



Photo by Natalia Krivtsova

Tatiana Bershadskaya. The voice of Russian music theory in the 20th and 21st century.

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This interview with Tatiana Bershadskaya¹, one of the oldest musicologists, music theorists and respected figures of Russian arts and professor of the St. Petersburg State Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory, was lead by the St. Petersburg Center for Contemporary Music – “reMusik.org.”

¹ Официальный сайт Т.С. Бершадской : www.remusik.org/bershadskaya/

What position does music theory occupy in our present times? Is it possible to talk about some sort of theoretical teaching, like a generally (at least within one continent) accepted conception of a musical system, similar, for example, to the conception of the major-minor system of the 18th-19th centuries? If this isn't possible, then what theoretical schools (or trends) could we name?

It's difficult for me to answer such a general question so quickly. I can at least say that we will probably not find such a universally accepted theory in our times like the major-minor system. This is the case because there are too many trends in

artistic creation itself and all theories are born as a generalization of artistic searches of composers. Now, things are so variegated that if you look at only the European continent, it is difficult to imagine some kind of uniform or prevailing conception. I can say now that we have, especially in western music theory, a certain substitution of ideas about musical systems as with laws, born by the essence of musical intonation, to a conception of them as the sum of various compositional techniques. Western and modern Russian composers and musicologists are very occupied with this at the moment. Testimony to this can be found in the published book “Theory of Composition in the 20th Century” by authors from Moscow. Essentially, in the book they talk about techniques. In this relationship, the name of the book by Kogoutek “Technique of Contemporary Composition,” seems to me to more accurately correspond to its contents. I personally make a very clear distinction between the “technique of composition” and the laws generated by the “intonation essence” of music. In this sense, I would like to think that I am a true follower of the national trends of music theory. I think that I have reason to say that Russian music theory, as a whole, is based more on the study of the intonation process itself in music. Yavorsky and Asafiev made the start at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. They spoke about intonation as the essential aspect of music. In general, I have to say that the concepts of procedural music and functionality are typical for Russian music theory. (Of course, I could be mistaken because; it's embarrassing for me to say that I might not have studied so well all of the trends of western music theory. I talk about it in a way that seems true to me.)

In the words of T. Bershadskaya, our national theory of music differs from

others in its attention to the procedural aspect, the functionality of music and to a certain system of the intonation process. This idea is exemplified in the theory of “musical form as a process,” which occupied a large role in the work of Asafiev, in the theory of functionality and changeable functions of Yuri Tyulin, in the concepts of Kushnarev, who for the first time spoke about monadic lads² as a system and in his functional organization, which is completely equivalent to the major-minor harmonic system. Kushnarev spoke about monadic lads for the first time as a complete functional system. Before this, monodies were chiefly looked upon with the position that they were more or less sound rows rather than functional systems. Kushnarev set up defined, specific functions for monadic lads and with these, in the judgment of Bershadskaya, made a discovery in the theory of musical systems.

So, the role of our national theory of music in the area of the Theory of Musical Systems, and above all, in the area of lads (of which, until now has not fully received a similar term and definition in foreign conceptions), in my opinion is undeniable.

Tatiana Sergeevna, you have very clearly outlined the status of affairs in the very essence of music theory. Do you think that this status is reflected in the terminology, which is used in the music world today?

On this subject, I can add one wise quote of Nikolai Chernishevsky, which says, “the state of scientific terminology in use is demonstrated in the state of the sciences.” With this thought in mind, you can say that our musical science presents itself as a rather sad picture. Our

terminology is absolutely in a state of disorder, full of various names and terms, which theorists, sometimes within one current or trend, understand differently or with one term define two different things. In this sense, the state of our terminology forces us to judge musicology and music theory as still a very imperfect science.

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Tatiana Bershadskaya thinks that working out an exact terminology should be the first task at hand or in any case one of the first tasks in music theory, which must be done in order that musicologists and musicians understand each other to a satisfying degree. In the opinion of Bershadskaya, this problem unfortunately is not being observed. This once again underlines the situation that we have an absence of a single, generally accepted conception. Musicians look at many things quite differently and by working this problem out, in at least some kind of starting positions, a single conception of terminology can be had. According to Tatiana Bershadskaya, the efforts of musicologist should be directed toward this goal.

