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Interview

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Interview with Composer and Pianist Sergei Oskolkov

Anton A. Rovner^{1,2}

¹*Moscow State P. I. Tchaikovsky Conservatory,
Moscow, Russia*

²*Moscow Humanitarian University,
Moscow, Russia*

^{1,2}*antonrovner@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5954-3996>*

Abstract. In this interview the famous St. Petersburg-based composer and pianist Sergei Oskolkov tells about his music, his biography and about the festival for the arts “Sergei Oskolkov and his Friends” of which he is the artistic director. The musician presents a characterization of the main stylistic parameters of his music and how there are manifested in certain particular musical compositions of his written in the genres of opera, orchestral, chamber, piano and incidental music for the theater. He describes the festival for the arts directed by him, which has been organized for the last 25 years in St. Petersburg and its suburbs. According to the main principles of its organization, classical and contemporary music, paintings, poetry, cinema and presentations of new books are demonstrated in it on an equal footing.

Keywords: composer Sergei Oskolkov, contemporary music, festival “Sergei Oskolov and his Friends,” musical setting of St. Petersburg, Peterhof, Oranienbaum

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Международный отдел

Интервью

Интервью с композитором и пианистом Сергеем Осколковым

Антон Аркадьевич Ровнер^{1,2}

¹Московская государственная консерватория имени П. И. Чайковского,
г. Москва, Россия

²Московский гуманитарный университет,
г. Москва, Россия

^{1,2}antonrovner@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5954-3996>

Аннотация. В интервью известный петербургский композитор и пианист Сергей Осколков рассказывает о своей музыке, делится фрагментами биографии и рассуждает о руководимом им фестивале «Сергей Осколков и его друзья». Музыкант характеризует основные стилистические параметры своих сочинений, созданных в жанрах оперы, а также оркестровой, камерной, фортепианной и театральной музыки. Высказывается о Фестивале искусств, который проводится в течение 25 лет в Петербурге и его окрестностях. Основные принципы фестивальных мероприятий заключаются в представлении в равной мере классической и современной музыки, а кроме того – произведений живописи, поэзии, кино и презентаций новых книг.

Ключевые слова: композитор Сергей Осколков, современная музыка, фестиваль «Сергей Осколков и его друзья», музыкальный Петербург, Петергоф, Ораниенбаум

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Mr. Oskolkov, you are well-known as a St. Petersburg-based composer and pianist, as well as the organizer of the festival for the arts “Sergei Oskolov and his Friends.” I would be happy if you could share some information in all three of these hypostases. Please tell us about your music. Could you name and give a characterization of your most significant and representative compositions?

I have been able to compose a considerable amount of music, around a hundred works. Among my most

representative compositions is my opera “Count Nulin” for five solo singers and chamber orchestra, based on the long poem of Alexander Pushkin, which was recorded on the Leningrad Radio and subsequently released on a compact disc under the direction of conductor Robert Luther, my opera “Kupriyanov and Natasha” for two singers and the chamber instrumental ensemble of violin, cello and piano based on the play with the same name by Alexander Vvedensky, as well as two concertos for piano and orchestra. I have also written

three cantatas, one of them for a cappella chorus, titled “Pamyat” [“Memory”], composed in 1985 on the poems of wartime poems in commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the victory in World War II, the second one, “Autumn Cantata” for soprano, clarinet and string orchestra, set to poems by Ivan Bunin, and the third, “Cortège d’Orphée” for baritone and organ set to poems by Guillaume Apollinaire. A very significant composition for me, written on a commission of the Bryansk Culture Department in 2003 in commemoration of the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of the famous poet Feodor Tutchev, is the cantata “O veshchaya dusha moya” [“O, my Prophetic Soul”] for recitation, piano and string orchestra. Since I am a pianist, I have composed a large quantity of piano music, including eight sonatas for solo piano, which I have performed regularly in my concerts and solo recitals. I have also composed three sonatas for violin and piano, a sonata for bass-clarinet and piano, and a wide assortment of other chamber music, as well as several song cycles and a substantial amount of music for theater and cinema. In the early 1990s my music for theater was performed in numerous theatrical productions in St. Petersburg, most notably, my music for the play “Till Eulenspiegel” composed for a performance in a student theater, as well as the music for the children’s performance “Kogda rastsvetyot margaritka” [“When the Marguerite will Blossom”] written for the Chimkent Puppet Theater, from which I have extracted numerous musical fragments which I have performed regularly in my concerts.

