newspapers. The opera played with

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 294-95.

success in Moscow and Leningrad theatres and received excellent reviews abroad. Shostakovich is young – about 25, inarguably talented but very self-confident and quite nervous. The article in *Pravda* struck him like a blow to the head, the guy is completely depressed. It is obvious that speaking of the blow I have in mind not the criticism, but the tone of criticism. And the criticism itself is unclear. “Chaos” – but why? In what and how is it expressed – this “chaos”? Here critics must give a technical evaluation of Shostakovich’s music. But what this article in *Pravda* has done is allowed a mob of untalented hacks to attack Shostakovich. And this they do. Shostakovich lives by what he hears, lives in a world of sounds, he wants to organize them, to create melody from chaos.

The attitude towards him expressed in *Pravda* can never be called “cautious” and he completely deserves namely this cautious relationship, as he is the most gifted of all contemporary Soviet musicians.⁴⁸

Gorkii’s own influence with Stalin was, however, quickly waning at this point, and his letter to the leader went unanswered.⁴⁹ Other writers who attempted to help Shostakovich (though unsuccessfully) by personally writing to Stalin were Mikhail Bulgakov and Leo Arnstam.⁵⁰ Remembering the assistance that Lunacharskii was able to offer Aleksandr Blok in the 1920s, it is obvious that a fundamental change had occurred in the government’s approach to the cultural intelligentsia.

For the party, the *Lady Macbeth* article together with the subsequent debate and apparent opposition by some facets of the musical community offered an excuse to abandon the official policy of “non-interference” that had been pursued until this time in the musical realm.⁵¹ Instead, party “enemies” began to be identified amongst the musical ranks. In a party document dated March 20, 1936, dealing with the musical “discussions” surrounding the *Pravda* article “Sumbur vmesto muzyki”, several dissenting voices within the musical community were identified. In Leningrad, musicologists Sollertinskii and Rabinovich, as well as the pianist Druskin, were labelled as “extreme formalists,

⁴⁸ Pis'mo A.M. Gor'kogo I. V. Stalinu”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia*, p. 301.

⁴⁹ See Kh'etso, p. 285. Gorkii died in June 1936, amid rumours that his death was arranged by Stalin.

⁵⁰ Meier, p. 192.

fully oriented towards Western-European musical modernism.”⁵² The former leader of RAPM, Lebedinskii, was also condemned for “attempting to orient Soviet composers exclusively to the creations of deceased composer Davidenko and his direction (RAMP⁵³), condemned by the decision of 23.IV.1932More than that, Lebedinskii stated that ‘we will soon hear the same words (about Davidenko) that we heard of Maiakovskii’”⁵⁴ The document went on to note that “in the discussion of the composers, the most important theorists were silent about formalism in music”⁵⁵. The composer Miaskovskii, who was absent from most of the discussion, was listed as “the recognized head of the so-called ‘Moscow School’ of formalists, the important composer-symphonist Miaskovskii, former leader of the Association of Contemporary Music (ASM), located amongst the international union of bourgeois modernist-musicians”⁵⁶. The musicologist Asafiev was called the “most noted of the theoretical formalists, author of ‘Book on Stravinskii’, the book ‘Musical Form as Process’, etc. . . . who advocates formalism, praises the abstruse music of the German expressionists Schoenberg and Alban Berg”⁵⁷. Asafiev was also directly linked with the attacks on Shostakovich: “It is necessary at the same time to keep in view that Shostakovich was educated namely with the theoretical creations of Asafiev, who is the author of numerous laudatory articles

⁵¹ As late as 1935, Stalin dismissed charges brought against the composer Nikolai Strel'nikov with the words “Well, we will put this case aside. Let us not bother the musicians.” See M. Rutman, ‘Melodiya dlya dvoikh’, *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti* (November 5, 1998), p. 10.

⁵² “Dokladnaia zapiska zamestitelia zaveduiushchego otdelom kul'turno-prosvetitel'noi raboty TSK VKP(B) A.I. Angarova sekretariam TS VKP(B) o diskussii sredi muzykantov po povodu statei v “Pravde” o formalizme v muzyke”, *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia*, p. 304.

⁵³ The error is in the original document. RAMP should read RAPM

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 304.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 304.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 304.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 304.

about Shostakovich (including one about *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsenk District*).⁵⁸ In conclusion, the document stated:

Without doubt, there exists a silent agreement between formalists of different directions, even those who fought amongst themselves earlier... Miaskovskii also appeared as an opponent of Shostakovich in particular discussions prior to the *Pravda* article, having sharply condemned the ballet "Svetlyi ruchei". On the day after the appearance of the *Pravda* article, Miaskovskii occupied a position of 'well-wishing neutrality' toward Shostakovich. The conduct of all these personalities is nothing other than a hidden form of sabotage aimed at the party. In essence, they abandon the principle of non-interference of the party in the internal workings of art.⁵⁹

The meaning of this document is clear. While musical life may have enjoyed a certain level of independence from the party prior to the January 1936 attack on Shostakovich, this was a privilege that musicians would no longer enjoy. The official "battle with formalism" had begun, but by no means could be considered to have reached a conclusion:

This discussion of the *Pravda* article cannot in any circumstances be considered to have been exhausted. The most visible formalists still have not been disarmed. Many creative questions of socialist realism in music have only been presented and await their resolution.⁶⁰

What are the key points made in this report? An official definition of formalism as a "complete orientation towards Western-European musical modernism" was given. While this definition was not new in and of itself (it can already be seen in RAPM criticism), it did represent the first official adoption of this understanding of formalism by the party. As such, it is a complete break with the concept of socialist music and the understanding of formalism that had been promulgated by Lunacharskii in the 1920s. The attack on Shostakovich and the public response to it were monitored by the party, and negative

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.304.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.304.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.304

responses to the article were equated with anti-party sabotage. Thus, not only was a composer who used the modernist idiom writing in a manner that was foreign to the people, he was now also an active participant in a struggle against the party.

Much has been written about the *Lady Macbeth* affair and its effect on Shostakovich. Meier views this article as one of the turning points in the composer's career.⁶¹ Glikman also suggests that Shostakovich's compositional career can be divided into two phases: before and after the *Pravda* article. However, in order to understand the full import of the article, it is necessary to place it into the larger political and social framework that existed at the time. Prior to this article, and even in the early days following the attack, a certain willingness to debate concepts was evident within the musical community. Critics were willing to give their honest assessment of a musical work (this assessment might well be based on previous ideological convictions concerning music, but these convictions as such were not directly enforced by the party). Following the *Lady Macbeth* affair, many who had spoken positively about the opera were forced to recant their earlier assessment of the work and thank the anonymous writer in *Pravda* for opening their eyes to their mistaken views. Both Asafiev and Sollertinskii publicly recanted their positive reviews of the opera.

The *Pravda* article was thus successful in condemning modern tendencies in musical composition, but as Gorkii pointed out in his letter to Stalin, it actually accomplished little in delineating what sort of Soviet music represented true "socialist realism". This difficulty was faced not only by Shostakovich, but by all Soviet

⁶¹ Khentova however, fails to make any mention of the article in her biography *Shostakovich v Petrograde-Leningrade*.

composers. Miaskovskii, realizing that the political/cultural climate had changed, voiced his confusion in *Sovetskaia Muzyka* in June 1936 when discussing his latest symphony:

I failed to find an adequate form for the last movement, which expressed my basic idea in a merely external manner, without inner conviction It was not the language I was seeking, not the language of a contemporary artist. *What that language should be, I do not know, and have no formula for it.* Neither Russian folk music nor our city songs can provide the material for the musical idiom of socialist realism.⁶²

Miaskovskii's frustration summarizes the plight of Soviet music at the time. Modernism was equated with formalism and was therefore unacceptable. The proletarian approach of RAPM had also been discredited in 1932 and again came under attack in 1936-37.

Without intending to become "anti-soviet", composers such as Shostakovich and Miaskovskii had been branded as such on account of their compositional approach.

Shostakovich continued to suffer personally in the aftermath of the *Pravda* articles. His Fourth Symphony was withdrawn prior to its premiere, ostensibly at the composer's own request:

Shostakovich has requested the Leningrad Philharmonia that his Fourth Symphony be removed from performance, since it in no way corresponds to his present creative convictions and represents for him a stage which he has left far behind.⁶³

In actual fact, according to Shostakovich's friend Glikman, this choice to withdraw the symphony was made not by Shostakovich, but by party officials.⁶⁴ It was only with the success of his Fifth Symphony that Shostakovich regained a level of public recognition and approval. Whether Shostakovich was ever in immediate danger of arrest, or whether recognition of his talent and potential value to the Soviet state protected him, is a debated

⁶² N. Miaskovskii, *Sovetskaia Muzyka* (June 1936), emphasis added.

⁶³ "Khronika", *Sovetskaia Iskusstvo* (December 11, 1936), p. 4.

point. Certainly, the evidence demonstrates that Shostakovich did not feel himself to be immune from further government action. According to friends, Shostakovich spent much of 1936-37 awaiting arrest.

