

SOCIALIST REALISM AND MUSIC in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China

Neil Edmunds, Hon-Lun Yang

University of the West of England, Bristol
Hong Kong Baptist University

Socialist Realism was the state-sponsored method to which artists, composers, and writers had to adhere in the former Soviet Union, its satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe until the mid 1950s, and the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC) until the early 1960s. It was officially introduced in the Soviet Union at the first congress of the Writers' Union in 1934. The origins of the term 'Socialist Realism' can be traced to a series of discussions held in the spring of 1932 by a Politburo-appointed commission that included Stalin, but the origins of its principles drew on Nineteenth-Century aesthetics, in particular the ideas of Nikolai Chernyshevskii, Vissarion Belinskii, Nikolai Dobroliubov and Dmitri Pisarev¹.

¹ For readers wishing a clear and concise summary of the main principles of Socialist Realism, see V. T e r r a s, *A History of Russian Literature*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press 1991, pp. 520–522, and P. K e n e z, D. S h e p h e r d, 'Revolutionary' models for High Literature: Resisting Poetics', in: *Russian Cultural Studies*, eds. C. Kelly, D. Shepherd, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, pp. 43–49. For more detailed discussions of Socialist Realism, see, *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, eds. H. Günther, E. Dobrenko, St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt 2000; H. E r m o l a e v, *Soviet Literary Theories 1917–1934*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press 1963; *Socialist Realism in Art and Literature*, ed. C.V. James, Moscow: Progress Press 1971; C. V. J a m e s, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory*, London: MacMillan 1973; *Socialist Realism without Shores*, eds. T. Lahusen, E. Dobrenko, „South Atlantic Quarterly” 94, 1995, and R. R o b i n, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1992.

Socialist Realism was a complex and confusing phenomenon that has given rise to some tortuous theoretical writing. However, it has been pointed out that 'at the root of every artistic method lies a definite concept of mankind'², and at the root of Socialist Realism was the Marxist concept of mankind and history: i.e. that man has the power to overcome the laws of history, change society, and control their own destiny. Consequently, it can be argued that Marxists acquired a sense of historical optimism, since they believed they had the power to change the course of history. This sense of optimism was an important aspect of Socialist Realist art in which characters were imbued with a desire to make history and perceive the world as a laboratory to create what Maxim Gorky described as 'the beautiful habitat of mankind, united in one [Communist] family'³. Thanks to its association with Stalinism, the study of Socialist Realism has had a chequered past. However, in the decade after the fall of Communism in Europe and the USSR, the antipathy towards the study of Socialist Realism has begun to diminish, and a wider and more international group of scholars than ever before have begun to realise its historical and artistic significance⁴. Yet comparatively little has been written with regard to application of Socialist Realism to music, as opposed to art and literature. This article aims to redress the balance by examining how Socialist Realism affected the musical policies and music of the Soviet Union and the PRC, before drawing comparisons between the experiences of both countries as a form of conclusion.

The earliest reference to Socialist Realism and its application to music in the Soviet Union was an article published in 1933 by the critic Victor

² A. M i a s n i k o v, M. P a r k h o m e n k o, *Foreword*, in: *Socialist Realism in Art and Literature*, ed. and trans. C. V. James, Moscow: Progress Press, 1971, p. 12.

³ M. G o r k y, *On Literature*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971, p. 112.

⁴ As illustrated by a cursory glance through the programme of panels at the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies Conference in Cambridge April 2001 (found at <http://www.gla.ac.uk/external/basees/basees01/prog.rtf>), the five conferences at the University of Bielefeld from 1994–1998 that resulted in Günther and Dobrenko's volume of over 1100 pages (*op. cit.*), and the recent conferences that particularly emphasise the relationship between Socialist Realism and music: 'Socialist Realism in Central European Music: 1945–1955' at Cardiff University (March 2001); 'Socialist Realism and Music: Antimodernisms and Avant-Gardes' at the Masaryk University, Brno (October 2001); and 'Socialist Realism and the Arts in Central Europe' at Cardiff University (March 2003).

Gorodinskii entitled 'On the Problem of Socialist Realism in Music'. It was a 'problem' too, since an idealised version of real life can be quite specifically portrayed in words or images in art or literature, but is a more difficult task to achieve in the less concrete art form of music. The situation was also not helped by Gorodinskii's article. It was full of vague assertions, such as 'The main attention of the Soviet composer must be directed towards the victorious progressive principles of reality, towards all that is heroic, bright, and beautiful. This ... must be embodied in musical images full of beauty and strength', and 'Socialist Realism demands an implacable struggle against the folk-negating modernistic directions that are typical of the decay of contemporary bourgeois art, [and] against subservience and servility towards modern bourgeois culture'⁵. The phrase 'modernistic directions that are typical of the decay of contemporary bourgeois art', however, soon became equated with atonality or extreme tonal dissonance. In the official criticism of Shostakovich's opera *Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda* (*Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*) in January 1936, for example, it was noted that the 'listener is shocked by a deliberately dissonant confused stream of sound... The danger of this trend is clear'⁶.

Coinciding with the criticism of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, symphonies (often with politically correct subtitles) or descriptive tone poems with contemporary themes composed by use of traditional materials in the tradition of the 'Mighty Five' became the order of the day. Topical symphonies dating from the 1930s included Nikolai Miaskovskii's Twelfth Symphony (subtitled *The Collective Farm*), Maximilian Steinberg's Fourth Symphony (subtitled *The Turksib*), Sergei Vasilenko's Fourth Symphony (subtitled *The Arctic*), Lev Knipper's Third, Fourth and Sixth Symphonies (subtitled *The Far Eastern*, *Poem to a Young Komsomol Fighter*, and *The Red Cavalry* respectively), and Boris Mokrousov's First Symphony (subtitled *The Anti-Fascist*). Socialist Realist music also had to appeal to and attract audiences, and motifs from popular songs were often added

⁵ Quoted in B. S c h w a r z, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917-1970*, London: Barrie and Jenkins 1972, p. 114. For an indication of the struggle that composers had to define Socialist Realism in musical terms, see P. F a i r c l o u g h, *The „Perestroyka” of Soviet Symphonism: Shostakovich in 1935*, in „Music and Letters”, vol. 83, No. 2, May 2002, pp. 259-273.

