

Sergei Slonimsky. The Age of the Symphony in the XXI Century.

“... to me it seems that the essence of the symphony is enclosed in the idea that it is a musical diary, without words, about our time and about our very dreadful era.”

Composer and professor Sergei Slonimsky shares his opinion in an interview with the Saint Petersburg Center of Contemporary Music “reMusik.org.”

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Stanislava Evtyushina

On February 22nd in the Grand Hall of the Saint-Petersburg State Philharmonic named after Dmitri Shostakovich, a performance of Slonimsky’s Symphony No. 21 “From Goethe’s Faust” will be presented. The premiere of the symphony took place in the Mariinsky Theater on January 17, 2010 during the festival “New Horizons” under the baton of Valery Gergiev.

Sergei Mikhailovich, do new ideas ever come to you while you are listening the performance of a particular work played by different orchestras? If these new ideas come to you, do you include them in that particular work later or do you use them as an impulse for new compositions?

“I would say that more often than not, simply a few unimportant slips of the pen become apparent in the orchestral parts and in the full score and by the next performance, they are already gone. Referring to the original text, if the work is written confidently enough and not in haste, then as a rule, the score remains practically without any changes. Sometimes in a work there are some nuances, a few touch-ups, some details or spots that need to be cleared up, but in general the

conception, certainly, remains unchanged. Every score must endure different interpretations. It wouldn’t be good if a composition were performed only in one way so that every orchestra or every conductor would play it exactly like the previous. If we speak about the unattainability of the classics, every conductor and every soloist interprets a composition in his own way. They interpret music from an artistic standpoint. It is really interesting that the performer and not the author bring variety to the music. I don’t like when a composition is only performed once. In principle, a work needs to endure and assume these different interpretations, especially if it is being performed by a great conductor like Gergiev or Nikolai Alekseev, who will be performing my symphony February 22nd in the Philharmonic Hall.”

Symphony No. 22. Sergei Mihailovich, we know that the idea for this symphony came about after getting to know the scenario of the film “Faust” by director Aleksandr Sokurov. Tell us please a little bit about the symphony.

“I’ve been friends with Aleksandr Sokurov for a long time. He wonderfully presented my opera “Antigona” in the St. Petersburg Kappela Hall. Unfortunately, this was a one-act performance but very well done in direction and musical accompaniment. Aleksandr Sokurov showed me the scenario for his film



“Faust,” which strays far from Goethe’s original. In essence, this film is like very free, contemporary variations. It might be more exact to say metamorphosis of the original Goethe text. I knew that an excellent composer and producer with whom Sokurov has worked with in the past would write the music for the film. Knowing that, I simply wrote for myself a whole set of motives and before all of that “Margarita’s Piece.” I didn’t write out this piece completely at first but wrote the first few strophes in the vocal part. I also wrote the theme for Faust, a kind of serial, twelve-tone theme, and themes connected with Mephistopheles and Walpurgis Night. I had a satisfying amount of musical sketches for the whole scenario and I wanted to develop them into a symphony “Faust” which would not be similar to the “Faust Symphony” of Liszt, which naturally, is my favorite.”

Sergei Slonimsky explains about his 21st symphony; the first movement is “Faust.” The “Faust theme is a series of his thoughts, his philosophical reflex, his searches for the meaning of life, youth, happiness, for a full-fledged earthly existence and the unattainability of this dream because you can only

“Each of his new works is a discovery, a revelation. One is amazed with the skills of an artist who is so diverse in intonation and style depending on a theme, epoch or chosen character and at the same time remaining true to himself. He is always recognizable by special touches and by melodic, harmonic and rhythmic constructions. One cannot but hear Slonimsky in a combination of an A major sixth chord with it’s sung minor triad; with an octave “split” into a tri-tone, minor second and perfect fourth (f2 – b1 – h1 – f2). Do you not instantaneously recognize his whimsically syncopated rhythms becoming now awkward, now exquisite and graceful, now derisive and lively, now harsh and even threatening?”