Another question that should be addressed is why, if the *Pravda* article was intended to send a message to the musical and cultural community as a whole, it was Shostakovich who was chosen as the victim? Musicologist Richard Taruskin writes “Shostakovich, until then perhaps Soviet Russia’s most loyal musical son, and certainly her most talented one, had been made a sacrificial lamb”.⁶⁴ But why Shostakovich? Certainly, he had shown no inclination for speaking or acting against the party line prior to this episode. His family background included revolutionaries who had fought against tsarist autocracy. Shostakovich himself had received government assistance during his studies at the conservatory. The explanation almost certainly lies in Shostakovich’s pre-eminence as the leading young Soviet composer of his generation, together with his reputation as a bold avant-gardist. By 1936, the understanding that “formalism” in music was equatable with “modernism” was accepted by the party elite. Shostakovich was the most outstanding young “modernist” and his opera was the most successful contemporary example of this musical style. Its success abroad probably only fuelled suspicion in a society that was becoming increasingly xenophobic. Once the formula for formalism (formalist equals modernist equals bourgeois) was accepted, the popularity of *Lady Macbeth* amongst bourgeois audiences only served to confirm the correctness of this interpretation. Shostakovich, together with Sollertinskii, had also been vocal in the early 1930s in his calls for Soviet composers to study the works of contemporary Western

⁶⁴ Glikman, pp. 12-13.

⁶⁵ Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 508.

composers. This marked both men as potential “enemies of the people”. The fact that it took two years between the opera’s premiere and its condemnation may be understood in two ways. Either music remained of lesser importance to the government so that controlling it was not a priority, or the understanding that formalism and modernist compositional techniques were one and the same was still developing. Most likely a combination of both these explanations comes closest to the truth.

Following the condemnation of Shostakovich, numerous other musicians also came under attack. This coincided with the first of the great “Show Trials” of 1936 and the beginning of the “Yezhovshchina” or “Great Terror” of 1937, when denunciations and purges spread to all levels of society. The first targeted victims in the musical community were former members of RAPM, particularly their leader Lebedinskii. In the aforementioned March 20, 1936 report of the discussion of Shostakovich, Lebedinskii’s name was already apparent as a potential victim, as his speech was clearly criticized. Former members of both RAPM and ASM were targeted during the “Great Terror”, though in far lesser numbers than their literary counterparts. As a societal group, musicians suffered far less than other cultural elites during the “Great Terror”. Most escaped with their lives, and many were later reinstated in their prior positions. This evidence, together with the general lack of attention that the party had paid to music until this time suggests that despite the 1936 attacks on Shostakovich and the subsequent purge of the Composers’ Union and the conservatories, musicians maintained a larger degree of independence than other artists.

The musical language of Shostakovich was unquestionably influenced by the society in which he was educated. He received his musical training at a time when

composition was by its very nature considered to be a political act. Unlike many Western composers, such an idea was an accepted fact in the society in which Shostakovich lived and worked. For this reason, his basic understanding of the role of music and the act of composition was closely linked to political action.

The problem of defining the meaning of musical content also plagued Shostakovich. While there is no indication that he considered himself a dissident prior to 1936 or even wished to express dissatisfaction with the political system (there is actually evidence to the contrary), in 1936 Shostakovich found himself unexpectedly labeled a formalist by the party. This must have come as a shock to the young composer. If one defines formalism as the complete “denial of extra-musical content”, then Shostakovich clearly argued against this approach, as the quote at the beginning of the chapter demonstrates. With the *Pravda* article of 1936, however, the party officially endorsed the definition of formalism that had been offered by RAPM.

From this perspective, Shostakovich’s condemnation can be said to result not from a struggle against party ideology, nor from his attempt to deny the function of music in building a Soviet state. In the end, the party endorsed the definition of formalism that was easier to regulate and Shostakovich was chosen as the first victim of this in the musical world.

Conclusion

Music reaches its high-water mark only among men who have not the ability or the right to argue.

- Friedrich Nietzsche

This thesis examined the interplay of politics and music in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s. The subject was approached on several different levels: a historical examination of various philosophical/political perspectives regarding music and politics, that of government officials involved in the formation of artistic policy, that of independent musical organisations, and that of an individual composer working within a given social/political system. Special attention has been paid to the concept of “formalism” and the development of its meaning within the Soviet context. The official government acceptance of formalism as being equivalent to modernist style in music was examined in reference to the *Lady MacBeth* affair of 1936.

