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DIPLOMACY, HARNESSING CLASSICAL MUSIC FOR POWER PURPOSES*

Lina and Serge by Simon Morrison is a rare phenomenon on the publishing market: it combines a popular appeal of a compulsively readable biography with a valuable scholarly contri-

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* Simon Morrison, *Lina and Serge: The Love and Wars of Lina Prokofiev*, Houghton Mifflin Har-

bution on a new research frontier in the study of history and politics—understanding the social, economic and political realities underpinning classical music in Soviet-style regimes. In particular, it reveals the staggering dimensions of the abuse of state power over composers and their families.

At the heart of the attractiveness to the general public lies the dramatic life story of an amazing woman: Carolina (Lina) Prokofiev. Brilliant, beautiful, and gifted with a captivating sociability, she was born in 1898, to a Spanish--Russian-Polish family of excellent opera singers Juan Codina and Olga Nemisskaya. She grew up in the Russian émigré community in New York City: a Brooklyn and Manhattan girl. Numbering about 500,000 prior to the Communist Revolution, subsequently swelling to 750,000, the Russian-American ethnic group in New York created a fertile environment for the incubation of intellectuals and artists. Lina travelled with her parents around Europe, learned five foreign languages before reaching adulthood, and received classical music education that was the cement of the social circles in which she moved. Her young life was filled with concerts and opera performances, often in association with institutions working in support of those most needy both in America and back in Russia.

Lina had the privilege of being admired, cared for, and educated by many leaders of the émigré population in New York. Her biography abounds with portraits of impressive, larger than life personalities. Linked to the equally vigorous cultural scene in Paris, the Russian-Americans who treasured classical music often crossed the Atlantic, and so did Lina. There, she lived and performed with Serge (Sergei) Prokofiev and married him in 1923. Her participation in the excitements of artistic life in Paris, narrated by Morrison with the eye for impactful intellectual breakthroughs among composers, electrifying competition among ambitious impresarios (including Serge Diaghilev of Ballets Russes), as well as lowbrow cabarets championing Russian music, would be enough material for a riveting biography. However, Lina's life took on an even more extraordinary and, unfortunately, devastating turn: the Prokofievs moved to the Soviet Union in 1936.

Lina had met Serge in 1919 after one of his performances. The virtuoso pianist, who arrived from Russia and toured the US, Europe, and Japan, composed in his every spare moment, including on train, ship, and during periods of respite afforded by periodical commissions from ballet and opera houses. The harrowing dominant drama of their lives first surfaced in 1925 when the cultural agents of the Soviet government initiated what would turn out to be a macabre courtship of a famous classical music composer needed to help legitimize the Soviet political and economic system in the eyes of the rest of the world. The positive effects of the cultivation of classical music on the country's international image (today some call it soft power), was deeply appreciated by Soviet leaders. However, harnessing classical music for power purposes had to be done delicately. As the example of Serge Prokofiev shows, the Soviets had a problem: in order to grow professionally, Russian musicians needed the interaction with Western artists, so they had to be allowed some contact before being lured to go back. Thus in 1918 Serge was allowed by Lenin's culture administration to travel to the West, and it was after 18 years that he went back to his home country.

Soviet enticements ranged from lucrative commissions for compositions to the logistics of everyday life, including a secure and flexible singing career for Lina. Soviet diplomats organized lavish parties in honor of the Prokofievs, invited them to elegant vacation homes in France, stage-managed glamorous welcomes on musical tours of the Soviet Union, and guaranteed first-class housing, first-rate education for their two sons, Svyatoslav and Oleg (in an elite English-language school created in Moscow for the children of the members of the foreign trade, banking, and other arms of the Soviet foreign service) and, "of course," the possibility of any time return to the West.

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court, Boston–New York 2013 (also published in England, *The Love and Wars of Lina Prokofiev*, Vintage Books, London 2014).

The regime succeeded in many ways in harnessing classical music to impress internationally and domestically. In the case of the Prokofievs, at first, Serge just praised the Soviet system in interviews with Western journalists, then accepted commissions for musical endorsements, such as, for example, the collaboration with Georgiy Yakulov and Diaghilev in 1925 on *Le pas d'acier*, a ballet about major features of communism (expressed in symbols such as, for example, a small street market to represent Lenin's New Economic Policy) in the process of building a new civilization superior to the West. Once in Moscow, Serge regularly churned out compositions whose subjects substantiated the main myths and propaganda of the Soviet system, and allowed all his work to be seen as part of the pursuit of the Soviet sound, the communist project of creating the brave new world.

