

Key words

Minimalist music, Russian minimalism, maximalist, Vladimir Martynov, Alexander Knaifel, Nikolai Korndorf, Alexandre Rabinovitch-Barakovsky, Sergei Zagny, Pavel Karmanov, Anton Batagov, Vita Nova.

Tara Wilson

Russian Minimalist Music: a 'Maximalist' Approach

Russian minimalist music is a postmodern, national and culturally-bound variant of (early) American minimalist music that first emerged in the Soviet Union during the early to mid-Seventies. Its key exponents are Vladimir Martynov (b. 1946), Alexander Knaifel (b. 1943), Nikolai Korndorf (1947–2001), Alexandre Rabinovitch-Barakovsky (b. 1945) and Georgi Pelecis (b. 1947), to name the most prominent of the first generation, with Sergei Zagny (b. 1960), Pavel Karmanov (b. 1970) and Anton Batagov (b. 1965) being major figures within the second generation. Similar to early American minimalist music in both style and technique, Russian minimalist music differs primarily in that its main aim is to function as a discourse conveying some important, weighty meanings. Often labelled 'maximalist' as a result, this aspect renders Russian minimalist music paradoxical in that it aims to signify or convey far more than its transparent form and minimal signifiers suggest. It is also a phenomenon not without controversy, given its hybrid qualities.

In this article I will examine Russian minimalist music as an aesthetic and compositional identity and consider how it differs from its American counterpart. I will explore how these composers' own perceptions of American minimalist music has led to them to create a unique, 'Russian' and in some respects, problematic variant. I will also look at some of the Russian-Western minimalist collaborations that have occurred: Martynov being commissioned by the Kronos Quartet, and Anton Batagov being commissioned by Philip Glass. The material of the article is partly based on my interviews with Russian composers and music scholars.

Ключевые слова

Музыкальный минимализм, русский минимализм, максималистский подход, Владимир Мартынов, Александр Кнайфель, Николай Корндорф, Александр Рабинович-Бараковский, Сергей Загний, Павел Карманов, Антон Батагов, Vita Nova.

Т. Уилсон

Русский музыкальный минимализм: «максималистский» подход

Русский музыкальный минимализм может рассматриваться как «постмодернистское», национальное, культурно обусловленное ответвление американского минимализма (раннего), впервые давшее о себе знать в Советском Союзе первой половины 1970-х годов. Первое поколение советских «минималистов» представлено такими фигурами, как Владимир Мартынов (р. 1946), Александр Кнайфель (р. 1943), Николай Корндорф (1947–2001), Александр Рабинович-Бараковский (р. 1945) и Георгий Пелецис (р. 1947); среди наиболее известных представителей следующего поколения – Сергей Загний (р. 1960), Павел Карманов (р. 1970) и Антон Батагов (р. 1965). Музыка названных «минималистов» может быть сходна с американским минимализмом в том, что касается стиля и техники, но отличается от него прежде всего тем, что функционирует как своего рода дискурс, несущий важные, существенные смыслы. Этот аспект, часто именуемый «максималистским», придает русскому музыкальному минимализму парадоксальные черты, поскольку значимость сообщаемых музыкой смыслов вступает в явное противоречие с простотой ее форм и минималистичностью означающих. «Гибридная» природа явления дает поводы для дискуссий. В настоящей статье я рассматриваю русский музыкальный минимализм как целостный эстетический и композиционно-технический феномен, сопоставляя его с американским минимализмом и выясняя, как названные композиторы, восприняв музыку американских минималистов, создали собственный, русский, во многом проблематичный вариант. Я уделяю внимание также некоторым случаям сотрудничества между русскими минималистами и западными музыкантами (Мартынов и Кронос-квартет, Батагов и Филип Гласс). Материал статьи частично основан на интервью, взятых мной у русских композиторов и музыковедов.

'To define us as «minimalist» is to miss the point. In Russia, we are «maximalists» – we are musical icebergs [...] the surface shows very little of the true meaning that lies beneath'.¹

Russian minimalist music first emerged in the Soviet Union during the early to mid-Seventies, with each of its first generation exponents adopting minimalist techniques more or less simultaneously between 1974 and 1978² while under the auspices of 'Alternativa', a marginal, left-wing and predominantly experimental faction that existed on the Soviet underground scene from 1972 to 1979. While Martynov, Korndorf and Rabinovitch-Barakovsky would meet as undergraduates at the Moscow Conservatoire during the mid-Sixties, with the slightly older Knaifel in St Petersburg and Pelecis in Riga each becoming acquainted with the group a few years later, all would become leading figures of the second ('post-Trinity') generation of the Soviet Avant-garde from the late Sixties to the early to mid-Seventies. This marks a significant difference from the American minimalist composers in that La Monte Young and Terry Riley were associated with experimentalism prior to their minimalist exploits, with Philip Glass and Steve Reich having never been connected with either experimentalism or the Avant-garde. Putting the Russian composers' adoption of minimalism into context, we can note that they adopted minimalist techniques and realized their own individual minimalist style as a single occurrence; that is, they did not employ the purer American minimalist style first and then adapt this at a later date. This again marks a significant difference from a number of other Eastern European variants.