(T.S. Bershadskaya)

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live one life. These searches for a blissful moment, even only one, are fraught with a price, which states that once this moment is reached, life will end. Faust then falls under the power of Mephistopheles. That is the overall idea for the non-traditional, programmatic contents for the first movement of the symphony which presents to the listener quite complicated philosophical ideas and writing using serial techniques. The second movement contrasts the first. This is now the "Song of Margarita" which she sings at the spinning-wheel the day before being thrown into prison. When she yearns for Faust, she is prepared for anything even the sacrifice of her own life in order to be with him. Margarita is a woman that suffers, a woman who calls out for sympathy but she also represents the symbol of the eternal feminine in Goethe a symbol that elevates the human spirit and takes it eternity or nirvana.

Sergei Slonimsky, during the explanation of the third movement "Walpurgis Night", tells how the two works "Faust" by Goethe and "The Master and Margarita" by Mikhail Bulgakov have something in common.

"In the third movement a devilish image of Faust is revealed, and this image is not just the roaming fires and infernal events of "Walpurgis Night." This image in Goethe's Faust, without question, influenced the great white hall of Satan in the novel "Master and Margarita" by Bulgakov. At the end of the finale of the symphony, appears the theme of Faust in full, climactic account for in essence the central hero (hoping, searching and committing crimes) is willfully and unwillingly, working under the power of the devil and at the same time reaching for the light and the ideal human existence. The finale can be call more or less tragic because in this symphony there are no pretenses to expound the complete conception of Faust and more precisely the two sides of his character. At the same time,

something of Faust's second side also appear especially in the finale of the symphony where the techniques of sound extraction from the instruments, the musical theme of flight, some sort of furious, devilish galloping and some pulse-raising, infernal rhythms become very important. That is my three-part, program symphony, which one might even say follows a romantic plan and was calculated for the largest halls. The symphony is highly contrasting in its musical language. The first movement is very complicated, the second is very simple and the third movement combines simplicity and complexion."

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Sergei Mikhailovich, in the interview with Asia Sollertinskaya (Klassica, FM, Jan. 27th 2010), you expressed the opinion that "The symphony is the most free form, which is an expression of the inner and outer being of the whole human race. It is definitely not a formal plan." We are very interested to know, what is the difference between the writing of a symphony today from the traditional form?

"Yes, It seems to me that listeners, conductors and performers, concerning this question, are simply a few generations ahead of the music critics, which are all the time making it difficult for us to work freely in the area of the symphony. From one side, some critics confirm that the symphony is an outdated form. Surely, they are looking at the symphony as necessarily a four-part sonata Allegro, andante, scherzo, and finale cycle. By no means is this the only type of symphony

today. From a different side comes the opposite. Conservative and not very well educated critics, of the classical form, consider that the symphony must be composed of four movements and that in general it must be long and boring. This contradiction is met all the time in our press. For me, from one side, this bothers me because critics fall upon my symphonies from two sides from the other angle, it means that it is worth it to write. Surely when critics are not satisfied, the public is very interested and the performers and conductor fight for the work meaning that business

goes on as usual. The business at hand is that the symphony is the freest from today, which can be expressed, practically, by any structural principal. It might be a form with large movements, which comment on each other and which merged by a discontinuous single development. It can be a very laconic form for after the symphony of Wagner it's not possible to require a certain length from a sonata or a symphony. The length might be calculated not only by minutes but also by seconds. Finally, it might be a cyclic form, which Beethoven changed during the writing of his sonatas. In that form there is no large-scale first movement or sonata form and also not always variations. There can be any kind of succession of form.

For example, the public and especially the young listeners received my twentieth symphony, which was performed in St. Petersburg and then in Moscow at a conference of composers, I can allow myself to say, with great

