

Machines, Films, and Operas: A (Mostly) Soviet Perspective

Paulo F. de Castro

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Résumé de l'article

Dans cet article, j'explore certains aspects de la façon dont l'opéra a été affecté par la dynamique de rupture et d'expérimentation en Union soviétique dans les années 1920 et au début des années 1930. En particulier, j'examine la critique de l'opéra en tant que genre parmi les compositeurs et les praticiens du théâtre, tels que Nikolai Foregger, qui a préconisé une fusion de l'opéra et du ballet inspirée par les rythmes, les mouvements et les sons de la modernité, et Adrian Piotrovsky, qui a plaidé pour le transfert des dispositifs cinématographiques à d'autres formes d'art, y compris l'opéra. L'article explore en outre certaines intersections avec le culte futuriste et constructiviste de la machine, comme en témoignent les expériences lyriques de Vladimir Dechevov et Aleksandr Mosolov, qui ont été presque immédiatement supprimées par la montée d'une esthétique plus populiste, et qui restent largement inconnues.

MACHINES, FILMS, AND OPERAS: A (MOSTLY) SOVIET PERSPECTIVE

Paulo F. de Castro

The Soviet avant-garde has received a great deal of attention in recent years in the fields of visual arts, literature, theatre, and film.¹ Musicology has been somewhat slower to respond to the renewed interest in the period, although composers such as Nikolay Roslavets, Artur Lourié, Aleksandr Mosolov, Vladimir Deshevov, and some others have begun to re-emerge from the almost total oblivion into which they had fallen following the virtual ban of their music in the 1930s. However, the rediscovery of the music of the post-Revolution years has not been helped by the ambivalence of present-day Russia towards this part of its past; judging from recent Russian musicological literature (and from the author's own experience of attending conferences in Russia), one might be forgiven for thinking that the Bolshevik Revolution never happened, or that if it did, it was no more than a distant rumble, barely perceptible on the hallowed ground of "art music" and its institutions (unless, of course, for the wrong reasons). Not surprisingly, research in this field has been, to a large extent, the work of inquisitive Western musicologists (or of a few cosmopolitan Russians), even though important documentary material has been made available in Russia in recent years. Despite increasing activity in the field, our knowledge of Soviet music of the 1920s and early 1930s remains limited and full of gaps, which it will take time to fill, whereas some blank spaces will probably never be filled adequately; in a sense, the music of the Soviet avant-garde remains the least accessible of any major twentieth-century repertoire.²

At the present stage of research, one thing seems clear: the blanket category of the "Soviet musical avant-garde" is in fact a problematic concept, if

¹ In his discussion of Russian modernism (a broader conceptual category than the avant-garde proper) literary scholar Leonid Livak states, "Systematic inquiry into Russian modernism, as distinct from the study of its individual representatives or practices, emerged in the West only in the 1970s, defying Soviet ideological opprobrium; made its way into the USSR in the late 1980s; and finally flourished in the 1990s. The post-Soviet documentary deluge and the collapse of the ideological coordinates hitherto guiding the writing of cultural history unleashed a Copernican revolution in the study of Russian modernism. That revolution is not over" (Livak 2018, 1–2).

² Major landmarks in research on the Soviet musical avant-garde include Gojowy (1980), Schwarz (1983), Sitsky (1994), Hakobian (1998), Nelson (2004), Barsova (2007—a collection of articles going back to the 1980s), Redepning (2008), Mende (2009), Frolova-Walker and Walker (2012), and Zuk and Frolova-Walker (2017).

by avant-garde one means something like a unified movement with a clearly defined strategy and program. Although interactions between music and major avant-garde trends such as Futurism and Constructivism cannot be overlooked, Soviet music of the 1920s and early 1930s seems to present a more fragmented and less theoretically self-aware landscape than the other arts. This could be ascribed to the insulating effect of music-academic traditions, to a greater degree of individualism or a lesser degree of intellectual ambition and discursive power of musicians in comparison with writers, painters, or film-makers. In the wake of the October Revolution, the musical profession seems to have split into two bitterly opposed camps: the “proletarian” musicians (or RAPM-ists) and their rivals, loosely grouped around the *Assotsiatsiya sovremennoy muzyki* (ASM) (Association for Contemporary Music), both organizations remaining more or less active between 1923 and 1932, when they were finally abolished by the Decree on the Reformation of Literary and Artistic Organizations. Whereas the “proletarians,” following in the footsteps of *Proletkult*, believed in the production of music suitable for immediate proletarian use, even at the cost of considerable simplification and the acceptance of narrow functional constraints (on occasion bearing some affinity with the German practitioners of *Gebrauchsmusik*), the ASM-ists pursued a path more akin to Trotsky and Lunacharsky’s notion of *kulturnichestvo*, or “culture-bearing,”³ which for composers entailed the strengthening of ties with the Western world and, to a certain extent, the exploration of “advanced” compositional techniques (even though not every composer affiliated with the ASM could be considered aesthetically “progressive”). On the whole, the schism between RAPM and ASM seems symptomatic of the conflicts inherent in the articulation of the political and the artistic avant-gardes of the time. Perhaps owing to a lesser degree of explicit politicization, with few exceptions, the ASM-ists seemed less well prepared to deal with the escalating tensions in the socio-cultural sphere, so that, for a brief period in the late 1920s, the RAPM came close to gaining the upper hand over their opponents.⁴ Although this may seem paradoxical in light of subsequent developments, it was in fact with considerable relief that many academically trained musicians welcomed the dismantling of independent associations and the refashioning of cultural life under state control in the 1930s.

My purpose here is to explore ways in which opera was affected by these developments. If the early twentieth century seems to have been a relatively barren period for Russian opera, the reasons for this should not necessarily be sought in the revolutionary turmoil per se, since a creative drought in the genre had already set in following the disappearance of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov—Rakhmaninov and Taneyev notwithstanding. In part, the

³ “The main task of the proletarian intelligentsia in the immediate future is not the abstract formation of a new culture regardless of the absence of a basis for it, but definite culture-bearing, that is, a systematic, planful and, of course, critical imparting to the backward masses of the essential elements of the culture which already exists” (Trotsky 1970, 48–9; originally in *Literature and Revolution*, 1923).

⁴ On the growing RAPM-ASM conflict, see, for instance, Frolova-Walker and Walker (2012, 217–29).

situation may reflect the dominance of instrumental music among the Belyaev-sponsored composers (like Lyadov, Glazunov, and Skryabin)⁵ alongside the widespread disaffection with operatic aesthetics in the post-Wagnerian era, as illustrated, among others, by Stravinsky's well-known pronouncements on the "false" artistic premises of opera: "I dislike opera. Music can be married to gesture or to words—not to both without bigamy. That is why the artistic basis of opera is wrong and why Wagner sounds at his best in the concert-room. In any case opera is in a backwater. What operas have been written since *Parsifal*? Only two that count—*Elektra* and Debussy's *Pelléas*" (White 1979, 225).⁶

For his part, a self-conscious, left-wing avant-gardist such as Nikolay Ro-slavets was ready to pronounce opera "dead" during a public discussion in 1926 (Kröplin 1985, 125). The major exception in this respect seems to have been Prokofiev, living in the West since 1918; his operatic breakthrough, *The Love for Three Oranges*, a Meyerholdian take on the *commedia dell'arte* and an early example of a modernist aesthetics of defamiliarization applied to opera, had its premiere (in a French translation) at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago in 1921, prompting one American critic to describe it as "Russian jazz with Bolshevik trimmings."⁷ However, performances of the opera in Leningrad in 1926 and in Moscow the following year were quite successful, providing a major boost to the composer's reputation in his home country. But Prokofiev's subsequent career as an opera composer (both in the Soviet Union and abroad) was hindered by a number of factors well documented in the musicological literature.⁸

Meanwhile, the development of opera in Russia was inevitably curtailed by the unstable socio-political situation of the NEP years, the institutional weight of the opera house rendering it prone to inertia and conservatism in its choice of repertoire (the libretti of standard operas being occasionally reworked in an attempt to render the traditional repertoire more relevant to proletarian audiences). Nevertheless, the 1920s was a decade of intense theatrical experimentation, and the work of stage directors such as Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Tairov, Meyerhold, and Sergey Radlov spilt over the conventional boundaries separating spoken and musical theatre, with often striking results. The year 1925 in particular seems to have been something of a hinge year for

⁵ A wealthy timber merchant and a generous philanthropist, Mitrofan Belyaev (1836–1904) was a major shaping force in Russian musical life from the 1880s, thanks to his activities as a music publisher, a concert promoter, and the creator of the Glinka Awards, an incentive to young Russian composers.

⁶ Originally in *Daily Mail*, 13 February 1913. Incidentally, in a letter to P. Suvchinsky (12 December 1922), Prokofiev remarked, "I understand when Stravinsky yells at me that opera as a form should go to the devil, for I know that he doesn't really mean it" (Nice 2003, 200).