- 1 Alexander Knaifel: Interview with author (Interpreter: Ekaterina Blazhkova): 18th June 2005, Amsterdam.
- 2 While Rabinovitch-Barakovsky is arguably the first Soviet composer to have produced a minimalist work, *La Belle Musique No. 2* (1974), drafted in the Soviet Union but completed after his emigration to Paris in 1974, Martynov is the first Soviet composer to have produced a minimalist work entirely on Russian soil: this being his *Partita for Solo Violin* (1976).

Composers in Hungary and Romania, for example, have initially employed a much more rigorous process-led form of minimalism, modifying this subsequently by including a greater harmonic complexity and an increase in discursive repetition. It is also worth noting that each of the Russian composers has also adhered more consistently to their chosen minimalist style throughout the intervening decades, doing so with almost no aesthetic or compositional development.³

While these Russian composers can collectively be considered a 'school' or movement on account of their commonalities, each can also be characterized by certain individual traits. Taking into account a variety of works from each composer, a number of similarities but also differences are present, irrespective of genre or even compositional development. First, as expected, all works are characterized primarily by techniques that immediately single them out as archetypally minimalist: by the use of homogeneous forms which are ascetic in both material and texture, by the use of predominantly modal and/or tonal languages, and by the use of either drones or, more commonly, systematic processes that develop gradually by means of repetition and/or a slight modification of the Basic Unit. Again, in all cases, these forms are significantly limited in teleological development, with each composer employing at least to some degree the additional use of silence. We can also note, however, the relatively small yet fairly regular modification of these techniques, compounded further by the use of non-minimalist techniques. Martynov, Rabinovitch-Barakovsky and to an extent, Pelecis all employ, for example, a rigorous process-led and repetitive-based homogeneous form that comprises, paradoxically, the juxtaposition of a range of both pastiche and in some instances, quotation, thus placing an emphasis upon syntax and harmonic function that, according to the definition of minimalism, should not be present. We can also note, especially in the works of both Korndorf and Knaifel, the use of differing (although not necessarily contrasting) micro-structures that render the work heterogeneous, at least to an extent, alongside the use of both quasi-serialist units and Avant-gardist performance techniques. Additionally, there is evidence of a shift in part from musematic to discursive repetition (i.e. from the simple and direct repetition of 'musemes' to the repetition of a more

- 3 Both Knaifel and Martynov have produced several commissioned, non-minimalist works; Knaifel writing for both film and television, with Martynov writing predominantly for theatre. It is interesting to note that Martynov's quite substantial liturgical catalogue – written explicitly for Russian Orthodox Church services and therefore not intended to be 'minimalist' – does however comprise a number of comparable techniques. This is not surprising given that Martynov's motivation for adopting minimalism was in part, its likeness to *Znamenny* chant.

generalized and not so precise kind), with metre having lost its audible significance and the sense of uniformity that would otherwise occur having been displaced by more complex and less rhythmical patterns. As a result, sound has returned, at least to a degree, to its more traditional function, that of being tied to inner compositional relationships rather than being an overtly audible entity in itself, with the emphasis having shifted slightly from that of process to one more readily associated with content. There is also, in all known cases, the use of a much slower tempo than that exhibited within the American minimalist output, with this also altering the range and, indeed, type of acoustic and psycho-acoustic phenomena engendered. By way of illustration, *Figure 1.1* below, taken from the opening section (bars 1–62) of Martynov's now seminal minimalist composition for two pianos, *Opus Posthumum II* (1983, rev. 1993; MS⁴), demonstrates the juxtaposition of a tonal, harmonic and more teleologically driven fragment, with the beginnings of a highly rigorous and repetitive process. *Figure 1.2*, taken from a later work by Korndorf for solo piano, *A Letter to V. Martynov and G. Pelecis* (1999; MS), indicates, conversely, a repetitive, process-led form that leads into highly stylized classical pastiche. *Figure 1.3*, taken from Knifel's *A Silly Horse: Fifteen Tales for Singer (Female) and Pianist (Male)* (1981) shows the use of a modified quotation juxtaposed within a highly ascetic structure that employs almost direct repetition.

We turn now to the reasons why each of these composers adopted minimalist techniques in the early to mid-Seventies and their individual perceptions of it. It becomes clear that minimalist music in fact had a high profile on the Soviet underground music scene, as both a style and a concept from the late Sixties onwards; the 22-year-old postgraduate Martynov having given alongside the pianist Alexei Lubimov, the Soviet premiere of Terry Riley's now seminal minimalist work, *In C* (1964) in a version for two pianos, as part of an underground happening in his father's Moscow apartment in September 1968. Lubimov, whilst corroborating the event, dates the performance slightly later as 'sometime in the winter of 1968/1969'.⁵ In discussing the reason not to adopt minimalism in 1968, but to adopt it six years later in 1974, Martynov dismisses first the suggestion that both he and his colleagues, having encountered what was effectively a new, Western and therefore 'subversive' art form during the late Sixties, consciously postponed their adoption of it for fear of reprisals from the Soviet authorities. Recalling

4 The score exists only in handwritten manuscript, having never been published. I have however made a computerised transcription of it in order to present a more readable copy of it here.
5 Alexei Lubimov: Interview with author: 28th July 2010, Moscow.