⁶ A n o n., *Sumbur vmesto muzyki. Ob opere „Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda”*, „Pravda”, 28.01.1936, p. 3.

to try and achieve this aim. Motifs from the song *The Planes are Flying* were included in the finale of Miaskovskii's Sixteenth Symphony (subtitled *The Aviators*), for example. Being accessible, however, was not enough to fully satisfy the tenets of Socialist Realism. Ideally, the audience should become involved in creative activities and not be just passive observers, and professionals had to collaborate with amateurs to achieve mutual enrichment⁷. Miaskovskii's Nineteenth Symphony, composed to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution, and Vasilenko's Third Symphony were scored for an amateur brass band and an amateur ensemble of balalaikas and domras respectively.

By employing methods such as adding a subtitle to a symphony so that it fulfilled the tenets of Socialist Realism was no reflection of political belief, although it ensured that composers could protect themselves from the regime. Consequently, there was always an air of ambiguity surrounding these topical symphonies, but no Soviet symphony of the 1930s exemplified this ambiguity more than Dmitry Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony (1937). Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony was written in response to the official criticism of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and subtitled 'A Soviet Artist's Reply to Just Criticism' as a result. However, it was also claimed to be an attack upon Stalin and the political establishment by the composer in his purported memoirs as related to Solomon Volkov⁸. Unfortunately, the debate over the symphony's 'meaning' has overshadowed Shostakovich's original and no doubt carefully chosen description of the work. This is unfortunate, because it is one of the better descriptions of an ideal Socialist Realist musical composition:

The theme of my composition is the formation of personality. It is precisely man with all his experiences whom I saw in the centre of the conception of this composition, which from beginning to end is lyrical ... The finale of the

⁷ It was this aspect of Socialist Realism that helps to explain why there was such a flourishing tradition of amateur music making in the former USSR. Virtually every factory and collective farm had its own club, and organised mass festivals of up to 30,000 amateurs taking part and working alongside professionals. Figure from Y. K o r e v, *USSR: Achieving Lenin's Ideas in Music*, „World Music”, 1972, vol. 2, No. 4, p. 40.

⁸ *Testimony. The Memoirs of Dmitrii Shostakovich*, ed. S. Volkov, London: Hamish Hamilton 1979, p. 140. The veracity of these memoirs have been both vehemently challenged and defended, and many serious scholars consider them an unreliable source.

symphony resolves the tragically tense moments of the earlier movements into optimism and the joy of living⁹.

With his emphasis on 'man with all his experiences ... [at] the centre of the conception of this composition', Shostakovich directly echoes the aforementioned assertion that at the 'root of every artistic method lies a definite concept of mankind'. Furthermore, since the theme of the Fifth Symphony was 'the *formation* [italics mine] of personality', man was not a passive object, but in a state of active development and progression. This process was resolved in the music of the symphony's necessarily optimistic finale. Optimism was an essential pre-requisite of Socialist Realism, since as noted, Marxists acquired a sense of historical optimism because they believed they had the power to change the course of history. Like the 'man' of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, they were not passive objects of historical processes, but actively created history. Moreover, the symphony was accessible to audiences, because the music 'from beginning to end is lyrical', and Shostakovich employed easily recognisable forms: the waltz in the *scherzo*, for example.

It would of course have been impossible for a member of the audience at the première of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony to work out the 'real' meaning of the work without access to the composer's explanation, since it was purely instrumental music. It was much easier for the aspiring composer of Socialist Realist music to communicate a political message with vocal music. One vocal genre in particular that was equated with Socialist Realism was the so-called 'song-opera', because it received Stalin's personal seal of approval and was consequently advocated by regime. The genesis of the song opera could be traced to Ivan Dzerzhinskii's *Tikhii Don* (*The Quiet Don*). The plot of the opera was based on the then still unfinished novel by Mikhail Sholokov and perfect in terms of ideology with Cossacks joining the Revolution, a landowner's son being shot by a Civil War hero, and a moral outlook that fitted the puritanism of High Stalinism. The music was inflected with folk motifs, but the orchestra had only a minor role to play, often only doubling up the vocal parts. The description of 'song-opera' for *The Quiet Don* arose because it was primarily constructed from mass songs. As Andrey Olkhovsky notes with reference to the opera: 'the mass song with its sharply emphasized accentuation, its

⁹ D. Shostakovich, *Moi tvorcheskii otvet*, „Vechniaia Moskva”, 25.01.1938, p. 3.

poster like tunes, its choppy, staccato texts, and its chanted slogans, began to play a basic role in the formation of operatic texture, giving rise to short episodic dramaturgy in place of broad scale dramatic construction¹⁰. In light of the fact that Socialist Realist music was to communicate with and educate the masses, it was also convenient that Dzherzhinskii had 'a negative attitude towards [confusing] ensembles in opera. When five people simultaneously start to sing – one smiling, the other frowning, and each speaking his own words – one cannot make any sense of it'¹¹.

Stalin was naturally delighted when in January 1936 he saw a performance of *The Quiet Don* – an opera where the emphasis was placed on making 'sense of it' – and it threw *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* with its dissonant music and a plot that included rape and murder into sharp relief. After the official approval of *The Quiet Don*, a rash of song-operas were composed, including Valery Zhelobinskii's *Mat'* (*Mother*), Tikhon Khrennikov's *V buryu!* (*Into the Storm!*), Oles Chisko's *Bronensets Potemkin* (*The Battleship Potemkin*), and another adaptation of a Sholokov novel by Dzerzhinskii, *Podnyataya tselina* (*Virgin Soil Upturned*). These composers undoubtedly followed a maxim in their work that was reiterated in 1948 by Aleksandr Shaverdian: 'The fundamental task of Soviet composers, basing their works on the principles of socialism [sic!] realism, is to express the musical ideas of the present time in a simple, natural musical language understandable to the people'¹².