In my music I make use of a broad palette of musical means. In some of my compositions I incorporate innovative, atonal harmonies and elements of avant-

garde techniques, while other works of mine possess diatonic harmony and a rather traditional musical language, combining elements of romanticism and neoclassicism. In some of my works I combine these various musical means organically, creating compositions which are integral in their musical logic. For example, my piano sonatas are endowed with complex, chromatic, frequently atonal harmonies, dramatic emotional moods and a virtuosic piano technique expanding on those of Liszt and Rachmaninoff. On the other hand, in my operas there is a predominance of diatonic harmonies, a coloristic attitude towards vocal and instrumental timbres, as well as a vivid theatrical expressivity. For example, my opera “Kupriyanov and Natasha” combines colorful, expressive arioso passages, endowed with diatonic harmonies, continuing the traditions of romantic and neoclassical opera, on the one hand, and complex, dramatic fragments, possessing atonal harmonies, dramatic effects and extended technical effects in the instrumental parts, and grotesque expressionistic moods, on the other hand. Some of my compositions initially composed as incidental music for theater are occasionally performed by me in my concerts. Such is the broad spectrum of my musical style.

Could you tell us about how your musical path began, and with whom did you study during your formative years?

I was born and grew up in Donetsk, where I began my musical studies. In my youthful years a significant influence was exerted by my grandfather Lev Samoylovich Shpolyansky. He was a student of Reinhold Glière at the Kiev Conservatory, where he also studied piano with Felix Blumenfeld. My grandfather was a unique personality,



a very fine composer and a brilliant musician. However, he was a person who stopped in his development on 19th and early 20th century Russian classical music, on such composers as Tchaikovsky and Glière. All subsequently created music by such composers as Prokofiev and Shostakovich was already perceived by him with great difficulty. He was a man who held his own absolute convictions. He worked as the chief choral director of the Donetsk Opera, and during the last years of his life he taught at the Donetsk Music College, where he had to give solfège dictations all the time. On his way to work he usually composed short two-voiced pieces for his dictations in his head, which then he played for his students, so that they would write them down on music paper after hearing them. Subsequently, many years later, an entire collection of his pieces for solfège dictations was published. A number of his short piano pieces was written by him for me.

Undoubtedly, an important influence for me was provided by my parents – my father, a cellist and musicologist, and my mother, a musicologist. This shows that I grew up in a musical environment, as the result of which my subsequent path was determined as being in the field of music, just as the paths of my two sons, Sergei Jr. and Alexander, both of whom are members of the Composers' Union.

Next, I must definitely mention my music school where I studied in Donetsk, where I had a remarkable piano teacher, Valeria Nikolayevna Zaplatkina. After that, at the Donetsk Music College I began studying with an absolutely unique teacher, a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory, Galina Davidovna Sladkovskaya, who determined in an absolutely cardinal way my subsequent development in the field of

music, first of all, as a pianist; but she also influenced my formation as a composer – in her class I began playing the music of contemporary composers, in addition to the classical repertoire. It was from her that I heard for the very first time the names of such composers as Miroslav Skorik, Boris Tishchenko and Rodion Shchedrin – their music was a great rarity for Donetsk in those days.

I began studying at the Leningrad Conservatory, first as a pianist, after having played my own transcription of Stravinsky's "Petrouchka" for piano at the entrance exam. Sladkovskaya inspired me with a strong confidence in my own abilities. I was elated from my lessons with her, and I am still very grateful to her that it was particularly she who helped me determine my course of life as that of a musician. At the Leningrad Conservatory I studied piano with People's Artist of the USSR, Professor Pavel Alexeyevich Serebryakov; I was virtually his last student – in 1977, during the year of my graduation from the Conservatory, in the spring I played the piano in my state examination, and in August he passed away.

Parallel to that, when I studied in the first course of the Conservatory as a pianist, I began attending a seminar of beginning composers held in the Leningrad Section of the Composers' Union by Vyacheslav Nagovitsin. I also studied counterpoint with the remarkable professor Iosif Yakovlevich Pustyl'nik, and also attended Johann Georgievich Admoni's seminar. The seminar for beginning composers brought forth many significant composers.

Nagovitsin was one of the last students of Dmitri Shostakovich. He guided his students in a very precise and a very delicate manner. He never suppressed any of my compositional plans, but curtailed

only what he saw as being absolutely inconsistent with the main musical idea in my works. He told me many stories about his teacher Shostakovich, about his method and manner of work, about his character and his life, and this, naturally, exerted an impact on me, as it did on many others – since, for the most part, the Leningrad compositional school was formed under the aureole of Shostakovich's music and personality.

