



# THE ZHDANOV DECREE

## 1948

**5**0 years have now passed since “Zhdanovschina” (the purge of Zhdanov). The January conference of 1948 was followed by a far-reaching “decree” singling out not only Muradeli, but Shostakovich and others. This decree was later “officially” condemned as having suffered from “erroneous judgements resulting from conditions surrounding Stalin’s personality cult”, in May 1958. The full text is published here, as a sobering reminder...

**ON THE OPERA, *VELIKAYA DRUZHBA* by V. MURADELI - DECREE OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE C.P.S.U. (b) of the 10TH. FEBRUARY 1948.**

The Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. (b) considers that the opera *Velikaya Druzhba* (*The Great Friendship*) (music by V. Muradeli, libretto by G. Mdivani), produced by the Bolshoi Theatre of the U.S.S.R. to mark the 30th. anniversary of the October Revolution is an inartistic work, faulty both musically and as regards to its subject matter.

The main shortcomings of the opera are primarily rooted in its music. The music of the opera is inexpressive and poor. It does not contain a single striking melody or aria. It is confusing and inharmonious, being constructed on pure dissonances and on ear-splitting sound combinations. Individual passages and scenes which lay claim to be melodious, are suddenly interrupted by inharmonious noise, completely alien to the normal human ear and which has an oppressive effect on the hearer. There is no organic connection between the musical accompaniment and the development of the action on the stage. The vocal part of the opera - choral, solo and group singing - produces an impression of poverty. In view of all this, the potentialities of the orchestra and the singers remain unused.

The composer has not made use of the wealth of popular melodies, songs, refrains, dance motifs, in which the creative work of the peoples of the U.S.S.R. is so rich and, in particular the creative work of the peoples inhabiting the Northern Caucasus, where the action depicted in the opera takes place.

In the chase after spurious “originality” in music, the composer Muradeli has neglected the best traditions and experience of the classical opera as a whole and Russian classical opera in particular, which is distinguished for its wealth of inner content, its richness in melodies and breadth of diapason, its popular nature, its exquisite, beautiful and clear musical form which has made Russian opera the best in the world, a genre of music loved by and accessible to wide sections of the people.

The subject matter of the opera is historically false and artificial; it lays claim to depict the struggle for the establishment of Soviet power and the friendship of the peoples in the Northern Caucasus in the years 1918-1920. It gives the incorrect impression that Caucasian people such as the Georgians and Ossetians were at that period hostile to the Russian people, which is historically untrue, since the impediment to the establishment of the friendship of people at that period in the Northern Caucasus were the Inguishi and Chechentsy.

The Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. (b) considers that the failure of Muradeli’s opera is the result of the faulty formalistic path, fatal to the work of a Soviet composer, on which Muradeli has embarked.

As the conference of workers in Soviet music, held in the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U.(b) showed, the failure of Muradeli’s opera is not an isolated instance, but is closely connected with the unhappy state of contemporary Soviet music, with the spread of a formalistic trend among Soviet composers.

As far back as 1936, the anti-popular and formalistic distortions in the work of D.Shostakovich were subjected to sharp criticism in the organ of the Central committee of the C.P.S.U.(b), *Pravda*, in connection with the appearance of the composer’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and the harm and danger of this trend in its effects upon the development of Soviet music were exposed. Then acting upon the instructions of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. (b) *Pravda* clearly formulated demands which the Soviet people make of its composers.



Despite these warnings and in the face of the instructions issued by the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U.(b) in its decisions on the journals *Svezda* and *Leningrad*; on the film *Bolshay Zhin*, on the repertoire of theatres and measures for their improvement, no reorganisation has been carried out in Soviet music. Individual successes by certain Soviet composers in producing new songs, which have found recognition and wide popularity among the people, in composing music for the cinema, do not alter the general picture. The situation is particularly bad in the sphere of symphonic and operatic work. It is a case of composers adhering to a formalist and anti-popular trend. This trend has found its fullest expression in the works of composers such as D.Shostakovich, S.Prokofiev, A.Khachaturian, V.Shebalin, G.Popov, N.Myaskovski and others, in whose work formalistic distortions and anti-democratic tendencies in music, alien to the Soviet people and to its artistic tastes are particularly clearly represented.



the Soviet people, have enclosed themselves in a narrow circle of specialists and musical gourmards, have lowered the high social role of music and narrowed its significance, limiting it to the anti-satisfaction of the perverted tastes of aesthete-individualists.