⁷ Karleton Hackett in the *Chicago Evening Post* (Pisani 1997, 495). On the American reception of *Three Oranges*, see also Press (2008).

⁸ Richard Taruskin sums up Prokofiev's fate as an opera composer as follows: "He always saw himself first and foremost as a composer of music for the lyric stage. If this seems surprising, it is not only because of Prokofiev's great success in the realm of instrumental concert music but also because of the singularly unlucky fate of his operas.... As usual in such cases, the victim has been blamed: 'Through all his writings about opera there runs a streak of loose thinking and naivety,' wrote one critic, 'and it runs through the works, too.' That—plus a revolution, a world war and a repressive totalitarian regime ...—indeed made for a frustrating career" (Taruskin 1992, 1135–6).

operatic composition, with Leningrad seeing what is usually considered the first significant topical Soviet opera, based on an episode of the Civil War, *Za krasny Petrograd, ili 1919 god* (For Red Petrograd, or the year 1919), with undistinguished music by the composers Gladkovsky and Prussak. The second half of the decade was also to witness an unprecedented wave of premieres of modernist Western operas (especially by Austro-German composers) in Leningrad and elsewhere, among which Franz Schreker's *Der ferne Klang* in 1925, Berg's *Wozzeck* and Křenek's *Der Sprung über den Schatten* in 1927, and the latter's *Jonny spielt auf* in 1928, alongside works by Stravinsky and Prokofiev. Max Brand's *Maschinist Hopkins* reached Kharkov (at the time the capital of Soviet Ukraine) in 1931, in a staging by Nikolay Foregger, the choreographer made famous throughout the 1920s by his experiments with "electric" and "machine dances," who had also played a role in the Leningrad premiere of Prokofiev's *Three Oranges*.

Mention of Foregger brings up the subject of the convoluted relations between music, opera, and machinism in the second half of the 1920s, a decade of Constructivism, LEF-art,⁹ and machine aesthetics, accompanied by intense intellectual debates on the future of canonic genres in a post-revolutionary political environment. In 1929 Foregger contributed an article entitled "Opera," with the allure of a manifesto, to the Ukrainian journal *Nova generatsiya*, which seems typical of the avant-garde spirit of the era (a spirit by then increasingly threatened by ideological pressure):

Life dictates the forms and pace of movements; the worker at the bench, the footballer in the game already harbour certain features of the dance: thematic dance tasks, or the identification of accents in movement (struggle, affection, victory, etc.), or a reflection of modernity. In the rhythmic pattern of the dance, those images are voiced that surround us... . Our life creates the dances of sidewalks, stadiums, fast-moving cars, and dance cannot ignore either the precision of machines, the speed of moving street crowds, or the immensity of the scale of construction.

Let's go back to the opera-ballet spectacle. The temporal course of the opera can be varied. Not only musical accompaniment, but also the wide use of all sound possibilities: sound, echo, hammering, words, shouting, etc.

It should be noted that in modern opera "things" can be included in the action along with the living person. Moreover, it is possible to automate the actor and humanise the thing.

Modernity is not embodied in figures of Radameses, Traviatas and Mephistopheleses turned into policemen, merchants and financial inspectors, but in the sophistication of modern rhythm and world perception. Give

⁹ Acronym for *Left Front [of the Arts]*, the title of the avant-garde journal published from 1923 to 1925, and, as *New LEF*, from 1927 to 1928, under the editorship of Vladimir Mayakovsky, among others.

room to combative tension, activity, enthusiasm. (Uchitel 2014 [in Russian translation], 65–6)¹⁰

Foregger's manifesto is a scathing indictment of contemporary operatic routine, beginning as it does with this remark: "It is said that opera is conservative—in fact it is not so: opera lost its traditions more than fifty years ago, already in Wagner's time. Opera is not a conservative art, it only pretends to be so, it is much worse. At present, it is a narcissistic, a stupid art" (Uchitel 2014, 63). For Foregger, opera and ballet should be fused together into a new type of spectacle inspired by the rhythms, movements, and sounds of modernity, in which material objects could share the stage—in fact, merge—with living actors in an embodiment of a truly contemporary world view. Note also the reference to the need to introduce variety into the "temporal course of opera," the actual nub of Foregger's polemics: modernity as (re)constructed on stage would have less to do with contemporary costume and topicality of content than with a modern sense of temporality, the temporality of the machine, of urban life, and by extension (although he does not explicitly mention this in his manifesto), of film. Cinema was itself, of course, but another avatar of the machine, and we find a more explicit connection between music and cinematic temporality in another text from 1929 (although written slightly earlier): Boris Asafyev's *Kniga o Stravinskom* (A book about Stravinsky):