I had many remarkable teachers, but, of course, in regards to music composition, first of all, my utmost gratitude during my whole life remains towards Yuri Alexandrovich Falik, with whom I studied orchestration, score reading, and composition at the Leningrad Conservatory. Until the last days of his life, we remained in close contact with him, frequently communicated with him, and I regularly showed him my compositions. So, Nagovitsin and Falik were my main composition teachers.

Could you tell us about your festival for the arts “Sergei Oskolkov and his Friends”? What year did it begin in, where does it take place, what principle of organization does it follow, what music is performed in it, and what other art works are presented in it?

I can speak about the festival for great length, since it has been a most significant part of my life, having been organization for already a quarter of a century. It was begun twenty-five years ago, in 1997, and it was transformed from a small-scale undertaking to a grandiose, socially significant event for Peterhof and Oranienbaum, as well as for St. Petersburg. When we began our endeavor, it was the first and only festival to be organized in these beautiful suburbs of St. Petersburg, and it was devoted to a number of different

arts: music, poetry, painting, theater and cinema. And all these twenty-five years we have made the attempt to demonstrate this combination of all these arts, so that it would remain significant at each of the festivals. Our very first festival took place entirely in Oranienbaum, in the park of this suburban town. During the entire time of the festival artists from over twenty countries of the world have participated in it. So it can be rightfully called an international festival. The remarkable conductor Vladimir Fanshil, who currently lives in Western Europe, came here to take part in the festival. There were remarkable musicians who came from Italy, such as flutist Roberto Fabbriani; we have hosted Swiss clarinetist Michel Marang, one of the most famous clarinetists from Europe, the outstanding Belgian clarinetist and composer Hedwig Swimberghe, as well as numerous remarkable artists from Russia.

We have hosted art exhibitions, in which a large number of painters from St. Petersburg and Peterhof have participated. This year three exhibitions have taken place as part of our festival – in the avant-garde gallery DokArt, in the Cultural Exhibition Center on Leninsky prospect titled “The Best City on Earth” and the Semyon Geychenko Library in Peterhof.

The festival has included poetry readings organized by poets from St. Petersburg and Peterhof, who have constantly changed – some have left us, some have remained with us, and new poets have also appeared.

What goals does your festival pursue? Could you tell us about its special distinctive features? Do you devote much attention to contemporary music in it?

A special feature of the festival is that it is devoted not only to music, but also



to poetry, theater, painting and cinema. The aim of this is synthesis of the arts, the unification of the most diverse artists of all varieties. Our festival primarily instigates meetings of like-minded people and artistic colleagues. As for contemporary music, it is presented in the festival on an equal footing with classical music. This is particularly why an important role here is played by the personalities of both the performers and the composers. As a rule, I also participate regularly in the concerts, moreover, both performing as a pianist – a soloist and an accompanist for the vocalists and instrumentalists – and demonstrate my new works, as a composer. And now I can assert with certitude that our festival has justified its name fully and completely: almost every year it enjoys the participation of my friends among the performers who present programs of works from the classical repertoire and contemporary oeuvres, as well as composers who almost every year contribute new compositions to the judgment of the audiences. It must be emphasized that both varieties of music are distinguished with high professionalism. But this does not deter in the least the creation of a relaxed, informal atmosphere of friendly communication during the entire course of the duration of the festival each year.

It seems that your festival hosts an established group of friends among the composers and the performers who regularly take part in it. Thereby, it can be asserted that you have created a veritable artistic community?

At the same time the festival by no means narrows down to the same names. We regularly invite new performers and composers to participate in our programs, and they become our new friends. Our

contemporary music programs reflect the present-day context of the musical life of St. Petersburg and to a great extent of our whole country. At the same time, the high quality of the performance mastery and the high quality of the compositional content has made it possible for our festival to send on equal footage with such contemporary music forums organized in Russia's northern capital as the festivals "From the Avant-garde to the Present Day," "Sound Ways," "St. Petersburg Spring," and "Pythian Games." But we differ from all of them in that, as I have stated before, our concert programs demonstrate not only contemporary music, but also the immortal classics.

Could you please tell us what other events take place as part of the festival? As we know, they are not limited to music, poetry and the visual arts.

