

## SOCIALIST REALISM IN THE OPERA HOUSE: Ivan Dzerzhinskii's opera *Tikhii Don*

**Meri Herrala**

University of Helsinki

Ivan Dzerzhinskii's opera *The Quiet Don (Tikhii Don)* is often regarded as the politically successful antipode of Dmitrii Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. As is well known, *Lady Macbeth* was officially condemned in a 1936 "Pravda" article entitled *Muddle instead of Music*; *The Quiet Don*, in contrast, was heralded as a successful example of Socialist realist song opera by none other than Joseph Stalin.<sup>1</sup> I am not going to call into question this dichotomy, which had everything to do with art politics – the Communist Party campaign against modernist trends in Soviet music – and very little, if anything, to do with artistic merit.<sup>2</sup> I will instead evaluate Dzerzhinskii's opera in the context of official debates about the meaning and purpose of 'Soviet' opera.

These debates were spurred by a proposal to organize a competition in celebration of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution. The proposal was

---

<sup>1</sup> L. E. Fay, *Shostakovich A Life*, Oxford 2000, p. 84; E. Wilson, *Shostakovich. A Life Remembered*, London, Boston 1994, p. 109. N. Edmunds has put Dzerzhinskii's opera in the context of the competition, N. Edmunds, *The Soviet Proletarian Music Movement*, Peter Lang: Bern 2000, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> *Sumbur vmesto muzyki (Muddle instead of Music)*, "Pravda" 28.01.1936, and the review of Shostakovich's ballet *Svelyi Ruchei (The Bright Stream)* as an unsigned article *Baletnaia falsh*, "Pravda", 6.02.1936, p. 3; *Beseda tovarishtshei Stalina i Molotova s avtorami opernogo spektaklia Tikhii Don*, sobshenia TASSa 6.03.1936.

developed by proletarian artistic workers at the January 5, 1932 Congress<sup>3</sup>; the competition that resulted from the proposal was one of the last events organized by the proletarian artistic workers before the liquidation of the proletarian artistic organisations by the Communist Party in April 1932.<sup>4</sup>

A second measure, one that concerned Soviet opera and ballet, involved the creation of dramaturgical laboratories, or workshops in the biggest theatres in the nation.<sup>5</sup> Instead of bringing a finished opera or ballet score to the theatre, composers would bring a general plan and a few numbers. The composer would then be guided through the remaining creative process by his peers in accordance with official artistic policy, notably the recently formed doctrine of Socialist Realism.<sup>6</sup>

A press campaign was launched in order to propagate the requirements for the new opera (and ballet). Librettos were to be chosen based on the quality

<sup>3</sup> "Komsomolskaya Pravda", No. 5, 5.1.1932; "Komsomolskaya Pravda" No. 63, 16.03.1932, p. 3; *Konkurs na operu i balet direktiei Gosudarstvennyj akademicheskii Bolshoi teatr Sojoza SSSR (GABT) i redaktsii gazety "Komsomolskaya Pravda" v oznamenovanie 15ia godovshina oktiabria*, RGALI (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva), f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 846; RGALI, f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 911, listok No. 2; fevralia 1936, pp. 52-53. The October revolution has been an inspiration also to many operas, which are composed for the celebration of the anniversary of the revolution. The Proletarian music movement's composers composed the first Soviet operas celebrating the October revolution. Also Dzerzhinskii's opera *Tikhii Don* celebrated 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary and his second opera *Podnjataia zelina* (*Virgin Soil Upturned*) the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as well as Vano Muradeli's opera *Velikaya druzhba* (*The Great Friendship*) the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

<sup>4</sup> *Postanovlenie politbiuro TsK VKP(b) 'O perestroike literaturno-hudozhestvennykh organizatsii'* 23.04.1932. *Vlast i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia. Dokumenty TsK VKP(b)-RKP(b), VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kulturnoi politike, 1917-1953 gg.* Compiled by A. Artizov, O. Naumov, Moscow 1999, razdel III, No. 7, p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> Soviet sources emphasize that the establishment of the system to the Malyi Theatre was the theatre's artistic director Samuil Samosud's idea, but no date nor year are provided. Samosud continued this work at the Bolshoi Theatre's laboratory from 1939.

<sup>6</sup> This system is comparable to the Soviet Composer's Union system of the sessions (different sections of the Union), where composers and musicologist criticized the half finished compositions brought to the evaluations. *Muzykalnaia zhizn Leningrada. Sbornik statei*, Leningrad 1961, p. 297.

