

Music Study In The Soviet Union: Old Traditions, New Trends

by Frances Larimer

In the spring of 1991 I was privileged to participate in an exchange with a member of the piano faculty of the Leningrad State Conservatory. The Leningrad professor visited with me on my campus for five weeks and gave a series of lectures on various aspects of Russian musical education and current political and economic influences on culture in that country. During my five-week stay in Leningrad, I gave lectures in the Conservatory, at two Cultural Institutes, and for the Leningrad Music Teachers Association. My presentations centered on piano pedagogy and teacher training in the United States, American beginning piano methods and educational materials, and group piano instruction including piano classes in the digital piano laboratory. These lectures were presented with videotapes demonstrating beginning piano study for children and different uses of the piano laboratory for class instruction, as well as performances of examples of American educational piano materials.

The highlight of my experience was the opportunity to visit many schools in addition to the ones at which I lectured. I was invited to observe classes, teaching demonstrations and student performances, and to meet informally with groups of music teachers and pedagogy students for discussions about unique and similar situations within each of our own teaching environments. The many Russian teachers and students with whom I had contact exhibited much interest in American pedagogical methods and materials and the

curricular structure of our professional schools of music. They were particularly impressed by the possibilities for group instruction that could be implemented through the digital piano laboratory. In turn, I was equally impressed by the high quality and diversity of instruction that is commonplace in their system of music schools for children.

Music Study In Institutions Of Higher Education

The Soviet system of music study, as thoroughly described in the August/September 1991 issue of *American Music Teacher*, is controlled by the state and is highly structured at all levels, beginning with the music schools for children upward to the institutions of higher education. Throughout all levels performance study is the main emphasis. Many serious students aspire to performance careers coupled with prestigious teaching positions in conservatories (not unlike career aspirations in this country).

There are several categories of higher education institutions: the music college, the institute, the conservatory, and the university. Except at the university, music study and teacher training are offered in all these institutions. The conservatory offers the highest and most prestigious credentials for the professional musician. Many students who first attend a music college will take examinations to qualify for entrance into an institute or a conservatory. The state controlled curriculum in all these institutions is similar, but on increasingly higher levels. In general, individual schools do not have the freedom to design their programs of study or add new courses; in some instances, however, selected schools are given permission to experiment with new curricula. In addition to traditional music studies and pedagogy, there are courses in philosophy, aesthetics, Soviet folk

music and the history of Russian music. Studies in psychology and learning theory were forbidden until more recently. The compulsory study of state socialism has been abolished.

Music Colleges

Music colleges are four-year music schools equivalent to our baccalaureate programs of study. They are transitional schools leading into an institute or conservatory. A student may enter at age fifteen or sixteen after at least a seven-year attendance at a music school for children. Music colleges function primarily as teacher training institutions for instrumentalists and vocalists who will be prepared to teach in the various music schools for children. Basic music course offerings are similar to those offered in the music schools for children except that they obviously are on a more advanced level.

Since music colleges are teacher training institutions, courses in pedagogy specific to the student's major instrument are compulsory. Usually there are several pedagogy instructors for each instrument, and each will be assigned a certain number of pedagogy students. There are more piano pedagogy instructors than for any other instrument, as piano enrollments tend to be the largest. Each of these pedagogy instructors teaches his own pedagogy course and supervises the teaching of his assigned group of pedagogy students. The typical arrangement consists of a one-year pedagogy course to be taken during the second year at the music college. Course content includes the study of beginning teaching materials, methodology for the particular instrument, technique development and repertory. This year-long course is followed by two years of supervised student teaching.