The festival has been initially devoted to music, painting, poetry, theater and cinema. It often includes presentations of new editions of books of poetry and prose, as well as books about music. Frequently, such presentations are organized together with related concerts, so one event can smoothly give way to onto another. The festival also includes demonstrations of new feature, documentary and innovative movies. Among the latter, special mention must be made of the presentation of Anastasia Yakubek's film "Ya svoboden" ["I am Free"] about the unique personality and tragic fate of composer Vsevolod Petrovich Zaderatsky, whose music was prohibited from being performed during the years of Stalin's rule and who was sent to labor camps several times, Andrei Bandura and Alexander Milyushin's film "Prometheus," in which a recording of Scriabin's composition with the same title

is combined with original video design selected by the two producers, as well as Anastasia Jurgenson's film about her great-great-grandfather Piotr Ivanovich Jurgenson, the first music publisher in Russia, which also describes the activities of her father Boris Petrovich Jurgenson, the organizer of the concerts of the Jurgenson Salon in Moscow.

A number of films by the outstanding Russian film producer Alexander Sokurov, as well as a retrospective of films by my friend Alexander Sulyayev, who died at an early age, have been demonstrated at the festival. I must also mention the regular participation in the festival of the outstanding movie producer, a winner of numerous international film festivals Dmitri Frolov (incidentally, I have written the music for many of his films).

Could you tell us about the contemporary music concerts which take place within the festival? In which concert halls are they held, and in what manner are they organized?

Ten years ago we have brought in a new innovation into the format of our contemporary music concerts, which now have a new annual main theme for their programs. Now each year the composers who are participants of the festival write new works "on a given theme." These compositions are performed by the chamber ensemble "Sound Ways," which is directed by pianist and composer Nikolai Mazhara. Such a unity of subject matter provides not only unity, but also a dynamic sense to the musical programs. The contemporary music concerts are held in the concert hall of the Composer' Union Building, or on the concert hall of the Foundation of the Artist Mikhail Chemiakine on Sadovaya Street, in a venue

which is greatly appropriate in its spirit for events devoted to contemporary music and art. The composers who regularly take part in the festival's contemporary music concerts include Georgy Firtich, Boris Arkhimandritov, Vladislav Uspensky, Georgy Portnov, Gennady Belov, Andrei Petrov, Stanislav Vorontsovsky, Leonid Rezetdinov, Svetlana Lavrova, Vladislava Malakhovskaya, Igor Vorobyov, Alexander Radvilovich, Olga Petrova, Nikolai Mazhara, Sofia Levkovskaya, Irina Tseslyukovich, Mikhail Krutik, as well as many others. You, Anton, are a regular participant of almost all of our festivals! The festival has presented works by composers from outside of Russia, such as Jean-Luc Darbellay from Switzerland and Joseph Pehrson from the USA. Until recently, a regular visitor and participant of the festival was composer and violinist Mark Belodubrovsky, who was the artistic director of the Nikolai Roslavetz and Nahum Gabo Festival for the Arts in Bryansk for many years. In a certain sense, the festival in Bryansk was a «relative» festival to «Sergei Oskolkov and his Friends.» Belodubrovsky constantly performed both his own music and the works of the classics and our contemporaries on the violin. Because of Belodubrovsky's efforts the programs of our festival included the participation of a large number of musicians from Bryansk. The most impressive group among them was the children's folklore-ethnographic vocal ensemble «Solovushki.» In recent times Belodubrovsky was not able to attend our festival because of the poor condition of his health, but his compositions have continued to sound in it in our contemporary music concerts. A few years ago, we were visited by composer Loren Blinov from Kazan, whose 75-th birthday was commemorated



by a concert of his music, as well as a remarkable performance of his virtuosic Sonata for piano written in the serial technique, which was brilliantly performed by Moscow-based pianist Feodor Amirov.

Thank you for your substantive interview, Mr. Oskolkov! I wish you and your colleagues, the participants of the festival “Sergei Oskolkov and his Friends” great success!

Information about the author:

Anton A. Rovner – Ph.D., Cand.Sci. (Arts), Faculty Member of the Department of Interdisciplinary Specializations for Musicologists in the Moscow State P. I. Tchaikovsky Conservatory; Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology and Culturology in the Moscow Humanitarian University.

Информация об авторе:

А. А. Ровнер – Ph.D., кандидат искусствоведения, преподаватель кафедры междисциплинарных специализаций музыковедов Московской государственной консерватории имени П. И. Чайковского; доцент кафедры философии, социологии и культурологии Московского гуманитарного университета.

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