of their representation of the triumphant proletariat, socialist construction, and the defence of the motherland against her enemies. Workers from the Bolshoi Theatre were sent to different areas of the Soviet Union to recruit composers for the laboratories.<sup>7</sup> To fulfil the requirements of the competition, regional branches of the Soviet Composers Union organised hearings and discussions of the compositions intended for inclusion in the competition.<sup>8</sup> Participants at the Leningrad Composers Union meeting emphasized the demand for close collaboration between the theatres and composers. The fact that some composers believed that the theatres limited their creative processes and maintained conservative policies sheds interesting light on the direction thereafter taken by Soviet music.<sup>9</sup> To help composers work out their ideas, the deadline for submitting operas to the competition was extended by a year, from 1933 to 1934.<sup>10</sup> Few operas, it seemed, fulfilled the stipulated requirements. Over the two year period, 11 symphonies, 38 operas, 3 ballets and 16 librettos were presented to the jury.<sup>11</sup>

Shostakovich did not participate in the competition, though his name appeared on the Leningrad Composers Union list of possible participants.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> *Konkurs na opery, balet, simfoniio i Muzykalno-zrelishnoe deistvie posviashtshennoe 15-i godovshtshine oktiabria, usloviia konkursa*, RGALI, f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 846. Themes were: socialisation of the states, socialist modernisation of agriculture, the technical revolution, socialist work, modernisation of living conditions and ideological reform, Komsomols and their ideological battle for socialist, nationalist and cultural construction, The Red army and defence of the country, creating the World proletariat movement led by the Soviet Union and the history of the revolutionary movement. Librettos had to be based on the works of revolutionary writers.

<sup>8</sup> "Komsomolskaya Pravda" No. 81, 6.04.1932, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> "Komsomolskaya Pravda" No. 135, 11.06.1934.

<sup>10</sup> The deadline presenting operas and ballets was originally given as 1.03.1933 but it was extended to January 1<sup>st</sup> 1934.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*. Prizes for symphonies were awarded in October 1932. The deadline for presenting operas and ballets was announced as being 1.03.1933 but it was extended to January 1<sup>st</sup> 1934.

<sup>12</sup> RGALI, f. 648, opis. 2, yed. khr. 915, listok No. 107; RGALI, f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 911, listok No. 7. Shostakovich showed 2 finished scenes of his opera at the same time to two theatres, to the producer of the Bolshoi Theatre Nikolai Smolich and the producer of the Nemirovich-Danchenko. At the time of the first deadline 1.3.1933 Shostakovich had already signed a contract with the Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre

At the time of the competition his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was finished and he had signed contracts to stage the opera in Russia and abroad.

The jury announced its awards in May 1934.<sup>13</sup> As a testament to the fickleness of the artistic policies current, no first prize was awarded.<sup>14</sup> Second prize was jointly awarded to Valerii Zhelobinskii for his opera *Name Day (Imeniny)* and to Aleksandr Gedike for his opera *At the Turning Point (U Perevoza)*.

The first work of this pair, *Name Day*, offers a damning critique of Russian aristocratic society.<sup>15</sup> Its protagonist, Andrei, is a court musician highly prized for his extraordinary talent but unable to improve his position in society: though heralded by the nobility, he remains a member of the lower classes. Andrei is likewise humiliated when his master, a gambler, is forced to sell Andrei to another nobleman in order to settle his debts. Refusing to be treated in this manner, Andrei escapes to join the army.

The opera's tuneful music, diverse rhythmic material, and relatively skilful orchestration were important factors in its success with the jury. The overriding

1932 and with MALEGOT in March 1933. Agreement with Bolshoi Theatre was signed in August 1933, after the first deadline and before the second deadline of the competition. The opera was premiered at the beginning of 1934 in the Malyi Theatre in Leningrad and at the Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theatre in Moscow. L. E. Fay, op. cit., p. 69, E. Wilson, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> The Jury decided to divide the works into three categories. In order to win a prize, operas belonging to the first category should have been evaluated once more by the jury in order to give the final decision. The first category included: L. Polovinkin's *Geroi*, Konstantin Dankevich's *Tragediinaia noch*, Aleksandr Gedike's *U Perevoza* and I. Zhelobinskii's *Imeniny*. Works were rated by a special expert commission. After the expert commission's written evaluation the jury made its final verdict after evaluating the opera a second time; *Protokol soveshtshaniia komissii po provedeniiu konkursa na operu i balet 10.11.1933 g.*, RGALI, f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 846, listok No. 71.

<sup>14</sup> *Protokol zakliutsitel'nogo zasedaniia zhiuri vsesoiuznogo konkursa na opery i balet po rassmotreniiu libretto ot 9-ogo maia 1934 goda*; See also "Komsomolskaya Pravda" No. 135, 11.06.1934.

<sup>15</sup> Zhelobinskiis opera *Imeniny* was estimated by the expert commission in April 1st 1934 after the completed libretto, piano score and parts of the orchestral score were evaluated, *Protokol soveshtshaniia komissii po provedeniiu konkursa na operu i balet 10.11.1933 g.*, RGALI, f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 846, protokol No. 19, 1-go aprelia 1934 g., listok No. 47.

reason for its receipt of a prize, however, lay in the allegorical dimensions of the plot. *Name Day* commented on the plight of nineteenth-century composers, who were situated in the bottom tier of Tsarist society. The situation was alleviated towards the end of the century, when Tchaikovsky, among other conservatory-trained composers, achieved professional status. Nonetheless, musicians of the period were beholden to noble benefactors. A second allegorical feature of the opera concerned the 'proletarian' composers of the Soviet period, who, at least in theory, could become prominent without traditional academic training. The activities of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians upended the traditional relationship between music teachers and music students in much the same way, of course, that the October Revolution upended the relationship between factory foreman and factory worker.