The formalistic trend in Soviet music has given rise to a one-sided liking in Soviet composers for the complex forms of instrumental symphonic music without using a text, and to a contemptuous attitude towards musical genre such as the opera, choral music, popular music for small orchestras and national instruments, vocal ensemble etc. All this is inevitably leading to a loss of the bases of vocal culture and dramatic mastery; composers are losing the art of writing for the people, evidence of which is the fact that not a single Soviet opera on the level of the Russian classical opera has recently been produced.

Characteristic features of this music are the denial of the basic principles of classical music, the prosounding (sic) of atonality, dissonance and disharmony, which are alleged to be the expression of rejection of the most important bases of musical composition such as melody, predilection for confusing and neuropathical combinations which make of music, cacophony and a chaotic accumulation of sounds. This music is strongly redolent (sic) of the contemporary modernistic, bourgeois music of Europe and America which reflects the marasm (sic) of bourgeois culture, the complete denial of Musical art, the impasse which it has reached.

The separation of certain workers in Soviet music from the people has reached the point that the rotten "theory" has obtained circulation in their midst, namely, that the failure to understand the music of many contemporary Soviet composers shown by the people is to be explained by the fact that the people has "not yet developed" to the stage of understanding their complex music, that they will understand it in a hundred years time and that there is no cause for despondency if certain musical works fail to find an audience.

An important symptom of the formalistic trend is also the renunciation of polyphonic music and singing based on the simultaneous combination and development of a number of independent melodies and predilection for single-tone unison music and song, frequently without words which represents a break with the multi-voice music song construction, proper to our people and which leads to the impoverishment and decline of music.

This out-and-out individualistic and radically anti-popular theory has helped a number of composers and musical historians to sever themselves still further from the people, from the criticism of the Soviet public and to isolate themselves in their ivory tower.

Trampling on the best traditions of Russian and Western classical music, rejecting these traditions as "obsolete", "out of date, and conservative", adopting a haughty attitude towards composers conscientiously attempting to master and develop the devices of classical music as supporters of "primitive traditionalism" and "imitation", many Soviet composers, in the chase after a false conception of innovation, have in their work severed themselves from the demands and artistic tastes of

The cultivation of all these and similar views is inflicting grave harm on Soviet musical culture. A tolerant attitude towards these views marks the spread among workers in Soviet musical culture of tendencies alien to it, which are leading to an impasse in the development of music, to the liquidation of musical art. The wrong, anti-popular and formalistic trend in Soviet music is also having a disastrous effect on the training and education of young composers in our conservatoires, primarily in the Moscow Conservatoire (Director- Shebalin), in which the formalistic trend is dominant.

A respect for the best traditions of Russian and Western classical music is not inculcated in students, nor are they educated in a love of popular

creative work, of democratic musical forms. The work of many pupils of conservatoires is a blind imitation of the music of D. Shostakovich, S. Prokofiev and others. The Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. (b) expresses the view that the state of Soviet musical criticism is quite intolerable. A leading position among critics is held by the opponents of Russian realistic music, by supporters of decadent and formalistic music.



its deep organic connection with the people and with the musical and song-production of the people, a high degree of professional mastery with simplicity and understandability of musical productions, the Committee on Art attached to the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R.

(Khrapchenko) and the Organising Committee of the Union of Soviet Composers (Khachaturian) have in fact encouraged the formalistic trend alien to the Soviet people.

These critics declare every work by Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Myaskovski and Shebalin to be a new "achievement of Soviet music", and laud in this music its subjectivity, its over-emphasis on construction, excessive individualism and the professional complication of language, i.e., exactly the aspects which should be subjected to criticism. Instead of opposing views and theories harmful and alien to the principle of Socialist Realism, musical criticism is itself furthering their dissemination by praising and declaring as "progressive" those composers who uphold false creative principles in their work.