Stravinsky's music is obedient to the tempi and rhythm of the times, and the rhythm of our time is the rhythm of work, of the machine, and also of film. From this there is no escape.... Evidence of the ways in which European music is obedient to the rhythm and tempi of work may be found in three fundamental trends. First, there has been a noticeable disappearance of self-satisfied, personal lyricism, and in its place have appeared themes and moods now tinged with pessimism, ... now sharply grotesque, now wholly devoted to the idea of solidarity with the sensations of extra-personal life of the human masses. [...]

The attitude of the modern composer to his material has also greatly changed: the spontaneous use of raw materials, not otherwise worked out in a constructive sense, is rejected. An intelligent and efficient selection of material and means of expression is made, according to its purpose and the tasks at hand, while at the same time the principle of the greatest economy and the most strict rhythmization is observed. (Asafyev 1977, 20–1)

Even though Asafyev never endorsed a genuine Constructivist musical aesthetics per se, his emphasis on the "constructive" and "objective" attitude required of the modern composer (and the intellectual discipline fostered by a "strict rhythmization," inspired by both machine and film) is symptomatic of a widespread conceptual and discursive trend, suggesting possible angles of approach to the impact of cinema on musical and operatic composition in the late 1920s, as evinced in the epochal fascination with narrative agility, episodic structure, perspectival mobility, and montage techniques.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise stated, all English translations in this article are by the author.

In the same year (1929), Adrian Piotrovsky, dramaturge and principal ideologue of the Leningrad Workers' Youth Theatre (TRAM), published a tract significantly entitled *Kinofikatsiya iskusstv*, a title that could be translated as *The Cinematization of the Arts*, which in a way epitomizes the tendency to regard cinema, itself a product of industrial technology and machine culture, not just as the art of modernity par excellence, but as a universal model that other arts should follow (Piotrovsky 1929, 13). In his tract Piotrovsky explicitly advocated the transfer of cinematic devices to other art forms and, in accord with certain formalist ideologemes, praised the potential renewal of perception brought about by montage techniques, the counterpoint of image and sound, and the rejection of organicist paradigms and linear narrative towards the liberation from automatisms, making it possible to see the world anew. Piotrovsky was also critical of "archaic" production techniques in art—especially prevalent in music, in his view. He encouraged Soviet artists to draw inspiration from the dynamic, urbanistic music theatre of the West, although he remained critical of crude "industrial stylization," of which more later.

TOWARDS A "MACHINE MUSIC"

Comparisons between opera and film crop up everywhere in music criticism of the 1920s. Commenting on Berg's *Wozzeck* at the time of its Russian premiere (1927), the conductor Vladimir Dranishnikov, for one, drew attention to "the formal cinematographic nature of the [opera's] tempo, which results from the clear and rapid succession of episodes, permeat[ing] ... the worn-out and diffuse form of the old opera concept" (Vogelsang 1973, 360). To an extent, Dranishnikov was thus pointing towards the exemplary quality of Berg's opera as a potential model for Soviet composers; despite some statements to the contrary, echoes of *Wozzeck* are clearly perceptible in Shostakovich's operatic version of Gogol's *Nose*, for instance.

The resonance of Berg's opera in the Soviet context was far from an isolated case. Another musical work originating in the West was to play a prominent role in the genesis of Soviet musical constructivism, such as it was: Arthur Honegger's *mouvement symphonique, Pacific 231*, whose Russian premieres in Leningrad and Moscow in February 1926 under Pierre Monteux were greeted with genuine enthusiasm and seized upon by the musical press as a momentous event. Both Boris Asafyev (writing under the pseudonym Igor Glebov) and Viktor Belyaev, for instance, wrote extensive reviews of the work for the journal *Sovremennaya muzyka* (Contemporary music), in which they praised the alleged transcending of "outer imitation" of the modern locomotive in Honegger's score in favour of a purely musical dynamism and structural strength. Whereas Asafyev nevertheless criticized the latent psychologistic dimension of the work, as a relic of an older aesthetics (Glebov 1926, 72), Belyaev chose to emphasize the shift in time perception brought about by the modern experience of mechanization and speed, praising the composer's ability to convey the very feeling of "modern movement" (Belyaev 1926, 76). Even the critic Evgeny Braudo, writing for the proletarian journal *Muzyka i revolyutsiya* (Music

and revolution) sounded a sympathetic note, with his claim that in Honegger's work could be found the "embodiment of the power and force of modern industrialism" (Braudo 1926, 37). The performances could hardly have been more topical, given the paucity of industrially inspired musical experiments suitable for the Soviet concert hall as late as 1926, in a milieu saturated with the constructivist obsession with the machine as a mark of the revolutionary zeitgeist.