interest. The first movement of the work is a complex, rhythmical and timbre work on one note "C." From one side, it is a parody on mini-music, maybe not a parody, a satire on mini-music. Nowadays the fashion in music is to flaunt the fact that the work is based on one note, three notes, one chord and so on. So here's the limit – one note. From a different side, it turns out that on this one note it is possible to satisfactorily, with different variations in rhythm and in instrumental relationships, write even a complex variation, an invention and almost, even a sonata form. In the second movement there is an aria for contrabass, not a romance, but like one stupid critic wrote, excuse me, in the journal "Musical Academy," a symphonic aria with linear development with a very vocal, long melody. In general, in a symphony, everything must develop over a long span. Surely, the fundamental quality of a symphony is that it is not a small form and a returning musical thought develops over a long span, not speaking of quantity of time but of unbroken and original development. The third movement is a triple fugue on three completely contrasting chromatic themes. At the end and in the coda, the invention on a single note "C" returns already in the look of a festive conclusion. All of the string players stand up and at the end the audience see a sort of instrumental theater. It might be such. In reality it is a satirical-grotesque symphony. Incidentally, this genre can be found in Shostakovich's ninth symphony, but there it is expressed differently, and in some other symphonies, or their separate movements, as a trick.

The symphony can be especially tragic as in say, my tenth symphony "Circles of Hell" alla Dante, where nine movement or nine cycles and two series unfold like a snake. In the last two movements, the music unfolds horizontally, in the last cycle, vertically always aligning in chords. They fill almost all of the

space as if already evil occupies these paths. In these paths, torment is clenched in the space of sound. At the end, in general, the light goes out in the hall and the symphony end in complete darkness. The symphony is dedicated the living and dying in Russia, that is, to all of us, to all people who go through the circle of hell during life and because of that, maybe we could be freed from this hell in that light. We've all experienced how badly people live. In general, it is necessary to say that for me the main theme in the symphony is the very bad, difficult and unsettled life of the everyday, decent, honest man. It concerns his incompatibility with life, his loneliness, and unrelenting

writing, then they don't have to be reduced to stylized neoclassical forms of inventions and fugues in their original forms. Because of that, it seems to me that the essence of the symphony concludes in that it is a kind of diary of humanity without words about our time and about our very dreadful era. Such eras of the division of people into separate atoms when literally taken to the limit, are a struggle of everybody against the individual, the individual against everybody and everybody against everybody. If anything I am probably more of a romantic in music than a neoclassic. Regarding form, they can be really varied. They can be polyphonic, homophonic sonorous, melodic or

Myaskovsky, one of my favorite and respected composers. Myaskovsky, in his creative work, was focused on the late romantics. This symphony was not long ago performed in the Hall of Tchaikovsky, in Moscow under the direction of Yuri Simonova with the Moscow Philharmonic. Myaskovsky was a teacher of many composers. His musical grandchildren were Schnittke, Denisov, Gubaidulina and many others. I, myself, studied under Shabalina who was a student of Myaskovsky. Without looking at the success of his work, his fate was a tragic one. In 1948, when he was already around seventy years old, he was rudely and indiscriminately deemed to be an anti-Soviet composer. Three years after that he was already dead. In the symphony number twenty-seven, looking away from the fact that the music is lyrical and vocal, there is no stylization after Myaskovsky or use of his themes. The symphony was performed on a concert, where on the second half was the 3rd piano concerto of Rachmaninoff (performed by Boris Berizovsky, not to be confused with the oligarch) and on the first half with the Overture to the Opera Evrianta by Weber. The public clamored for tickets to this concert with such a varied program and completely filled the hall. Everybody came to hear the young pianist play Rachmaninoff but they enthusiastically received the 27th symphony because it is very vocal. With surprise, all the people present heard that in a contemporary symphony there can be melody, that there can be long, melodic development and that it is also important. This work is written in the form: sonata-moderato, scherzo, even scherzo-decapo, instrumental aria, adagio, and finale. The tragic finale is in a rondo-sonata form with a tragic coda. In the given example is a wonder plan for a program; dedication and orientation to the type of symphony of the time of

Myaskovsky, Rachmaninoff, and late Tchaikovsky. The form of the symphony wrote itself very naturally, without any stylizations, because, I think, primarily about the essence of Tchaikovsky and about the emotions of this music. Although, if an educated musicologist carefully looks at the score, he will see much that is individual in the melodies, in the use of modes, in the harmonies, which might sound borrowed but are in reality not traditional, that appears in some fundamental form . . .