First-year student teaching consists of two forty-five-minute lessons weekly with

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one beginner. During the second year, the student teacher may continue with the same pupil plus another beginner. Student teaching experiences rarely go beyond the second or third year of study. Each week, the student teacher teaches one of the lessons independently, and the supervisor observes and participates in teaching the second lesson. These lessons are followed by weekly critiques with the supervising teachers. There are periodic sessions in which all pedagogy students of a particular instructor meet together with the instructor and his pupils to present short teaching demonstrations. After all demonstrations have been completed, the young pupils leave the room and a class discussion on the teaching follows. Lesson emphasis primarily is on technique development and repertory study. Children in this program have additional classes in solfège and theory through a children's department (for the purpose of teacher training) connected with the musical college. Group instruction in piano or other instruments is unknown. When I inquired about how student teachers would learn to teach at more advanced levels, the answers were vague. It was apparent that little attention was given to instrumental teacher training beyond the elementary level. All student teaching experiences were with young children; none were with students of college or adult age.

I had the opportunity to observe pedagogy classes at one of the music colleges conducted by a pedagogy teacher, Kira Rajonskaya, who I later learned was considered to be the best in Leningrad. One session included several student teachers each giving mini-lessons with their young pupils on one particular activity within a typical lesson. The mini-lessons were followed by a discussion between the pedagogy students and the instructor on the teaching demonstrations they had just observed. Of particular interest was the fact that points made about the student teaching demonstrations were quite similar to what might occur during an American piano pedagogy class discussion. In one instance the observers felt it was difficult to determine the goal that one student teacher had in mind when working with her pupil on a particular activity. Observers noted that a second student teacher did much

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talking during the lesson and did not give her pupil ample opportunity for input. A third student teacher was observed to give many directions to the pupil, but without following through adequately to make sure that he understood how to do the task before leaving it. All agreed that teacher modeling was more effective than extensive verbal explanation. Many positive comments were made for each teaching demonstration regarding energy level and speaking voice of the student teacher, ability to give clear directions, and so forth.

I visited another piano pedagogy class conducted by the same instructor that dealt with a review of materials for beginners. Each pedagogy student gave a short description of an assigned book followed immediately by an evaluation of the material by the instructor. Positive and negative features of each selection were colorfully illustrated by this dynamic instructor. Choice of teaching materials seemed rather limited, but within these limitations much discrimination was made as to what was the most appropriate for whom.

Institutes

The institutes are four- and five-year institutions at baccalaureate and masters levels. The primary purpose of their

professional music programs is to train music teachers for the elementary and secondary schools (although some may also teach in the music schools for children). These instrumentalists and vocalists will teach music classes and conduct choirs and orchestras in the ordinary schools in the Soviet Union. Their teacher training system is very similar to ours in that student teachers receive practice teaching assignments in the ordinary schools under the supervision of the regular school music instructors. In addition to music studies, many institutes also offer arts and humanities studies, thus making them similar to our universities. Choreography (ballet studies) and theater are important programs within the institutes. Quite recently, some of these institutes have added business and marketing courses. One institute visited was housed in a new and very contemporary complex of buildings. It included a dormitory accommodating nine hundred students, large modern classrooms, a theater, a sports center with the usual exercise equipment, and a room scheduled to be used as a computer classroom. (They were awaiting funds for purchase of the computers.) They also hope to attract an American professor to teach a semester- or year-long course in cultural marketing. This particular institute was not under the state ministry system, but was under the jurisdiction of a trade union organization that apparently has more funding for educational facilities than does the state.

Another type of teacher training institution, the pedagogical institute, prepares teachers in all subject areas for placement in ordinary schools as well as in institutions of higher education. These institutes do not offer professional music study. However, music study in the form of cultural courses and early level piano instruction for non-musicians may be offered in some of these institutes. I met with two piano teachers from one of Leningrad's pedagogical institutes who wanted information about our beginning piano methods and group instruction for adults. They were amazed to see the variety of activities included in the adult materials I had taken with me.