From the perspective of medial interplay, one should note that Honegger's score (1923) itself had its genesis in the cinema, a fact often overlooked in the literature. The work—the composer's later testimony notwithstanding—derives from the music originally written for Abel Gance's *La Roue* in 1922, of which only a fragment appears to have survived.¹¹ Therefore, when director Mikhail Tsekhanovsky (a pioneer of Soviet animation) made a short film out of Honegger's score in 1931, he was in a sense returning the music to its filmic roots, while at the same time making explicit the analogy between the orchestra and the machine (as well as the conductor and the engine driver): a further testimony to the lasting Russian infatuation with Honegger's *mouvement symphonique*.

Honegger's *Pacific 231* seems to have triggered a flurry of imitations among Russian composers, among which Vladimir Deshevov's emblematic piano piece *Relsy (Rails)* op. 16 stands out.¹² In fact, *Relsy* was itself a spin-off of the incidental music to Boris Paparigopulo's stage adaptation of the novel *Le Rail* (1912), by French "proletarian" writer Pierre Hamp (*nom de plume* of Henri Bourrillon). Its Leningrad premiere, on 18 May 1926, took place just a few months after the Russian premiere of Honegger's work. Table 1 gives an outline of the most relevant intermedial connections in this regard.¹³

Table 1. Intermedial connections of Honegger's *Pacific 231*

1912	Pierre Hamp, <i>Le Rail</i> (novel)
1922	Arthur Honegger, music (mostly lost) for the film <i>La Roue</i> by Abel Gance (November/December)
1922–3	Enrico Prampolini, Ivo Pannaggi and Vinicio Paladini manifest "L'arte meccanica" (published in French in <i>Le Futurisme</i> 7, July 1923); Abel Gance, <i>La Roue</i> (film; release 17 February 1923)
1923	Arthur Honegger, <i>Pacific 231</i> (score composed between March and December)
1923–4	Fernand Léger, <i>Ballet mécanique</i> (film)
1924	Premiere of <i>Pacific 231</i> (Paris Opera, 8 May, conducted by Sergey Koussevitsky)
1924–5	Sergey Prokofiev, <i>Symphony no. 2</i> (premiere 6 June 1925, conducted by Sergey Koussevitsky)
1925–6	Sergey Prokofiev, <i>Le Pas d'acier</i> (ballet)

¹¹ See Halbreich (1992, 458–9).

¹² On Deshevov (1889–1955) and his work, see Shen (1961); also the relevant sections of Sitsky (1994) and Mende (2009).

¹³ On the cinematic connection, see Albera (2005).

Table 1 (continued)

1926	Leningrad and Moscow premieres of <i>Pacific 231</i> (February, conducted by Pierre Monteux); Milhaud visits Russia (March); Leningrad premiere of stage adaptation of Pierre Hamp's novel by Boris Paparigopulo (18 May); stage music by Vladimir Deshevov
1927	Publication of <i>Relsy</i> (Rails), op. 16 by Vladimir Deshevov (version for piano solo); Alban Berg's <i>Wozzeck</i> in Leningrad; premiere of Prokofiev's <i>Le Pas d'acier</i> (Paris, 7 June; Russian premiere of Suite, 1928); Aleksandr Mosolov, <i>Zavod: Muzyka mashin</i> (Iron foundry; originally as part of the ballet <i>Stal</i> [Steel]; Moscow premiere of Suite, 4 December)
1929	Committee for the Creation of a Soviet Opera (S. Radlov, B. Asafyev, V. Dranishnikov—Leningrad)
1930	Vladimir Deshevov, <i>Lyod i stal</i> (Ice and steel; premiere Leningrad, 17 May)
1931	Mikhail Tsekhanovsky, <i>Pacific 231</i> (film); N. Foregger's staging of Max Brand's <i>Maschinist Hopkins</i> (Kharkov); Adolph Bolm's ballet <i>The Spirit of the Factory</i> (Hollywood Bowl)
1949	Jean Mitry, <i>Pacific 231</i> (film)

