

IN TIME OF BITTER WAR

HENRY COWELL

IS music of use in time of bitter war? Can it "carry on?" In what form, and how?

We have had news of recent musical activities in England; even from some of the European states under Hitler. The most interesting reports, however, come as might be expected, from the Soviets, where dynamic use of music is being made during the war which now threatens the heart of the country.

It would be trite to point out that armies everywhere demand music — military bands for morale, bag-pipes for fighting tone, singing together for greater solidarity. Nonetheless some peoples need music more than others. Americans and Englishmen are not so habituated to singing that to do without means disaster. But it is hard to imagine a group of Russian men spending a social evening without fraternizing in song. It bursts from them spontaneously. Take this away from an army of Russians and you would have a serious ebb of spirit.

From the news that has poured out of Russia since the war and from recent not inconsiderable importations of Soviet music, it is now possible to reconstruct a picture of its present musical life.

Because of the always close relationship between the Soviet state and its artists, it might be assumed that after the German attack all musicians who had been working in larger form would turn to writing popular-style war songs. But not at all. There is indeed tremendous activity in this field, but also a perfect explosion of energy in the composition of long and serious works. Many of these are written for the direct purpose of being performed before soldiers for whom symphony concerts are given with astonishing frequency. The performers are workers' clubs, "traveling troupes," divisions of the famous Red Army Ensemble, amateur art associations — none of which units could probably be exactly duplicated anywhere

else — and who have geared their musical activities to the accelerated tempo of modern Blitzkrieg.

III

To understand this vast, communal, effort, one needs a background of Russia's pre-war condition. Under the Soviets, social life has at all times been dependent to a large extent on clubs growing out of work organizations. Each farm, each factory forms its own social circle. I heard a number of these groups sing in 1929 and again in 1930 when I visited Moscow. At that time also, I attended some of those extraordinary stage performances, partly composed, partly improvised, always subject to informal change, given by factory worker clubs for their own amusement. Usually a well-trained composer would supervise, but everyone felt perfectly free to incorporate his own ideas into either the music or the drama. Musical amateurs did not have that false respect for professional talent which sometimes prevents untrained people from adding their own mite to mixed musical activities. It was only much later in this country that any performance was seen which could remind one of those early spontaneous Soviet efforts; the Blitzstein "operas," *The Cradle Will Rock* and *No for an Answer*, do resemble them in spirit.

At that time also the most astonishing expansion of music education, production and publication was under way. The Moscow Conservatory had overflowed into several adjacent buildings and was employing five hundred teachers to serve ten thousand students. Every night three opera companies played to full houses, several concerts were heard, ballet companies regularly gave new works. Newly composed workers' songs sold literally by the millions in little leaflets for one to two kopecks. Large orchestral scores, chamber music, solo works were plentiful and in demand. Hundreds of collectors with recording machines gathered folk material in the farthest reaches of the Soviet Union and scientific experiments were carried on in the field of musical sound.

These many activities were steadily increased during the thirties, so that when the war broke out there existed an extraordinary number of professional and amateur, centralized urban and far-dispersed local musical organizations. The workers' and farm clubs volunteered their talent to entertain the army and the army's dependents — for soldiers departing for the front and the families they left behind them. The troupes of concert artists who had been touring Russia for many years, performing for factory and other mass groups, were absorbed into the same morale effort.

All these were still not enough, and so many new bodies have been formed. Now forty ensembles are continuously on tour and their repertory is like nothing else in the world – both classical and contemporary in the most immediate sense. Much of it is freshly minted for the changing fortunes of the war, by poets, authors and composers. Indeed keeping the groups supplied with new material has become a full war-time job for a large number of creative musicians. The concert performances nearly always manage to include some form of music-theatre and a chorus. One of the touring ensembles is a jazz troupe which gives dramatic works too. Incidentally, the Russians write their own jazz – the two best-known composers being Rusanov and Merchilov; like all the composers and authors of the jazz texts they are Red Army men.

But not every creative activity is harnessed to the specific demands of the war. Six operas, a ballet and several symphonic and choral works have just been composed for the centennial of the death of the Russian poet, Lermontov. The composer Vassilenko is engaged in writing an opera, *Suvorov*, for the Stanislavsky Theatre. Ivanov-Radkevich is at work on a fourth symphony. Veprik is composing a cantata and a violin concerto. Dzerzhinsky has been commissioned to write an opera and Shostakovitch is finishing his seventh symphony. Composers in Georgia, the Ukraine, Armenia, and in the Oriental parts of the Soviet Union continue to supply imposing lists of new operas, symphonic works and smaller pieces.