After just a few months, broken promises started crashing down on the Prokofievs. Among the first was the pledge of freedom of international travel: the last trip, with their sons kept in Moscow as hostages, took place in 1938. Serge had to report on himself during the trip, observe curfews specifying the length of stay in the places he visited, and continue to work on "Soviet topics," such as, for example, popular songs in honor of Soviet leaders (among them, as it later turned out, mass murderers). Requests for further travel were turned down and so Serge stopped petitioning for fear of overstepping the clear but unspoken decision made somewhere in the corridors of power. Corrupt bureaucrats suffocated Lina's singing. Serge received engagements, but unpredictably and dependent on the political approval, which caused him endless frustrations. For example, Prokofiev's opera *Semyon Kotko* which had originally been composed to be anti-German, featuring a sarcastic parody of a German march, had to be reconfigured at the urging of the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov after the USSR signed the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939, ushering extensive cooperation, including between the two secret services in dividing up Poland. The main hero of the opera switched from fighting the Germans, to fighting the Austrians, and then, in another forced adjustment, to fighting anti-Soviet Ukrainian nationalists. In the meantime, the English school for children closed down. Teachers, neighbors, colleagues, and friends were executed, secretly killed with the help of hired thugs, or dispatched to the Gulag. Serge found himself writing musical works lauding the Soviet political and economic system in the hope of shielding the people working on these artistic projects from danger of imprisonment.

Both Serge and Lina learned the art of making only positive statements about the Soviet regime, even in private. Sometimes they slipped and made an honest mistake without intending to come across as critical. Serge, for instance, once altered, for musical reasons, a libretto that contained Lenin's speeches. As a result, he saw his *Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of October [Revolution]* banned, thus learning that "tampering with Lenin's words was akin to burning the Bible—absolutely taboo" (p. 179).

Morrison's intricate knowledge of the political, social, and economic realities at the time allowed him to discern many telltale things that the Prokofievs did not do. For example, Serge did not volunteer for political committee work in the Union of Soviet Composers, instead, "he turned up at the meetings only when his music was under discussion, acting incredulous at any suggestion that his melodies and harmonies evinced anti-Soviet tendencies" (p. 178). Lina did not register to obtain a medal For the Defense of Moscow distributed to civilians engaged at the home front in the capital, and did not give up friendships with diplomats at Western embassies. Given the context, these were unmistakable signs of inner resistance to the political system.

Starting in the summer of 1937, Serge received a summer vacation in a spa in Kislovodsk in North Caucasus, but Lina did not. Even when Lina came for a short visit, she could only stay in the Intourist hotel. In contrast, Mira Mendelson, a devoted admirer, 23 years Serge's junior, whose family belonged to the elite in charge of economic central planning, received the same spa allocation — with the common

dining room, and opportunities to try to sneak to Serge's room. By the time Serge finished the third summer in Kislovodsk with Mira in the spa, and Lina in Moscow, the family was broken. Serge moved out with a Soviet mistress very much unlike Lina. Mira had a positive attitude to the Soviet system, and instead of making Serge feel that he should fight it, she was happy to help him navigate its opaque patronage system.

Lina remained faithful to her husband for her entire life. She categorically rejected any request for divorce (the judicial system quickly found a way around it). With the victory in World War II came increased security apparatus activism and Lina was imprisoned on fabricated charges in 1948. During the nine month long investigation before the trial, she endured horrifying tortures, then fought for survival in nightmarish conditions serving an 8 year sentence in the Gulag.

Morrison is exceptionally well qualified to chronicle the life of Lina Prokofiev. Professor of music history at Princeton University, he is gifted with a wonderful writing style, and has published both on Russian classical music and Russian émigré cultural life. His books include *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* and *The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years*.[1] Prior expertise in unmasking the use of art as a propaganda vehicle, shrewd historical judgment, and hands-on research style, including extensive contacts with two generations of the Prokofiev family and stays in Russia exploring many sources of information, enabled Morrison to dig deeply.

In the first half of the biography, he gives a mesmerizing account of Lina's youth, at the same time using it to instruct the reader about Russian-American and Russian-French history, as well as 20th century classical music. The second half of the book about the Prokofievs' interaction with the Soviet regime contains unique historical material. Its novelty should appeal equally to scholars and the general audience.