By 1948, however, even an opera with a libretto that seemed ideologically appropriate on the surface was not necessarily acceptable to the regime. This was a lesson that Soviet composers should have learnt after Sergey Prokofiev's *Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of the October Revolution* sunk without trace, and brought home loud and clear by the official criticism of Vano Muradeli's *Velikaia druzhba* (*The Great Friendship*). *The Great Friendship* was composed to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the October Revolution. It dealt with the Sovietisation of Georgia and emphasised the role played in the process by Sergo Ordzhonikidze. Ordzhonikidze was an unfortunate choice of operatic hero, since he had criti-

¹⁰ A. O l k h o v s k y, *Music Under the Soviets*, Westport: Greenwood Press 1975 (Reprint), p. 169. For a definition of 'mass song', see N. E d m u n d s, *The Soviet Proletarian Music Movement*, Oxford/Bern: Peter Lang 2000, pp. 233–236.

¹¹ I. D z h e r z h i n s k i i, *Moia novaia opera*, „Sovetskoe iskusstvo”, 22.01.1937, p. 2.

¹² Quoted in A. O l k h o v s k y, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

cised Stalin and probably paid for it with his life¹³. This was not common knowledge at the time, though, and the subject of opera seemed perfectly acceptable from an ideological point of view, but Andrey Zhdanov, Stalin's Commissar for Culture, and disliked what he heard when he attended a closed performance of the opera. This was made clear by the Central Committee's resolution 'On the Opera *Velikaia druzhba* by Muradeli', published on February 10th 1948, which stated that the 'opera is chaotic and inharmonious, [and] full of continuous discords which hurts one's ears'¹⁴.

The resolution of February 10th 1948 was also significant in that it defined formalism (and thus by implication Socialist Realism) in musical terms. Formalism was the antithesis of Socialist Realism, and it signified according to Zhdanov, who undoubtedly wrote the resolution: 'the rejection of the basic principles of classical music, and the preaching of atonalism, dissonance and disharmony'¹⁵. Zhdanov's attack on formalist music and its composers was reiterated in his report at the first conference of the Union of Composers two months later, and although his criticisms were officially repudiated in May 1958, formalism and Socialist Realism were still used as sticks to beat composers. Any composer who strayed from the official line was branded 'formalist', and in extreme cases could be forced into exile.

In 1949, eighteen months after the Union of Soviet Composers' congress, the Communists led by Mao Zedong had swept to power in China and created the People's Republic of China (PRC). The earliest reference to Socialist Realism in a musical context in China was made in an article by Lu Ji entitled 'The Outlook on Chinese New Music' that was published in 1936. Lu Ji, who later became the PRC's music spokesman, noted that 'Soviet composers shared a common belief, which was reflected in their works ... called new realism'¹⁶. He then emphasised how music should be

¹³ Although the exact circumstances surrounding his sudden death in 1937 are still shrouded in mystery.

¹⁴ Quoted in A. W e r t h, *Musical Uproar in Moscow*, London: Turnstile Press 1949, p. 28.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

¹⁶ The article was originally published in the August issue of *Guangming* and reprinted in Li Yedao's *Lu Ji Pingzhuan. (A Critical Biography of Lu Ji)*, Renmin Yinyue Chubanshe 2001, p. 37. For the quote, see L i Y e d a o, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–42. Lu Ji was born in 1909 and was one of the founders of Yan'an's Lu Xun Arts Academy in 1937. He was later appointed the chairman of the Chinese Musicians Association; the Chinese equivalent of the Union of Soviet Composers.

'a tool to win over a mass audience, to reflect their lives, thoughts, and emotions... [Its] mission is to mobilise, educate, and organize'¹⁷. Four years later, Xian Xinghai, who was to be hailed by the authorities in the PRC as the first native composer of Socialist Realist music (see below), also acknowledged the influence of the 'new realism' on composers in the Soviet Union and claimed it should become the creative goal of all Chinese composers¹⁸. Furthermore, Xian echoed his Soviet counterparts in claiming that the composer of Socialist Realist music had to be responsive to the needs of the nation, while the music itself needed to be bright, clear, simple, accessible, and raise the masses' cultural standard in order to guard against what he described as 'vulgarity'¹⁹.

Mao Zedong also made reference to Socialist Realism in his 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' of 1942, which were to shape the PRC's cultural policy for the next twenty years²⁰, but was not very precise with regard to its practical application. He stated that he was in favour of Socialist Realism, despite some of his colleagues' opposition, and emphasised the need for Chinese art and literature to be '*Puchi*' (i.e. accessible to the masses) so that it could be used as an effective means of propaganda²¹. No doubt influenced by Stalin, Mao also advocated the 'song opera' in his 'Talks', and this led to the establishment of the *yangge* opera movement in Yan'an (the Communists' headquarters) in 1942²². Composers at the Lu Xun Arts Academy in Yan'an were also encouraged to cultivate a dramatic play on contemporary issues with songs and dances inserted at appropriate moments that followed the format of a rural narrative genre called the *yanggexi*²³. Such works included An Bo's *Xiongmei*

¹⁷ Li Yedao, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹⁸ Xian Xinghai, *Xian jieduan Zhongguo xinyinyue yundong de jige wenti [Issues Concerning the Present State of the New Chinese Music Movement]*, *Xian Xinghai Quanji*, vol. 1 (Guangdong gaodeng jiaoye chubanshe, 1989-1990), p. 120.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 120-121.

²⁰ Mao's 'Talks' are available in English translation in: *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Peking: Foreign Language Press 1967, pp. 204-233.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 206.

²² For a discussion on *Yangge* opera, see D. Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1991).