III

All this activity, carried on if not solely for the war, at least during the war, is the intensified expression of a long developing tendency. Since we have no access to all the music we cannot tell whether the quality, too, has been generally intensified. Moreover some of the larger works just received from Russia are not new as of this last year. The well-known opera, *Quiet Flows the Don*, by Ivan Dzerzhinsky, first produced in Moscow on March 25th, 1936, is only now available here in printed form. This is an extreme case of rather forced simplicity in a work of large dimensions. The tunes are folk-like, several themes can be spotted easily as taken from Stravinsky's *Sacre*, but into the diatonic fabric are injected sentimental chromatic tones like over-ripe spots in an apple. In severe contrast to this is Serge Prokofiev's new choral and orchestral work on the life of the hero, *Alexander Nevsky* (adapted from his film score). It is simple, too, but the simplicity seems natural and unforced. This is not the slick Prokofiev who used to write for a Paris audience, and whose apparently casual ease was

liberally pepped up by a seasoning of dissonance. Here he makes simple but strong, folk-like music, tellingly arranged for both orchestra and chorus. The longest section, in the middle, *The Battle on Ice*, is quite realistic, a polite and musicianly version of the sort of battles on parlor pianos often written during the 1890's in this country. But considering the fact that the work was completed long before the war entered Russia, the words are prophetic, as when the chorus sings: "In our native land foemen shall not live," "Foes who come shall be put to death." And it closes significantly enough with this nationalistic paean, "Celebrate and sing, native Mother Russia."

Of the new songs written for present army use — composed songs, but more or less in folk style, all are very practical for Russians to sing. In the early part of 1941, a collection of fifteen standard Red Army pieces including *The Plain Soviet Man*, by V. Krutchnin (a very plain and sickly-common tune) and *All for One, One for All*, by A. Heifman, was compiled and published in New York (Am-Rus Corporation). Both are said to be widely sung at present. The second is far better than the first, with a snap to the tune which places it somewhat halfway between a brisk folksong and the Tschaikowskian pep-section in an overture.

Much more interesting however, is a new set of ten songs, just received (also Am-Rus) which appear to have been written since the war began. Eight start in minor key, have a major phrase in the middle, and then return to a somewhat minor strain. One of the other two begins with the same tune as the *Londonderry Air*. Some of the group are undistinguished: number three, *We Will Destroy All Fascists* set to a plain uninteresting tune, has an accompaniment which sounds like a cross between Schumann and Rachmaninov; *The March of the Stalin Aviators* is sentimental and tasteless, and supported by an umpah-umpah; *Song of the Brave* sounds, particularly in the middle, like the caricature of an American march rhythm set to a Russian folk tune. On the other hand several have special and thrilling qualities. Boris Shekhter's *Victory Will Be Ours* has an unusual key-change, the chords being dramatic without losing the diatonic quality; and although there is much fast change, it is easy to sing, and could be learned by rote by gigantic crowds. Such qualities are rare. Tunes that can be learned easily by large groups are usually so commonplace as to seem denatured. Perhaps the best of these is *March With Wider Steps*, by P. Akulenko. It is simple but good, again with an unusual turn of the tune; it strikes a common chord without being commonplace. Shouts are

used in a stirring manner, characteristically Russian. Characteristic also is the rise of the chorus to a high A – which is higher than a chorus for popular use would dare to go in this country. It is a truly stirring work.

The war appears to have accelerated musical creative activity in Russia in all forms, to a far greater degree than has even been dreamed of elsewhere. Just imagine anyone in this country suggesting that what our army needs is forty new opera companies! Yet that, among other things, is what has happened there. To carry the point still further, suppose that we *did* have forty new opera troupes for army performances, who would ever stipulate that the operas performed should be newly commissioned ones by native composers?

It is of course unfortunate that much of the early music from the Soviet Union has been disappointing. In 1930, with a view to possible publication in this country, I examined several hundred scores by Russian composers, young and old. Most of them sounded as if written by the same person – a strange entity combining the mystic Scriabin and the polyphonist Reger. Turgidity was the prevalent tone. But the complete contemporary output of any nation would not bear critical scrutiny. What is important is the degree of progress. As a whole the music of Soviet Russia today is much more vivid, more pointed than it was ten years ago. The tendency now is toward simplification – a tendency made inevitable by the necessity of designing music to be played and sung by untrained people. This movement has now spread to and made its impression on some of the new larger works as well. There is a new directness of approach in the best of the big serious works, as in the latest army songs – which suggests that the stultifying influences of the past are being driven out rapidly, even as the country wages war for its future.