*Name Day* won second, rather than first prize at the competition because it approached, but did not fully satisfy the requirements of Soviet opera. These were outlined by Mikhail Druskin in a 1935 article in "Sovetskaia Muzyka". 'Rather than simply being "costumed",' Druskin wrote, the heroes of Soviet opera needed to be 'depicted within an authentic historical context.' Rather than 'stylized', Druskin continued, the time and place of the action needed to be 'actualized'. Rather than being 'static' he concluded 'the plotline needed to unfold 'dynamically', with the stage events 'infused with features indicative of dialectical historical development'. *Name Day* evidently did not satisfy these demands.<sup>16</sup> One notes here that Druskin's comments were essentially rhetorical, less intended to rebuke composers than to point out that, within the Stalinist cultural apparatus, creative work always needed to progress, and artists always needed to refine their ideological messages.

The other second prize winner in the competition, Gedike's opera *At the Turning Point*, concerns an eighteenth-century peasant insurrection. The plot was lauded for the folk scenes, and the score for the inclusion of folk allusions in the vocal lines, this being a tenet of Socialist Realism.<sup>17</sup> The composer was later criticized, however, for basing his melodic material too uncritically on folk

---

<sup>16</sup> M. Druskin, *V. Zhelovinskii i ego opera Imeniny*, "Sovetskaia Muzyka" No. 5, 1935, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Protokol zasedanii ekspertnoi komissii vsesoiuznogo konkursa na operu i balet*, 1934 g., RGALI, f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 846, listok No. 29, 30.



intonations.<sup>18</sup> The “Sovetskaia Muzyka” critique in question reflected a vigorous discussion in the musical establishment at the time about the ‘correct’ use of folk material. Folk music should not simply be quoted, but should be varied and developed. *At the Turning Point* was likewise critiqued for an absence of dialectical symphonic development. This criticism implied that Gedike’s opera did proceed organically, that is to say, in accordance with the musicologist Boris Asaf’ev’s well-known concept of ‘symphonism’. Soviet critics interpreted such development in terms of historical (Marxist-Leninist) dialectics.<sup>19</sup>

Though the plot was topical, it too came in for criticism.<sup>20</sup> (Indeed topical plots came in for more scrutiny than usual in critical circles.) The central event, a peasant girl’s rebellion against the strictures of Catherine the Great, obviously related to the Bolshevik uprising, but it also touched on official concerns about

---

<sup>18</sup> V. Ferman, U Perevoza A. F. Gedike, “Sovetskaia Muzyka” No. 12, 1935, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> “Sovetskaia Muzyka” No. 12, 1935, p. 35. The term ‘symphonism’ was introduced in Asaf’ev’s article *Temptations and Triumph* in 1917. This concept referred to the basic premises of dialectical materialism. The antagonism between communism and individualism found its musical manifestation in the definition of symphonism as ‘a stream of musical consciousness, when not a single element was conceived or perceived as being independent amidst a remaining multitude where all is intuitively comprehended as a creative entity set in motion.’ Musical composition was in this thinking understood to develop “symphonically” (according to the laws of Marxist dialectics). ‘An integral sound impulse’, Asaf’ev argued, is ‘continuous within a given sphere of sound, within a composition and proceeded in a series of changing but closely connected musical representations that constantly draw onwards as they have drawn from point to point, from attainment to attainment-to the ultimate conclusion.’ A symphonic work had also in the Asaf’evian sense an interaction and simultaneous development of contrasting ideas juxtaposed so as to produce a sensation of conflict. This was similar to Marxist materialist dialectics where the historical development of the community from socialism to communism proceeds from conflict. Also music was understood as developing ‘when a struggle or conflict between musical ideas developed throughout time.’ See D. E. Haas, *Leningrad’s Modernists: Studies in Composition and Musical Thought, 1917-1932*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 1998, pp. 75-78. For more on ‘symphonism’, see *Muzykal’naia Enciklopediia V*, Moscow, Sovetskaia Enciklopediia 1973, 1974, 1976, 1978, 1982; *Enciklopediiskii Muzykal’nyi Slovar’*, Moscow, Sovetskaia Enciklopediia, 1966, 466; L. V. Danilevich, *Sovetskii Simfonizm. Lektsiia*, Moscow, Leningrad Muzgiz 1952.

<sup>20</sup> *Protokol zasedanii ekspertnoi komissii vsesoiuznogo konkursa na operu i balet, 1934 g.*, RGALI, f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 846, listok No. 29, 31.

uprisings against the Soviet authorities. In the 1930s, stories about peasant rebellions could be seen positively as indictments of the bourgeoisie, or negatively as celebrations of enemies of the people. Shostakovich's ballet's *Svetlyi ruchei* (*The Bright Stream*), for example, concerns collective-farm life in Kuban, but the actual peasants in this region were regarded as threats to the regime.