²³ The *Yanggexi* is a rural narrative genre popular in the Northern Western part of China that is usually staged during the lunar Chinese New Year in the open air. It consists of the telling of a story interspersed by the performance of songs, dances

kaihuang (*The Brother and Sister Reclaiming the Wasteland*) (1943), Ma Ke's *Fuqi Renzi* (*The Couple Learning to Read*) (1944), and Qu Wei's *Baimaonu* (*The White-haired Girl*) (1945). The latter became the model for many later operas on revolutionary themes, and gained the seal of approval of He Luting, China's leading musicologist. He particularly admired how its folk melodies evoked the characters' emotions, and the natural transition between the spoken dialogue and the singing²⁴.

After the Communists came to power in China, intellectual life was quickly brought under the control of the new regime, and it was not long before the influence of the Soviet Union also pervaded the Chinese artistic field²⁵. This was natural, since the authorities in Beijing initially perceived the USSR as a source of inspiration, and a Treaty of Alliance and Mutual Assistance was signed with the Soviet Union on February 14th 1950. Musical life was not immune from the pro-Soviet sentiment of the regime. As Cong Qun claimed in 1950: 'Needless to say, the Soviets have experiences from which we need to learn; we need to implement a campaign to learn from the Soviet Union!'²⁶. Consequently, Soviet specialists were brought to teach at the Central Conservatory in 1954, and introduced the PRC's leading music institution to the Soviet system of musical education²⁷.

Opera companies that were later labelled 'experimental' were also founded in Beijing and Shanghai to put the theory into practice with the help of Soviet advisors who were employed as consultants and instructors from 1954 to 1960²⁸. The works composed for these companies, such as Chen Zi and Mao Yuan's *Liu hulan* (*Liu Hulan*) (1954), Ouyang Qianshu and Zhang Jingan's *Honghu chiweidui* (*The Red Guards of the Honghu*

and marshal arts, and originated in the peasants' songs sung during the month when crops are sowed (*Yangge*).

²⁴ He Luting, *Xin geju wenti* [Issues on new opera] (1961-62), in: *He Luting Quanji* [The Complete Works of He Luting], vol. 4 (Shanghai: Yinyue Chubanshe 1999), p. 284.

²⁵ A. P e r r i s, *Music as Propaganda: Art at the Command of Doctrine in the People's Republic of China*, „Ethnomusicology”, vol. 27, no.1, 1983, p. 21.

²⁶ C o n g Q u n, *Zhankai xiang Sulian yinyue xuexi de rechao* [Set off a Vigorous Campaign of Learning from the Music of the USSR], „Renmin Yinyue”, 3, 1950, p. 6.

²⁷ B i a n M e n g, *Zhongguo gangqin wenhua zhi xingcheng yu fazhen* [The History and Development of Chinese Piano Culture], „Huayue Chubanshe”, 1996, p. 41.

²⁸ They were labelled 'experimental' so as to distinguish them from the traditional Beijing Opera or Cantonese Opera troupes trained on traditional repertoires and ideologically inappropriate for the new society. *Ibidem*, p. 198.

Region) (1959), and Yang Ming, Jiang Chunyang and Jin Sha's *Jiangjie* (*Sister Jiang*) (1959) were clearly influenced by Soviet Socialist Realist operas from the 1930s and 1940s²⁹. All were based on real-life incidents immortalised in revolutionary history, and in each case the plot was centred on a heroine who sacrificed her life for the call of revolution³⁰.

As in the Soviet Union, mass songs and choral works were also encouraged in the PRC, because they were particularly apt for propaganda purposes and amateur performance. During the Great Leap Forward of 1958, the Shanghai Musicians Association claimed to have 1500 mass songs under preparation, and planned to compose another 150 songs a month, while composers at the Shanghai Conservatory planned the composition of 1734 mass songs³¹. These songs either eulogised important events in revolutionary history or lauded contemporary aspects of the socialist development. The most popular of them included Qu Xixian's *Honggjun gebudi dahechang* (*The Base Camp of the Red Army Chorus*) (1958), She Lemeng's *Zhang zheng dahechang* (*The Long March Chorus*) (1958), Zheng Lucheng's *Xingfu de longzhang* (*The Blessed Farm*) (1958), and Ma Secong's *Huihe dahechang* (*The Huai River Chorus*) (1958)³².

Socialist Realism proved equally as difficult to define and apply to music in the PRC as in the Soviet Union. From the early 1950s, there were pleas in the pages of the country's leading music journal „Renmin Yinyue” („People's Music”) similar to those made by Gorodinskii twenty years earlier for composers to follow the model of the Soviet Socialist Realist music, but no clear instructions about how to do this in terms of actual compositional

²⁹ Z h a o C o n g [Chao Tsung], *Zhongguo dalude xiju gaige, 1942-1967* [*Drama Reform in Mainland China, 1942-1967*] (Hong Kong: Chinese University 1969), pp. 77-78.

³⁰ L i a n g M a o c h u n, *Zhongguo dangdai yinyue* [*Contemporary Chinese Music*], pp. 205-206. *Liu Hulan* was also staged in Leningrad and Moscow in 1958 by Beijing's Central Experimental Opera Theatre to great acclaim. A n o n., *Sulian guanzhong ping zhongguo geju* (*Soviet Audience on Chinese Opera*), „Zhongsu Youhao”, 1, 1959, pp. 26-27.

³¹ As well as eighteen works on a larger scale. All figures from A n o n., *Chengfengpolang qitunshanhe sixiangchuangzuo gongzuo qitoufeiyue* [*Riding the Wind and Cleaving the Waves, the Ideological and the Creative Works Advance Side By Side with Full Daring*], „Renmin Yinyue”, 2, 1958, pp. 3-8.

³² Musically speaking, they were based on the model of Xian Xinghai's *Yellow River Cantata* and Soviet choral music, and not particularly original. L i a n g M a o c h u n, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

techniques. More concrete guidance came in 1955, though, when aspiring composers of Socialist Realist music were urged to seek inspiration in the music of Nie Er (1912–1935) and Xian Xinghai (1905–1945), because they 'succeeded in developing the revolutionary tradition of realism in our national music'³³. Both Nie Er and Xian Xinghai were Communists and deceased, so their sacrosanct legacies could be twisted to fit present requirements without impunity, and anyone who dared criticise them was persecuted³⁴.