The historical interrelationship of music and politics was explored, as was early Bolshevik policy toward the arts in general and music in particular. Anatoly Lunacharskii emerged as the most influential figure in the 1920s, whose mitigating influence was sorely lacking in 1936. It is clear that there was no single generally accepted definition of art and its place in the early years of the Revolution. In the 1920s, a multi-faceted artistic life appeared as conflicting groups strove to define what constituted true “socialist art”.

Clarification of the term “formalism” within the Soviet context is one of the primary achievements of this paper. In the 1920s, it was associated with two fundamentally different definitions: the denial of the existence of extra-musical content in music (Lunacharskii) and the utilisation of contemporary compositional techniques

(RAPM). In the Soviet context, these two definitions existed side by side. The idea of music having extra-musical meaning can itself be traced back to the Greeks, but the question of defining the meaning itself occurred purely within the Soviet context. These definitions of formalism appeared from within society: different musical groups and writers offered their own interpretations of “suitable” and “unsuitable” music.

The 1936 *Pravda* article was the first clear delineation of government doctrine in the musical realm. At this point, the debate over definition moved out of the sphere of discussion between individuals and groups within society and became a policy imposed from above. This policy was rooted in the earlier debates however, and is best understood as government affirmation of one particular stance already in existence rather than the delineation of an entirely new policy. That the situation in the artistic world (as in the political world) had changed irrevocably by 1936 was demonstrated by the lack of influence that individuals were able to exercise in their attempts to mitigate Shostakovich’s fate.

What became defined as acceptable for “socialist realism” in music elicits little surprise: folk songs, traditional harmonies and programmatic instrumental works. All these have their roots in the classical Russian musical tradition of the nineteenth century. Thus, the musical history of the country played a larger role than is often recognised in defining the musical style of the twentieth century. That the musical style encouraged by the government shifted from the avant-garde (under Lunacharskii) to the traditional (under Stalin) was a turn of affairs that was itself predicted by Plato.¹ In solidifying his hold on power, Stalin moved from revolutionary to reactionary politics. Music no longer

¹ “For any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited When modes of music change, institutions of the State always change with them”. Plato, *Republic*, Book III.

needed to encourage the new and different, but was limited to conforming to and reinforcing existing reality.

Certainly, this thesis cannot claim to have examined all the intersecting forces of historical, government, societal, and individual life that shaped the musical landscape of the Soviet Union during the years in question. It has, however, addressed the ongoing debate of interpretation of Shostakovich from a new perspective, by placing greater emphasis on social and political trends that affected the context within which the composer was educated and worked during his formative years. It has also highlighted the problem of political terminology when it is applied to the arts. The terms of “right” and “left” lost their meaning as different individuals and groups defined these terms in the manner that best supported their personal agendas. The term “formalism” itself developed different meanings as various groups defined it according to their own perspective. One particular definition of this term eventually became entrenched by government endorsement. But this government definition was itself shaped by the previous debates in the musical community. Rather than merely accepting these concepts as clearly defined artistic stances, historians would do well to address these terms in relation to the social/political context in which they were used and defined. Most musicologists and historians have failed to do this, selecting the most widely available definition of a term and applying it to a context in which the definition had little or no relevance. That Soviet and Western musicologists have done this while analysing a musical composition from the context of their own social/political perspective is understandable, but for historians to repeat this error when looking at the development of Soviet music gives a slanted view of the period in question.

One area which this paper has not touched upon in any depth is that of the actual political convictions of the musicians working within the Soviet system. All compositional approaches (avant-garde and proletarian) claimed to be supporting the aims of the revolution with their work and, in the context of this paper, these statements have been accepted at face value. The focus has not been on individual political convictions that might fundamentally differ from those of the State itself, but on the interplay of various groups in determining a definition of music's role and form within the Soviet system. In such a context, the personal convictions of particular people are of less importance than their expressed views and how these views affected the development and understanding of music and its role in the Soviet Union.

Another promising area for future research is the connection of "leftist" political trends with destructive (both extreme modernist and proletarian) artistic trends. A similar delineation occurred in the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" in Maoist China. Is this an independent artistic trend that tends to associate itself with leftist politics? Or is it a trend that stems directly from leftist political convictions?