Tatiana Sergeevna, could you tell us please what are the more famous names in Russian music theory?

Well, you know there are very many big names. I will, of course, talk mainly about those people that I knew and with whom I have interacted. I will also talk mainly about my St. Petersburg, or to be more exact, Leningrad conservatory (because for me it will, always in a way,

stay as the Leningrad conservatory). This is, of course, the school of Yuri Tyulin, who is the founder of the concept of variable functions and general functionality and systemic order. Function (more often than not lad function), which in classical theory is understood as an unshakeable feature of a concrete chord in a concrete system, turned out to be moveable and became a part of the process. Yuri Tyulin transferred this idea of a procedural system to all aspects of music. When Tyulin speaks of the variableness of function, he talks about this not only in the context of harmony and lads but also in the context of functionality of form in a way that merges with Asafiev’s understanding of form as a process. Although this wasn’t something fixed in stone for them in some specific works, we as students constantly heard this in our lessons. This was eventually picked up and developed as a general problem of the functionality of music in the work of Anatoly Milki and as a problem of the functionality and variableness of the function of form in the work of Viktor Bobrovsky. Especially Tyulin formed all of these ideas as a general principle. I have already spoken about the role of Asafiev as the founder of the concept of intonation.

Leo Mazel, a marvelous musician, analyzer, and theorist of the Moscow school, was one of the brightest figures of the 20th century. There was also Viktor Zuckerman who worked at the same time and also jointly with Mazel was a preacher of integrated analysis of musical works.

In the opinion of Bershadskaya, Christoph Kushnarev was a great master, composer, expert of polyphony and the creator of a particularly strict teaching method. Bershadskaya suggests that the most important thing handed down from him was his discovery of the

² Lad – A pitch-specific system of subordination of a defined row of pitches or sound elements logically differentiated by the degree and form of their inhibiting or supporting roles.

theory of monodic lads, which he created from his own national Armenian monodic music, but which, of course, greatly outstepped the narrow nationalistic framework as it sheds light on many new laws, including many regarding contemporary music. In the words of Bershadsкая, the theory of Kushnarev resonates with the teachings of different national cultures, for example with the modal theories of monody of the Near East. Tatiana Bershadsкая has much evidence to show that the Far East (Mongolia, and China) is responding to this concept. She thinks that, maybe, these theorists didn't properly know the work of Kushnarev and already focused on her

things that have been traditionally accepted in the past.

Certainly, Bershadsкая feels closest to problems dealing with harmony and lads and because of that cannot speak on the topic of Yuri Holopov, a brilliant musicologist who created a very large school of thought (in the present case, T.B. is talking about the degree of prevalence of his concepts, which were picked up all throughout Russia). A different question would be how she views these concepts. T. Bershadsкая has a bit of doubt about his ideas. She doesn't agree with many of the fundamental concepts, above all with his rejection of the material substance of harmony, which in her view

My interests were developed in the process of study and further professional activities. I can immediately say that, above all, it is about the problems of musical language, of musical intonation and the musical pitch system.

I began as an adherent to the problems of harmony having studied in the class of Nikolai Privano and later with Yuri Tyulin.

In the center of Bershadsкая's interests, lie the problems of harmony and form. Her final paper to enter graduate school was a "complex analysis" of the symphonies of Dvorak. This paper allowed her to enter the graduate course of Y. Tyulin. Afterwards, Tyulin moved back to Tashkent and Bershadsкая fell into the class of Kushnarev. This move ended up defining her future interests and existence. Her dissertation was concerned with polyphony in Russian folk songs. Although she doesn't consider herself to be a folklorist or ethnomusicologist, this work, which was published in 1961, is still being used as a reference in Russia and abroad.

Interaction with Kushnarev combined with what he gave me and what I had absorbed from Tyulin gave rise to all of my later research and investigation and gave direction to all of my observations and generalizations. I was occupied with the general problems of the musical system, above all problems of lads. Recently, I have been working more and more on lads. I was interested in the problems of lads as a universally binding, language category of music, which is independent from the question of whether there is concrete tonic or not. I am becoming more and more convinced, and continue to insist, that outside of lads, intelligent and comprehensible music cannot exist and the system and organization of lads for music is necessary in the same way that



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interpretation of the given concept. Bershadsкая has received many letters from Mongolia and China with responses of thanks. All of this shows how much the theory of Kushnarev is really quite valid.

