SESSION FOUR
THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF DMITRI KABALEVSKY

Last week’s class focused on the life and music of Sergei Prokofiev. Today we will explore the life and music of Dmitri Kabalevsky.

PRELUDE
Two weeks ago our class session began with a performance of Dmitri Kabalevsky’s Violin concerto, a charming, energetic piece from 1948. Kabalevsky’s third piano concerto was another in a series of concertos he written for students and adult musicians. It remains one of his most popular works today, and a favorite with audiences, although it is played mostly by students. It is considered a model of Soviet Realism: cheerful, melodious, and easily understandable by audiences.

The performance here is by 10-year-old Grace Chen, with the Thousand Oaks, CA Philharmonic Orchestra.

PLAY/DISCUSS WITH “SHOULD BE” OUTLINE

KABALEVSKY PIC
Today we take up the life and music of Dmitri Kabalevsky, one of the most prominent and influential composers of the Soviet era. How many of you are familiar with some of his music?

Born in 1904 into middle class Russian family, Kabalevsky graduated from the Moscow Conservatory. He joined the Communist Party in 1940, and during the Great Patriotic War he gained official approval by writing many patriotic songs and choruses. In 1950 Joseph Stalin chose him to represent the Soviet Union in a Russian-American cultural exchange program.

AS A COMPOSER
Dmitri Kabalevsky is the composer who most fully embraced the concept of Socialist Realism. He was a prolific composer in all musical genres.

Even so, in Andrei Zhdanov’s famous decree of 1948, Kabalevsky was originally on the list of composers who were guilty of formalism; however, due to his connections with high-ranking party and governmental officials, his name was removed before the document was published.

In contrast to the music of other Soviet composers, Kabalevsky’s music is more direct and accessible, with more conventional harmonies and simple, singable melodies. Many of his best-known works date from the post-World War II era of extreme censorship. In the West, however, where audiences were familiar with the more modern works of Stravinsky and Bartok, Kabalevsky’s music was considered bland and unemotional.
OVERTURE TO “COLAS BREUGNON,” 1938
Kabalevsky’s opera tells the story of Colas Breugnon, a poor but honest carpenter and sculptor, unlucky in love and oppressed by an evil Duke, who threatens to burn his studio and all his sculptures. This would seem to be a perfect story for Soviet audiences – the proletariat being oppressed by the upper classes. The plot of the opera turned out to be too complex and confusing, but the overture survives as a popular concert piece throughout the world.

PLAY/DISCUSS WITH “SHOULD BE” OUTLINE

AS A MUSIC EDUCATOR
After the Central Committee of the Communist Party received a scathing report about the low level of music education, Kabalevsky was asked to look into the problem and propose some solutions. Perhaps his most important contribution to the world of music-making was his consistent efforts to connect Soviet children to music.

Taking a personal interest in the problem, Kabalevsky began writing music that bridged the gap between children’s technical skills and adult aesthetics. He also established a pilot program of music education in twenty-five Soviet schools, and for a time taught a class of seven-year-olds how to listen attentively and put their impressions into words. His writings on this subject were published in the United States in 1988 as Music and Education: A Composer Writes about Musical Education.

PIANO SONATA 3, 1945
Kabalevsky’s Piano Sonata No. 3 is another good example of music written expressly for both students and adults to play. It is a cheerful, energetic piece with predictable rhythms and singable melodies. This performance is by an American college student, part of his senior recital, and very well done. The romantic second movement is a fine example of “Soviet Schmaltz.”

PLAY/DISCUSS WITH “SHOULD BE” OUTLINE

AWARDS AND HONORS
Kabalevsky was frequently chosen to represent the Soviet government overseas: he was a member of the Soviet Committee for the Defense of Peace as well as a representative for the Promotion of Friendship between the Soviet Union and foreign countries.

He was also the most decorated of all Soviet composers. Between 1940 and 1984 Kabalevsky was awarded many state honors for his musical works and other activities. His major awards and prizes include:

- People’s Artist of the USSR
- Hero of Soviet Labor
SONATA FOR CELLO AND PIANO 1964
In 1964 Kabalevsky’s 60th birthday was widely celebrated with a series of concerts throughout the Soviet Union. It also marked the completion of his sonata for cello and piano – an introspective, serious, melancholy piece, quite different in mood from other Kabalevsky pieces, and meant to be performed by mature adults, not students.

PLAY/DISCUSS WITH “SHOULD BE” OUTLINE

GREAT PERFORMERS: LOYALTIES AND DEFECTIONS

GILELS AND RICHTER (9 min)
This short documentary film has many performance clips by the two greatest pianists of the soviet era, Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter. The narration is in English.

DEFECTIONS
Emigration from the Soviet Union was expressly forbidden. Joseph Stalin, especially, feared that the loss of talented and highly educated citizens would drain much-needed talent from the nation and be a political embarrassment as well. The choreographer George Balanchine defected to Paris in the 1920s, but overall the number of defections of artists and other prominent people was low.

After the Great Patriotic War the number of defections gradually increased, and to counter this Stalin imposed more severe restrictions. When people were permitted to travel, spouses and children were never allowed to accompany them. Instead, Party officials were assigned to travel with them, to help insure they had no contact with officials of foreign governments or anti-Soviet groups.

NUREYEYV PIC
Then in 1961 Rudolf Nureyev, principal dancer with the Kirov Ballet and the most beloved dancer in the Soviet Union, defected at the Paris airport despite several attempts to prevent his escape. He was granted asylum in France, later gained Austrian citizenship, and continued his spectacular career in Europe, England, and the United States. Nureyev’s defection caused an international
sensation. As a result the Soviet Union imposed more severe restrictions on foreign travel.

Despite this, some prominent Soviet composers and musicians continued to travel to the west for performances and recording sessions. A few were sent by the government to attend important international conferences.

**ROSTROPOVICH PIC**
In 1970 the prominent cellist Mstislav Rostropovich sheltered the novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, after Soviet authorities refused to publish several of his novels and expelled him from the Union of Soviet Writers. Rostropovich was punished for this by having most of his concerts cancelled. In 1974 Rostropovich defected to the United States with his wife and children, and was punished by losing his Soviet citizenship.

**ASHKENAZY PIC**
The concert pianist and conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy defected to England while on a concert tour, while his Icelandic wife and children were visiting her family in Iceland. He became an Icelandic citizen in 1972 and has lived in Switzerland since 1976.