

Russian musicians about Edvard Grieg. Vladimir Blok

Ekaterina Tsareva, professor of the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, has claimed that “Edvard Grieg’s music became an integral part of Russian culture, because from the very beginning it was perceived in Russia as its own”.

The first person who wrote about congeniality of Grieg’s music with the Russian soul and about the unbelievable admiration of Grieg’s music by the Russian public was Peter Tchaikovsky. His quotes of 1888 are often repeated in all Russian publications. According to Tchaikovsky, already in 1870s Grieg’s masterpieces were very well known and beloved in Russia. Today, in almost all Russian researches related to the names of Tchaikovsky and Grieg, it is highlighted that Tchaikovsky pointed Grieg out of the peers, and called “genius” Grieg only. This fact was also noted by Vladimir Blok in 1994. He wrote “it cannot be ignored that always correct and sincere Tchaikovsky speaking about his contemporary colleagues, uses epithet “genius” for only one person, Edvard Grieg. Indeed, Grieg would have been genius even if he had only composed the “Solveig’s song” or “I love you”.

It can be noted that writing this about Grieg’s music, Vladimir Blok points out his vocal works. It is an interesting fact that similar assessments can be found in 100-year-old documents. Thus, Sergei Tolstoy, a composer and a son of Leo Tolstoy, describes the last meeting with his farther in October of 1910, “He asked me to play piano. When I performed Grieg’s “Ich liebe dich” in Grieg’s arrangement, he let out a sob”. Another Russian composer, Nikolai Metner, wrote: “The composer must be in love. <...> if I play “Solveig’s song” you will understand that Grieg was in love with his art and thus he was singing”. It is a surprising fact that Vladimir Blok’s and Nikolai Metner’s thoughts about Grieg’s songs coincide with Grieg’s own words: “I have been genius only once in my life. My genius was my love. I fell in love with a woman with enchanting voice <...> this woman became my wife“.

Grieg’s music could be heard everywhere in Russia at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries: on the most famous stages as well as in private performances. Here is an example of a letter from one young woman to another, “Dear Liolya, <...> could you please take some printed music to play as piano duet? Best of all, take something by Tchaikovsky and Grieg” (November, 11 1896). The conjugation of Grieg’s and Tchaikovsky’s names is very typical for home performances in this period. We can find more examples in the memoirs of composer Anatoly Alexandrov (Tchaikovsky’s godson and one of Vladimir Blok’s teachers) and in the biography of composer Vassily Prokunin (one of Tchaikovsky’s pupils). Their favorite composers were also both Tchaikovsky and Grieg.

Unbelievable admiration by Grieg’s music in Russia has inspired a large number of 19–20th century works. In literature among them are I. Severyanin’s poems “Norwegian Fjords” and “Overture”; as well as “Nordic Symphony” poem by A. Belyi, inspired by Grieg’s op. 24 and published in 1904 with the author’s dedication “to Edvard Grieg”. It is also worth noting K. Balmont’s poem “At the Scandinavian Rocks” and N. Gumilev’s poem “Grieg’s motifs” (1905).

At the realm of music among the works inspired by Grieg's art I would like to mention the ballet "Ice maiden" (or "Solveig") for Grieg's music arranged by B. Asafiev and A. Gauk in 1917–1927. Grieg's music had an obvious influence on young S. Prokofiev and S. Rachmaninov. Vladimir Blok calls Prokofiev's the First Violin sonata "a sign of respect to Edvard Grieg". N. Myaskovsky noted that the repercussion of Grieg's melody and harmonic coloring in the slow movements of the First and the Third Rachmaninov's Piano concertos are not accidental.

The "Russian Grieg" phenomenon created by Peter Tchaikovsky had been budding through the 20th century as well. Among the compositions dedicated to Grieg or inspired by his music in this period, we can name "Hommage a Grieg" op. 233 (1993) for two violins with orchestra by A. Shnitke, "Northern ballade dedicated to the memory of E. Grieg" for piano by S. Slonimsky (1998), as well as a number of works by V. Blok. Among them are the song «Dedication to Grieg», "Grieg rhapsody" for violin and symphony orchestra, "Grieg suite" for viola and piano, as well as "Small suite on Norwegian motifs" for violin and piano. The most famous work of literature inspired by Grieg's music in the 20th century is probably the story by K. Paustovsky "A Basket with Fir Cones" (1953).

Taking into account the influence of Grieg's art on Russian culture the appearance of serious musicological works is not very surprising. Tchaikovsky's "Autobiographical Account of a Tour Abroad in the Year 1888" was followed by the publications by Nikolai Voroshilov of 1897–1898 and Nikolai Findeizen of 1908–1910, the articles of N. Zhilyaev and N. Kashkin, monographs by Boris Asafiev (1948) and Yu. Kremlev (1958), and many others. In Olga Levashova's monograph published in 1962 more than 40 Russian-language musicological works about Grieg are mentioned; and obviously its number has increased now. In addition, many complete articles have never been published due to different reasons.

The Moscow Conservatory alumnus, an apprentice of the outstanding pianist Emil Gilels, a composer, pianist and musicologist, Vladimir Blok (07.11.1932–28.08.1996) has become famous, first of all, as Sergey Prokofiev's music expert and an outstanding restorer of his compositions (Blok has completed Cello sonata op. 133 on the base of Prokofiev's sketches). At the same time, Norway and Grieg's music has become a special theme in Vladimir Blok's biography, the theme that has traced a very deep line through his whole professional and personal life. His composing, musicological and pedagogical activities form a solid part of Grieg-research in Russia.

Taking into consideration a deep attachment of Russian public to Grieg's music over the last 150 years, it seems natural that the world's first Edvard Grieg Society was created in Moscow in 1993. Its founder was Vladimir Blok. In addition, Blok was one of the initiators of The International Grieg Society and The International Edvard Grieg Piano Competition.

The reasons why I have decided to represent a paper about Vladimir Blok at this conference are the events which happened to me here, in Bergen, in September of 2012. I came to Norway for several days to work at the Bergen Public Library. During 3 days of work in the Library I heard the question whether I have ever met Vladimir Blok several times when I was stating my Russian origin. When I came back to Moscow,

I decided to work at the Moscow Conservatory's Archive as well as at Vladimir Blok's home archive to find out more information about him.

I did not have an occasion to ever meet Vladimir Blok in person. Russian Edvard Grieg Society was founded in May of 1993, while I came to Moscow to study at the Moscow Conservatory several months later. In June of 1996 I came to Bergen for the first time and in September I decided that my diploma would be related to Norwegian classical music. Unfortunately, a month before that Vladimir Blok passed away.

Blok's biography is not routine, it is full of different, including tragic, events. He was born in a Jewish family; his ancestries came to Russia from Ukraine. Vladimir inherited his music talent from his mother, a pianist, who had been working at the Moscow Conservatory for more than 20 years.

Vladimir Blok's parents, Bernard Berkovsky and Maria Itkina met and got married in Kiev in 1923. Maria was studying music at the Kiev Conservatory in the class of professor Heinrich Neuhaus at that time. Young family moved to Moscow and 3 years later, in 1926, Maria was accepted by the Moscow Conservatory to the class of Alexander Goldenweiser.

Bernard Berkovsky, a talented economist, started lecturing as a senior assistant, and later an associate professor, at Economics Institute in Moscow. Later, at the age of 35 he was appointed a high position at the Central Bank of the Soviet Union.

The life of this family was ruined by the tragic 1930s. On the 3rd of June of 1937 Berkovsky was accused of participating in counter-revolutionary plot and being a member of a terrorist and sabotage organization. In September of 1937 he was found guilty by Soviet justice, immediately executed by a firing squad and buried in a communal grave. Two months after her husband's execution Maria was charged as a "public enemy's" family member. In December of 1937, she was sentenced to 8 years in "corrective labor" camps. Fortunately, after 2 years in the camps she was freed because of the "dismissal of a case" and she was reemployed by the Moscow Conservatory.

Just several days after returning home from the camps, Maria Itkina registered her marriage with Michel Blok, changing her own and her son's last names. In all the documents and official forms filled out, she always hid the truth, stating that she divorced with her first husband in 1934 and that she did not know anything about him since then.

Vladimir Blok kept very good memories of his father, and many years later thought about changing his last name back to Berkovsky, but he did not bring this idea to life.

The facts that Vladimir was a Jew and a "public enemy's" family member, inevitably affected his career in a Soviet reality. But the integrity and the stamina of his character, as well as astonishing energy, allowed him to overcome most of the barriers, but, of course, not all of them.

The years of the Second World War Vladimir spent in mandatory evacuation in Tajikistan. Being an 8-year-old boy, he discovered Grieg's music for the first time. Years later he wrote about it "This enchanting music came to me for the first time when I was in Tajikistan. It was 1941, a grief of evacuation. But a music

school in Leninabad was working. And Alexander Shafran, a pedagogue evacuated from Leningrad, gave me “Arietta”, then Waltz A minor and “The Motherland song”.

In 1944 Blok returned to Moscow, enrolled in a music school and several years later in the Music College of the Moscow Conservatory. He graduated from the College with honors in 1951 and was accepted by two faculties of the Moscow Conservatory at the same time: piano (in the class of Emil Gilels) and composition (in the class by Vissarion Shebalin). 6 years later, in 1957, Blok graduated with honors from both faculties. I would like to note that among his examiners were Dmitry Shostakovich and Aram Khachaturian at the composition faculty and Alexander Goldenweiser at the piano faculty.

Vladimir Blok’s musical talent became apparent in different areas: he was an outstanding composer, a brilliant pianist, a musicologist with an impressive and broad vision, and an editor and a restorer of Sergey Prokofiev’s, Sergey Taneev’s and Alexander Scriabin’s works. Blok was also a collector of Russian folklore, as well as a responsive pedagogue who worked at primary music school for years, wrote children pieces and worked out the tutorials.

Speaking about Blok’s contribution into Russian folklore collection, I would like to note that in the archive of the Folk Music Research Center of the Moscow Conservatory we can find the records made by Blok in the expeditions of 1956–1958. Now, many years later, they are absolutely unique and are necessary for studying regional vocal and instrumental traditions. Two Collections of folk songs based on Vladimir Blok’s records were published in 1958 and 1964. It is important to note that the first countryside expedition for folk songs recording inspired the young Blok so much that he conducted two other trips to the same region.

It is a remarkable fact that even in zhaleika tunes (a Russian folk wind instrument, a shawm) Blok recognizes Grieg-motif. He wrote, “In Krutilovka village we heard zhaleika herdsman tunes <...>. Here is one tune which surprisingly reminds Grieg’s melodies by its descending third intonation”. In my opinion, it is difficult to hear the Grieg-formula in this tune. But it was not so for Vladimir Blok, who obviously was extremely fascinated by Grieg’s music at that time.

It is also worth noting, that one of the Blok’s folk expeditions took place in winter of 1957 and lasted a whole month. It happened only several months before his graduation exams at the Conservatory. Indeed, not every student is able to sacrifice a month of the last semester for a serious work not related to the diploma project! And at that time Blok was preparing not only for the composition examination which included the performance of his orchestral and chamber works, but also he was preparing to perform a complicated piano program, including Left hand Piano concerto by M. