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BOOK REVIEW

Vospominaniia s Kommentariiami i Illiustratsiiami, by Evgenii Brusilovskii and Nari Shelekpayev, Almaty, Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture, 2023, $31.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9786017158064

Evgenii Brusilovskii never became one of the faces of Soviet music like Dmitrii Shostakovich or Sergei Rachmaninov. He also never became the face of Soviet national music, as did the Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian. But he did become one of the driving forces of Soviet-era Kazakh music. Not Kazakh himself, Evgenii Brusilovskii came to the republic in 1933 at the behest of the Leningrad Union of Composers to help develop European-style classical Kazakh national music. What was meant to be a short-term stint turned into a decades-long career in Alma-Ata (now Almaty). After years of being held at the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Brusilovskii's memoirs were recently compiled by Yale Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures Nari Shelekpayev, who wrote the introduction and added supplemental materials, such as newspaper excerpts, commentary from musicologists, and fragments of related archival documents. The book is a tremendous document for historians but is equally interesting to broad Russian-speaking audiences interested in Soviet and/or Kazakhstani history.

As Shelekpayev notes, the memoir presents great value as a document demonstrating "how the Sovietization of Kazakh culture took place in the Stalinist period" (11). Scholars such as Sarah Cameron and Paula Michaels have already shown just how violent this process was, from annihilating an entire ethnic group's nomadic way of life to forcing European bio-medicine on it.[1] Brusilovskii, however, generally focuses on other things, largely the need to cultivate national musical cadres and produce Kazakh national European-style music. Opera was especially valued by the Soviet state, which prioritized its production in "national republics" as a show of their newfound sophistication and "culture."

Brusilovskii's own attitude toward Kazakh music (in its non-European-classical form) and Kazakh musical producers is ambivalent. At times, he waxes poetic about the "genius instrumental work" (230) of Kazakh music and notes its "exquisite rich[ness]" (73). For a European-trained musician of the early 20th century, he even shows considerable mental flexibility regarding the professional status of Kazakh performers, noting that conservatory training is not an inherently necessary component of professional musicianship. He asks, for instance, whether "a folk musician, who has devoted his entire life to musical art and achieved a high, virtuosic level of professional performance on the dombra [Kazakh national instrument], who has created tremendous examples of dombra music dazzling in their professional mastery and fine understanding of original style – is this individual a dilettante? [Musical] Illiteracy is a social evil, but not an indicator of low spiritual culture" (71). Brusilovskii also acknowledges that European-style staff notation is not universally applicable or even necessary, commenting that "the music of the *kuy* [Kazakh folk song] has long lived without [musical] notes. And even the relatively accurate recording of a *kuy* would still not be able to convey with [musical] notes alone the originality of its sound and the remarkable uniqueness of [its] music" (72).

None of this stops him, however, from using European musical notation to record Kazakh folk songs as part of his work in the "Scientific Cabinet" (that is, research section) of Alma-Ata's Musical-Dramatic Technicum or from imposing his European musical worldview on the Kazakh national composers and performers around him. For example, a challenge Brusilovskii claims to repeatedly face in working with Kazakh national performers was that "no one knew [musical] notes. All the actors and choir learned their parts by ear, and without a leading voice in the orchestra, any

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one of them could get lost at any point…. This was a typically national problem in professional performance" (95). So, even if he understood that Kazakh music should not be limited by European-style musical notation, he still believed that Kazakh musicians needed to learn this and viewed them in a racialized way, that is, as inherently resistant to certain musical concepts. Moreover, he insisted that the development of Kazakh-language culture was important as an act of preservation, as "your grandchildren, who will likely mostly speak Russian, will not remember Kazakh songs or [know] how to sing them" (137). So, even if Brusilovskii considered Kazakh music "genius," he also believed in the teleology of the Soviet system that would eventually lead Kazakhs to prefer its European and/or Russian equivalent.

With that, I agree with Shelekpayev that "Brusilovskii never doubted the principle of intervention of Soviet ideology into Soviet art and internalized this ideology to the point of un-discernment with his own self" (13). But there's more to unpack: Brusilovskii held nearly the same dismissive attitude toward his *own* (Jewish) national culture: he was one of the "grandchildren" he described earlier, noting that "I did not know the Jewish language, I was not connected to Jewish art in any way, I had never gone to synagogue, and had never really felt myself Jewish, that is [I was] nationally cut off from life" (33). Brusilovskii also describes how the great Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels, who once worked together with him, claimed that "there is and can be no future for our national culture. Our people is flexible, it adapts quickly, it enters another culture quickly, but it has not had its own for a very long time" (64). Brusilovskii was more than just the colonizer – he was also the colonized.

Shelekpayev's comment changes in light of this bit of nuance. Indeed, Brusilovskii had internalized Soviet ideology, but this was in some part because he had himself experienced it — and was now helping others do the same. None of this, of course, excuses his derogatory attitudes toward Kazakhs or Kazakh music (or the plagiarism of Kazakh folk melodies in his European-style classical compositions). But it makes us wonder what the many layers of involvement in Soviet nationality politics and national culture can be.

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Note

1 Sarah I. Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2018); Paula A. Michaels, *Curative Powers: Medicine and Empire in Stalin's Central Asia*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003).