The equation of formalism with modernist compositional techniques may also be useful in addressing the question of "secret dissidence" in music following the 1936 anti-formalist campaign. Although extra-musical connotations are notoriously difficult to determine, particularly in "absolute" music, in the Soviet context the government itself came to offer a technical definition of anti-Soviet sentiment in music. The Soviet system insisted that all music contained some political implication. Further, particular compositional techniques (i.e., modernism) were officially defined as anti-Soviet. It is true that a specific definition of "socialist realism" in music continued to be unclear, but

this equating of “modernism” with “formalism” and “anti-Soviet” tendencies was made apparent in the 1936 campaign against Shostakovich. It is this understanding that in turn served to influence composers and musical audiences of the Soviet regime. The Soviet audience came to expect political meaning within a musical composition, and composers were conditioned to approach their work with the knowledge that they were in fact making a political statement. This was a fundamentally different understanding of music (particularly classical or “art” music) than that which was held by Western society. The early years of the Soviet Union thus effectively politicised the concept of music. In addition to this politicised concept, the government also offered a clear definition of “anti-Soviet” music. It is hardly surprising then, that listeners came to hear anti-Soviet sentiment in the music of such composers as Shostakovich, who as a result of utilising contemporary compositional techniques, were attacked for their so-called “formalist” errors. Nor is it surprising that Shostakovich himself wrote several works that are undeniably anti-Soviet in their content (for example, the “Antiformalisticheskii raek”)².

Of course, in pieces of “absolute” music, the extra-musical content is more open to debate. This paper has not attempted to address what would constitute a “correct” or “incorrect” interpretation of such pieces by Shostakovich or any other composer. Fundamentally, the understanding of a work of art (be it music, literature, sculpture or some other medium) depends upon the social/political background of both the composer and the listener. The goal of this thesis has been to demonstrate the heightened politicisation of music under the Soviet system in order to assist in understanding the political flavour of the ongoing Shostakovich debate. To separate completely the

² The score for this piece was only discovered in 1989, though according to Isaac Glikman, Shostakovich showed him the work (a cantata that includes parts for Stalin and Zhdanov among others) in 1948. See

composer from the political life of his time and focus solely on compositional approach (as some musicologists have done in the past) demonstrates a lack of attention on the social/political context surrounding a musical work's genesis. Yet to do the contrary and to focus exclusively on the composer's personal experience is to ignore the social/political context in which listeners heard and interpreted this work and to also lose an aspect of the place that music held in society of the time.

The debate surrounding Shostakovich and Soviet avant-garde composers in general often loses sight of the fundamental question of what role music actually came to play in Soviet society. This question cannot be answered by confirming or disproving Shostakovich's "secret dissident" status or by lamenting the silencing of avant-garde composers in the 1920s. The musicologist Taruskin recognises this point, stating that "as contexts change, subtext accumulates. What made Shostakovich's music the secret diary of a nation was not only what he put into it but what it allowed listeners to draw out... whether viewed internally or externally, whether in terms of their content or in light of their context, Shostakovich's works are fraught with horrific subtexts that can never be ignored."³ The difficulty of interpreting music, particularly absolute music in reference to the external world, is also its strength. This point, noted above by Nietzsche⁴, applies particularly well to the Soviet context. Music could provide an outlet for expressing feelings and emotions that could not be expressed by other means. Government policy had, in the end, encouraged Soviet audiences to hear political meaning in music, but it was unable to control the interpretation of that music by individual listeners.

Lemaire, p. 141.

³ Taruskin, "Shostakovich and Us", *Defining Russia Musically*, pp. 475-77.

⁴ "The Wanderer and his Shadow", *Philosophy of Nietzsche*, ed. by Geoffrey Clive (New York: New American Library, 1965), p. 303.

From this perspective, the debate surrounding Shostakovich is misguided. To understand his music in relation to its meaning for a Soviet audience and Soviet society as a whole, historians must look not only at the biographical perspective or official government declarations, but also at the social/political perspective of the audience, fellow musicians, and party bureaucrats. This thesis has attempted to do this in relation to the years immediately following the revolution in order to provide the groundwork for further exploration of Soviet music within a societal context.

Appendix I

Сумбур вместо музыки
(Правда, 28 января, 1936г)

Вместо с общим культурным ростом в нашей стране выросла и потребность в хорошей музыке. Никогда и нигде композиторы не имели перед собой такой благодарной аудитории. Народные массы ждут хороших песен, но также и хороших инструментальных произведений, хороших опер.

Некоторые театры как новинку, как достижение преподносят новой, выросшей культурно советской публике оперу Шостаковича «Леди Макбет Мценского уезда». Услужливая музыкальная критика превозносит до небес оперу, создает ей громкую славу. Молодой композитор вместо деловой и серьезной критики, которая могла бы помочь ему в дальнейшей работе, выслушивает только восторженные комплименты.

Слушателя с первой же минуты ошарашивает в опере нарочито нестройный, сумбурный поток звуков. Обрывки мелодии, зачатки музыкальной фразы тонут, вырываются, снова исчезают в грохоте, скрежете и визге. Следить за этой «музыкой» трудно, запомнить её невозможно.