These are the people whom T. Bershadsкая places in the top row.

T. Bershadsкая says that there has been much interesting work done by Julia Yevdokimovaya. The work was done during her school years and according to Bershadsкая; it is still hard to judge "because we are talking about a very young person who, unfortunately, left this world at a very early age." Yevdokimovaya has works about polyphony that in the judgment of Bershadsкая are very interesting, which compel us to look differently at many

creates a lot of confusion. Soon, a small book on the subject by Bershadsкая will come out detailing her objections to Holopov. In the words of Bershadsкая "we have our differences on this topic, but Holopov is certainly one of the brightest."

It's very difficult for me to answer questions outright about my colleagues. It's always a bit dangerous that you might forget someone or not name another. I would like to ask all of my colleagues to forgive me for any possible missteps. If I didn't name someone, it's not because I don't recognize them or don't want to consider their point of view, it's just because I name the people whose ideas I am constantly and directly connected with.

What is the fundamental direction of your work?

grammatical subordinations are necessary for verbal language. I would also like to say that the structural similarities between verbal and musical language happen to be one of the directions of my recent work. I have also written an article on this idea. It's exactly this conception of lads that took me to the idea of lads as a universal language system in music; acting in many different forms from one-voice to polyphonic textures.

One of the most important points, that I can consider a real find of my own, is the concept of a carrier or informant of lad functions. I'm talking about a certain structure, which is capable of informing us about the functional meaning of a given sound group. In the classical major-minor system, a single tone cannot be the informant of lad function; only a chord has this capability. In monody, a tone is sovereign and chords are not required to confirm the lad function. Oppositely, in music that develops on the basis of monophonic intonation, even with multiple voices, a tone can consonantly dictate the function. I divide lad informants into three categories: a tone, a chord, and finally, a tone, colored by a chord, which by itself does not act as a definer of function. To me it seems that nobody has really mentioned this. This is because conceptions of the role of melodic connections and organization of systems as melodically connected chords existed long ago. Reti, Persichetti and many others speak about this, but not one of these people asks questions about what, in these circumstances, acts as the expresser of function and then there won't be differences between, let's say, the harmony of Bartok and the harmony of Chopin in the case of ellipses, i.e., of movement, for example, from the dominant of C major to the seventh chord built on the second scale degree of F major or F minor. When we listen to

Chopin, we clearly hear a functionally directed chord in each of these points. I'm talking about something else: not about a principle of communication, but about the point as the bearer of function, which in mono-harmonic systems is carried out not by a chord but by a tone. The chord can exist but it cannot express lad function. I consider this to be very important in this conception, which, in summary, I came to hear from Tyulin and Kushnarev and was revealed to me in the reading of Asafiev, and finally, which I tried to bring together into one unified system. In the first place, I am firmly convinced that the lad is a universally effective category. Secondly, we will never be able to establish a finite number of existing lad systems. I believe that there are as many lad systems as there are musical texts, that, along with stabilizing stereotypes, every text can create it's own system (like the breaking of laws in spoken language). On the other hand, I propose a scheme, through which we can examine and classify the system being used in every separate case. I propose a series of separate and important indicators: the type of functionality, the type of sound material and so on, all of which divides into many of my subcategories, each of which can continue into infinity, specified only by the direction of their characteristics.

This would be the main direction of my thought, in which the problems of lads have formed into a stock of polyphony, melody, harmony and all the other forms of musical organization.

Tatiana Sergeevna, tell us please about the wartime at the conservatory?

Yes, I can really say quite a lot about this. I spent all of the war and blockade in Leningrad and was closely connected to the conservatory during that time. The key staff of the conservatory

evacuated to Tashkent around the 20th of August. Only a small group of people stayed, and as scary as it is to say, continued to study and teach. At this time, I was a student in the second course (to be more exact, I had just passed from the first to the second course).

During the first days of the war, everybody was still here but we were quickly mobilized in locale air-defense teams. I was on a team for management of and communication with firefighters. In the famous picture of Shostakovich on a roof, somewhere it is possible, probably, to find me, in so far as I was also there at the time. It was really a time of anxiety but in an educational way. I really remember well the taking of this photo.