Deshevov's *Relsy* certainly evokes the toccata typology in the sense of an inexorable, if not demonic, motion à la Prokofiev—Deshevov's one-time fellow-student at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire. In its original function as stage music, the episode, labelled "Katastrofa," culminated in a dramatic railway crash (a common ingredient in technological fiction of the time, probably a legacy of nineteenth-century melodrama, as mediated by "silent" film). Deshevov's piece received the following accolade by Orest Tsekhnovitser, who wrote in a review of a concert for a working-class audience:

What is closer to the proletariat, the pessimism of Tchaikovsky, and the false heroics of Beethoven, a century out of date, or the precise rhythms and excitement of Deshevov's *Rails*? During the playing of Beethoven, the workers were utterly bored and patiently waited for the music to end. But contemporary Soviet compositions aroused contagious emotion among the audience. Proletarian masses, for whom machine oil is mother's milk, have a right to demand music consonant with our epoch, not the music of the bourgeois salon, which belongs in the era of the horse and buggy and of Stephenson's early locomotive. (Nelson 2004, 56)¹⁴

THE MACHINE REACHES THE STAGE

Many of the same musical devices, including the proliferation of *ostinati* and the principle of musical montage and non-linear temporality, were later deployed by Deshevov—an especially prolific composer of music for the stage—in the opera *Lyod i Stal* (Ice and steel, premiered in Leningrad, 17 May 1930), one of the first products of the Opera Reform Commission set up in Leningrad in 1929 with significant input from the ASM, with the aim of creating a new type of Soviet opera. The machine-music topic is especially prominent in the prelude to act 2 of the opera (subtitled "Zavod" [The factory or The plant]), a suitably mechanistic depiction of a steelworks, in a pseudo-constructivist style

¹⁴ "Novaya muzyka i proletariat," *Novaya muzyka* 2, no. 1 (1927–8).

made popular by Aleksandr Mosolov's celebrated depiction of an iron foundry in his own *Zavod: Muzyka mashin* (The factory: Music of machines, known in the West as *Iron Foundry*) (1927), itself originally conceived as an episode of the ballet *Stal* (Steel), whose remaining episodes appear to have been lost (see example 1).¹⁵ Steel symbolism was of course an essential feature of Soviet culture around the turn of the decade, cropping up in all kinds of contexts—including, most notoriously, in the very name “Stalin”.

Very much a period piece from today's perspective, *Ice and Steel* was a brave attempt by Deshevov and his librettist Boris Lavrenyov to tackle the subject matter of the Kronstadt rebellion (1921), one of the most controversial episodes of then-recent revolutionary history, by means of a fragmented and mobile dramaturgy that seems to attempt a synthesis of Mussorgskian and Bergian operatic realism, the cinematic principle of montage, and the tradition of heroic melodrama, with emphasis on the “documentary” treatment of vocal intonations, especially in the first two tableaux (taking place in a marketplace and a factory, respectively). For long stretches in both acts, vocal focus appears in permanent motion, to an extent suggesting the fast movements of a movie camera capturing the naked truth of “life as it is” (a crowd of black-marketeers and sailors in act 1, factory workers in act 2). The opera, however, appears deeply flawed as an apologia for the revolution: as noted by musicologist Wolfgang Mende, “The weak point of the dramatic construction is that the heroine Musya, the embodiment of the ethos and the belief in the future of the revolution, can achieve nothing in the first two acts. In her two appearances as an agitator she does not manage to persuade the opponents and sceptics of the revolution. The libretto establishes the final victory of the revolution solely on the basis of military heroism, not on a credible superiority of the political idea” (Mende 2009, 470).

Furthermore, Deshevov's use of the machine music topic remains oddly disconnected from the Bolshevik imperative of the emancipation of labour: the spectacular prelude to the industrial act opens onto a scene of mutiny, and the technological enthusiasm broadly associated with the machine throughout the 1920s remains largely irrelevant to the cause of revolution as such. In a sense, then, Deshevov's opera could even be regarded as the swan song of the socialist-Constructivist utopia, an ironic response to the rapidly evolving social and political context of the Soviet Union—but was the irony at all intended? At any rate, by the mid-1930s, Adrian Piotrovsky (himself a former associate of Deshevov at the Leningrad Workers' Youth Theatre) was already describing *Ice and Steel* rather curtly in a survey of Soviet musical theatre as an “agitational primitive” (*agitatsionny primitiv*) (Piotrovsky [1936] 1969, 169). By then, after a relatively successful start, the opera had disappeared from the repertoire, never to be performed again until its revival abroad in the twenty-first century (in Saarbrücken, Germany, 2007).¹⁶

¹⁵ Mosolov's *Zavod* was later made into an actual ballet by Adolph Bolm, and presented at the Hollywood Bowl in 1931–2 to rousing ovations.

¹⁶ A DVD recording of this production is commercially available (ArtHaus Musik 101323).

Moderato con moto. automatto. And 2^a Zabol. *Dr. Deshevsk op 24*
1923.

5

7

11

15

2

Example 1. Vladimir Deshevov, *Lyod i stal*, act 2, manuscript piano reduction (St. Petersburg, Russian National Library). Note the marking “Moderato con moto. automatto” [sic].

The brief flowering of modernist-revolutionary Soviet opera around the turn of the 1930s was to be curbed almost as soon as it started (that is, quite some years before the infamous *Pravda* editorial, “Muddle Instead of Music,” denouncing Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in January 1936), as can be inferred from the fate of Aleksandr Mosolov’s opera *Plotina* (The dam), to a libretto by Yakov Zadykhin.¹⁷ Although finished by the end of 1930, the opera was deemed unsuitable for a proletarian audience and withdrawn soon after the first run of rehearsals in Leningrad, never to be performed in Mosolov’s lifetime. However, the subject of the opera was eminently topical at the time of the first five-year plan (1928–32): the construction of a hydro-power station, and the attendant clash between the forces of Soviet progress (represented by the engineer Gard and his crew) and the atavism of Old Russia (personified by the fanatic miller Sekleteya and other villagers), whose very existence becomes threatened by the advances of industrialization and collectivization.¹⁸ (Less topically, a melodramatic love triangle unfolds against these momentous events.) The work presents a whole panoply of modernist dramatic and musical features, including the abundant use of music-machine topics—alongside a strong intertextual resonance with both *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina*: the former most obviously in the guise of a character reminiscent of Musorgsky’s Holy Fool, the latter in the overall conception of the opera as the portrayal of the fated struggle between the past and the future of Russia. The shadow of Berg’s *Wozzeck* is also perceptible throughout Mosolov’s score, particularly in its manipulation of heterogeneous musical styles. Interestingly, the aesthetics of film is not just alluded to in the dramatic structure of *Plotina*; cinema is now explicitly used as an expressive resource, in the form of film sequences interpolated in the operatic narrative, following widespread trends in German and Soviet theatre of the 1920s (including some early uses of film in the so-called *Zeitoper* [Opera of the time], from around 1926–7; see table 2).¹⁹

Table 2. Early uses of film sequences (or film-derived techniques) in music theatre

1917	Erik Satie, <i>Parade</i>
1922	Alban Berg, <i>Wozzeck</i> (pr. 1925)
1923	Richard Strauss, <i>Intermezzo</i> (pr. 1924)
1924	Erik Satie, <i>Relâche</i>
1926	Kurt Weill, <i>Royal Palace</i> (pr. 1927); Ernst Křenek, <i>Jonny spielt auf</i> (pr. 1927)

¹⁷ On Mosolov (1900–1973) and his work, see among others Meshko (1986), Vorobyov (2006), Barsova (2007), and Mende (2009).

¹⁸ Mosolov’s opera is roughly contemporary with another opportune (opportunic?) piece inspired by the building of the colossal Dnieper Hydroelectric Station, Yuly Meytus’s *Dneprostroy*, a work known in the West thanks to a recording by the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris under Julius Ehrlich, made by Columbia around 1931—originally the B-side to Mosolov’s *Zavod*.

¹⁹ The film episodes in Mosolov’s opera correspond to the narrowly avoided bursting of the dam in one scene, and to the triumph over nature in another, thus creating a noticeable cinematic association not so much with technical progress per se, but with catastrophe and utopia, respectively. It could be said that film enacts a kind of technological sublime within the framework of what could be termed a Soviet *grand opéra* of sorts.