In general, I really respect serious musicologists and many of them write about my music, but I can't stand snobby music critics. Because of that I have a very strange fate that all of my works weather it be an opera, symphony, romance or quartet seem to receive contemptuous statements and reviews about deficiencies. What then, when after a few years, ten, twenty, thirty, they will write dissertations and defenses about my music. There are about two examples of positive reviews and a million examples of bad P.R.. Perhaps it is already beginning to suit me. Because of that, from the latest symphonies, I dedicated number twenty-eighth (I have a kind of detailed dedication which I intend to print in the score.) to my musical enemies, which constantly are helping the anti-muse, the author of boredom, laziness and angry reaction. I then turn all of this into creative energy. The more prohibitions and abuse, the larger the symphony will be, the more interested the public. I think that kind of dedication has not yet been incorporated into compositional practice. The goal of these people is quite simple. They want scare the theater into not presenting the opera. They want to insult and scare the conductor so that he won't perform the symphony of the given author. It means that I really bother somebody. There are conductors that are not scared. In this group



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struggle with all sorts of temptations, aggression, and rudeness. It also refers to the eternal contradiction of everyday, idealistic problems and life's tyranny and you can say pressure from the powers that be. That is the theme; how varyingly it is embodied in life, and how varied people are in life, and how varied are the expressive techniques and forms in music. Because of that, music must not be an unpretentious miniature of a short breath. It must be a canvas of a large breath in space with development of musical ideas. Any musical idea, including melody, but if they are melody then they must be in a modal relationship, which is original and not an unoriginal following must not be taken from the arsenal of romanticism or Prokofiev. If they are harmonies, then they must be individual outlines. Figuratively speaking of harmonies, if there is polyphonic

monophonic. In my works there is also a monophonic symphony number six. The symphony is composed in one voice and almost everything is in the hypo-phrygian mode and in different, nontraditional modes. There the four-tone form of the eighth symphony, which might be called a symphony motet or a one-part symphony. It's an instrumental concerto for strings with trombone and bells. In it the four-tone melodic turns play a large role like in the tenth symphony or, for example, in the thirteenth. The thirteenth symphony is called "Four Stasima from an Ancient Tragedy," but the tragedy is not noted. Its parts are Stasimas, that is, choral speech and expressive commentary in an instrumental form.

The twenty-seventh symphony is from the later symphonies and is dedicated to the memory of the noble Nikolai Yakovlevich

belongs Yuri Simonov, whom I consider a great conductor. I followed his work with great admiration. He led six rehearsals of a mixed program and gave out music, ninety percent of which was unknown, which could have been played out somehow, having recalled that which was written. He drew out all of his exclusive, conductor's shades and nuances. That is what can make the difference in every performance; individuality, exclusive shades and nuances and, of course, agreement with the author. These were really joyous days for me.

What are the differences that you see between the St. Petersburg school of composition and the western school, in particular, the differences from the period of the second half of the 20th century until the present?

"This is a very logical question. It is simply for me personal like for a practical musician, the understanding of a school changes with the understanding of individuality. Because of that, I don't undertake to formulate what is in the parts of the St. Petersburg school of composition, if because, for one reason, the Shostakovich school is the official, recognized school. I think in the forties, when this school conversely pursued, that it was new for that time. After fifty or sixty years these ideas became something elemental of conservatism and many composers simply imitate the genius of Shostakovich. That's one thing. From a different side, there is, we will say the school of Shervachova a very great St. Petersburg composer who was unjustly forgotten. He gave meaning to individual freedom of every individual symphonic composer and every individual symphony. From his students you can find the wonderful composer-inovator, who is recently deceased, Lucian

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Prigozhin who, in my opinion, is on the same level with Denisov, Schnittke and Gubaidulina. Simply St. Petersburg musicologist (I mean here, more often than not, historians of Russian music), poorly work and poorly spread propaganda of their own achievements so that even Balakirev, Glazunov and Lyadov are not studied to the degree in which Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Metner and even Myaskovsky are studied. With contemporary composers, the same thing happens. If a person from Moscow justifiably nurtures, remembers and cherishes not only Gubaidulina, Schnittke and Denisov (Gubaidulina is actually living, a great friend and a wonderful composer), but also Sildelnikov and Karetnikov who is older, then here it is forgotten. This is very bad because here there is the school of Sherbachev, which carries a freer character from the side of composition of a cycle and of musical language, which is not reduced to only one mode, to the open genius of Shostakovich or to only one form of the deployment of themes."