Following the Soviet emphasis on vocal music, Nie and Xian's anti-Japanese songs of the 1930s were considered the most appropriate models to help composers of Socialist Realist music in their quest to write musical propaganda with mass appeal. They were allegedly composed as a patriotic act in order to rally support against the Japanese invaders, but in Xian's case, it was also partly to ease his (and his family's) financial difficulties. As the composer himself noted:

Why did I write the "salvation" songs?... I wanted to write about the country's suffering, so my songs could awake the entire nation to fight against feudalism, imperialism, particularly Japanese imperialism. Besides, I needed the money to live... I don't have the luxury of not writing. If I stop... I will be in

³³ A n o n., *Jicheng Nie Er, Xian Xinghai de yichan: wei shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi de yinyueyishu de fanrong ernuli* [Continue with the Legacy of Nie Er and Xian Xinghai: Work Hard for the Prosperity of the Socialist Realist Art of Music], „Renmin Yinyue”, 10, 1955, pp. 2–4; M a K e, *Xian Xinghai shi woguo jiechu de shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi yinyuejia: jinian Xian Xinghai shishi shizhounian* [Xian Xinghai is an Outstanding Socialist Realist Musician of Our Nation: To Mark the 10th Anniversary of Xian Xinghai's Death], „Renmin Yinyue”, 11–12, 1955, pp. 10–14.

³⁴ Wang Lisan, for instance, claimed there was a need to examine Xian's music objectively in an article he submitted to „People's Music” in 1957. Consequently, his professorship at the Shanghai Conservatory was terminated and he was sent to a reform camp. Wang Lisan, in: *Zhongguo Jinxiandai Yinyuejia Zhuan* [Biographies of Contemporary Chinese Composers], vol. 4, ed. Xiang Yansheng, Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe 1994, pp. 419–420. For details regarding Xian's sacrosanct status in the PRC, see Y a n g H o n - L u n, *The Making of a Musical Icon: Xian Xinghai and his Yellow River Cantata*, in: *The Voice of Resistance, Protest, and Repression: Music and Political Power*, ed. A. Randall, Routledge, forthcoming. Richard Kraus has also pointed out that Xian's populism in the PRC had been exaggerated and his cosmopolitanism has been ignored for political reasons R. K r a u s, *Piano and Politics in China: Middle-Class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989, pp. 40–69.

trouble. I can endure material hardship, but not my old mother. To give her the comfort she deserves, I worked hard to compose those songs.³⁵

The ambiguous motives behind the composition of Xian's anti-Japanese songs, however, did not stop one anonymous writer claiming that: 'they reached a high degree of unity between the art of fighting and the content of revolution. Their use of music to serve the revolution signified the beginnings of [musical] Socialist Realism'³⁶.

As well as his anti-Japanese songs, Xian's Second Symphony (subtitled *The Holy War*) was also considered a model Socialist Realist symphony music because it 'describes contemporary revolutionary incidents and emphasises the meaning and significance of the class struggle', and exemplified 'how a composer could use music to mobilise the masses in the service of revolution'³⁷. Unlike the Soviet composers who added subtitles to their symphonies during the 1930s in order to fulfil the tenets of Socialist Realism and protect themselves from official criticism, Xian's music reflected his political beliefs. He had been expelled from the National Conservatory in Shanghai for being a member of a radical student movement, was a member of the National Song Salvation Movement, which provided free music lessons to members of the Chinese Communist Party, and joined the staff of the Lu Xun Arts Academy at Yan'an in 1938.

The Socialist Realist emphasis on making music more accessible and available to the masses also soon became a part of the PRC's official music policy. In 1955, the Chinese Communist Party instigated a campaign to create amateur music clubs and choirs throughout the country, and many factories and villages were soon reported to have established drama clubs, choirs, or even small orchestras³⁸. Classes in conducting, singing, and instrumental playing taught by professional musicians were also held in so-called 'cultural palaces' in all parts of the country, and professional ensembles were paired with amateur groups to build rapport and raise standards³⁹. Moreover, in

³⁵ X i a n X i n g h a i, *Quanji [Composition Notes]*. p. 129; Ma Ke, *Xian Xinghai, op. cit.*, p. 11.

³⁶ A n o n., *Continue with the legacy, op. cit.*, p. 2.

³⁷ M a K e, *Xian Xinghai, op. cit.*, pp. 12–13.

³⁸ W a n g S h i l u, *Zhankai shehui zhuyi de geyong yundong [Embark on a Socialist Song Movement]*, „Renmin Yinyue”, 5, 1956, pp. 11–12.

³⁹ A n o n., *Women shi ruhe kaizhan shehui zhuyi geyong yundong de [How We Embarked on the Socialist Song Movement]*, „Renmin Yinyue”, 5, 1956, pp. 12–14.

the wake of Mao's 'Shang shan xia xiang' (literally 'up onto the mountains and down into the fields') campaign of 1957, the Chinese Musicians Association decided to send composers, as opposed to just performers, to work amongst the masses in the countryside (or 'gongnongqunzhong' as one would say in Chinese) for a period of six months to two years⁴⁰. It was argued that only through personally involving themselves in the lives of the people could composers write accessible musical propaganda, while the composers themselves were happy to be seen to be supporting the Party's policy of developing the economy of rural areas⁴¹.

As in the Soviet Union, Socialist Realism in the PRC soon became equated with anti-modernism, and contemporary Western musical developments were denounced. As Lu Ji proclaimed in no uncertain terms at the second conference of the Chinese Musicians Association in 1960: 'No matter whether it be called new music or Jazz, it is permeated with capitalist poison [and] is a tool of Imperialism. Twelve-tone music, serial music, [or] electronic music ... is not real music, but a reflection of pathetic craziness and mental breakdown ... typical of imperialism and colonialism'⁴². However, as Sino-Soviet relations began to cool, the appeal of Socialist Realism waned and a new state-sponsored method of composition that the authorities could claim to be purely Chinese called Revolutionary Romanticism was adopted⁴³. But Socialist Realist need for a composer to ensure a piece of music to contain an appropriate political message never disap-

⁴⁰ It was called a 'rectification campaign' in Western writings. For details of the campaign, see R. Coldman, *The Rectification Campaign at Peking University: May-June 1957*, in: *China Under Mao: Politics Takes Command*, ed. R. MacFarquhar, Massachusetts: The M. I. T. Press 1966, pp. 255-270.