Table 2. (continued)

1927	Paul Hindemith, <i>Hin und zurück</i> ; Kurt Weill/B. Brecht, <i>Mahagonny-Songspiel</i>
1928	Max Brand, <i>Maschinist Hopkins</i> (pr. 1929); George Antheil, <i>Transatlantic</i> (pr. 1930); Darius Milhaud, <i>Christophe Colomb</i> (pr. 1930)
1929	Arnold Schönberg, <i>Von heute auf morgen</i> (pr. 1930); Bohuslav Martinů, <i>Les trois souhaits</i> (pr. 1971)
1930	Aleksandr Mosolov, <i>Plotina</i> (The dam) (pr. 2012, abridged)
1935	(unfinished), Alban Berg, <i>Lulu</i> (pr. 1937/79)

Note: pr. = premiere

By the early 1930s, however, the Soviet Union already had little use for a deliberately confrontational aesthetics. *The Dam* had its belated first performance at St. Petersburg's Conservatoire Theatre on 21 March 2012 (!), in a shortened and heavily edited version that could hardly do justice to the work's original conception, but seems itself symptomatic of the twenty-first-century Russian ambivalence towards the Soviet legacy, to which I alluded earlier. In this particular staging, a video of which is available online,²⁰ the film inserts are borrowed from easily identifiable sources, including Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Dziga Vertov's *Enthusiasm: The Symphony of Donbass*, the overall sense of the opera's final sequence being clearly inflected towards catastrophe rather than utopia. In short, this production could be said to represent a crude distortion of Mosolov's explicit intentions (some would even say a new form of censorship) in response to the present-day imperative of de-Sovietization at all costs.²¹ Of course this could be taken as just another layer in the intertextual and inter-medial fabric of the operatic experiment—but perhaps more broadly as an emblem of the paradoxical status of the Soviet musical avant-garde as a historical phenomenon: in a sense, a brand of “music of the time” whose strange fate it seems to be to remain forever locked out of any present.

The well-documented vicissitudes of Shostakovich and Prokofiev's endeavours towards the creation of a viable model for Soviet opera tend to overshadow previous attempts by lesser-known composers to solve the impossible equation of Sovietization *and* modernization of the operatic genre in the post-revolutionary context. In spite of its many gaps, our emerging awareness of previous developments in this sphere—including the often overlooked role played by the cult of the machine and the impact of film in the 1920s and 1930s—is certain to add depth to the field, and show that the fateful forces unleashed by the ominous *Pravda* editorial in 1936 were in fact already gathering momentum around the turn of the decade.

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBxKDMjTO9M&t=20s>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jL_n7f-10Q&t=424s; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lHpJSqneV5A>.

²¹ In the words of a critic reviewing the premiere of *Plotina*, “Apparently, even in the twenty-first century, to mount an opera of the post-revolutionary era without taking sides in the conflict (old/new, white/red, rich/poor, peasant/proletarian, etc.), and staying ‘above the fray,’ presenting the historical events dispassionately with all their contradictions and tragic mistakes remains impossible” (Smotrov 2012, 53).

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ABSTRACT

In this article I explore some of the ways in which opera was affected by the dynamics of rupture and experimentation in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s. In particular, I examine the criticism of opera as a genre among composers and theatrical practitioners, such as Nikolay Foregger, who advocated a fusion of opera and ballet inspired by the rhythms, movements, and sounds of modernity, and Adrian Piotrovsky, who argued for the transfer of cinematic devices to other art forms, including opera. The article further explores some intersections with the Futurist and Constructivist cult of the machine as reflected in the operatic experiments of Vladimir Deshevov and Aleksandr Mosolov, which were almost immediately suppressed by the rise of a more populist aesthetics and remain largely unknown.

Keywords: Soviet avant-garde, opera, film, machine music

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, j'explore certains aspects de la façon dont l'opéra a été affecté par la dynamique de rupture et d'expérimentation en Union soviétique dans les années 1920 et au début des années 1930. En particulier, j'examine la critique de l'opéra en tant que genre parmi les compositeurs et les praticiens du théâtre, tels que Nikolai Foregger, qui a préconisé une fusion de l'opéra et du ballet inspirée par les rythmes, les mouvements et les sons de la modernité, et Adrian Piotrovsky, qui a plaidé pour le transfert des dispositifs cinématographiques à d'autres formes d'art, y compris l'opéra. L'article explore

en outre certaines intersections avec le culte futuriste et constructiviste de la machine, comme en témoignent les expériences lyriques de Vladimir Dechevov et Aleksandr Mosolov, qui ont été presque immédiatement supprimées par la montée d'une esthétique plus populiste, et qui restent largement inconnues.

Mots-clés: Avant-garde soviétique, opéra, cinéma, musique des machines

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Paulo F. de Castro (PhD, Royal Holloway, University of London) is Associate Professor at Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Portugal) and a researcher with a focus on musical signification, intertextuality, and the philosophy of music. He has written extensively on the cultural significance of nineteenth- and twentieth-century music in France, Russia, and the Iberian Peninsula—subjects on which he frequently gives lectures in Europe, North America, and Brazil. He is a former chairman of the Portuguese Musicological Association.