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SPIRITUAL INDEPENDENCE,
OR A CULTURAL NORM?

GALINA USTVOLSKAYA AND THE ZNAMENNY RASPEV

Throughout her life, Galina Ivanovna Ustvol'skaya (1919-2006) largely refused to cultivate the following her music received, and chose to live in a reclusive manner. Despite an avid admiration following the beginning of international recognition for her work during the 1980s, she fiercely ignored the limelight in which she was thrust and actively decided not to give interviews, be videotaped or photographed. She, too, stalwartly refused commissions, saying: 'I only write when I am in a state of grace, then I let my work rest for a long time. When it comes, I reveal the composition. And if the time does not come, I simply destroy it. I never accept commissions to order'.¹ As if to reinforce the point, Ustvol'skaya wrote to Hans Sikorski, her publisher seeking a commission:² 'I would gladly write this work for your publishing firm but it depends on God not on me. If God gives me the opportunity to write something, I'll do it immediately.'³

1 Lemaire, Frans C., *La Musique du Xxe siec le en Russie et dans les anciennes Republiques sovietiques, Les chemins de la musique*, (Paris: Fayard, 1994), p. 450.

2 Lee, Marian. *Galina Ustvol'skaya: The Spiritual World of a Soviet Artist*, PhD diss., Peabody Conservatory of Music, p. 3.

3 Gladkova, Olga. *Galina Ustvol'skaya – muzyka kak navazdyeniye*, [Music as an Obsession] (St. Petersburg: "Muzyka", 1999), p. 4. As Ustvol'skaya's compositions are so inextricably linked with her spiritual ideas, it is of great importance initially to define 'spirituality' successfully by way of illuminating the intricate differences between religious, liturgical, sacred and spiritual music. It is important to highlight the Russian word "*dukhovnyi*" the meaning of which incorporates both the concept of the 'sacred' and the 'spiritual'. With this in mind, it would seem that 'spiritual-ness' is deeply embedded in Russian realisation (as in the English language these concepts are expressed by two separate words). Galina Ustvol'skaya did in fact say of her own work that it was not religious in a 'literal' sense, but rather surrounded by a 'religious spirit'. As quoted in Viktor Suslin, *The Music of Spiritual Independence*, in *Ex-Oriente...I Ten Composers from the USSR*, Ed. Valeria Tsenova, (Berlin: Verlag Ernst Kuhn), p. 24.

Ustvol'skaya also strongly warned against analysis of her music, adamantly insisting: 'There is no link whatsoever between my music and that of any composer, living or dead. I ask all who love my music not to make a theoretical analysis of it.' (Hirsbrunner, Theo. 'Tic-Toc International Festival of New Performance', found at <http://tictocfestival.org/artists/vs/ustvols.html>., accessed on 26/06/06).

It is with this overriding spiritual proclivity in mind that the semantic value of Ustvolskaya's appropriation of musical material from the *Znamenny Raspev* is relayed. Although Ustvolskaya obstinately refused to acknowledge this influence throughout her lifetime, evidence of characteristics of the chant are constantly flagrant in each of her profoundly spiritual works, without exception. However, in light of her refusal to confirm publicly that it was a resounding influence, the extent to which this inclusion was entirely intentional is ambiguous.

What we can be sure of, however, is the personal context and artistic climate from which Ustvolskaya's music sprang. Ustvolskaya enjoyed a relatively affluent upbringing; her mother was from an aristocratic family (although Ustvolskaya was perpetually insistent that it was a poor aristocratic family!) and was a schoolteacher, and her father a lawyer. Given this fairly high standard of living,⁴ regular music lessons, and her parents' status, it can be assumed that her parents had made her aware of her links with her musical past.⁵ Furthermore, Nikolai Uspenskii was on affable terms with Ustvolskaya, holding a teaching post at the very same conservatory in which Ustvolskaya worked, providing her with access to his numerous anthologies of these Russian liturgical melodies in her workplace.

In addition to this flourishing practice, 'The Khrushchev Thaw' - as it has been dubbed - saw a sudden increase in the popularity of this compositional approach as Uspenskii's collection of transcribed *Znamenny* melodies was finally published. This was the first time Soviet composers had gained access to such an overtly religious publication and thus was an appropriate time for Ustvolskaya to instigate her exploration of such traditions. Added to which, Yuri Butsko's⁶ *Polyphonic Concerto*, with an exhaustive explanation of his inclusion of the chant in a lengthy preface, was made available to the public, and Schnittke's *Hymns* (1974-1979) soon followed. Indeed, the 1970s saw a flurry of compositional activity for Ustvolskaya, where some of her strongest personal (and, beyond coincidence, most profoundly spiritual) music materialized.⁷

It is perhaps the opening fragment of Ustvolskaya's *Piano Sonata Number 2* (1949) that bears - both visually and aurally - most resemblance to *Znamenny*

4 This, of course, was before the revolution. In post-revolutionary Soviet times, the family was allocated just three small rooms.

5 Dullaghan, Andre. *Galina Ustvolskaya: Her Heritage and her Voice*, PhD Diss., University of London, 2000, p. 24.

6 Yuri Butsko (b. 1938), is a composer from Moscow who studied at the Moscow Conservatory alongside Alfred Schnittke among others. Butsko is a great expert on the Old Believers, and the music of the Orthodox Church as a dedicated believer himself, having attended church regularly and consistently throughout his life. He spent many years making modern adaptations of the ancient chant, and devised a system through which *Znamenny Raspev* could be organised.

7 The 1970s saw the composition of Ustvolskaya's *Compositions 1, 2 and 3* and her *Symphony number 2*, her first symphony for nearly a quarter of a century that paved the way for the influx of her final three in the subsequent decade.