Sergei Mikhailovich speaks regarding western music, about that he can't say that there exists only one school. He goes through examples of the different school like the sonorous with its paradoxical, philosophical core. He talks about his admiration for Cage in America and the Minimalists, which also study different African rhythms, the Gamalan and others. In line with this school, there are others like the Complex-City with Norman Hall, Bervist, and others. There is the post-serial school of

Boulez who to this day lives and works. There is the work of Messiaen with his completely original modes, arithmetic language, original rhythms connected to the east and with Indian music. There are very many different schools and trends. Finally, there is a line, in the opinion of Slonimsky, of which little is known in our music. This is the line of Slavic folklore for example Boguslav Martin and Karol Szymanowski.

"I really love the pieces of Martin, his cantata "Bouquet of Flowers" and Szymanovsky's "12 Large Songs," the oratorio "Sabat Mater" and others. But surely this is quoted on the market of avande garde work, in festivals. This music is absolutely intelligible for the widest group of listeners and at the same time not reduced to the primitive of Orfa or Phillip Glass. All of this is very interesting to me, the melodies, harmonies, clarity, the natural originality and at the same time the non-primitive quality, the sense of folklore which comes form any country including Russia. I consider that Russian national melody is not reduced to the school of Sviridov because he wrote that the diatonic is seven sounds, tonality must be chiefly in the minor modes and chiefly in the natural mode. Thank God that this is his individual opinion. It could be different like with indirect chromaticism, with a strong closeness to old village songs with its very complex, branched rhythm. In this trend, I really like the cantata "Bouquet of Flowers" by Martin. Orff is not so close to me because work is really reactionary. He

shows a reaction to the serialism and ultra-chromaticism of Schoenberg. Glass on the other hand shows a reaction to the post-dodecaphony composers for example Boulez, Stockhausen, Ligeti and my favorite Luigi Nono who was a wonderful composer. This is reaction to the side of conscious primitivism and closeness to mass culture. We also have those types of composers. I don't have contact with them, although one or another of them has their market and agents for advertising and sales. This we all know well but that type of music does not develop the human essence does not answer the task of art and that means it does not give the possibility to educate the soul of a human. That is why we are speaking about a large, varied school like the Russian, not only St. Petersburg, and western. Between the European and American schools there are a few differences. The Americans, it is true, have mini-compositions, which invaded Germany. I think that in all of these trends it is possible to find many rational and useful elements. For example you can find the widening of the study of instruments. I consider that in many trends the sphere of instrument study, simply many sound-extractions in every instrument became the same very landmark or defining moment like it became during the time of Debussy, Scriabin, and Ravel. In the beginning of the 20th century was the sphere of harmony or the sphere of chords. That which the impressionists opened up has not been written off. Everything is accounted for; everything went in the general baggage. They created wonderful works. Luigi Nono, Ligeti with his "Requiem," Boulez, some composers of sonorous composition: Edgard Varese, Crumb and Cage created wonderful works in the same way. They are all greatly varied. For me, the most important thing is individuality. All of the composers I have listed have individuality and are not just

presenters of a certain school. This can also be said about Messiaen and about Lutoslavsky who I really like. Lutoslavsky is one of the great composers who found in the rough stream of contemporary schools and currents his own mode, his own frigate, which went confidently with an individual style having mighty influence on many. Of course, conversations about the end of compositional creativity and the end of a genre is just craftiness. I don't know why people, who continue to compose, what to deny other the same right. I am against any sort of denial. The point of a school is to stop banning melody, to stop banning harmony, to stop banning polyphony, to stop banning sonorousness, to stop banning traditional forms (from periods to sonata form), to stop banning free forms (nontraditional – the limits of wideness), to stop banning symphonic works, to stop banning vocal and so on and so on. It is necessary to strive for an ancient breath, which can be found in ancient Greece and in ancient, eastern music. That is the only way achieve a new quality in the 21st century. It's the new Renaissance. I see that and because of that musical speech, which is in many depends on the idea and to whom it is written. If you are applying yourself to a kindergarten audience then it's not worth it to write a piece of sonorous music in the spirit of my quartet "Antiphony." If you're writing for an audience of scientist who can perceive higher mathematics and atomic physics then you don't need to give them some children's pieces. You need to show them an "Antiphony," with its quantum rhythms because that type of work is closer to physics. The closeness to physics refers to the rhythmic units not being measurable (one of my little discoveries or maybe not.) I wouldn't say that they are uncontrollable but they are controlled within improvisational deviations of the finest performers. They are written correspondingly by

