In this work, Peter J. Schmelz presents a thorough study of Soviet avant-garde music during the Kruschev-era thaw (1953-1974). The book focuses on six prominent “young composers” of the time: Edison Denisov, Sofia Gubaidulina, Arvo Pärt, Valentin Silvestrov, Alfred Schnittke and Andrey Volkonsky. Schmelz’s chronologically organized monograph develops an intriguing narrative of a Soviet musical underground in which composers were able to experiment with previously forbidden compositional techniques, listen to and discuss the music of contemporary composers both foreign and domestic, and perform their work to audiences of young, idealistic peers. The author argues that the ideas, attitudes, and practices of this group of composers, artists, and intellectuals generated a social environment of passive opposition toward the oppressive Soviet System. The music produced by these composers parallels the evolution of the unofficial musical community. The initial period of excitement following Stalin’s death in 1953 and leading into the early 1960s saw composers, eager to work with previously forbidden techniques, producing works of strict serialism and sharp abstraction. These early compositions were met with harsh criticism from officials, but rapt attention and enthusiastic support from audiences. Over time, as the thrill of change and audience members dwindled, composers began to adopt a more generally accessible approach to music, stressing dramatic effect and aleatoric techniques over strict serial organization. Schmelz’s book displays stunning
research and analysis throughout its 392 pages. Within the eight chapters and epilogue, Schmelz exhibits his incredible depth of knowledge through professional yet accessible prose, engaging readers both within and outside academic spheres.

The text’s introduction and first chapter investigate the earliest effects of the thaw and subsequent alleviation of restrictions on the Soviet artistic community. Schmelz draws connections between visual art and music, in the sense that two distinct styles became evident during the thaw. The author borrows Karol Berger’s terms, abstract and mimetic, to describe the development of Soviet avant-garde music over time (10). Schmelz describes Oscar Rabin’s _Ferris Wheel in the Evening_ (1977)—a work of strong social implication and powerful imagery—as mimetic. Conversely, Francisco Infante’s _Space-Movement-Infinity (Project for a Kinetic Object)_ (1963) is considered an abstract work, consisting solely of geometric shapes and lines with no overt social impetus. Schmelz’s choice of the term “unofficial” to describe the music of this period stems from his desire to avoid romanticizing the composers as dissident rebels toward the USSR. Rather, Soviet avant-garde composers withdrew from the system, allowing them to retain artistic purity and redefine themselves even in their suspended position. As Andrei Codrescu wrote of his generation in Romania, unofficial composers wanted to “escape, not to fight” (19).

In chapter one, Schmelz investigates the composers’ experiences as students of the Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev conservatories, as well as a period that Schmelz deems “the second conservatory,” a term borrowed from Denisov to describe the unofficial musical community of the 1960s (40). Though Stalin had passed by that time, the “frigid atmosphere of Stalin’s regime still lingered” in the conservatory (30). Modern music from the West remained banned and compositional techniques that were permitted were constricting at best. According to the print records and oral accounts presented by Schmelz in this chapter, it seems the formal education available to students was, as Schnittke described, “insufficient” (41). With the exception of a handful of sympathetic professors and influence from foreign guests, the majority of composers appear to have developed only after their “official” education. Throughout the 1960s, many young composers spent their time engaging in discussion and debate about modern music and compositional practice. Soviet composers who were allowed to attend the annual Warsaw Autumn Festival brought back scores and recordings to broaden their musical horizons as well as that of their peers. Andrey Volkonsky often hosted listening parties in his apartment where he and his contemporaries devoted hours to listening to and discussing the Western avant-garde. Schmelz imbues the personalities and activities of these composers with a spirit of youthful exploration and discovery that is also reflected in the works of this decade.
In chapter two, Schmelz reiterates much of what he discussed in his 2005 article, “Andrey Volkonsky and the Beginnings of Unofficial Music in the Soviet Union,” in which he underscores the importance of Volkonsky to the early abstract era of Soviet avant-garde music. In his article, Schmelz hails Volkonsky as “the most influential composer of his generation,” illustrating him as not only a talented, outspoken young composer, but also a vital source of knowledge about new western music for his colleagues.\(^1\) Born in Geneva and raised in Paris until he was fourteen, Volkonsky maintained his Western connections, allowing him access to music and literature forbidden to his compatriots. Schmelz compellingly retells the story of Volkonsky’s musical career, focusing on three important works: \textit{Musica Stricta}, \textit{Suite of Mirrors} and \textit{Laments of Schaza}. Schmelz analyzes each piece, outlining Volkonsky’s development as a composer. From the first use of strict serialism in \textit{Musica Stricta} to the exotic rotations of \textit{Laments of Schaza}, these early serial compositions “set the stage for unofficial music and subculture” and were instrumental in informing the development of composers like Denisov, Schnittke, and Pärt (67).