Musical criticism has ceased to express the opinion of the Soviet public, the opinion of the people, and has become the mouthpiece of individual composers. A number of musical critics have in place of criticism based on objective principles, begun to humour and show subservience to this or that musical leader, on account of the friendship existing between them and to extol their work in every way.

All this means that among a section of Soviet composers, survival of bourgeois ideology, fed by the influence of contemporary decadent Western European and American music, have not yet been overcome. The Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. (b) considers that this unhappy situation on the front of Soviet music has come about as the result of the incorrect line pursued in the sphere of Soviet music by the Committee on Art, attached to the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R. and by the Organising Committee of the Union of Soviet Composers.

Instead of developing the realistic trend in Soviet music, which is based on a recognition of the enormous progressive role of the classical inheritance, in particular, of the traditions of the Russian musical school, the use of this inheritance and its further development, the combination in music of a high degree of content with artistic perfection of musical form, verisimilitude and realism in music,

The Organising Committee of the Union of Soviet Composers has become a tool of a group of formalist composers, the main breeding ground of formalist perversions. A fusty atmosphere has developed in the Organising Committee and creative discussion is lacking. The leaders of the Organising Committee and the musical historians grouped around them praise anti-realistic and modernistic works, which are not worthy of support, while work distinguished for its realistic character, for its attempt to continue and develop the classical inheritance, is declared to be second-rate and remains unnoticed and neglected. Composers, who pride themselves on their spirit of "innovation", on being "arch-revolutionaries" in the sphere of music appear in the Organising Committee as the supporters of the most retrograde and stagnant conservatism, displaying a haughty intolerance towards the smallest manifestations of criticism.

The Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. (b) considers that such a state of affairs and such an attitude to the functions of Soviet music as has arisen in the Committee on Art attached to the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R., and in the Organising Committee of the Union of Soviet Composers can no longer be tolerated, since it is inflicting very great harm on the development of Soviet music.

During the past few years, the cultural requirements and the level of the artistic tastes of the Soviet people have shown an unprecedented rise. The Soviet people expects of its composers, works of high quality and ideology in all genres, in the sphere of operatic and symphonic music, in singing, in choral and dance music. In our country, composers are granted unlimited creative opportunities and all the necessary conditions have been established for a true flourishing of musical culture. Soviet composers have an audience which never knew a single composer in the past. It would be unpardonable not to make use of all these very rich opportunities and not to direct creative efforts along the correct realistic path.





The Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. (b) decrees:

- (i) To condemn the formalistic trend in soviet music as anti-popular and in fact leading to the liquidation of music.
- (ii) To instruct the propaganda and agitation department of the Central Committee and the Committee on Art to secure a rectification of the position in Soviet music, the elimination of the shortcomings outlined in the present decree of the Central Committee, and to secure the development of Soviet music in a realistic direction.
- (iii) To call on Soviet composers to imbue themselves with the realisation of the high demands the Soviet people makes of musical work, and, after casting from them all that is weakening in our music and impeding its development, to secure such an advance in creative work as will enable Soviet musical culture to progress rapidly and to lead to the creation and high-quality works worthy of the Soviet people in all spheres of musical creation.
- (iv) To approve the organisational measures of the appropriate Party and Soviet organs, aimed at an improvement in musical affairs.

*(A verbatim report delivered to European Press Agencies on the 11th February, 1948)*

---

## THE DSCH JOURNAL TEAM

Journal Editor:

Alan Mercer

Les Eversins du Presle,  
69870 Chambost-Allières, France

e-mail : opus147@serveur.dtr.fr

FAX: (+33) 4 74 60 12 44

Internet Web Site:

<http://members.tripod.com/~DSCH/>

Subscription Secretary:

Howard Wilson

2935 Larmona Drive  
Pasadena, CA 91107  
U.S.A.

e-mail: hiwilson@aol.com

FAX: (+1) 626 794 0881

Recordings Editor

W.Mark Roberts

e-mail: wroberts@phoenix.princeton.edu

FAX: (+1) 609 258 1334