Так в течение почти всей оперы. На сцене пение заменено криком. Если композитору случается попасть на дорожку простой и понятной мелодии, то он немедленно, словно испугавшись такой беды, бросается в дебри музыкального сумбура, местами превращающегося в какофонию. Выразительность, которой требует слушатель, заменена бешеным ритмом. Музыкальный шум должен выразить страсть.

Это все не от бездарности композитора, не от его неумения в музыке выразить простые и сильные чувства. Это музыка, умышленно сделанная «ширворот-навыворот» – так, чтобы ничего не напоминало классическую оперную музыку, ничего не было общего с симфоническими звучаниями, с простой, общедоступной музыкальной речью. Это музыка, которая построена по тому же принципу отрицания оперы, по какому левацкое искусство вообще отрицает в театре простоту, реализм, понятность образа, естественное звучание слова. Это – перенесение в оперу, в музыку наиболее отрицательных черт «мейерхольдовщины» в умноженном виде. Это левацкий сумбур вместо естественной, человеческой музыки. Способность хорошей музыки захватывать массы приносится в жертву мелкобуржуазным формалистическим потугам, претензиям создать оригинальность приемами дешевого оригинальничания. Это игра в заумные вещи, которая может кончиться очень плохо.

Опасность такого направления в советской музыке ясна. Левацкое уродство в опере растет из того же источника, что и левацкое уродство в живописи, в поэзии, в педагогике, в науке. Мелкобуржуазное «новаторство» ведет к отрыву от подлинного искусства, от подлинной науки, от подлинной литературы.

Автору «Леди Макбет Мценского уезда» пришлось заимствовать у джаза его нервную, судорожную, припадочную музыку, чтобы придать «страсть» своим героям.

В то время как наша критика – в том числе и музыкальная – клянется именем социалистического реализма, сцена преподносит нам в творении Шостаковича грубейший натурализм. Однотонно, в зверином облики представлены все – и купцы и народ. Хищница-купчиха, дорвавшаяся путем убийств к богатству и власти, представлена в виде какой-то «жертвы» буржуазного общества. Бытовой повести Леского навязан смысл, какого в ней нет.

И все это грубо, примитивно, вульгарно. Музыка крикает, ухает, пыхтит, задыхается, чтобы как можно натуральнее изобразить любовные сцены. И «любовь» размазана во всей опере в самой вульгарной форме. Купеческая двуспальная кровать занимает центральное место в оформлении. На ней разрешаются все «проблемы». В таком же грубо натуралистическом стиле показана смерть от отравления, сечение почти на самой сцене.

Композитор, видимо, не поставил перед собой задачи прислушаться к тому, чего ждет, чего ищет в музыке советская аудитория. Он словно нарочно зашифровал свою музыку, перепутал все звучания в ней так, чтобы дошла его музыка только до потерявших здоровый вкус эстетов-формалистов. Он прошел мимо требований советской культуры изгнать грубость и дикость из всех углов советского быта. Это воспевание купеческой похотливости некоторые критики называют сатирой. Ни о какой сатире здесь и речи не может быть. Всеми средствами и музыкальной и драматической выразительности автор старается привлечь симпатии публики к грубым и вульгарным стремлениям и покупкам купчихи Катерины Измайловой.

«Леди Макбет» имеет успех у буржуазной публики за границей. Не потому ли похваливает её буржуазная публика, что опера эта сумбурна и абсолютно аполитична? Не потому ли, что она щекочет извращенные вкусы буржуазной аудитории своей дергающейся, крикливой, неврастенической музыкой?

Наши театры приложили немало труда, чтобы тщательно поставить оперу Шостаковича. Актеры обнаружили значительный талант в преодолении шума, крика и скрежета оркестра. Драматической игрой они старались возместить мелодийное убожество оперы. К сожалению, от этого еще ярче выступили ее грубо натуралистические черты. Талантливая игра заслуживает признательности, затраченные усилия – сожаления.

“Chaos instead of Music”
(*Pravda*, 28 January, 1936)

Together with the general growth of culture in our country, the demand for good music has also grown. Composers have never before had such an appreciative audience before them. The masses await good songs, and also good instrumental compositions, good operas.

Several theatres present Shostakovich's opera “Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District” to the new, culturally mature Soviet public as a novelty and an achievement. Obliging musical critics extol the opera to the heavens, praising it loudly. In the place of useful and serious criticism, which might help him in his future works, the young composer hears only ecstatic compliments.