Figure 1.1: Extract from *Opus Posthumum II* (1983, rev. 1993):

Opus posth.

V. Martynov
(1983, rev. 1993)

The image displays a musical score for two pianos, labeled 'Piano I' and 'Piano II'. The score is titled 'Opus posth.' and attributed to 'V. Martynov (1983, rev. 1993)'. It shows a complex rhythmic pattern with many beamed notes and rests, characteristic of minimalist music. The score is divided into systems, with bar numbers 6, 15, 31, and 47 indicated at the start of new systems. The notation includes various musical symbols such as clefs, key signatures, and dynamic markings.

Figure 1.2: Extract from A Letter to V. Martynov and G. Pelecis (1999):



MP3 N. Korndorf – A Letter to V. Martynov and G. Pelecis. Fedor Amirov (piano)
http://sias.ru/upload/music/2021-25/wilson_02.mp3

Figure 1.3: Extract from A Silly Horse – Episode Eleven: 'Jonathan Bill':

MP3 A. Knaifel – A Silly Horse, episode 11. Tatiana Melentieva (soprano),
 Oleg Malov (piano)
http://sias.ru/upload/music/2021-25/wilson_03.mp3

his willingness to go against officialdom, giving as an example his organization of an experimental, 'Alternativa' event in 1973, he states that: 'One of my activities, about a year before I recognized minimalism as the true way forward, was to organize an open and well-publicized happening in Latvia, along with my associates, Alexei Lubimov, Georgs Pelecis and Mark Perkarsky. True, I was forbidden from entering the city of Riga by Soviet officials thereafter. But I didn't take this seriously and in no way was I ever afraid of repercussions as an artist or as a human being.'⁶ The musicologist Levon Hakobian, while agreeing that a fear of reprisals would not have featured highly in these composers' initial decision not to adopt minimalism, offers in addition a rather judicious perspective, asserting that the authorities, despite issuing the above penalty to Martynov in 1973, would have been tolerant of his adoption of minimalism had this occurred in 1968; perhaps more so, as this would have signified a rejection of serialism in favour of a language which was more tonal (modal). Hakobian states that: 'The irony is that the [Communist] Party would have been delighted. Not on the surface; indeed, there would have been some minor punishment, conceived no doubt by some clueless hack-worker. But our leaders would have let minimalism pass through, relatively speaking, in an attempt to rid our culture of dodecaphony, which is far less pleasing to the common man and therefore far more of a threat to the Socialist Realist mentality.'⁷

In interviews with Martynov, Knaifel, Pelecis and Rabinovitch-Barakovsky, each has asserted that minimalist music was viewed by the underground scene, largely as a curiosity; as a style to be performed and moreover, listened to, but never as one to be adopted given its supposed 'incompatibility' with the modernist aesthetic. Martynov states, ironically, that while being interested in it, he nevertheless made a clear distinction between: 'minimalism that stimulated me as a performer and was surprisingly difficult to perform; minimalism that allowed me to listen to structures in a different way – and minimalism that was the antithesis of everything that I believed in as a composer. It wasn't cutting-edge'.⁸ Knaifel, likewise states that: 'For me, and for others, Avant-gardism was a direction which was subversive and viable. It was serious, progressive. It had possibilities for originality and was intellectually high-minded. Minimalism was certainly subversive; however, it wasn't and isn't progressive in any sense.'⁹ Rabinovitch-Barakovsky adds to this, explaining that minimalism was viewed at that time as 'anti-modernist';

⁶ Vladimir Martynov: Interview with author: 2nd August 2004, Moscow.

⁷ Levon Hakobian: Interview with author: 27th April 2001, Moscow.

⁸ Vladimir Martynov: Interview with author: 2nd August 2004, Moscow.

⁹ Alexander Knaifel: Interview with author: 6th June 2012, St Petersburg.

moreover, as a direction also akin to a 'non-academic' style on account of its simplicity, its tonality, and more crucially, its potential to engender psycho-acoustic phenomena, thus being characterized more by its ability to produce an aural 'by-product' than by its formalist tendencies and espousal of non-referentiality. He states that: 'everything that minimalism is and represents: this is what we need now. But it was not what we either wanted or needed then. It has an emotional component. It is neither modern nor has its form hidden. There is, I suppose, an idea or even a game which says that [the structural configuration of] Avant-gardism has to be beyond the understanding of many. [The structural configuration of Early American] minimalism is, it seems, capable of being understood by all'.¹⁰

