

GALINA  
USTVOLSKAYA

REINBERT DE LEEUW  
VERA BETHS  
HARMEN DE BOER

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has done more than bring political autonomy to the various countries that were once yoked together under a single Communist regime; it has brought attention to the variety of peoples and cultures that cover this part of the globe and, especially in the West, made us curious of historical and contemporary figures about whom we've had little or no knowledge. For example, there is probably a greater interest in pre-Soviet Constructivist and Suprematist art than at any time since the 1920s, and this includes revolutionary composers like Mossolov, Roslavets, and other pre-World War I Modernists who were sacrificed to the "progress" of Soviet Realism.

More recently, a generation of composers including Edison Denisov, Sofia Gubaidulina, and Alfred Schnittke has flourished due to a new acceptance and availability of their music both within and outside of their native land. The first recording of Galina Ustvolskaya's music outside of Russia may introduce her to that international audience, though it's likely that even what reputation she now has in Russia has suffered over the years from official neglect if not outright censorship. It's hard for us to get an adequate picture of Ustvolskaya and her historical place in Russian music, since almost nothing has been written about her outside of Russia, and her position within was complicated by the ideological conflicts since the time of Stalin. Too, she is of the generation preceding that of Denisov, Gubaidulina, and Schnittke, which places her in a different historical perspective.

Born in 1919, too late to reap the benefits of the energetic, freely experimental period between the October Revolution and the rise of Soviet Realism, she studied until 1939 at the Leningrad Conservatory and after that, interrupted by the War and service in a hospital, at the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory. One of her teachers was Dmitri Shostakovich, who later on continued to correspond with her, support her within the Union of Soviet Composers, and influence her early compositions just as, quite possibly, he was himself influenced by her own work toward the end of his life. Ustvolskaya's earliest published compositions date from after World War II, and certain characteristics have remained consistent over the decades—a concise, concentrated, sometimes enigmatic handling of thematic material; extreme, sometimes violent, contrasts of tone, texture, and dynamics; a rejection of conventional forms.

All of these combine to give her music its singular identity, but there's something else that contributes to her personal voice and vision. There is a palpable strength in her music, a bold expression of integrity and determination, that was quite possibly her only conceivable response to the political pressures of the Party, as well as the pervasive musical influence of Shostakovich. Unlike the "hidden" anti-Soviet symbolism that some musicologists have ascribed to several of Shostakovich's key works, her music no doubt describes less the condition of the State than the condition of her soul (with her religious beliefs and folk aspirations a personal subtext), which in

any case could only lead to trouble with the authorities. As far as my limited research can tell, however, she may have been more ignored than censured, and her living in Leningrad, away from the constant Moscow in-fighting and scrutiny, may have helped. In fact, her *Sonata For Violin And Piano* (dating from 1952) seems to have been the work chosen, for better or worse, to officially exemplify the “experimental” bent of the Leningrad school of composers; it was performed for a visiting 1958 contingent of composers from the United States (including Roger Sessions, Ulysses Kay, Peter Mennin, and Roy Harris, who called it “dissonant from beginning to end” and “kind of ugly”)

and again in 1962 for the historic visit of Igor Stravinsky, in addition to being performed at that year’s Warsaw Festival of Contemporary Music.

Of course, we hear her music differently than did the tone-deaf Soviet bureaucracy, different even from the then-dodecaphonically-inclined Stravinsky or the conservatively modal-eared Harris. Dissonance, for one thing, doesn’t have the meaning or create the mood it once did, and has been replaced, post-Cage, by other forms of musical tension, primarily rhythmic. Ustvolskaya’s music uses tonality as an expressive maneuver, but goes far beyond that, incorporating micro-tones, overtones, harsh timbres, and aggressive attacks (at times in the *Duet For Violin And Piano* and the *Piano Sonata No. 5* the physical gestures are almost more than the instruments can bear). Her individual approach to melody is introduced in the 1949 *Trio* for violin, clarinet, and piano (where Shostakovich’s influence may be most

evident), equal parts tenderness and courage, though there are times here and in the later works where lyricism is not allowed to blossom; rather, the line, all muscle and sinew, is stretched taut, or is shaped by the splintered notes of shattered chords. We can trace the repetitive, even hammered, rhythms back to *Le Sacre du Printemps*, that most Russian of Stravinsky’s works (that is, with the possible exception of *Les Noces*), and perhaps the lingering remnants of those Futurist scores from pre-Soviet days, but here, too, Ustvolskaya balances the tremendous rhythmic tension with contemplation—silence, framed by urgent intensities.

Ustvolskaya’s music is dark, somber, even remote when a solitary voice holds sway. Her rejection of easily recognizable form suggests that, metaphorically, time is not a factor; as temporal references are acutely literal, the means to escape an oppressive time and place are found in spiritual, not social, values. Similarly, the chilling sparseness of textures becomes an emotional landscape, scarred, sometimes painfully severe, where inner strength is necessary for survival. But there is, too, especially in the *Duet For Violin And Piano*, a sanctity of mood (shared with the later Shostakovich, when he was obsessed with death, and where, in his final works such as the *Viola Sonata* and *Sonata For Violin And Piano*, the influence of Ustvolskaya may be felt). In moments like this, rare is the music where the human will is so immediate, so enduring.

Art Lange, January 1993

## ADDENDUM:

When I wrote this abbreviated essay in 1993, little was known about Madame Ustvol'skaya outside of Russia, and precious few of her works had been recorded. Since then, a great deal of information has come to light, and performances and recordings of her authorized compositions – especially her piano music – have multiplied.

There is even a website (<http://ustvol'skaya.org/eng/>) that provides us with two of her exceedingly rare, but revealing, interviews as well as several detailed responses by her husband Konstantin Bagrenin which attempt to correct misconceptions about her life and music. However, it now appears that Madame Ustvol'skaya (who died in 2006) treasured her privacy more than we may have realized, and sought to control what information was made available to the public, to the point of manipulating history in order to correspond with her feelings later in life.

For example, I was mistaken when, in my original text, I wrote that she “never stooped to writing secular cantatas or programmatically accessible music for theater or films.” In fact, it is now known that she did compose a number of such works during the 1940s and '50s, later explaining they were done “due to extreme material poverty, in order to help my family,” but which she went to great pains to erase completely from her catalogue of works. Then too, there are her final comments about her professional and personal relationship with Dmitri

Shostakovich, which seem contradictory to accounts provided by friends and colleagues aware of the circumstances at the time, some of which were reported in Shostakovich biographies by Elizabeth Wilson and Laurel E. Fay. Nevertheless, none of this affects her music, which retains its power, audacity, expressivity, and originality.

Art Lange, June 2017



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## GALINA USTVOLSKAYA (1919–2006)

first recordings by

REINBERT DE LEEUW *piano*

VERA BETHS *violin*

HARMEN DE BOER *clarinet*

### TRIO for violin, clarinet and piano (1949)

1 *Espressivo* 8:30

ISRC CH 130.1700797

2 *Dolce* 3:33

ISRC CH 130.1700798

3 *Energico* 4:47

ISRC CH 130.1700799

### 4 SONATA No. 5 IN TEN MOVEMENTS for piano (1986) 17:42

ISRC CH 130.1700800

### 5 DUET for violin and piano (1964) 23:52

ISRC CH 130.1700801

Total Time 58:44

DDD <sup>24</sup>Bit

Produced by Harry Vogt, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Köln;

Digital recording October 5 & 6 1991, De Vereniging, Nijmegen by Frans van Rossum & Adriaan Verstijnen;

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8

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