The third prize winner in the competition, Leonid Polovinkin's opera *Hero* (*Geroy*) was considered to be artistically and technically polished, but the jury found that it crossed the line of good taste by absorbing 'decadent' modernist trends.<sup>21</sup> Polovinkin shared his honour with two other composers, Aleksander Davidenko and Boris Sekhter, whose opera *The Year 1905* (*1905 god*) was seen to uphold the requirements of the competition.<sup>22</sup>

It is no small irony that the one opera in the competition to gain immortality, *The Quiet Don*, fared poorly. Its position in the jury rankings fell during the deliberations. It was placed in the second prize category (works with remarkable features), but was subsequently deemed too simplistic and monotonous, and thus relocated to the lowest category (works of insufficient quality) and received a very poor score.<sup>23</sup>

*The Quiet Don* was rescued from obscurity by none other than Shostakovich, who, noting that the jury praised some of the melodies,<sup>24</sup> introduced Dzerzhinskii to Samuil Samosud, the artistic director of the Malyi Theatre, who accepted an improved version of the score into his ballet and opera laboratory.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> *Protokol zasedanii ekspertnoi komissii vsesoiuznogo konkursa na operu i balet, 1934 g.*, RGALI, f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 846, listok No. 29, 31a. Davidenko's and Sekhter's opera won third prize. See more details of the opera in: N. Edmunds, op. cit., pp. 241-245.

<sup>23</sup> *Zasedaniia ekspertnoi komissii Vsesoiuznogo konkursa na operu i balet, ot 1-go apreliia 1934 g.*, listok No. 47, protokol No. 19, RGALI, f. 648, op. 2, yed. khr. 846.

<sup>24</sup> *Protokoly zasedanii ekspertnoi komissii vsesoiuznogo konkursa na operu i balet, 23.8.1934*, RGALI, F. 648, opis 2, ed. hr. 846, listok No. 29. This document is dated later, than the results of the competition were published in "Komsomolskaya Pravda"!

<sup>25</sup> Shostakovich's article at "Sovetskoe Iskusstvo", 5 dekabria 1935 g., published in: D. Shostakovich, *O vremeni i o sebe 1926-1975*, Vsesoiuznoe izdatelstvo Sovetskii kompozitor, Moskva 1980, pp. 56-57; See also I. I. Dzerzhinskii's recollection of the

The Malyi Theatre laboratory's activities were positively recognized in the Leningrad Soviet Composers Union resolution of December 1935. Samosud's productions of Valerii Zhelobinskii's *Chamberman (Kamarinskii Muzhik)* and the aforementioned *Name Day* received special accolades. Nonetheless, one of the Malyi Theatre's administrators, S. Gisin, noted that Samosud's decision to accept *The Quiet Don* into the theatre was controversial.<sup>26</sup> The Composers Union countered that, in order to enhance Soviet opera, efforts needed to be made to recruit untested composers into the laboratory system.<sup>27</sup>

During his career, Dzerzhinskii was often criticized for his inadequate compositional technique, but to some extent, he turned this deficiency into an attribute, propagating a simple musical language which could be understandable for the masses. He stayed true to the forms of the classical period, and never tired of stating that he loved folk tunes and derived his melodies from them.<sup>28</sup> The catchy choruses in *The Quiet Don*, together with the stand-and-sing arias, typify the opera's folksy appeal. Two numbers – the soldiers chorus *Oh – what a life in the trenches (Ekh, zhite-byte okopnoe)* and concluding mass chorus *Ot kraia i do kraia (From frontier to frontier)* – became instant, official favourites. Later on, the song *When my mother sent me to fetch the bucket (Kogda poslala menia mat za beloio glinoiu)*, performed by 38 Cossacks, was added to the third scene to enhance its catchiness. To help create the number, actual Cossacks had been invited to Moscow by the Bolshoy Theatre.<sup>29</sup> The outcome was often a naïve tune that, amusingly, recalled galloping horses in the refrains.

Dzerzhinskii suffered from a lack of training in orchestration, but benefited from the help of three prominent musicians: Shostakovich, Samosud and Asaf'ev. Shostakovich's role as a mentor to young composers was highly praised

---

help, S. S. Samosud, *Staty, vospominaniia, pisma*, sost. avt. vstup. stati i komment. O. Dansker, Moskva 1984, p. 93; "Teatralnaia dekada", Moskva 20.1.1936; B. Schwartz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917-1970*, New York 1972, p. 143.

<sup>26</sup> *Muzykalnaia zhizn, O roli Leningradskogo Malogo opernogo teatra v oblasti sozdaniia sovetskoi opery i baleta. Iz postanovleniia pravleeniia Leningradskogo Sojuza Sovetskikh Kompozitorov ot 17 dekabria 1935 g.* The resolution of the meeting is published in "Sovetskaia Muzyka", No. 3, 1936, p. 96.

<sup>27</sup> *O roli Leningradskogo Malogo*, op. cit., pp. 9-10, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> *Beseda tovarishtshei...*, op. cit.



at the Leningrad Composers Union's meeting of December 1935. Dzerzhinskii acknowledged Shostakovich's help by dedicating the first (1937) edition of *The Quiet Don* to him.<sup>30</sup> It is worth adding that Shostakovich's musical monogram – D-S-C-H – is heard several times in the score.<sup>31</sup> It characterizes, for example, the heroine Aksinya's leitmotif.

One telling example of Dzerzhinskii's weak orchestration skills emerges from his draft of the orchestral score of the first scene, titled *The Wedding (Svad'ba)*.<sup>32</sup> On page one the first and second violins play the melodic line in unison while the winds accompany with a variation of this same melody. The draft lacks measure numbers, and several passages involving the winds are erased,<sup>33</sup> suggesting that Dzerzhinskii found scoring for brass particularly difficult.<sup>34</sup> The melodic line is doubled or tripled in many places: sometimes the cellos play an octave beneath the violins with the violas even lower.<sup>35</sup> The amount of empty staves increases as the score unfolds.

Concern about Dzerzhinskii's skills and those of his young contemporaries echoed throughout the Soviet music world in the years surrounding the premiere of *The Quiet Don*.<sup>36</sup> In a speech on December 12, 1939 concerning the training of Soviet composers, Sergei Prokof'ev sarcastically noted that

The quality of Soviet music is deteriorating very rapidly. The music of [the composers] Dunaev and Prokrassa... mimics operetta and Cossack ditties. It does not elevate the masses, but debases them.'

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the foreword 'posviashchaetsia D. D. Shostakovitsu', klavir operu Dzerzhinskogo Muzgiz, Moskva 1937, p. 2. Elisabeth Wilson has claimed that Shostakovich orchestrated large chunks of Dzerzhinskii's opera, E. Wilson, op. cit., p. 109. She does not indicate, however, on what evidence she bases her claim.

<sup>31</sup> You can find Shostakovich's initials (D, Es, C, H) from the second part of the opera, where Shashka is telling stories about the war (2<sup>nd</sup> act, second picture). The initials are repeated also an octave lower. The same theme is found at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> part when Natalia comes to tell Aksinya that Grigory is dead. At this time, the theme is repeated several times and works as an intermezzo between the parts.

<sup>32</sup> I. I. Dzerzhinskii, *Tikhii Don* opera 1-ia kartina, *Svadba* partitura, avtograf, 9 listakh, RGALI, f. 992, opis. 1, yed. khr. 6, 1933.

<sup>33</sup> Page 3, 3-4 bars at the brass section, page 5 also at the brass section.

<sup>34</sup> Page 6, there are no notes at all in the 5 first bars for the wind section. There are no notes for the brass section either or notes have been wiped out.

<sup>35</sup> Page 6, pages 1, 3-4 and 5. At the page 4 violoncellos follow the melody of the violins'.

<sup>36</sup> B. Schwarz, op. cit., p. 145.

Dzerzhinskii's music, Prokof'ev added, is 'ungrammatical', and his success has started to have a negative impact on more substantial composers. In light of the praise heaped on *The Quiet Don*, innovation and creative boldness have been sidelined. Prokof'ev concluded that, nowadays, critics are too quick to dismiss innovation as extremism. 'I did not understand the music on first hearing, hence this music is formalism.'<sup>37</sup> One notes that Prokof'ev's opinion about Dzerzhinskii and *The Quiet Don* contradicted the only opinion that mattered at the time. According to the artistic director of MALEGOT, Stalin regarded *The Quiet Don* as an innovative work that represented an entirely new genre of opera.<sup>38</sup>

Stalin's tastes were fickle, and the requirements for Soviet opera ever-changing, but it is nonetheless worth trying to identify why the leader privileged *The Quiet Don* over the other operas staged during his visits to the Malyi Theatre's tour in Moscow in 1936.<sup>39</sup>

First, and as Laurel Fay has observed,<sup>40</sup> *The Quiet Don* began to be promoted at the same time that the All-Union Committee for Artistic Affairs was established, the implication being that the two events were politically connected, perhaps even scripted. The second factor that comes into play concerns Dzerzhinskii's patriotic subject matter. In accordance with the socialist realist archetypes, *The Quiet Don*, is based on Mikhail Sholokhov's first book and concerns heroic derring-do on the Don River during the revolution and at the

---

<sup>37</sup> *Slovy o sovetskoi muzyke*, konspekt, 12 noiabria 1939 g., RGALI, f. 1929 (Prokof'ev, S. S.), opis 2, yed. khr. 111, list 1. I am very grateful to assistant professor Simon Morrison for providing me with this document.