Although important links between state power and art and artists in Soviet-style communist regimes have been established,[2] gaining in-depth insight into any single case of political interference with artists and their families in the Soviet Union is exceedingly rare. The reasons for the difficulties in assembling such a comprehensive study are numerous, to mention a few: scarcity of official documentation, limited nature of the information gained from interviews, and relative absence of government assistance. Soviet-style regimes produced little in terms of paper trail concerning political coercion. Instead, the system produced mountains of figures and analyses that painted a positive picture, while suppressing and distorting information that could give rise to criticism (beyond the acceptable official self-criticism).[3] Memoirs and interviews with victims of political violence can provide important evidence, but it has to be checked and complemented with a wider context: victims differ in their capacity for perception and self-reflection required to chronicle their ordeals with thoroughness, and their recollections are often filtered by two powerful inhibitors: fear and shame. Citizens lived in fear of a plethora of punishments for speaking openly;[4] while prisoners were even required to sign a pledge of silence upon being released, making it illegal for them to talk about their experiences. The problem of shame has to do with the structure of the political system that forced people into collaboration, which they deep inside detested, but preferred to avoid discussing because of guilt. It is particularly acute among those who spent time in prisons and labor camps. In order to survive, prisoners had to suspend moral judgment and wholeheartedly fulfill the expectations created by the political system. Compliance could earn privileges of additional food, a desperately needed medical treatment, or a periodic release from work. In contrast, visible signs of resistance were punished brutally, often with what was in effect a death sentence: exposure to the unbearable cold in the north, heat in the south, starvation,

[1] Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, University of California Press Berkeley and Los Angeles 2002; *The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 2008.

overwork, and untreated illness. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi observed the same dynamic in Nazi death camps: the necessity of becoming "privileged" in order to survive, followed by tormenting feelings of guilt. In his discussion of the problem of shame, Levi quoted the author of Gulag memoirs Alexander Solzhenitsyn: "Almost all those who served a long sentence and whom you congratulate because they are survivors are unquestionably "pridurki" [who gain privileged position by being compliant] or were such during the greater part of their imprisonment." [5]

Government coordination is needed to create a large and easily accessible documentary and oral history base that can lead to the emergence of a broad and precise scholarly picture of the enormous apparatus of political coercion of society under communism. It has been designed and implemented most extensively in Germany [6] and in Poland. The Polish government encouraged the work of scholars and victims of communism through the creation of the Institute of National Remembrance (Instutut Pamięci Narodowej—IPN): with its growing country-wide network of Committees for the study of Crimes against the Nation, the Institute has led to an outpouring of publications (of documents and analyses) that grew on the fertile ground of improved collection and accessibility of data in archives, in print, and on the internet. [7] In contrast, in Russia, the opposite process seems to take place. The data collection citizen initiative *Memorial* has been harassed by the government and subject to the current political intrigue to close it altogether. *Memorial* is in a catch-22 situation: starved of government funding, it stands accused on being a foreign agent on account of accepting foreign donations. Irina Sherbakova, a historian and co-founder pointed out that if only the Russian government were prepared to support *Memorial*'s work, the organization wouldn't need funding from abroad. The head of *Memorial* Alexander Tscherkassov speaks of a fallback to the Soviet times. [8] Until more openness, improved data collection, and analysis of the abuses of state power are allowed and encouraged in Russia, Morrison's book is a model of gaining penetrating insight into the history of artists in the Soviet Union. The book unearths unprecedented amounts of new data that had been carefully scrutinized by the author for distortions and falsifications.

One hopes that Morrison will produce more biographies in the future. In the course of Lina's biography he clearly found new information about Igor Stravinsky. Perhaps a full length biography of Stravinsky might, in turn, lead him to a case study of Dmitri Shostakovich? It would be a tremendous gain for scholars working in many areas in politics, sociology, history, as well as music.

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[2] See, for example, Anne Applebaum's book, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944––1956*, Allen Lane, London and New York 2012.

[3] For secret police methods to control scholars that avoided written directives and public channels see, for example, Zbigniew Romek, ed., *Cenzura a nauka historyczna w Polsce 1944––1970*, Wydawnictwo Neriton-Instytut Historii PAN, Warszawa 2010.

[4] See Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, Picador, New York 2007.

[5] Alexander Solzhenitsyn quoted in Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Vintage International, New York 1989, p. 84.

[6] In terms of publications, Germany has the most productive network of centers for data collection and research dealing with dark periods in its history: national socialism and communism. New projects are constantly added, for example, in the heart of Munich, a major new center for the collection of documentary evidence and remembrance of victims of national socialism.

[7] See, for example, the IPN portal: ipn.gov.pl/publikacje

[8] For example, see the controversies surround the exhibit, owned by *Memorial*, that was on show in Berlin in June–September 2013. www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-06-03/putin-threatens-gulag-campaigners-as-berlin-shows-terror.html; Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, www.srf.ch/news/international/memorial-gegen-putin

In sum, anyone looking for an enjoyable time would do well to read this book. From the point of view of the human and historical interest, it is wholly educating and enriching. It also brings to light new data about Soviet policies aimed at the Prokofievs: an intriguing mixture of the geopolitical, the comparative and the personal, discovered by Morrison through patient and painstaking peeling off layers of social deception.