From the first minutes of the opera the listener is struck with a deliberately untuned, chaotic flow of sounds. Snatches of melody, beginnings of musical phrases disappear, break forth and again vanish in crashes, scrapes and squeals. To follow this “music” is difficult, to remember it impossible.

This is the case for almost the entire opera. On the stage, song is replaced by screams. If the composer happens by chance to hit upon a simple and understandable melody, then he quickly, as if frightened by such misfortune, throws himself into the jungle of musical chaos, transforming it into cacophony. The expressiveness that the listener demands is replaced with violent rhythm. Musical noise is supposed to express passion.

All this is due not to the composer's lack of talent, nor to his inability to express simple and strong emotions in music. This is music consciously done “inside out”, so that it has nothing to do with classical operatic music, it has nothing in common with symphonic sounds, with simple easily comprehensible musical language.

It is music built on the same principle of negation of opera, as leftist art negates simplicity, realism, understandable images and the natural pronunciation of words in theatre. This is a carrying over to opera, to music, of the most negative aspects of “Meierholdism” in the extreme. This is leftist chaos in place of natural, human music. The ability of good music to capture the masses is sacrificed to petit-bourgeois formalist attempts, claims to create originality by acceptance of the cheapest means. It is a playing at abstruse things that might end very badly.

The danger of such a direction in Soviet music is clear. Leftist deformity in opera springs from the same source as leftist deformity in painting, in poetry, in teaching, in science. Petit-bourgeois “innovation” leads to a break with genuine art, genuine science, genuine literature.

The author of “Lady Macbeth” borrowed from jazz its nervous, spasmodic, paradoxical music in order to give “passion” to his heroes.

While our critics – amongst them, musical critics – bow to the name of socialist realism, we are presented with the crudest naturalism in the work of Shostakovich. Everyone is painted in the same hue – the people and the merchants. The predatory merchant's wife, who seized wealth and power by way of murder, is presented as some kind of “victim” of bourgeois society. To Leskov's story of ordinary life has been attached an idea which it does not contain.

And all this is rude, primitive, vulgar. The music grunts, hoots, pants, gasps so as to portray love scenes as naturally as possible. And “love” is smeared over the entire opera in the most vulgar way. The merchant's double bed occupies the central place on stage. All “problems” are resolved on it. Death from poison as well as lashing (almost on the stage itself) are also shown in a rude, naturalist style.

Apparently the composer did not present himself with the task of listening to what the Soviet audience awaits and searches for in music. He seems to have deliberately encoded his music, confusing all sound in it, so that his music only appeals to aesthetic-formalists, who have lost their good taste. He bypasses the demands of Soviet culture to drive rudeness and wildness out from all corners of everyday Soviet life. This praise of mercantile lust is called satire by several critics. It is impossible to talk about any kind of satire here. The author strives to win the sympathy of the public to the crude, vulgar aspirations of merchantess Katerina Izmailova by all means of musical and dramatic expression.

“Lady MacBeth” enjoys success among the bourgeois public abroad. Does not the bourgeois public praise the opera because it is chaotic and absolutely apolitical? Is it not because it tickles the perverted tastes of a bourgeois audience with its jerking, clamorous, neurotic music?

Our theatres have spent considerable energy in order to carefully present Shostakovich's opera. The actors have shown notable talent in overcoming the noise, cries and gnashing of the orchestra. They have attempted to compensate for the melodic poverty of the opera with a dramatic performance. Unfortunately, this only makes its crude, naturalistic features more clear. Talented acting deserves recognition, expended energy – pity.

Appendix II

Terminology

ASM - Assotsiatsii Sovremennoi Muzyki (Association of Contemporary Music). Formed in 1923 in Moscow. Promoted modern compositions and was branded by members of RAPM as a representative of “bourgeois” or “rightist” values in music. This style of music came to be referred to disparagingly as “asmovskii” or “decadent-modernist formalism”. The successor of ASM, VOSM, was dissolved by government decree in 1932.

Artistic Unions – formed by government decree in 1932 to take the place of all other artistic groups. In music, the organisation was the *Union of Composers*, and in literature the *Union of Writers*.

Cheka (VCHK) - Vserossiiskaiia chrezvychainaia kommissia po bor'be s kontrevoliutsiei i sabotazhem (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Combating of Counter-Revolution and Sabotage). First Soviet secret police, formed in 1917 as a temporary measure to safeguard the revolution.

LASM – Leningradskii Assotsiatsii Sovremennoi Muzyki (Leningrad Association of Contemporary Music). Formed in Leningrad in 1925 as a sister organisation of ASM. Somewhat more radical than ASM in terms of the musical styles that it supported.