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The performance expectation for students entering music colleges and institutes from the music schools for children is not as high as that required for entrance into the conservatories. Many students in the music colleges and institutes who are strong performers aspire to study further in the conservatories if they can pass the entrance competition. Conservatory credentials are the most prestigious, and graduates have more opportunities to obtain the best positions as members of orchestras, as conductors, and as teachers/performers or composers in the higher education institutions. The best teacher training, however, occurs in the music colleges and the institutes. Therefore many music students wish to obtain their professional training through a combination of music college or institute education with conservatory education for the best possible credentials.

Conservatories

There are twenty-four conservatories in the Soviet Union, the most prestigious being in Leningrad and Moscow. The Leningrad (St. Petersburg) Conservatory, the oldest, was established in 1862 by Anton Rubinstein. Among its notable early teachers and students were Glinka, Glière, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov, Liadov, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. (See "Prokofiev By Prokofiev" in the April/May 1991 issue of *AMT* for an account of his student days at the Conservatory.) The five-year program of study at the conservatory is the highest level of musical training available in the Soviet Union. Competition is very rigid, particularly in Leningrad and Moscow, and only the top performers are accepted. The main emphasis of study is performance training; other course work is treated as supportive of performance studies. Courses of study for each major are strictly prescribed; there are no electives. Leningrad is also noted for its excellent program of studies in conducting. Students attending the conservatories aspire toward a performance career, although most cannot

make a living just by performing and will seek to combine performing with teaching. Faculty and students are expected to give many concerts within the conservatory and elsewhere. The conservatories are steeped in tradition and strive to preserve traditional teaching methods established by their famous and distinguished teachers. New approaches and innovative teaching techniques are seldom found; tradition dictates curriculum.

Pedagogy course work and student teaching also are compulsory for all students. Pedagogy studies in the conservatories follow the same plan as those described earlier for the music colleges — a year-long course in pedagogy followed by three years of student teaching with young children. I observed a lack of enthusiasm on the part of some conservatory piano pedagogy students — perhaps because pedagogy studies there somewhat repeated what had been covered in a music college. Several piano pedagogy students expressed their desire for the opportunity to work with older pupils. I was told that the Leningrad Conservatory is planning to expand piano student teaching into more advanced levels with older conservatory students.

Conducting majors also have pedagogy course work along with the opportunity, through assistantships, to practice their skill with school choirs and instrumental groups. There is a great demand for choir conductors in the Soviet Union, as there are many amateur choirs throughout the country. Every factory has its own choir.

A two-year postgraduate course is available for the very best performance majors. The first year is devoted mainly to course work and further performance studies; the second year is spent in research and the writing of a dissertation. Additional student teaching may be elected through an assistantship. This might include continuing work with children or assisting one's own piano instructor with his other pupils. The final credential is equivalent to the master of music degree. This credential is a must for those seeking the more prestigious teaching positions in the institutions of higher music education: music colleges, institutes, and conservatories.

Piano Study For Non-Pianists

Piano study is considered to be the foundation of all music study in all schools, regardless of the particular instrument of choice. All non-pianists are required to study piano from the earliest years in the music schools for children up through the conservatory. Even though the piano performance level of non-pianists may be quite high when they enter the conservatory, they are required to continue with piano studies. The primary emphasis is on the study of piano repertory of all styles and periods for the purpose of increasing general musicianship and broadening knowledge of a wide body of music literature. All instruction is through private lessons.

At the conservatories, conducting, theory and composition majors are expected to perform entrance examinations in piano at the same level as entering piano performance majors. Students who major in these fields are required to study from four to five years and, in addition to advanced repertory study, they must develop skill in score reading, accompanying and harmonization. These skills are covered by the piano instructor as a regular part of the twice-weekly lessons.

Instrumentalists study for two years, usually through one weekly forty-five-minute lesson. In addition to repertory study, they also develop skill in transposition, score reading and accompanying. At the home of one conservatory piano teacher, I heard some of her secondary piano students perform accompaniments quite well for each other's violin solos. Following the performances, they told me that they considered their piano study a valuable tool not only for studying their accompaniments, but also for their general knowledge about music.