<sup>38</sup> Tikhii Don. *Sbornik statei i materialov k postanovke opery v Leningradskom Gosudarstvennom Akademicheskome Malom Opernom teatre*, Leningrad 1935, p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Other operas of the tour were Zhelobinsky's *Komarinskii muzhik* and *Imeniny*, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth Mtsenskogo uezda* and Meyerhold's production of Tshaikovsky's *Pikovaia Dama*, Vechernyi vypusk "Krasnaia Gazeta" 5.01.1936; N. L. Velter in: S. S. Samosud, op. cit., p. 87. See also, *Beseda tovarishtshei...*, op. cit.; "Sovetskaya Muzyka" 1936, fevralia, p. 11; K. Meyer, *Shostakovich, Zhizn, Tvortshestvo, Vremia*, Sankt-Petersburg 1997, p. 184; L. Maksimenkov, *Sumbur vmesto muzyki, Stalinskaia kulturnaia revoliutsiia 1936-1938*, Joriditseskaia kniga, Moskva 1997, p. 72.

<sup>40</sup> L.E. Fay, op. cit., p. 89.

Austrian Front during World War I.<sup>41</sup> The libretto excluded those features of the source novel that could be interpreted as counter-revolutionary. These features include the immoral behaviour of the Red Guards towards the Cossacks and the Cossacks' conflict with the Bolsheviks. The hero of the opera is described as a representative of the revolution, but in the novel he bears all the qualities of an opponent. Emphasis on the love triangle between the characters Grigorii, Aksinya, and Natalia, substitutes for a probing of their cultural roots and political views.<sup>42</sup> It bears emphasis that the opera is set in Kuban, where, in the 1930s, the Cossacks rebelled against the Soviet authorities.<sup>43</sup>

Even if Dzerzhinskii's opera, unlike Muradeli's opera *The Great Friendship*, was lauded by Stalin, these operas share many similarities. Like Vano Muradeli's opera, which precipitated a political storm in 1948, *The Quiet Don* places a complex love story amidst the whirl of the Civil War in the Don Region and the Caucasus at Muradeli's opera. Conflict arises between people of different social strata in *The Quiet Don*, whereas, in *The Great Friendship*, they arise between people of different nationalities. The representation of the enemy forces is comparable in both operas. In *The Quiet Don*, the Cossacks turn against the tsar and the war when they determine that their leader, an estate owner Listinsky, is actually their oppressor.<sup>44</sup> In *The Great Friendship* the political beliefs of the protagonist Murtaz change in favour of the revolutionaries after he is ordered by a White Guard to kill a Red Officer. The hero of *The Quiet Don*, like the hero of *The Great Friendship*, sacrifices personal happiness for the greater good, the socialist cause.

*The Great Friendship*, however, bore a political subtext that *The Quiet Don* did not, and was thus branded an unsatisfactory example of Soviet operas. Beyond the presumed 'formalism' of the music, *The Great Friendship* featured a hero of Caucasus origin, which was untenable in 1948, for Stalin had

---

<sup>41</sup> Dzerzhinskii's opera *The Quiet Don* is based on Sholokhov's first book's events during World War I on the Austrian front in the years 1914-1917 and on the Don during the revolution. The second book depicts the Cossacks' movement and general political wartime mood and revolution in 1916-1918. Politically one most interesting events, the Don's revolt against Soviet power in 1918-1920, take place in the third book.

<sup>42</sup> "Raboचाia Moskva" 5.02.1936.

<sup>43</sup> Pictures I-IV and VI take place at Kuban and picture V at the Austrian front.

<sup>44</sup> Act III, 5th picture.

previously issued a decree ordering the deportation of the people of the Caucasus to the Far East. The hero of *The Great Friendship* could not be considered a friend of the Soviet racial majority.

*The Quiet Don*, in contrast, bore no political subtext and expressed its patriotic message in transparently simple terms. The storyline was historical rather than contemporary, and was supported with music that was pleasant to a fault. In its grim time, its banal cheerfulness could only be regarded as a positive attribute.

Beyond *The Quiet Don*, few of the operas in the aforementioned competition made it to the stage. Because Dzerzhinskii's first opera was lauded by Stalin, his second opera, *Virgin Soil Upturned* (*Podnaitaia tselina*) was produced by the Malyi Theatre on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the revolution. Soviet composers produced a remarkable number of operas; the song opera genre, however, was not durable, and even those works that were produced did not maintain a foothold in the repertory.<sup>45</sup> When, in 1948, his opera came under scrutiny for its 'formalist' elements Muradeli acknowledged that he did not follow Dzerzhinskii's example, because *The Quiet Don* and *Upturned Virgin Soil* were trite scores that had failed to move the masses.<sup>46</sup> Muradeli was correct from a musical perspective but wrong from a political perspective. Despite its high-art grandeur, Dzerzhinskii's opera was regarded as capable of moving the masses and was therefore popularised on numerous opera stages in the following years.

