

THE QUALITY AND STATURE OF SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET MUSICAL EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF MUSIC CONSERVATOIRES

Razia Sultanova [Разия Султанова]¹

Abstract

This paper addresses the modernisation of musical traditions in Soviet and Post-Soviet states, by assessing the development of particular conservatoires as proxies for the dominant discursive and political paradigms of the era. While a prominent historical purpose for the establishment of these musical institutions was for the successful introduction of the Western style of education to the Soviet Union, the situation has seen a marked change since the fall of the USSR. Much of this transition is closely tied to concepts of social and legal sovereignty, with many conservatories struggling with the political and economic transformation in the post-Soviet era, due to cultural, religious and social policy. Three particular conservatoires are used to illustrate this hypothesis: the Moscow State Conservatoire (founded in 1866), Kazan Conservatoire (founded in 1945) and State conservatoire of Uzbekistan (founded in 1936).

Keywords

Music education, USSR, Post-Soviet era, Conservatories, Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this presentation is an investigation into the practice and epistemological approach that arose from the institutionalised study of music in the USSR and post-Soviet conservatories. Drawing on more than thirty years of first-hand experience at various levels of music education in school, college and conservatories; as well as comparable literatures and scholarly analyses from the Western tradition; I would like to propose modernisation as the main phenomenon, principal in the establishment and the development of music education bodies all over the country.

The word ‘Conservatory’ is derived from the Italian word ‘Conservatorio’, a word initially used to refer to orphanages that safeguarded children and trained them to sing for the church, a practice that started in 1537 (Campbell & McCarthy, 1996: 60). It took several centuries for conservatories to become the prominent institutions of higher musical education, as we currently know.

Indeed, Anton Rubinstein founded the St. Petersburg Conservatory as a formal successor to the Russian Musical Society, an organisation that was created in 1859 to promote musical excellence and raise the standard of musical education in the country. A few years later, Pyotr Tchaikovsky established the Moscow State Conservatory in 1866 (Figure 1).

¹ Dr Razia Sultanova is a musicologist and cultural anthropologist. Born in Russia and having grown up in Uzbekistan, she studied and consequently worked at both the Uzbek and Moscow State Conservatories. After moving to the UK – specifically to the University of London; Goldsmiths College and SOAS – she has since moved to Cambridge University and worked there since 2008.



Figure 1: The Moscow State Conservatory named after Pyotr Tchaikovsky. This, and all following pictures are freely available in the public domain.

The high level of interest in music in Russia also produced conservatories in Voronezh (1867), Kazan (1864) and Kiev (1863) and Sergeant (2005: 245).



Figure 2: Kazan state Zhiganov Conservatory.

MODERNISATION

The popular view of the modernisation process of musical traditions is that typically, it involves the introduction of notation, the standardisation of instruments, the establishment of concert life with distinct and attentive audiences and the institutionalisation of music teaching. However, all those features were already part of the Russian music world and some republics beyond the Russian area, both before and during Soviet times.

Modernisation in Russia was a particularly multifaceted and complex phenomenon, owing to the breadth of diversity in ethnonational identities and established cultural heritages. Rather than the broadly linear modernisation that was experienced in the more homogeneous and stable European societies at the time, modernisation in Russia was closely tied to the drastic politico-economic transitions encountered during and after the Soviet era.

According to the sociological approach to the study of Russian modernisation, 'By the time of the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991 it had become increasingly accepted that the modernisation of society effected by Soviet communism had reached its inherent limits and, in particular, that the

increased complexity of an industrialised society had exhausted the capacities for change of the centrally managed “planned” economy and the rule of a single party claiming superior scientific knowledge of the management of society’ (Kivinen & Cox, 2016: 1).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, academic opinion has reflected Russia's unique path of transformation, with a particular recombination of Soviet forms of rule with a distinctly Russian historical and cultural identity. According to David Lane, ‘In terms of political economy Putin moved Russia away from a chaotic economic formation in the direction of a state-led form of corporatist economy ... [while] politically the country moved in the direction of competitive authoritarianism’ (Lane, 2014: 291).

In this context, Russian modernisation is understood as developing into a combination of economic, political and technological changes, ‘building a high-tech, great power Russia relying on lessons and technology borrowed from the West, and political modernisation based on Russia’s own national political culture’ (Pursianinen, 2012: 5).

The most influential social theory scholar, Talcott Parson, whose work laid the foundations for later structural functionalist arguments, argues that ‘in the Soviet system the function of goal attainment is emphasised too much which means that political institutions are playing too large and economic institutions too little a role; this also implies that because of the lack of market economy power is playing too large a role as a generalised medium, and money is not significant enough; and on this basis Soviet modernisation can be characterised as infrastructural modernisation (urbanisation, industrialisation and increasing literacy) and not as institutional modernisation where the social institutions (RS: social institutions – is a historically established form of organisation of joint activity of people, whose existence is dictated by the need to meet the social, economic, political, cultural or other needs of society as a whole or its part) would have been properly differentiated’ (Parsons 1967, 1970, 1978).

AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

Uzbekistan, where I grew up, had a wide network of musical schools and colleges which have existed in abundance since Soviet times (every major city of the 12 provinces plus one autonomous republic in Uzbekistan has a Music College and several music schools plus great many music schools in the capital Tashkent). In addition, in the capital Tashkent, there are the Uzbek State Conservatory, Philharmonic orchestra, Opera house and various dance ensembles, TV and Radio committee and the Melodia Company that produces LPs to promote local musical culture. The Tashkent State Conservatory of Uzbekistan after Mukhtar Ashrafi (Uzbekistan Davlat Konservatoriyasi 'M Ashrafi'), the oldest musical institution in Central Asia, was founded in 1936.



Figure 3: The Tashkent State Conservatory of Uzbekistan after Mukhtar Ashrafi.

The Tashkent State Conservatory occupies a new building erected in 2002. In this building, there are four concert halls, 305 rooms for teaching, rehearsals and general classrooms, and four sound recording studios. The Conservatory houses a Museum of national instruments, a research centre, the music library (with a sound archive of Uzbek musical heritage), and a publishing house 'Music'. There is an associated Academic Lyceum for talented teenagers offering a three-year foundation-course program.



Figure 4: The new building of the Tashkent State Conservatory.

I came to study music at a later age than is usual for children in the USSR: at the age of eleven. When my younger sister Goulmara was seven-years-old, she passed all entry exams, and was accepted to study piano in a famous musical school in Andijan (Uzbekistan), where we lived at that time, and my parents had to buy a piano. They had not been able to afford it when I was seven – the age when children would normally start learning music in the USSR. My sister's teacher, who I met during her piano lessons, as it was my duty to accompany Goulmara for all music-school lessons, immediately recognised my thirst to play piano and suggested that my parents should find me a class for 'latecomers', which they did. My first piano teacher enthusiastically recommended that I apply to study at the College of Music, where I was finally accepted after eleven entrance examinations that I passed with distinction. So, I was accepted into the Faculty of Musical Theory, which had been my real dream.

The Soviet Union was renowned for its well-established institutional approach to the teaching of music. The subject was taught not only in comprehensive schools as chorus singing, but also in various music schools (entailing seven years of study, including an instrumental specialism that was tutored weekly, alongside weekly lessons in solfeggio, the theory of music, the history of music and others), music colleges (four years of intensive training in various subjects), conservatoires (five years) followed by study for doctorate degrees (three or four years).

As a result, the massive hours of music education had borne fruits, producing an army of excellent musicians. According to the world-famous Lithuanian violinist, conductor and orchestra leader – Professor Saulius Sondeckis (1928-2016) with whom I had the great honour of working with in Brandenburg in 1997: 'The Soviet Union's music education was based on a system similar to a military drill!' (Sondecki & Sultanova, 1997).

The model of teaching music was based on the extensive repetition of playing-pattern techniques and strict discipline in both practice and theory, in preparation for competitions, submissions and examinations. Education was a euphemism for instilling discipline through the new subject of musical performance, or the study of music as a theoretical, academic subject. It meant long hours of practising piano, even at the Faculty of Musical Theory. As our Ansijan State Music College was relatively new, we also had to sing in a choir for two hours every day due to the shortage of choral students. It was our responsibility – and even duty – to participate regularly in city, regional and republic choir competitions, as well as performing Uzbek songs for local radio recordings.

For me, my piano lessons in Music College served as a gateway into another culture. It was not an easy task for students to learn to analyse and perform Western music without any practical experience of listening to an opera, a symphony orchestra or chamber music performed live in front of us. After all, there was no opera house, philharmonic orchestra or concert hall where I studied in Andijan – which was also true for the majority of the Soviet Union, while excluding metropolitan hubs or republic capitals.

The Western music that we learned about was listened to on LPs, of which our Music college had a shortage. I had to ask my parents to order LPs from Leningrad, spending a great amount of money on such a collection. Fortunately, my father was a great enthusiast and motivating force in helping me with these studies, but this scenario was also a common one.

As students, however, we learned to perform genres of classical music and were able to comment with confidence on major Western music genres. Our favourite music, during the time of my education, was the 18th to 20th century piano music, which we loved and could play for hours. Uzbek music had very little place in the musical curriculum of colleges and conservatoires of Uzbekistan. Inevitably, that was one of the key reasons as to why it was so commonly found as the subject matter for our dissertations and theses.