It is clear from the above citations that these composers possessed (and to a degree, still possess) a fairly inaccurate perception of the early American minimalist aesthetic. Comments such as: 'it was the antithesis of everything that I believed in as [an Avant-garde] composer', 'it wasn't cutting edge' or 'it isn't modern' clearly indicate their assumption that minimalism was and is anti-Avant-garde. Statements such as 'it has an emotional component' alongside Rabinovitch-Barakovsky's underestimation of its non-referentiality clearly imply their misreading of its abstract and formalist intentions. Such inaccurate perceptions are due, it seems, to four main factors. First is that the phenomenon was experienced entirely out of context, with these composers having had no experience of it within the Western counter-culture in which it had evolved. Second, and compounding this, these composers had also developed a unique perspective on the European Avant-garde given that it too had emerged on the Soviet underground scene not only out of context, but also, more crucially, with a temporal lag, estimated to be about twelve years.¹¹ Engaging with a far more austere form of the Avant-garde than that which existed at that time in other locations, their (slightly distorted) perceptions of both of these movements were, as a result, far less analogous than they would have been otherwise, with this augmenting the degree to which minimalism seemed at odds with their present aesthetic. Third is the fact that the exponents were also experiencing the minimalist phenomenon within an underground culture that was to a large extent artificial, with this very insular environment producing, and indeed perpetuating, a 'bubble mentality' that exacerbated their inaccurate perceptions and created little incentive for external

¹⁰ Alexandre Rabinovitch-Barakovsky: Interview with author: 1st February 2004, Lille.

¹¹ Epstein M. *The Dialectics of Hyper // Russian Postmodernism*. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999. P. v.

influence, wider discussion and debate or cross-cultural communication. Of this, Hakobian states that: 'The problem was not a lack of access but one of ignorance. Our perceptions and experiences of Western cultural movements and the art that this has produced were, are and probably always will be, incorrect in many ways. This is a result of the lack of freedom that prevailed and the atmosphere that it generated, although to be fair, it produced, paradoxically, the need to undertake worthy tasks, with this often creating excellent artistic results'.¹² Finally, there is the fact that each of these exponents also forged at that time wider parallels between American minimalist music and vernacular sources.

While these parallels are perhaps understandable, they also furthered the miscomprehension that minimalism is a 'non-academic' style. Martynov, in highlighting the commonalities between minimalism and the use of modal motifs, repetition and asceticism in Gregorian and Russian Orthodox *Znamenny* chant, goes on to elaborate upon the connections that he identifies between minimalism and the folk traditions of the Northern Caucasus, Pamir and Tadzhikistan,¹³ thereby making an ethnomusicological connection which bears a resemblance to those made by Glass and Reich in relation to both Indian and Ghanaian musics. Martynov states that: 'minimalist music <...> is merely a separate channel, running alongside the mighty and ancient channel of folklore, with an independent structure and a completely different ontological nature'.¹⁴ Both Korndorf and Rabinovitch-Barakovsky each make similar connections between minimalist music and Eastern Russian Folk traditions, with Korndorf's widow, Galina Averina-Korndorf, discussing how his work for solo piano and magnetic tape, *Yarilo* (1981), uses Russian folk motifs that develop almost imperceptibly through a gradual and repetitive additive process to symbolically represent the rising of the sun during an ancient pagan ritual.¹⁵ Korndorf's biography on the website for Continuum Contemporary Music Ensemble (which is currently unavailable) stated that:

Perhaps most curious of all are the connections made by not only by Martynov but also by a number of non-minimalist composers – Eduard Artemyev in particular – between minimalist music and the elongated, frequently repetitive and at times, hypnotic

¹² Levon Hakobian: Interview with author: 15th February 2008, Moscow.

¹³ Both Martynov and Lubimov undertook a student field trip to these regions in 1966 to collect and collate Eastern Russian folk melodies, with both making a second visit in 1974.

¹⁴ Cited after *Katunian M.* Vladimir Martynov's Parallel Time // Tsenova V. (ed.) *Underground Music from the Former USSR*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997. P. 170.

¹⁵ Galina Averina-Korndorf: Interview with author: 24th October 2010, San Francisco.

structures produced by British progressive rock supergroups in the Seventies such as Yes, ELP (Emerson, Lake and Palmer), King Crimson and Curved Air, as well as the German group Tangerine Dream. Martynov discusses, not entirely accurately, how American minimalist music was born at least in part out of the (originally American) psychedelic movement of the mid-Sixties¹⁶ and that it attempted to emulate the 'acid-induced sense of timelessness'¹⁷ that prog-rock went on to produce. In relation, Martynov would, between 1974 and 1978, manage his own Russian prog-rock group, FORPOST, dedicated to playing covers of British prog-rock albums, as well as a number of his own early post-minimalist compositions.

The arrival of minimalist music in the Soviet Union occurred around 1974, when a number of composers, mainly of the 'post-Trinity' generation, independently of each other came to the conclusion that the time for complex Avant-gardist idioms was over. This coincided with these composers' search for a new compositional direction, with every exponent interviewed acknowledging that its appearance was timely and that it actively consolidated their choice of style. While Knaifel dates his search as beginning in 1970, Pelecis, Martynov and Rabinovitch-Barakovsky each date theirs between 1972 and 1974, with Korndorf, according to his widow's recollections, beginning his search, a year later in 1975. Crucially, all of the composers cite identical reasons, not only in deciding to search for a new direction, but more importantly, in selecting minimalism as their choice of style. The fact that each chose to alter their approach at more or less the same time, with all citing identical motives, indicates that at least some of the factors involved were generic: i.e. either shared compositional concerns or influences, or wider artistic and cultural changes or developments. It is interesting to note however, that none of the composers were influenced by political or even socio-political factors, despite the totalitarian context in which they lived.