Vocal, choreography and folk instrument majors also are required to study piano repertory and various practical skills, but the length of study will vary and the level of advancement may be less. Usually these students are admitted to higher education institutions with less piano background than others.

Instructors who teach piano to non-pianists often will specialize in working

with one of the above categories of students. Thus they can concentrate their teaching on the specific skills and repertory required for these particular categories.

Teachers in all the institutions I visited were quite interested in the American system of secondary piano study — the variety of activities and skills included in the curriculum, materials used, and the concept of group instruction in the piano laboratory. Many felt that more emphasis on practical skill development and less stress on advanced repertory study would improve the curricula for their non-pianist students.

Obtaining The First Job As A Professional Musician

One of the effects of the changing political scene in the Soviet Union is that students graduating from the professional music schools can no longer count on the state to find them jobs. They now must find their own jobs with the help of their schools and major professors. There are no job-placement bureaus available to new graduates. Finding a desirable position can be quite tricky. Since the more talented students in higher education institutions pay little (if anything) for their education, they are expected to “pay back” the institution by accepting a teaching, conducting, or orchestral assignment in the provinces (rural areas) selected for them by their school. This is a dreaded assignment for young musicians just beginning their careers, because they must move abruptly from the highly cultural environment of a city educational institution into near desolation. Many graduates surreptitiously circumvent these rural assignments.

It is almost impossible for graduates of one of the leading city institutes or conservatories to remain in the same city and find work if they are not permanent residents of that city. There is a long-time policy known as “propiska,” which has to do with city registration restrictions. If one is not registered in the city, then one cannot obtain housing in that city; thus one cannot work there. In order to remain, some graduates find devious ways around this policy, and others try to return to their own

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Most of the faculty in the conservatories and institutes are graduates from those same institutions. The best graduates may have spent their early teaching years in smaller schools elsewhere, but have been invited to return once they have become established and achieved some success.

New Trends In Music Study And Teaching

The most innovative teaching is occurring in some of the more progressive music schools for children which have been given permission by the Ministry of Culture to experiment with new teaching methods. It is presumed that the more successful innovations in these progressive schools will become the models for others to incorporate similar changes within their own schools. The teachers in these schools are generally young, very enthusiastic about their work, and exhibit great love for working with children. I made several visits to one such school where I met with faculty members, observed classes, and attended an impressive student concert.

This fifteen-year-old school is housed in a modern building with excellent teaching facilities and a large theater/concert hall. Plans are to expand the facilities to include a complete general school as well. The main philosophy held by the administration and faculty of this school is to develop the potential of the average child. Children attending this school are not pushed to excel, but encouraged to do their best at whatever musical endeavor they pursue. Due to the large number of students who wish to enter the school, the faculty must select from the preschool preparation music classes those who show the most potential for success. They are presently unable to accommodate more advanced transfer students. During the coming year the school will begin a special music program for blind children.

Unlike the more traditional music schools for children, the performance, solfège, theory and choral faculties work together as a team in order to interconnect these various studies. Faculty members write much of their own teaching material. Students apply information acquired in ear training and theory classes to the piano via harmonization, improvisation and composition assignments. Songs learned in choral classes are played by ear and accompaniments improvised.

One of the most unique offerings by this, or any other, children's music school is a musical theater where students of all ages (seven to seventeen) may participate. The twenty-one operas in their repertory are based on Russian folklore, fairy tales, and Disney themes. (I attended a spectacular production of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.”) Students write the librettos, compose the music, make sets and costumes, sing and perform the musical score on the piano (with other instruments added occasionally). All students can sing all parts and can play the entire score on the piano. Throughout a performance, student musicians trade off singing different roles and playing the instrumental accompaniments. The director of this musical theater is a piano and composition teacher assisted

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by other members of the faculty. In the initial stages of preparation of a new opera, a story theme is agreed upon, the libretto is chosen or written, and the director/composition teacher assigns each of the participating children different parts of the opera to compose. The end result is most impressive. This theater has participated in an exchange with the Harlem Children's Theater in New York City and is eager to participate in more exchanges with American children's theater groups.