For example, in my last year of study at the Tashkent State Conservatory, this same duality impacted me further. According to the Music Faculty's rules,

I had to choose the subject for my dissertation and discuss it with my supervisor and the Dean. My choice was Prokofiev's music, which I loved very much, and I proudly announced it to our Dean, Professor Ilyas Akbarov. His response was unexpected: 'Sultanova, are you mad? What are you talking about? Why Prokofiev? As an Uzbek, with the family name Sultanova, you must do your research only on Uzbek music'!

I had to change my mind, and redirected my attention to the crown of Central Asian court music, the genre known as *shashmaqam*. The Republic's policy at that time was to concentrate on the study of local culture and traditions, and unwritten rules required Dean Akbarov to 'advise' students to concentrate on their own local culture.



Figure 5: At the defence speech of my thesis, Tashkent State Conservatory, 1979. (Photo by Photo by Elena Temina).

THE SURVEY

To determine the personal perceptions and experiences of the modernisation of musical traditions in Soviet and post-Soviet states, I surveyed five colleagues who, like myself, studied in the USSR, but are now working in various conservatories in Russia or in the new independent republics like Uzbekistan.

The Survey's focus was to understand the precise quality and perceived stature of Soviet and post-Soviet musical education, when compared with the corresponding musical education of the present post-Soviet state.

All of the questions are considered for two distinct time periods: before and after the collapse of the USSR. This is intentional, in order to discover the different factors in the chosen conservatories that are as follows: educational (for instance, subject preferences); related to nationalism (for example, a preference of studying Western music above national music or the language for education); politically motivated (the approval of certain curriculums) and so on.

The colleagues who were surveyed include well-established Professors, Associate Professors and Lecturers from Moscow State Conservatory, Kazan State Conservatory, Tashkent State Conservatory. They answered my questions about their past studies and their current situation in those conservatories.

My colleagues who answered our Survey's questions were Professor Dr Violetta Yunusova, Moscow State Conservatory (studied at the Ufa State Institute of Arts); Dr Zilya Imamutdinova, Moscow, State Institute for Art Studies; Dr Rezeda Khurmatullina, (Kazan State Conservatory, Tatarstan, Russia); Dr Elnora Mamadjanova (Associate Professor of the Faculty of History of Music, Tashkent State Conservatory, Uzbekistan) and Dr Alexander Djumaev (Union of the Uzbek Composers, Tashkent, Uzbekistan).



Figure 6: Professor Dr Violetta Yunusova, Moscow State Conservatory (Photo by Angelina Alpatova); Figure 7: Dr Zilya Imamutdinova, Moscow, State Institute for Art Studies².

² All photographs with depicted persons are by the author. Other pictures are open source and free pictures for promotion.

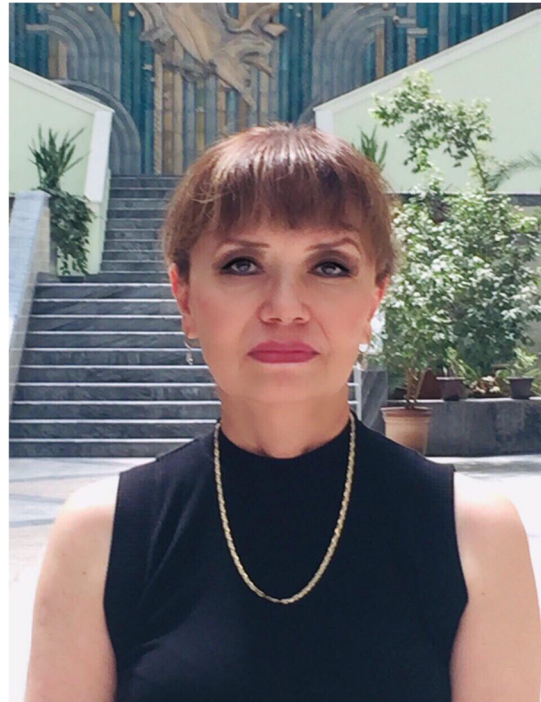


Figure 8: Dr Rezeda Khurmatullina (Kazan, Tatarstan, Russia); Figure 9: Dr El'nora Mamadjanova (Tashkent, Uzbekistan).



Figure10: Dr Alexander Djumaev, Tashkent, Uzbekistan (Photo by Shavkat Boltaev).

As some of those colleagues had studied in other conservatories, or are working in institutions that have been recently established, a few new institutions are evident in the survey (Ufa Institute of Arts, for instance, was created in 1968 as a branch of the Russian Gnesins Academy of Music, a prominent music school in Moscow).

THE SURVEY'S QUESTIONS AND QUERIES

A. Studying

1. Which subject did you enjoy the most?
2. Which subject did you enjoy the least?
3. Who was your favourite teacher, and for which subject?