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When most of the conservatory had gone, we the remaining people continued to be a part of these war teams. We had a headquarters for the air-defense. I have saved with me, printed on papyrus paper, identifications that state that I, Tatiana Sergeevna Bershadskaaya was a fighter on the conservatory command and communications team. I have two papers: one signed by P. Serebyakov before the evacuation and the second signed by Tihomirovaya, who was the

headquarters commander after the evacuation.

We lived at the conservatory in barracks. They let us go home once every few days. When the alarms sounded, we fled to the roof or to the attics. When the firebombs fell, we had to put them out. My duties were mostly in the attics. To this day, I know by heart all of the attics and their numbers at the conservatory. For example, attic number one is located in the opera studio; numbers three and four are on the fifth floor of the Small Hall, attic number eight is on the fifth floor of the academic building where the classes of the foreign department are. All of this, for me, is still just “living material.”

Despite the fact that we were members of a war team, we still studied at the same time. We had classrooms where lessons were taking place. If I remember correctly, there were thirty-nine of us left. Recently, the conservatory put out a compilation called “The Leningrad Conservatory During the War Years” where they listed all of the students that continued to study there at the time. I was a part of this group.

The classes we had were all run by the use of oil lamps and the students all wore fur coats and felt boots. The conservatory, like everyone else, was not yet finished. You can definitely imagine how it must have been. The teachers wore gloves with cutout fingers when they played the grand pianos because without them it was impossible. The keys were very icy. History of music lectures were given by Mikhail Druskin, instrumentation by Rudolf Mervolf and analysis by Vladimir Berf. All of these professors with the exception of Druskin died of hunger during these years. Ekaterina Dalgovet, one of the more famous pianists of her time, held a general piano course, and later, when she died, the course was taken up by the

Lyublinsky, who had just returned from the front (where he had lost one eye).

So, we were able to have classes, but, if suddenly during the lesson the air raid sirens went off, all the classrooms were closed and we ran to our posts. We suffered from hunger and cold, but we continued to study. The conservatory lived.

In the spring of 1942, a great joy awaited the remaining people in Leningrad. A present was sent to the conservatory from our friends in Tashkent. I’m not speaking about this from a material standpoint; for the starving Leningrad Conservatory, a gift of rice and dried fruit was something simply unbelievable. This was not the most important thing. More important were the feelings of camaraderie and of someone to lean on – “They didn’t forget us!” – this was the most important thing. Somehow, after that, things became a bit easier.

The day the blockade was lifted and the words of Levitan “Citizens of Leningrad, the firing no longer threatens you!” are unforgettable. This day sticks in my memory even a bit more than the 9th of May.

In the spring of 1944, everyone from the conservatory returned and slowly things began to return to normal.

Thank you so much, Tatiana Sergeevna, for the fascinating interview.

Tatiana Sergeevna Bershadskaya was born on July 4th, 1921 in Petrograd (from 1924 – 1991 the city of Leningrad, from 1991 – present the city of Saint Petersburg). She is a musicologist, professor, Doctor of art history, Honored Russian Art Worker, and member of the Union of Composers.

T. Bershadskaya studied music throughout her childhood. Having finished secondary school, she entered history/theory department of the music school N.A Rimsky-Korsakov and graduated in 1940. The same year she entered history/theory branch of Leningrad Conservatory (now known as the St. Petersburg Conservatory).

Since 1945 she has been working as a teacher of harmony and form at the music school N.A Rimsky-Korsakov and since 1979, at the Conservatory. In 1960, she received the title of lecturer and in 1979 she was awarded with a professor title.

Since the 1960s, she has been involved in the study of theoretical problems of harmony and mode as general categories of music. In 1978, her book “Lectures on Harmony” (second edition – 1985, third edition – 2004), which brought together the results of many years of study and reflection, was issued. In 1985, she defended her PhD thesis based on materials of this book.

Quite a lot of her works over recent years have been issued including her own collection of “Articles of different years” (2004) which contains articles of absolutely new directions of thought such as “Analogies and parallels in musical and verbal languages” together with early works. Polemical article “Misunderstanding becoming a tradition (dedicated to the problems of tonal and modal modes)”, concerning the problem of classifying modal systems, was printed in the magazine “Musical Academy” №1, 2008.

More about Tatiana Bershadskaya:
www.remusik.org/bershadskaya/