⁴¹ Reporter, *Dao gongnongqunzhong zhongqu, dao huore de douzheng zhongqu: shoudu yinyuejia xiangying dang de haozhao fenfen yaoqiu shangshanxiangxiang* [Go into the Midst of the Broad Masses of Workers and Peasants, [and] Plunge into the Fiery Struggles: Musicians of the Capital Respond to the Party's Call and Volunteer One after Another to Go and Work in the Countryside and Mountainous Areas], „Renmin Yinyue”, 12, 1957, pp. 2-3.

⁴² Lu Ji, *Wei gongnongbing fuwu de yinyueyishu: zai zhongguo yinyuejia xiehui dierci huiyuan daibiaodahui shang de baogao* [Music in the Service of Workers, Peasants and Soldiers: A Report on the Second Conference of the Chinese Musicians Society], „Renmin Yinyue”, 7-8, 1960, p. 28.

⁴³ For more details about Revolutionary Romanticism, see Li Huanzhi, *Tan geming langmanzhuyi* (Discussion on Revolutionary Romanticism), „Renmin Yinyue”, 10, 1958, p. 6.

peared, and became more important than ever in the ten years following Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing, taking control of cultural affairs in 1966. During the Cultural Revolution, as this period is usually described, official policy was so radical that one commentator claimed it entailed 'politics above art, content above form, popularisation above elevation and 'redness' above expertise'⁴⁴. The performance and display of all Western literature, art and music was forbidden, and art of the past was replaced by new and original forms that portrayed 'arduous struggles and heroic sacrifices', and expressed 'revolutionary heroism and revolutionary optimism'⁴⁵. Jiang's pet project was the eight *Yangbanxi* (model works) – two ballets, one symphonic work, and five operas – which were collectively composed by a team of handpicked specialists and intended to propagate an appropriate political message through the application of the theory of two lines and three prominences⁴⁶.

The Cultural Revolution was therefore undoubtedly the nadir of musical and cultural life in the PRC. The sanctioned repertoire consisted of only the eight model works, so-called 'yuluge' (songs based on Mao's words), and some programmatic symphonic or instrumental works that eulogized communism, the regime, or Mao personally. The retrenchment of the late 1960s in the PRC, however, was not matched by developments in the USSR, although the commitment to Socialist Realism remained as strong as ever after the death of Stalin in 1953. As noted in a resolution of the second conference of the Union of Composers in 1957: 'The entire work of the Composers' Union should be directed towards helping composers carry out creative tasks, and contributing to the close solidarity on

⁴⁴ A. C h a n g, *Painting in the People's Republic of China: The Politics of Style*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 1980, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Quotes from *Ibidem*, p. 23; and L i u C h i n g - c h i h, *Yangbanxi he wenge yinyue*, in: *Zhongguo xinyinyue shilun* [A History of Chinese New Music], Taipei: All Music Magazine 1998, pp. 518–519.

⁴⁶ The two lines – i.e. the proletarian 'red' line versus the counter-revolutionary 'black line' – were required to be reflected in all art works. The three prominences entailed prominent roles to be given to three positive (in the eyes of the regime) and heroic characters in a work of art. See A. C h a n g, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–24 for further details. For a discussion of the model operas, see L u G a n g, *Modern Revolutionary Beijing Opera: Context, Contents, and Conflicts*, Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1997.

the basis of Socialist Realism'⁴⁷. The Resolution, though, also reiterated that Socialist Realism was a method to inspire composers, rather than a stick to beat them, because it permitted 'endless ways of resolving creative tasks that are common to all Soviet art'⁴⁸. This eventually began to ring true by the end of the 1960s when the definition of Socialist Realist music was expanded to contain compositions by Arvo Pärt, Boris Tishchenko, and Rodion Shchedrin that according to Boris Schwarz 'severed their ties with Socialist Realism by their advanced musical idiom'⁴⁹. One work in particular to which Schwarz referred was Shchedrin's oratorio *Lenin v serdtse narodom* (*Lenin in the People's Heart*) (1969). It was composed to celebrate the centenary of Lenin's birth in a strikingly modern idiom that included, as the composer himself noted, the 'imitation of the factory sirens, of the locomotive and steamship whistles'⁵⁰. Hence, Gerard McBurney's assertion that Shchedrin composed 'music of a kind that would be deemed avant-garde enough to achieve foreign performances and win the approval of those who were enthusiastic supporters of modernism'⁵¹. This was despite the fact that he was appointed First Secretary of the Russian branch of the Composers' Union in 1973, and thus expected to set an example when it came to composing Socialist Realist music.

The idea of equating Socialist Realism with modernism and the avant-garde during the 1960s should not come as complete surprise, though. Thirty years earlier, the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, before it was officially condemned in „Pravda”, was considered one of the first examples of Soviet Socialist Realist music. One critic, for example, argued that *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* 'could have been written only by a Soviet composer brought up in the best traditions of Soviet culture', and that it was 'the result of the general success of Socialist Construction, [and] of the correct policy of the Party'⁵²; by which one takes to mean Socialist Realism. Moreover, the German art historian Boris Groys considered that:

⁴⁷ Quoted in B. S c h w a r z, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 488.

⁵⁰ Quoted in the c.d. liner notes of Olympia OCD 204.

⁵¹ G. M c B u r n e y, *Soviet Music after the Death of Stalin: The Legacy of Shostakovich*, in: *Russian Cultural Studies*, eds. C. Kelly and D. Shepherd, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, p. 125.