First, almost every composer makes reference to having developed what are specifically compositional concerns: these having not been

16 It would be more accurate to say that these two movements evolved in parallel within the wider American counter-culture. Macan elaborates on the fact that while the American minimalist exponents saw their music as an antidote to complexity with the psycho-acoustic phenomena produced as a 'by-product' – Psychedelia and more latterly British prog-rock, conversely, attempted to engender more meditative states and introduce complexity into a popular music scene dominated by simple Blues-style harmonies: *Macan E. Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counter-Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. P. 140). It is only later, post-1972, that minimalism and Prog-rock would merge, largely under the auspices of 'Ambient Music', produced in the main by Brian Eno and *King Crimson* founder/guitarist, Robert Fripp.

17 *Macan E. Rocking the Classics*. P. 139.

in play in 1968 when minimalism was first encountered. All, with the exception of Knaifel, cite their increasing dissatisfaction with serialism: this being symptomatic of a growing despondency with the problems associated with the Avant-garde and with the complexities of the modernist language as well as with wider issues concerning authorship and the rejection of historicism, compositional issues that were prevalent across the whole of Eastern Europe at that time. Martynov, discussing his own despondency, states that: 'For me, that particular love affair [serialism] came to an end. It was a natural conclusion and I was primed for a change in my musical thinking. I rediscovered [the language of] Riley and Glass and became obsessed at that time with repetition, with the gradual renewal of short patterns and with the possibilities that arise from this. <...> Minimalism signified for me a return to the past but with fresh ideas and without having to choose between the traditional and the modern.'¹⁸ Putting aside the irony that in viewing minimalism as the antithesis to the Avant-garde, these composers were poised to adopt a style that was in fact associated with the very movement that they wished to reject – it becomes clear that each was focused now far more specifically not only upon psycho-acoustic phenomena which in their perspective, was minimalism's main characteristic, but equally upon the actual simplicity of the minimalist form, viewing this as an alternative to the complexities of the serialist process. The musicologist Margarita Katunian raises a valid point, however, in that while the need to return to a more accessible language was widespread and certainly not restricted to these particular composers, there existed within this context noticeable differences in approach, with there being clear distinctions between, say, the aesthetics and practice of Arvo Pärt, Henryk Górecki or even Valentin Silvestrov, and those of Martynov, Pelecis and Knaifel. 'Between 1974 and 1976', she states, 'a radical departure from the structural refinement of dodecaphony and the elements of serialism and a move towards a «new simplicity» occurred simultaneously in the music of Pärt, Martynov and Silvestrov. «At exactly the same time, but independently of one another, [Martynov states] we discovered tonality.» However, the discovery of a «new simplicity» was expressed in a different way by each composer. No collective metaphor could define the «new simplicity» of Martynov's music, Pärt's «tintinnabuli» style and the «quiet music» of Silvestrov'.¹⁹

I would question the use of the term 'New Simplicity' in reference to Martynov's music: his works signifying not merely a return to a simpler and more tonal (modal) language, but also a number of specifically

18 Vladimir Martynov: Interview with author: 2nd August 2004, Moscow.

19 Katunian M. Vladimir Martynov's Parallel Time. P. 34.

minimalist techniques alongside the attempt to actively engender a very specific range of psycho-acoustic phenomena. Certainly, any attempt to unify the minimalist exponents with the likes of Pärt, Górecki or Silvestrov under the generalist term of 'new simplicity' or even 'mystical minimalism' does a disservice to their individual identities as regards compositional language and the experiences and significations which they aim to engender, as well as to their genealogy and sphere of influences, and in particular, to their thinking as regards the use and juxtaposition of non-minimalist techniques. Often grouped together on account of four identifiable common traits – a) their use of minimalist techniques; b) their use, in a wider context, of a more reflective, homogeneous and harmonically simplified language, coupled with a return to tonality/modality; c) their use of a semantic import that is esoterically themed; and d) their preoccupation with ritual – there are, within this context, a number of crucial divisions that do need to be acknowledged.

The issue of reflection and a return to tonality (modality) also relates to a wider cultural influence that affected these composers at this time: that of Postmodernism, which appeared in the Soviet Union in the early to mid-Seventies, again with what Epstein calls 'an all too familiar temporal lag which quickly manifested itself into a concentrated, intellectualized and accelerated form of the phenomenon'.²⁰ Influencing both the sociological and artistic dimensions of Russian culture far more intensely than it might have done otherwise, the mid-to-late Seventies became a period of reaction against the cult of the new and its notion of 'grand narratives', viewed subsequently as a period of retrospection – indeed introspection – in which the arts witnessed a much more reflective and personalized way of thinking in the choice of ideals, styles and techniques. The post-Avant-garde mentality, encompassing a revival of historical and once neglected trends, strives also for plurality and for a less confrontational way of thinking, with Martynov's predilection from 1983 onwards for 'bricolage' being a clear manifestation of this: his entire compositional aesthetic being based upon the notion of the 'Death of the Composer', a concept that is clearly analogous with the post-structuralist thinking of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida. In Soviet literature, the works of Dmitri Prigov and Lev Rubinstein, as well as those of the poet Joseph Brodsky are also marked not only by the use of pre-existing literary styles and fragments but also by a sense of reflection and a concern, in part, for the more ethereal aspects, due largely to what Epstein also refers to as 'the 'phenomenon of post-atheist religiosity':²¹

²⁰ Epstein M. The Dialectics of Hyper. P. vii.