In the years following its premiere, *The Quiet Don* continued to provoke discussion. In 1948 Dzerzhinskii's music came under attack at a Leningrad Composers Union meeting.<sup>47</sup> The conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic, Evgeni Mravinskii, excoriated Dzerzhinskii's lack of proficiency. He remarked, for example, that, in 1936, 'Dzerzhinskii talked a lot about the fact that he does not let anyone orchestrate his works and that he does everything by himself. 'I reserve the right to doubt this.' Concerning Dzerzhinskii's later opera *The Prince of the Lake* (*Knyaz' ozera*), Mravinsky quipped: 'It would be very

---

<sup>45</sup> B. Schwartz, op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>46</sup> Vano Muradeli v sovetsanii 6. janvaria 1948, Tak Eto bylo, T. Khrennikov, *O vremeni i o sebe. Dialogi ob iskusstve*, Dialogi vela i teksty obrabotala V. Rubtsova, Moskva 1994, p. 198.

<sup>47</sup> *Stenogramma obshego sobraniia chlenov Leningradskogo Sojoza Kompozitorov*, RGALI, f. 2077, opis 1, ed. khr. 241.



interesting to see the score...and to determine the number of original markings versus the number of markings in red pencil.<sup>48</sup> Later, in 1948, the composer Jurii Vainkop described Dzerzhinskii as symptomatic of the stagnancy of Soviet opera composition. Dzerzhinskii continues his historical success, Vainkop remarked, but Dzerzhinskii himself has not swum over *The Quiet Don*.

The vagaries of official discourse, and the absence of concrete directives, meant that Soviet opera did not progress as envisioned by ideologues, while the political penalties for crossing the hypothetical line between good and bad composition caused many composers writers' block. Empty rhetoric, and such empty terms as Formalism, Naturalism and, of course, Socialist Realism persisted until the time was ripe to allow more talented composers such as Rodion Shchedrin and Alfred Schnittke to arise. These composers were able to compose the kind of works that political pressure denied to their predecessors, irrespective of their level of talent.

## 1. AFFIX

RGALI, f. 648, opis 2, yed. khr. 915, listok no. 1

A list of operas, participating in the competition: composer, librettist and date of evaluation by the expert commission

1. <i>Hrabryi nazar</i> Stepaian A.	librettist ne ukazan
2. <i>Poslednaia Barrikada</i> Ippolitov-Ivanov,	librettist Krapennikov
3. <i>Geroi</i> Polovinkin L.	po poveste Singi
4. <i>Stuplenie</i> Pompashekts Z.	librettist Teif M.
5. <i>Podzhigatel'</i> Melkikh D.	librettist Shrkutov A.
6. <i>Sot</i> Starokadomski M.	librettist Leonov i Levishiateri
7. <i>Khristofor Kolumb</i> Vasilenko S.	librettist Antonov i Argo
8. <i>Tragediinaia noch</i> Dankevich K.	librettist po bezimennomy
9. <i>Til' Eulenspiegel</i> Kochetov V.	librettist Kozlov V.

<sup>48</sup> Dzerzhinskii's opera *Kniazn Ozero* was completed in 1947. Ibidem, 3. rolik, p. 169. Several other composers, such as Vainkov, Chicherin, Solov'ev-Sedoi, Evlahov and Pustylnik criticized Dzerzhinskii at the meeting.

- |  |                               |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 10. <i>Spartak</i> Vakhvakhizhvili T.                        | librettist layv               |
| 11. <i>Novye pesni</i> Tolstikov                             | librettist ne ukazan          |
| 12. <i>Bronenosets Potemkin</i> Rechmenskii<br>i Ponomar'kov | librettist Krashenininkov     |
| 13. <i>Povest' o Karmen</i> Shengin                          | librettist Linskerov          |
| 14. <i>Gladiator</i> Tal' F.                                 | po poveste Hol'mu             |
| 15. <i>Metkin strelok</i> Shishov I.                         | librettist Pankov M.          |
| 16. <i>Karshaty</i> Kostenko V.                              | librettist Pankov M.          |
| 17. <i>Zemlia gorit</i> Janovskii V.                         | librettist Ljibtsherko        |
| 18. <i>Vziv</i> Janovskii V.                                 | librettist ne ukazano         |
| 19. <i>Baryshnia krestianka</i> Dodonov                      | po Pushkinu                   |
| 20. <i>Arsen</i> Balanchivadze A.                            | librettist Dadiansh Sh.       |
| 21. <i>Smert' Pushkina</i> Kaduchev F.                       | librettisti Kaduchev F.       |
| 22. <i>Mark Aron</i> Kaduchev F.                             | librettist Kaduchev F.        |
| 23. <i>Okean</i> Kaduchev F.,                                | librettist ne ukazano         |
| 24. <i>Korsshkanka</i> Dudkevich G.                          | librettist Galsherin M.       |
| 25. <i>Ivan Bolotnikov</i> Pechaev V.                        | librettist ?                  |
| 26. <i>Pir vo vremia chumy</i> Tarnopolskii                  | po Pushkinu                   |
| 27. <i>1905 god</i> Shekhter B. i Davidenko A.               | librettist Mstislavskii       |
| 28. <i>Amrav</i> Stolliar Ia.                                | librettist Gorodetskii S.     |
| 29. <i>U Perevoza</i> Gedike A.                              | librettist Gedike A.          |
| 30. <i>Sorok Pervyi</i> Aleksandrov A.                       | librettist Morits V. i Gusman |
| 31. <i>Giul'kara</i> Veisberg V.                             | librettist Parion i Veisberg  |
| 32. <i>Skaz o zemliakh Sovetskikh</i><br>Bermiato-Sukhorkov  | librettist Bermiato-Sukhorkov |
| 33. <i>Imeniny</i> Zhelobinskii V.                           | librettist Brik               |
| 34. <i>Tikhii Don</i> Dzerzhinskii I.                        | librettist Dzerzhinskii L.    |
| 35. <i>Novyi put'</i> Mil'ner                                | librettist Galitskii          |
| 36. <i>Ovod</i> Eiks A. A.                                   | librettist Gal'nerin M.       |
| 37. <i>Bakhtriony</i> Kiladze                                | librettist Kakavadze          |
| 38. <i>10 dnei kotorye potriasili mir</i><br>Korchmarev K.   | librettist S. Gorodetskii     |