⁵² Quoted in B. S c h w a r z, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

Socialist Realism put into effect practically all the fundamental watchwords of the avant-garde: it united the artists and gave them a single purpose, erased the dividing between high and utilitarian art and between political content and purely artistic decisions, created a single universal and easily recognizable style, [and] liberated the artist from the service of the consumer and his individual tastes⁵³.

Groys therefore rejected the orthodox belief that the imposition of Socialist Realism destroyed the avant-garde, and this to a certain extent can be corroborated by developments in Soviet music after the death of Stalin, but not in the PRC under Mao. Composers such as Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998), Edison Denisov (1929–1996), Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931), Arvo Part (b. 1935), Nikolay Karetnikov (1930–1994), Galina Ustvolskaya (b. 1919), and Giya Kancheli (b. 1935) certainly considered themselves members of a musical avant-garde, and perceived themselves as opposed to the composer-apparatchik who was actively involved with the composers' union. However, the situation was not as clear-cut as they liked to make out, since although the two camps viewed themselves as opposed to each other, one writer has recently emphasised how 'the enmity between them is best understood as part of a complex pattern of interdependence'⁵⁴. In reality, 'a complex pattern of interdependence' constituted certain of the aforementioned composers taking advantage of the privileges offered by the Composers' Union, such as above-average housing, special holiday apartments and composers' retreats, and performing their music in the Union's concert halls. They also composed works on propagandistic themes: Denisov's opera *Ivan – soldat* [*Ivan the Soldier*] (1959), Karetnikov's ballet *Geologi* [*The Geologists*] (1956), Pärt's oratorio *Maailma samm* [*Stride the World*] (1960), Schnittke's oratorio *Nagasaki* (1959), and Ustvolskaia's *Podvig geroya* [*The Hero's Exploit*] (1959), for example. Several of the above composers also received state prizes, which would bring with them financial benefits and prestige. Kancheli, for instance, was awarded the USSR State Prize in 1977 and the Rustaveli Prize of the Georgian SSR in 1981, Pärt was joint first prize winner of the All-Union Young Composers' Competition in 1962, while Gubaidulina became a member of the jury that awarded Lenin Prizes in 1990.

⁵³ Quoted in P. K e n e z and D. S h e p h e r d, 'Revolutionary' Models for High Literature: Resisting Poetics, in: eds. C. Kelly and D. Shepherd, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁵⁴ G. M c B u r n e y, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

In contrast to the Soviet Union, no musical avant-garde existed before 1976 in the PRC. This was partly a result of the application of Socialist Realism militating against a lack of innovation, but also due to the fact that Chinese musicians were only beginning to be acquainted with the compositional styles of the early nineteenth century during the 1920s and 1930s. Chinese composers were thus stylistically much closer in proximity to the compositional method prescribed by the authorities than some of their Soviet counterparts irrespective of government intervention. There emerged after the Cultural Revolution, however, a new generation of what were described as 'avant-garde' Chinese composers who led to what became known in the PRC as the *xinchao yinyue* (the 'new-wave music' movement)⁵⁵. This young generation of composers, such as Tan Dun, Zhou Long, Chen Yi, and Bright Sheng, eventually all emigrated to the West, while the older generation, including Zhu Jian'er, Lou Zhongrong and Wang Xilin, taught themselves contemporary composition techniques and were able to join the new-wave music camp as a result⁵⁶. None of the music of new-wave music' movement bore the traits of Socialist Realist music, and some of their works attacked on the regime. Zhu's first and second symphonies, for example, were intended to evoke the pain and suffering in the Cultural Revolution, while Wang Xilin's third and fourth symphonies were reflections on human suffering in general and the suffering of the people of the PRC in particular⁵⁷. Like their Soviet 'avant-garde'

⁵⁵Note that 'Avant-garde' used in this context is a rather misleading label since what described as 'avant-grade music' in the West was not synonymous with 'new wave music' in the PRC. The term 'avant-grade' is used in the PRC to merely refer to compositions that showed the influence of contemporary twentieth-century compositional techniques.

⁵⁶ For more information on the new wave music movement, see F. K o u w e n h o v e n, *Mainland China's New Music, Out of the Desert, Madly Singing in the Mountains, The Age of Pluralism*, „Chime”, No. 2, pp. 58–93; No. 3, pp. 42–134; and No. 5, pp. 76–113 respectively; B. M i t t l e r, *Dangerous Tunes. The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the People's Republic of China since 1949*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 1997; L i u C h i n g c h i h, *Xinchao Yinyue, 1977–1985*, in: *Zhongguo xinyinyue shilun [A History of Chinese New Music]*, pp. 648–699; and M e l v i n et al., *The Sound of New Music is often Chinese*, „The New York Times”, 1st April 2001.

⁵⁷ Studies on the older generation of PRC composers are largely written in Chinese with the exception of H o n - L u n Y a n g, *Angry Young Old Man: Wang Xilin's Symphonic Odyssey*, „Chime”, 2002.

counterparts, though, Zhu Jian'er, Lou Zhongrong and Wang Xilin composed works eulogizing the regime and Party before they joined the new-wave music movement, and took advantage of the stable income, guaranteed performance, and above-average housing provided by the state.

It is therefore difficult to disagree with Marina Frolova-Walker when she notes with regard to the USSR that 'Socialist Realism' was never worked out as a coherent theory', and that 'officials found this vagueness and lack of coherence far too useful to be sacrificed, for it allowed them unlimited flexibility in manipulating artists'⁵⁸. Composers in the Soviet Union were able to turn this vagueness to their advantage. Although scorn has always been poured on Tikhon Khrennikov's claim that Socialist Realist music embraced 'a wide variety of styles'⁵⁹, there were numerous examples of innovative compositions that have been branded Socialist Realist that can be dated back to *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and the *Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of the October Revolution*. In the PRC, Socialist Realism restricted composers to a far greater degree than in the USSR. Innovative compositions were practically non-existent before 1980, and composers who were exposed to avant-garde techniques before the establishment of the PRC, such as Sang Tong and Jiang Wenye⁶⁰, found it impossible to apply what they had learnt due to tight political control.