Muzyka-massam – Formed in 1929 as a musical group with the self-proclaimed mandate of popularising music among the workers. Opposed by RAPM.

Narkompros – Narodnoe Komissariat Prosveshcheniia RSFSR (People's Commissariat of Enlightenment). Chaired by Anatoly Lunacharskii from 1917-1929.

ORK – Obedinenie Revolutzionnykh Kompozitorov Muzykalnykh Deiatelei (Association of Revolutionary Composers and Musical Workers). Formed in 1924 as a splinter group of RAPM. Dissolved in 1929, when its members reunited with RAPM.

Prokoll - Production Collective of Student Composers. Formed in 1925 by students of the Moscow Conservatory as an attempt to bridge the gap in musical styles that existed between ASM and RAPM. Focused on composition as a collective rather than individual effort. Dissolved in 1929, when most members joined RAPM.

Proletkul't – Proletarian Organisation for Cultural Education. Organisation dedicated to the development of proletarian culture. Founded in 1917 by Lunacharskii and Bogdanov as an independent artistic organisation, later subjugated to control by Narkompros and finally dissolved in 1925. Generally considered as a primary representative of “destructive leftist” artistic tendencies and as a forerunner of such groups as RAPP and RAPM.

RAPM – Rossiskii Assotsiatsii Proletarskikh Muzykantov (Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians). Formed in 1923 as the musical counterpart to RAPP. Promoted a simplified musical style that would be easily understandable to working-class audiences, such as mass songs and marches. Generally referred to as a representative of leftist tendencies in music (meaning “simplified musical primitivism”). This style of music came to be referred to as “rapmovskii”. Dissolved by government decree in 1932

RAPP – Rossiskii Assotsiatsii Proletarskikh Pisatelei (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers). Primary literary organisation that represented “leftist” tendencies in writing. Gained hegemony in the late 1920s until its dissolution by government decree in 1932.

Socialist Realism – official artistic approach adopted by the Artistic Unions in 1934, first developed by Andrei Zhdanov. Encouraged the depiction of true socialist reality (i.e., a positive portrayal of reality). In music, comes to be referred to as the antonym to *formalism*.

VOSM - Vserossiiskaiia organisatsia sovremennaia muzyka (All-Russian Organization of Contemporary Music). Name given to the restructured ASM in 1928. The ASM continued to exist under this name until being dissolved in 1932.

Musical terms¹

Atonality – abandonment of the traditional tonal idiom by intentionally avoiding the use of a central note or tonic. Pioneered by Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, Claude Debussy, Arnold Schoenberg, among others. Unlike serialism, a musical “row” is not created to take the place of the tonal system. The composer is free to make use of harmony/dissonance without being limited to the confines of any particular defined musical scale or pattern.

Formalism – In the Soviet context, this is defined alternately as the denial of extra-musical content in a composition or as the use of modernist compositional devices.

Modernism – in music, refers to the use of compositional devices developed or cultivated by composers of the early twentieth century such as Schoenberg, Bartók, Webern, etc. Both *serialism* and *atonality* are characteristic modernist devices. Condemned in the Soviet Union by musical groups such as RAPM and by the Union of Composers after 1936 as “bourgeois”.

Modes – musical scales used by the Greeks as the basis of their theoretical system of music. Each scale had a particular name (Dorian, Phrygian) and was related to a certain mood or emotion.

¹ These definitions refer to terms as they are used in this thesis. Several of these terms have various meanings according to the context in which they are used. Those meanings not immediately relevant to the paper have been omitted.

Serialism – a compositional device first developed by Arnold Schoenberg to take the place of traditional tonality. Further developed and refined by Webern and composers of the later twentieth century. Involves the creation of musical “rows” that take the place of a musical scale as the basic building block of a composition. True serialism was never widely cultivated by Soviet composers due to political pressure. Sometimes referred to as “twelve-tone” technique.

Tonality – refers to music that has a central note or tonic that acts as the basis of the composition. The major-minor tonal system, based on scales of eight notes or of twelve semitones, has been the fundamental musical language of Western music from the time of J.S. Bach (1685-1750) until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Encouraged in the Soviet Union as more comprehensible to the masses than *atonality* or *serialism*.

Traditionalists – in the Russian/Soviet context, refers to composers who continued to compose in the nineteenth-century style inherited from Tchaikovskii and the “Mighty Five”. Includes such composers as Glazunov and Glière. Attacked by members of Proletkul’t and RAPM as propagators of bourgeois culture.

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