Many teachers in other music schools for children also have developed teaching techniques different from the traditional. The main emphasis for all these progressive teachers is to develop the musical potential of any child through a comprehensive music study plan that interconnects instrumental, solfège and theory studies. Many now believe that all children have talent; it just needs to be developed. One teacher expressed her belief that one can give children difficult musical tasks if they are presented in a language they can understand. At a young age, creative activities are incorporated along with performance studies and are continued on a regular basis throughout the child's music study. It is believed by many progressive teachers that an on-going plan of original improvisation and composition activities not only strengthens the child's general music understanding, but also improves his performance level.

New teaching materials are being developed to supplement traditional study materials. Young students transpose, play by ear, improvise, and compose in many styles using information they acquire in ear training and theory courses. Student compositions are imaginative and contemporary in style and harmony. Jazz is a very popular idiom for improvisation and composition. The concept of comprehensive musicianship is being widely practiced by many progressive teachers in some of the music schools for children. Creative activities and the interconnection of music subjects with performance studies are producing well-rounded young musicians, not merely performance robots.

In addition to curriculum changes in some of the progressive state children's

music schools, new privately run music schools for children are beginning to emerge. In these schools, faculty and administration have complete freedom to design the study programs as they wish without guidelines from the state ministries.

General Impressions

On Music Teacher Training

Although teacher training in the performance areas is compulsory and highly structured in the higher education institutions, the breadth and level of pedagogy course work and student teaching experience is quite narrow, limited primarily to two or three years of working with elementary level children. Student teaching assignments emphasize the teaching of early level technique and repertory. Much attention is given to the proper approach to the instrument in the beginning stages of study — use of the playing apparatus, learning appropriate gestures, and listening for, and learning to produce, a singing tone. Early lessons can be tedious for student teacher and pupil, since each new element must be perfected before continuing. Little attention is given to an overview and the character of a new piece of music before tackling details. Learn the details and they will evolve into a whole. Teaching style is authoritative, and much of the lesson is spent in error-correcting and reprimanding. Little praise is given to the pupil.

The differences observed in student teaching and follow-up discussions with supervisors and those lessons taught by some of the creative teachers in the more progressive music schools were dramatic. Given the limitations of the pedagogy/student-teaching system, one wonders where these talented teachers learned their craft. Perhaps they had exceptionally good pedagogy teachers at some point, had opportunities to observe excellent models, or just had the ingenuity to develop their own unique talents. The latter would seem to be the case. I was not able to find an answer. Obviously good teachers do develop, perhaps by trial and error, perhaps also by perpetuating the traditions of former great teachers. Possibly the high level of musicianship and

performance skill of Soviet musicians emanates from the tightly structured and unified system of music instruction — beginning through professional levels — in spite of the quality of the teachers along the way. Theirs is a true spiral curriculum.

Improvements may yet occur in the system of performance teacher training. Opportunities to observe and work under the supervision of those more creative teachers in the progressive schools could inspire young student teachers and greatly accelerate their development. Assistantships, under faculty supervision, to teach at more advanced levels and with older pupils would better prepare the young teacher for an increasingly competitive job market.

Contemporary Attitudes On Culture And Music Education

The changing political and economic situation in the Soviet Union is having its effect on culture and musical education. As more democratic ways are being adopted and joint ventures with other countries (as well as private enterprise opportunities) increase, new influences are being infused into long-established traditions.

Music instruction is no longer free; students at all levels must pay, albeit a small amount in most instances. Much emphasis is placed on quality music instruction for children, and parents make heavy sacrifices in order to provide instruction in music and other arts for their children. Enrollment in the children's music schools and the institutions of higher music education has declined recently due to the current economic situation and the added instruction fees. I was told that there are now many unemployed musicians in the Soviet Union. There is increased interest in the musical education and development of the average pupil. Before fees were charged for instruction, musical studies were reserved mainly for the serious and more gifted students. Some of the music schools for children now have incorporated into their curricula low pressure programs of study for the average child.