²¹ Ibid. P. ix.

a factor also in part responsible for the increase in spiritual dimensions in relation to 'mystical minimalism', as discussed above. We can note in retrospect that the characteristics associated with Postmodernism also spread across the musical domain, with there appearing not only a reconsideration of the tendencies associated with the Soviet Avant-garde but also within a wider context a move towards simpler languages and monostylistic structures. Collage and polystylistic approaches begin to be disregarded in place of a more organic and less confrontational style of writing. The cellist Alexander Ivashkin states that this general cultural re-appraisal signified: 'a rediscovery of a vast world made up of elements of a pre-language of stark simplicity'.²² Within this context we also see a prevailing notion of 'a post-history', of which Epstein comments upon when stating that: 'the future has become a thing of the past, whilst past approaches us from the direction where we had expected to meet the future' (Epstein, 1999: vi). This is reflected in the titles of several works of the period: e.g. *Postludium DSCH* (1981), *Postlude for Solo Violin* (1981) and *Post-Symphony* (1984) by Silvestrov, as well as Pelecis' *Postlude* (1979) and Martynov's *Opus Posthumum II* (1983, rev. 1993), the latter dealing conceptually with the idea of a new cultural space following the 'death' of music.

This brings us to the third and most significant reason for these exponents' adoption of minimalism: one that is much more personalized and specific. In all cases, each composer has utilized minimalist techniques with the aim of creating a form that functions first and foremost as discourse. That is to say that each composer has made a conscious decision to create a much more expressive and semantically-bound musical language in contrast to the (mainly) abstract configurations of their former Avant-gardist practices. In this, the principal consideration of all minimalist composers becomes actively semiological, with each utilizing both sound and structure – as well as the range of experiences that the minimalist form potentially engenders – to intentionally give rise to an array of different types of meanings: those which are intended and pre-determined, i.e. socially-constructed meanings, as well as those which are allegedly pre-existing in the universe irrespective of human endeavour and which we may term existential and/or esoteric. In relation, the Russian minimalist aesthetic becomes the very antithesis of the (early) American minimalist aesthetic with its aim of functioning as discourse not only characterizing the variant and singling it out as unique and culturally specific, but also

²² Ivashkin A. Letter from Moscow – Post October Soviet Art: Canon and Symbol // The Musical Quarterly. Volume 74. No. 2 (Spring 1990). P. 305.

being its most defining feature; more so than any compositional aspect, ironically, given that its language is characterized predominantly by minimalist techniques.

In this, we can say that the minimalist aesthetic of abstraction and non-referentiality has, as such, been turned 'inside out': it no longer rejects external association and symbolic content but, on the contrary, directly encompasses the semantic and conceptual aspects that lie beyond (and in contrast to) the limitations of the material. As such, the Russian variant becomes a construction based upon illusion in that its signifiers imply that there is no reference to anything other than what is immediately apparent. Even the term 'minimalism' – not to mention its wider contextual association with its American predecessors – seems to negate the possibility of a more meaningful experience being intended, with the variant therefore being essentially a paradox, proposing a far more communicative experience than its definition suggests. While the desire to convey meaning is clearly an individual issue, with each composer citing factors such as their philosophical development, personal circumstance, religious conversion, or a search for a more purposeful and/or spiritually-driven existence, it is also clear that wider and more generic factors have affected their decision to actively create a mode of discourse. Certainly, the cultural milieu already mentioned has been of influence, with Postmodernism prompting a greater degree of reflection in terms of personal beliefs, values and aesthetics. Another consideration is of note, however: one that concerns the 'genealogical' nature of Russian music and its legacy and traditions of emotionalism. The fact that Russian minimalist music aims to convey or facilitate meaning is perhaps not so surprising when we consider that minimalism actively contradicts the very tradition of Russian music, which is essentially 'maximalistic' in its nature: a nature that has throughout history served as an emotional catharsis to a far greater extent than the music of other locations. Russian music has, within its genealogical make-up, an introspective as well as retrospective characteristic. We can observe an ongoing need to reflect upon sociological concerns and to make reference to emotional, spiritual or ethereal aspects as an integral part of its creative activity and development. Minimalism, adopted through a Russian perspective, is much more likely to develop an additional semantic component; a darker and more subjective undercurrent as a result of the pre-conceptions and expectations of its composers and their view of their art as a means of confession. Ivashkin, in discussing this characteristic, states that: 'the Russian style is first of all, a metaphysical one. It tries to ensure that all the events, all the written notes or colours do not conceal the content

of the work. The real content, the real tensions are between the words, the colours or the sounds'.²³