As Sino-Soviet relations began to cool, the influence of Socialist Realism ended in the PRC, and was replaced by Revolutionary Romanticism. The origins of Revolutionary Romanticism was Mao's belief – put forward in the Yan'an Talks – that art was not only to reflect the reality but also to 'instruct' and 'change' the reality. The musical expression of Revolutionary Romanticism, however, can be traced to a concert given by the Soviet National Philharmonic in Beijing on 18th May 1958 that was attended by the Vice-Premier Chen Yi. Chen was so deeply moved by what he heard at the concert – Tchaikovskii's *1812 Overture* and Shostakovich's *Eleventh*

⁵⁸ M. Frolova-Walker, „National in Form, Socialist in Content”: Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics, „Journal of the American Musicological Society”, vol. 58, No. 2, 1998, p. 368.

⁵⁹ Quoted in B. Schwarz, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

⁶⁰ Sang Tang (b.1923) was a student of Tan Xiaolin (1911–1948), who in turn was a student of Paul Hindemith. Jiang Wenye (1910–1983), a native of Taiwan, trained in Japan in the 1930s and returned to Beijing in 1940 where he was severely persecuted by the regime due to his Japanese connections.

Symphony (*The Year 1905*) – that he urged composers to write music inspired by historical and revolutionary events. Revolutionary Romanticism proved as problematical to define in musical terms as Socialist Realism, though, but the writer Zhang Hongdao provides us with an indication of how it sounded. After a concert of symphonic compositions by Chinese composers, he noted that ‘every work contains a very distinct and appealing melody supported by a clear and simple harmony ... it is something the masses can get used to rather easily’⁶¹.

The application of Revolutionary Romanticism to music was therefore in practice not particularly different from the application of Socialist Realism. It resulted in programmatic compositions eulogising historical and revolutionary events, which were composed in a romantic style similar to that of the nineteenth-century ‘nationalist’ composers and often included motifs from revolutionary songs. Chinese composers, however, more frequently employed the pentatonic scale than their Soviet counterparts so as to add a little ‘authentic’ Chinese colour to their music. Amongst the better known of the hundred or so symphonic works composed between 1958 and 1962 were Qu Wei’s symphonic poem *Renmin Yingxiong Jini-anbei* (*The Monument to the People’s Hero*) (1959), Wang Yun Jie’s Symphony No. 2 (subtitled *The Anti-Japanese War*) (1959), Lou Zhongrong’s Symphony No.1 (subtitled *Yuan Xi Sha* and based on Mao’s poem of the same name) (1959), Li Huanzhi’s Symphony No. 1 (subtitled *The Heroic Island*) (1959), Shi Rongkang’s Symphony No. 1 (subtitled *Dawn from the East*) (1960), Ma Secong’s Second Symphony (a musical evocation of the events of China’s revolutionary wars) (1959), and Ding Shande’s *Long March Symphony* (1961).

A genre of Socialist Realist and Revolutionary Romantic compositions thus appeared in the PRC that was characterised by its ‘revolutionary’ subject matter and traditional musical language. It was governed by the aesthetics of its period in a similar fashion to the way in which the music of the Baroque, Rococo, or Romantic periods was governed by a particular set of aesthetic values, and it proved a testament to human creativity and adaptability at times of extreme pressure to conform. The same statement could

⁶¹ Zhang Hongdao, *Yao biao xian xin de ren wu he xin de jing shen mian mao* [To Portray a New type of Character and the New Spirit], „Renmin Yinyue”, 11, 1958, p. 18.

also be applied to the Soviet Union, although Socialist Realist music embraced a wider variety of styles there than in the PRC. In both cases, however, it would be a mistake to consign Socialist Realist music to the dustbin of history merely because of the ideological pressure exerted on the composer. It is the cultural product of countries that portray (or portrayed in the case of the Soviet Union) themselves as ultra modern, but struck impartial observers as containing so many resonances of the past, and one recent commentator has even claimed that 'Fine music has come from the spirit, if not the bureaucratic letter, of socialist realism'⁶². There can be greater recommendation for the study of Socialist Realist music than this, and fortunately today, readers can decide themselves whether it is true or not thanks to enterprising record labels, such as Marco Polo, Olympia, Russian Disc, Consonance, CPO and Arte Nova.

Socrealizm i muzyka w Związku Radzieckim i Chińskiej Republice Ludowej

Po ponad dziesięciu latach od upadku komunizmu w tej części świata, niechęć wobec studiów nad socrealizmem zaczyna powoli znikać. Coraz liczniejsza, międzynarodowa grupa badaczy zaczęła uświadamiać sobie jego historyczne i artystyczne znaczenie. Niemniej, stosunkowo niewiele napisano na temat związków socrealizmu i muzyki, pomimo niedawnego stwierdzenia, że „muzyka, tworzona przez kompozytorów w Związku Radzieckim... i poza nim, wywodzi się z ducha, jeśli nie biurokratycznej litery, socrealizmu”. Celem tego artykułu jest przestudiowanie, w jaki sposób socrealizm oddziaływał na politykę muzyczną i muzykę w ZSRR i Chinach. W artykule pokazano, jak gatunek socrealistycznej muzyki pojawił się w ZSRR i Chinach, rządząc się szczególnym zestawem estetycznych wartości i „rewolucyjną” tematyką, ale obejmując większą różnorodność stylów w ZSRR niż w Chinach. W obu jednak przypadkach zostaje podkreślone, że socrealizm nie powinien być wrzucony do kosza na śmieci historii tylko z powodu ideologicznej presji wywieranej na kompozytora. Muzyka ta jest cennym wytworem kultury i metaforą krajów, które przedstawiają się (lub przedstawiały się) jako ultranowoczesne, lecz w ich obrazie bezstronnego obserwatora uderza duża liczba odgłosów przeszłości.

⁶² C. Norris, *Socialist realism*, in: *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie, 2nd Edition, vol. 23, London/New York: Macmillan 2001, p. 600.