Russian composers continue to exhibit strong nationalistic flavor in their works, but I heard several new works performed during my visit that included more avant-

garde techniques. Music teaching materials, however, remain traditional. The most widely used beginning piano study book was published in 1949. (This is *The Russian School of Piano Playing* available in English translation since 1978 and published by Boosey & Hawkes.) Much Soviet folk music is used in early level study material, along with works by Soviet composers written in traditional styles and common practice harmony. Jazz is highly regarded and seriously studied by students of all ages and levels. Much is improvised by the students themselves, and it is apparent that American recordings of jazz greats have been the major influence. There also are Russian composers of jazz, and their collections can be found in the music shops. Music schools at all levels include studies in Soviet folk music and performance on folk instruments.

Music teachers' associations are active in most cities. The large association in Leningrad meets monthly for an afternoon in the former Kshesinsky Palace. Lectures and demonstrations of new teaching methods are offered, as well as performances by students from the various music schools for children throughout the city.

Adult instrumental study for amateurs is not prevalent yet in the Soviet Union, but there are culture clubs and hobby schools that do offer instruction in music and other cultural and recreational skills.

English is the most popular choice in foreign language study; book shops quickly run out of English language study books. Most college students are learning English in school, and many music students are eager for the opportunity to study music in the United States.

Educated Leningraders are very knowledgeable not only about their city's glorious history, but also about the lives and works of the many writers, poets, artists and musicians who lived and worked in that city. Many also are familiar with cultural history in other parts of the world, including the United States.

Personal Reflections

All the students and teachers with whom I came in contact were gracious, friendly and generous. They were eager to hear more

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about life in the United States, musical and otherwise. I was asked many questions, some of which I was hard-pressed to answer. The following are a few samples:

- Who are the best American pianists?
- Who are the prominent American composers?
- What are American music teachers paid, and how many hours are they required to teach?
- How do music graduates obtain jobs?
- Are American folk instruments and music taught in the professional music schools?
- Is Russian piano music taught and performed in the United States?
- How are Russian musicians and teachers who emigrate to the United States received?
- How do they compare with American performers and teachers?

In reflecting upon a memorable five weeks in Leningrad, I think of some of the features of present-day American music education that would be of particular interest to Russian music teachers and other musicians. One of the most apparent is the use of technology, not only in various aspects of teaching music, but also in

composition. Computer use in music instruction and composition is not yet being employed in the Soviet Union. The main reason is that computer use in general is limited; also teachers and composers have neither the knowledge nor the expertise to incorporate computers into their music education system. The concept of using the digital piano laboratory for certain types of keyboard instruction was a fascinating idea to the many teachers I met. Since piano study is such an important part of Russian music education for all musicians regardless of their main performance interest, it is probable that teachers would find many uses for such equipment in their keyboard teaching. A wider variety of educational teaching materials, particularly in contemporary idioms, also would be of great interest.

Of equal importance is the question "What can American music teachers learn from their counterparts in the Soviet Union?" One of the obvious features is that of a strong continuity in the music education system, beginning with the large network of music schools for children upward to the institutions of higher musical education. Students who are accepted into the professional music institutions enter with a consistent level of musical background and preparation from the children's music schools. Another great strength of the Soviet music education system is the heavy emphasis on developing a student's ear and keen musical awareness through extensive ear training activities and singing from the earliest years through the most advanced studies. The pervading philosophy in the Soviet music education system is that first one should learn to hear and discriminate good musical sound, and then prepare the physical equipment to produce what the ear wants to hear.

No doubt the rapidly changing political and economic situation in the Soviet Union will pave the way for many productive exchanges between American and Soviet music teachers and students.

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