4. Who was your least favourite teacher?
5. Which lectures do you remember the most?
6. Which lectures were the least important to you?
7. Which practical supervisions (tutorials) were the most important for you?
8. What was the balance between Eurocentric and ethnic subjects in your conservatory?
9. Was the Curriculum in your conservatory set up according to the governmental departments of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR?
10. What was the main advantage in the system of conservatory education of the USSR? What were the benefits? What were the shortcomings?
11. In provincial conservatories, were national music and instruments studied?
12. Did study in the conservatory take place in the local language or Russian?

B. Working

1. What is your point of view on the current state of conservatories after the collapse of the USSR?
2. How have things changed in terms of teaching subjects?
3. What are the most popular subjects these days?
4. Has the number of hours dedicated to the study of the main subjects been changed?
5. Has the number of textbooks or related educational aids changed?
6. Has the number of teachers/students changed?
7. Has the cost of education changed?

Summarising all their answers, one can see the picture of music education in the Soviet and post-Soviet times.

The results of the survey were as follows:

The most-enjoyed subjects were:

a) History of Foreign Music, History of Soviet music, History of Music of the Peoples of the USSR and Analysis of Musical Forms.

The Less-liked subjects were:

b) Marxism–Leninism related disciplines: History of the Communist party, Scientific Communism, and Political Economy, English language; Military training courses: Basics of Life Safety, or Civil Defence when we were made to wear military gas masks.

The basis of the musical system of education was the following:

c) A preference for European music (Tatar music for example had no place in the curriculum of the KSC); The whole system of academic music education was focused on studying Western music, Theory of music and History of Russian music of the 19th century. For instance, at the Tashkent Conservatory, twelve modules were devoted to the study of European system of music education (piano, orchestra instruments, opera singing, history and theory of Western music, choral conducting, composition and so on) and very few to the study of local music.

At the Tashkent Conservatory, which opened in 1936, the historical–theoretical faculty was established immediately (along with composition, performance and music pedagogy), whereas the Maqam-based teaching was established much later in the 1990s.

d) A distinct diversity within Soviet music education: both performers and theorists received versatile knowledge not restricted to their own discipline, but in general in the field of musical art, visual arts, theatre, cinema, aesthetics and so on.

Inappropriate educational curriculums designed by the governmental departments or in the Soviet Union's Ministry of Culture were as follows:

e) A strong focus on ideological disciplines (History of the Communist Party, political economy, Scientific communism);

f) Disproportionately scarce studies of national music and instruments;

g) Dependence on the approval from the governmental departments above,

h) All subjects were studied in Russian.

Post-Soviet changes:

i) Some republics developed their new curriculums with a reduced Western component. For example, Tatarstan, Kabardino-Balkaria and other conservatories are currently teaching classes related to national instruments and national singing.

j) This is also evident in a new discipline appearing in curriculums on Bashkir music – such as the art of concert performance, where students are taught to play Kurai (a flute, and the most popular national instrument among Bashkir and Tatar nations).

k) In Tashkent, the new national music modules were established which included traditional singing and folk instruments. This includes Traditional Musical Theory and History of the Art of Maqom and others.

l) The Soviet ideological corpus of subjects was dropped, though in some post-Soviet countries they were partly replaced by the local ideological subjects (such as the Works of President Karimov in Uzbekistan).

CONCLUSION

The Russian (or Soviet) conservatory – as a site of higher musical education – was loaded as a mechanism through which the political and ideological agenda of the state could be culturally expressed, and imbued with a sense of political and ideological function. The anecdotal and popular view that Soviet conservatories were unmatched in the excellence of their teaching, can be reconciled with the competitive nature of ideological beliefs, during the existence of the Soviet Union. The conservatory was a site at which Soviet excellence could be culturally demonstrated, exhibiting both the breadth and diversity of regional and ethnic cultural existent under the banner of the Soviet Union, but also the strength and might of the ideological backbone that had initiated modernity and united these peoples. The rich musical tradition of Imperial Russia transitioned itself from a privileged enclave of Russian high culture, into a functional apparatus for competitive cultural dominance. The conservatory, as a model for both teaching standardised discourse and elevating regional traditions into a united Soviet cultural wealth, was beneficial to the modernising intentions of the Soviet political machine, as it combined musical education and excellence with a deeper political and social purpose.

One overarching conclusion is that the foundation of musical education that was created and imposed universally as a standard during Soviet times, remains, to a certain degree, unaltered. There is still an understanding of a conservatoire as a site with a sociopolitical function, in expressing the national, ethnic, and in some cases, ideological, narratives. While 'Soviet' lessons and teachings have been removed, the approach to musical education has in many instances remained disciplinarian and reliant on a firm theoretical grounding.

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