## 2. AFFIX

Songs from *Tikhii Don*

## Хор солдат

Э-эх, житье-бытье окопное

Э-эх, житье-бытье окопное,  
Мы сдружилися с тобой на беду...  
Зато - знаем мы - добудем счастье,  
Что написано нам на роду.

Э-эх. И долю воевали мы,  
Натерпелись вдоволь горя-беды.  
Раз не-знаем, за что страдаем,  
Так зачем же нам страдать?

Э-эх, война, война проклятая,  
Долго ли нам за тобой пропадать.  
И зачем хватать австрийскую землю,  
Коль свою у нас некому пахать.

## От края и до края

От края и до края, от моря и до моря  
Берет винтовку народ трудовой,  
Народ боевой, готовый на горе,  
Готовый на муки, готовый на смертный бой.  
За землю, за волю, за лучшую долю.  
Идем мы на смертный бой.

Realizm socjalistyczny w operze:  
*Cichy Don* Iwana Dzierżyńskiego

Na VIII Kongresie związków twórczych, 5 stycznia 1932 roku, radzieckie grupy artystyczne przedsięwzięły szereg działań propagujących kulturę. Jednym z nich była organizacja konkursu operowego i baletowego, którego zwycięzcy mieli gwarancję wykonania własnego dzieła w czasie uroczystości z okazji 15 rocznicy Rewolucji Październikowej. *Cichy Don* Dzierżyńskiego wyróżnił się w konkursie, podobnie jak trzy inne opery: *Imieniny* Walerija Żetobińskiego, *Rok 1905* Aleksandra Dawidienki i Borysa Szechtera i *Bohater* Leonida Połowinkina. Konkurs miał miejsce tuż przed tym, jak partia komunistyczna zaczęła sprawować swoją władzę w dziedzinie polityki kulturalnej, likwidując proletariackie organizacje artystyczne.

Wielu kompozytorów, którzy brali udział w konkursie, znajduje się dzisiaj na marginesie historii muzyki, wielu z nich nigdy nie zobaczyło swoich dzieł na scenie. Ale *Cichy Don*, który był postrzegany jako jedno ze słabszych dzieł w konkursie, zyskał sławę. Został wzięty do „laboratorium radzieckiej opery”, które służyło wspieraniu wystawiania radzieckich oper i baletu. *Cichy Don* spodobał się Stalinowi i media ogłosiły go wzorcowym przykładem socrealistycznej opery, która charakteryzowała się ariami typu *stand-and-sing*, chóralnymi wykonaniami mormorando i patriotyczną tematyką. Skupiając się najpierw na konkursie operowym, a następnie przechodząc do samej opery, autorka omówiła dwuznaczność miejsca, które *Cichy Don* zajmuje w historii radzieckiej muzyki.

Mimo że reżim zabiegał o Dzierżyńskiego, został on zdyskredytowany przez innych kompozytorów, w tym najbardziej znanego Siergieja Prokofiewa, który przedstawił druzgocącą krytykę pracy Dzierżyńskiego, zarzucając mu zarówno brak talentu, jak i umiejętności technicznych.

Porównuję również operę Dzierżyńskiego z inną znaną operą tamtego czasu, która zwróciła uwagę Stalina: *Wielką przyjaźnią* Vano Muradelego. Mimo podobieństw w warstwie fabularnej losy tych oper potoczyły się inaczej. Opera Dzierżyńskiego nie miała żadnych politycznych podtekstów i niosła w sobie przejrzyście podany patriotyczny przekaz, podczas gdy dzieło Muradelego wzbudziło wściekłość Stalina i zostało uznane za niewłaściwy przykład radzieckiej opery.