After a veritable government blacklisting of his work forced Volkonsky out of professional composition, Edison Denisov assumed the role of leader for the Soviet avant-garde movement in the late 1960s. Denisov was more publicly outspoken and zealous about new techniques, often speaking and publishing about serial theory. His open dedication to the avant-garde was looked upon unfavorably, making the composer and his peers targets for Soviet officials. Schmelz focuses his analysis on Denisov’s \textit{Sun of the Incas}, an important work that received wide foreign exposure. The piece became a “certain sensation” in the West, despite being criticized or ignored by Soviet officials, even after its successful premiere in Leningrad.\(^2\) As reported by Richard Taruskin, Denisov’s work went on to influence several “elite modernist” composers in the U.S who consider themselves “today’s Russian avant-garde.”\(^3\) In this section, Schmelz accurately argues that the official reception of Denisov’s work marked a change in attitude toward this group of young composers. What were once “youthful indiscretions” became “intolerable provocations” (135). This new attitude toward the now “unofficial” composers tightened the vice on performances and concert spaces, forcing them to seek alternatives.

Restrictions on available venues for new music drove the unofficial culture further underground, forcing composers, performers, and audiences to take matters


into their own hands. Venues such as Grigoriy Frid’s Moscow Youth Musical Club (officially labelled a center for “scientific research”) had to operate under the radar of Soviet officials. As Schmelz describes, at these underground clubs listeners could “directly challenge and question the aesthetic norms of socialist realism” (180). Chapter three goes into detail about several unofficial venues in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev, often located in museums, and universities. Concerts usually attracted crowds of fellow musicians and “young educated professionals” with an interest in the new, progressive music that was gradually becoming further associated with social criticism. The music drew the majority of audience members there not for reasons of resistance, but rather for an opportunity to experience something that until recently was unavailable. Unlike Schmelz, Robert Adlington puts more stock in the dissidence of these audience members, claiming that “audiences were drawn by the novelty, exoticism, and perceived illegality of the new music they heard, and attending these unofficial concerts became a means of circumventing, reinterpreting, and undercutting the dominant socialist realist aesthetic codes.”

Whether the intentions of audience members were personal or political, their attendance indicates a curiosity and interest that helped drive artistic and social development at this time.

In the next chapter, the author presents the work of Sofia Gubaidulina, Arvo Pärt, Valentin Silvestrov, and Alfred Schnittke together, as a body of work that set stylistic boundaries between early and later avant-garde composers. The chapter examines the reaction of these composers toward tighter artistic restrictions following the deposition of Nikita Kruschev and instatement of Leonid Brezhnev in 1964. Dissatisfied with the constraints of strict serialism, these composers instead began incorporating personal style, aleatoric methods, and improvisation into their work, creating a more mimetic, drama-oriented music. Ironically, this freer method of composition, which in principle defied all socialist ideals of organization and uniformity, was applauded by officials despite its more overt social implications. This is because of the heightened accessibility of this more mimetic music as compared to the abstract work of Volkonsky and Denisov. In essence, this approach somewhat “softened” the avant-garde for listeners. The more mimetic approach taken by these composers expressed a desire for a more literal musical freedom and “an interest in addressing matters of broader importance” (274).

Schmelz concludes the book by addressing the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent hardening of Soviet rule during the 1970s and 1980s. Many previous musicologists hold this event to be the official end of the thaw, but Schmelz argues the cutoff is much later. Schmelz cites the premiere of Schnittke’s first symphony in 1974, the emigration of Andrey Volkonsky, the bulldozing of a modern art exhibit in 1974, and

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Dimitri Shostakovich’s death in 1975 as more appropriate markers. As Pauline Fairclough points out, there was a significant loosening of the restrictions toward “unofficial” music in the mid-1970s and these markers do not accurately mark the end of the musical thaw, but rather “the end of the true ‘unofficial’ period of avant-garde music.”

Such Freedom if Only Musical is a thorough display of excellent scholarship on a subject that, until now, had not been investigated to such an extent. The sheer amount of research this book relies upon is impressive in and of itself, and creates a firm basis from which Schmelz’s points originate. What is perhaps more impressive is the extensive oral history the author collected between 1999 and 2007. Though Schmelz admits to the potential risks of relying on oral accounts of past events, these recollections allow Schmelz to support his arguments in a more compelling way than could be provided through archival research. That being said, with this depth of research come some issues that must be addressed. In his book, Schmelz’s points and arguments are often lost amidst a surplus of quotations and footnotes. I found myself often having to sift through the words of others to find the author’s voice. Though this degree of secondary information is certainly appreciated, it often disrupted the flow of the text, creating choppy sections in which the author’s point was abstracted. Another issue in this work is an often distracting presence of superfluous information that draws the author away from the main point. I have not found it uncommon to grapple with what feels like an excess of unfiltered facts in academic literature. Much of the information in Schmelz’s book comes across as excessive, arguably self-indulgent, and does not always clearly reflect back to the argument at hand, particularly in the biographically-focused chapters three, four, and six.

The treatment of musical analyses in this book is certainly one of its strengths. Schmelz is thorough in his study of the scores presented, albeit the technicality of the analysis is certainly not for the untrained reader. Supplementary to the overall construction of the compositions, Schmelz intriguingly examines the stylistic subtleties that each composer possessed, and uses these examples to reveal the musical shift from abstract to mimesis. It is clear these chapters are intended for readers within the academic sphere with a particular interest and knowledge of avant-garde music. The more casual reader will most definitely find these portions a challenge.

Schmelz’s writing style further strengthens the book as he maintains a delicate balance between academic and casual tones. The author’s prose is clear, professional, and intelligent, without being overly saturated by jargon or ornate language. Schmelz does not condescend nor does he compromise the content of his text by

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oversimplification. Schmelz writes with expert ability and fantastic style, resulting in an accessible text that retains the ability to engage and challenge the reader.

Schmelz makes a conscientious effort not to romanticize this musical period and the people involved. Though this certainly preserves the academic tone of the text, it seems to wash away the individuality of each of his subjects. Schmelz focuses on a very culturally rich and significant group of people, and the overt effort to maintain an objective point of view, at times, dehumanizes them. This creates portions of dryness and seems to contradict the passion and personality exhibited in the recollections and memoirs of the composers.

My final criticism is one also considered in Kiril Tomoff’s review of this book. The subtitle of Schmelz’s text, Unofficial Soviet Music during the Thaw proves misleading to the content of the book. Schmelz regards the six composers studied as the center of unofficial music and overlooks entire other groups of unofficial musicians and composers. As Kiril puts it, “What about jazz and the later emergence of rock with its widespread youth appeal and its own ‘air’ of opposition? And what of the bards like Bulat Okudzhava and Vladimir Vysotskii and their large followings?” Russian musicologist Valerie Tsenova’s collection of essays focuses on eighteen different composers and their involvement in underground music, of which Schmelz considers only two. Boris Schwarz also talks about the development of “Soviet Jazz” during this era. It seems that the title of Schmelz’s book is somewhat misleading concerning the breadth of content the author provides.

Despite these criticisms, Such Freedom if Only Musical is a captivating and engaging text, and is the first to examine the music and composers of this era so carefully. Schmelz’s meticulous research and overarching care in construction has produced a fantastic, groundbreaking piece of scholarship that will serve as a jumping off point for navigating one of the great unexplored frontiers of musicology.

For Further Reading:

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