white, black and white, and black notes, like long values, half length values, short values, fast values, but not twice as short as the long. To physicist this type of thing is clear. In a kindergarten it's a bit early to talk about the "Theory of Relativity" and quantum mechanics. Exactly because of this, I consider that any sort of dogma of method in our time, even in the teaching of composition is extremely dangerous. You need to individually find your way in creativity and in pedagogical work. Everything depends on the plan of composition and the individuality of the student."

Thank you, Sergei Mikhailovich for the interview.

Thank you.

Sergei Mikhailovich Slonimsky (Russian: Сергей Михайлович Слонимский) is a Russian and Soviet composer, pianist and musicologist.

He was born in 1932 in Leningrad, studied composition under Shebalin, Evlakhov, polyphony – under Nicolai Uspensky, the author of the reading book "Samples of Ancient Russian Vocal Art", piano – under Artobolevskaya, Savshinsky, Nilsen.

Sergei Slonimsky is a professor at the St. Petersburg state conservatory named after Rimsky-Korsakov and Samara Pedagogical University, Winner of the Glinca state Prize and of the St. Petersburg Government Prize, Academician of the Russian Academy of Education, the People's Artist of Russia.

The composer's father was a Russian writer and an active member of the literary circle "The Serapion Brothers" – Mikhail Slonimsky (1897-1972); his uncle Nicolai Slonimsky (1894-1995) was a famous American musical expert, the author of fundamental musical encyclopedias; his father's cousin Anthony Slonimsky (1895-1976) was a famous Polish poet and political dissident. Sergey Slonimsky is the author of such operas as "Virinea" (1967), "The master and Margarita" (1972), "Mary Stuart" (1980), "Hamlet" (1990), "Tsar Ixion" (1993), "Ioann the Terrible's vision" (1995); of ten symphonies (The Tenth – "Circles of Hell" after Dante – recorded on CD in Russia), the ballet "Icarus".

"Virinea" was staged in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara, Perm; his opera "The Master and Margarita (chronologically the first adaptation for stage of Bulgakov's novel) had been prohibited for stage during seventeen years after the performance of the first act in the Leningrad House of Composers conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky. "Mary Stuart" was staged in Samara, St. Petersburg, Leipzig, Olomouts, Alma-Ata. Drame per musica "Hamlet" is on in Samara and Krasnoyarsk. The ballet "Icarus" was shown in Bolshoi Theatre, on the stage of the Kremlin Palace of Congress (choreographer and performer – Vladimir Vassiliev), in the Mariinsky Theatre of St. Petersburg (choreographer Igor Belsky) and in Brno (choreographer Daniel Visner).

Sergei Slonimsky the author of more than a hundred compositions, among them – Concerto-Buffo (performed several times in the USA and England conducted by Yuri Temirkanov), Organ, Violin, Oboe, Balalaika, Electric Guitar Concerts, recently finished Piano Concert ("Jewish Rhapsody"), Cello Concert, 24 preludes and fuges, which are played in Russia and abroad and are in the pedagogical and concert repertoire of pianists.

Theatre and symphony opuses of the composer were performed by such famous conductors as Temirkanov, Gergiev, Kondrashin, Yansons, Grikurov, Rozhdestvensky, Chernushenko, Sinaisky, Simonov, Ermler, Chistyakov, Talmi, Krents, Class, Sondetskis, Dalgat, Nesterov, Provatorov, Kovalenko, Shcherbakov and many others.

More about Sergei Slonimsky:
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