It is apparent, however, that there are a number of problems relating to the Russian variant, both as a practice and as an aesthetic, with it having acquired certain negative connotations. Despite a lengthy presence on the Russian music scene, the variant still operates as a marginal faction. As to its profile outside of the former Soviet Union, it is almost non-existent, in contrast to, say, the repertoire of other former Soviet composers who have employed ascetic forms and modal and/or tonal languages such as Pärt or Silvestrov. The reasons for this are, I suggest, partly stylistic but also partly historical and cultural. First, the Russian variant possesses a degree of notoriety, being viewed by many as compositionally 'regressive' in light of its simplicity of form, texture and harmonic organization, alongside its use of modal and/or tonal language. This has led to the charge – especially in relation to Martynov and Rabinovitch-Barakovsky – of them being 'bad composers', of being 'unable to control one's material', although we can note that in many instances critics forgo the actual distinction between a composer who is *unable* to produce a more complex, event-filled and musically progressive form, and one who, having previously been a leading and acclaimed exponent of the Avant-garde, has consciously forsaken these compositional characteristics in line with his own aesthetic. Second, in a musicological context, the variant's structural configurations also become a point of contention in that they are deemed unworthy of analysis, due to their transparency and resulting lack of 'penetrability', with this leading to a distinct lack of research into the variant, both in Russia and beyond. While such criticisms can clearly be applied to all minimalist musics, there are in addition, those which are wholly specific to the Russian variant. These concern its 'pro-Western' character, its 'non-Russian' language and its 'hybrid' qualities, as well as its synthetic and peculiar nature. A regular accusation is that the variant is modeled structurally and to a degree stylistically upon a Western compositional trend, with this leading to a criticism of its supposed lack of originality. Further criticisms involve its 'non-Russian' language alongside its so-called 'propagation' of pluralism. An example of this would be its juxtaposition of dodecaphonic (micro-) structures with elements that are 'historic', with Hakobian describing the variant as 'odd and obviously artificial'.²⁴ This leads onto a further charge: that the variant is stylistically less convincing than the American minimalist model from which it originated. The second generation composer Sergei Zagny states that: 'Russian minimalism is

23 Ivashkin A. (1992). The Paradox of Russian Non-Liberty // The Musical Quarterly. Volume 76. No. 4 (Winter 1992). P. 549.

24 Levon Hakobian: Interview with author: 15th February 2008, Moscow.

really the most obvious example of postmodernist music that exists in Russia today. There is nothing new or progressive about it, even in my own music. It has a fifty-year old foundation. Martynov, Pelecis and Rabinovitch-Barakovsky constantly look backwards to the past, connecting minimalism to historical styles. What is the future in this music?'²⁵

There is, however, a much more serious accusation: that the composers themselves are purposefully stripping Russian music of its national identity as regards its aesthetic of symbolism and expression. This accusation is raised predominantly by Russians who perceive American minimalism's original aesthetic of non-referentiality correctly and who believe that these composers, in adhering to minimalist techniques, have consciously rejected Russian and Soviet music's primary function of conveying some important, weighty and earnest meanings, and are thus 'diluting' its propensity for 'real art' and rescinding its legacy and traditions. Hakobian refers specifically to this criticism, stating that: '[the variant] is considered by many to be non-Russian because it is supposed to be less than music. [The consensus is that] it seeks to be soulless and therefore cannot be considered worthy in line with the music of Shostakovich, Schnittke and others who understood that it is their duty to express ideas <...>. Paradoxically, Russian minimalism's most offensive characteristic is not its language, but the fact that it has stepped aside and has no wish to speak to anybody, intellectuals or the common man alike'. He goes on to assert that 'As such, there are many who see these composers' use of the minimalist style as the pouring of Russian integrity into a Western black hole'.²⁶

This very real criticism highlights a very serious problem: the fact that the Russian variant is widely and commonly misunderstood. Its primary aim of functioning as discourse is commonly overlooked. The listener encounters the variant – or to be more precise, its structures and configurations – with no prior information as regards its aesthetic or intended significations, and misinterprets it, failing to recognize that it has been constructed with the aim of conveying meaning. The work is therefore approached as something resembling a compositionally 'watered-down' and slightly quirky version of its American counterpart, with the assumption being that it too comprises only abstraction. The listener does not expect (or therefore even search for) traces of the intended meaning when coming into contact with its compositional form, thus it is perceived merely as a bizarre entity: unoriginal and historically and culturally misplaced. Without an awareness of the

²⁵ Sergei Zagny: Interview with author: 1st August 2004, Moscow.
²⁶ Levon Hakobian: Interview with author: 27th April 2001, Moscow.

composer's intent, the variant loses its true identity, that is, the unique and culturally-bound distinctiveness that distinguishes it from any other. Even in cases where the variant's aesthetic intention is acknowledged, the significations intended are often still not understood. There are, I suggest, three main reasons for this. First, there is the minimalist form itself: this being too ascetic and limited in signifiers to produce or sustain complex significations. Conversely, the listener therefore brings unwanted meaning to the musical structure. Second, the minimalist form does not support narrative development. Ironically, much of these composers' semantic import is narrative, with this being actively at odds with the non-teleological minimalist structure. Third, there is the complexity of the semantic import that they wish to convey, with these being too abstract or intangible, when positioned within the minimalist context.

There is however, at least some positive regard for this music, in the form of a number of more recent Russian-Western collaborations. First, there is the collaboration between Martynov and the American string quartet, Kronos (established in San Francisco in 1973). Kronos have had, throughout their highly successful fifty-year career, an unusual approach to repertoire, choosing to perform only music written by contemporary composers, with much of their repertoire increasingly having been commissioned. Working with Martynov in 2012 to produce his album, 'The Beatitudes', Kronos invited Martynov in 2017 to become one of their 'Fifty for the Future': that is, their commission of fifty international composers (25 male/25 female) who will produce fifty new string quartets over a ten-year period, so as to develop international performance, education, and leave a legacy of 21st century string quartet repertoire for future generations. All works are expected to be included in Kronos' performance seasons and will be free to download as both score and recording from Kronos online library. In response, Martynov produced, in 2018, his quartet 'Andante Amoroso', which was given its world premiere at the Zaryadye Hall, Moscow on 6th March 2019. Martynov states that: 'Instead of using repetitive techniques and a gradual build-up of energy, I decided to try to maximize the amount of information in each 10-to-20-second interval. From the late Romantic to early Modernist styles of late Debussy and Webern, I saw this piece as a kind of pastiche of love songs and arias, adapted for the string quartet sound'.²⁷

The success of Martynov's collaboration with the Kronos Quartet is particularly welcome given that both his music and philosophies have been criticized by Western audiences in previous decades; the most dramatic

²⁷ Further information can be found at: <http://50fff.kronosquartet.org/composers/vladimir-martynov>. Accessed 20 October 2021.

example of this occurred in 2009, following the world premiere of his second opera, *Vita Nova* (2003, rev. 2008). Commissioned by Valery Gergiev and the Mariinsky Theatre in 2001, with the first act being realized as a semi-staged performance in St Petersburg as part of the White Nights Festival in June 2003, the original commission was dropped, before being taken up by Vladimir Jurowski, Principal Conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, in 2008. Based upon Dante's original 1294 text – an expression of courtly love, written in a prosimetrum style – the opera's narrative structure as adapted by Martynov was overly complex, with the Russian translation being poor, and the accompanying programme notes, designed for a British audience, giving little indication as to Martynov's compositional style or aesthetic. This, combined with the audience being unfamiliar with Russian minimalist music as a genre and indeed, with Martynov's intentions for the work, led to a disappointing world premiere in London on 18th February 2009. Despite first-rate performances by the soloists, the premiere was badly received with scores of ticket holders leaving the hall prematurely and the British broadsheet reviews being unanimously vitriolic to the point of scandal. In November 2009, Martynov published a book-length response to these events²⁸, openly accusing both British audiences and critics alike for what he termed their intellectual and cultural laziness; not least in that the critics had not only misunderstood the work's semantic import but moreover, had mistakenly confused pastiche with quotation, criticising the work for its alleged excessive use of pre-existing material and even citing examples which they perceived to be present, when in fact no direct quotation had been employed. A second performance took place in New York on the 25th of February 2009, and was again badly received, for similar reasons. This seemed to signify an inherent misunderstanding between Russian composer and Western concert-goers.

On the other hand, the second-generation minimalist composer and pianist Anton Batagov, after being the first Russian to both perform and record all of Philip Glass' 'Etudes', was chosen by Glass to be the recipient of a new minimalist work: 'Distant Figure: Passacaglia' for Solo Piano' (2018): this being the first piano work composed by Glass since 'Etude No.20', written in 2012. Regarded by Glass as a cosmic companion piece to 'Mad Rush' (1979), and therefore the second half of a diptych written almost 40 years later, 'Passacaglia' was given its Russian premiere by Batagov at the Zaryadye Hall, Moscow in April 2018. In this, the doors are opening for a greater understanding of American minimalism by these Russian composers, as well as for a greater awareness of Russian minimalism music by Western audiences.

- 1 Epstein M. The Dialectics of Hyper // Russian Postmodernism. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999.
- 2 Ivashkin A. Letter from Moscow – Post October Soviet Art: Canon and Symbol // The Musical Quarterly. Volume 74. No. 2 (Spring 1990). P. 303–317.
- 3 Ivashkin A. (1992). The Paradox of Russian Non-Liberty // The Musical Quarterly. Volume 76. No. 4 (Winter 1992). P. 543–556.
- 4 Katunian M. Vladimir Martynov's Parallel Time // Tsenova V. (ed.) Underground Music from the Former USSR. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.
- 5 Macan E. Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counter-Culture. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- 6 Мартынов В. И. Казус Vita Nova [Martynov V. I. The Case of Vita Nova]. М.: Классика-XXI [Moscow: Klassika-XXI], 2010.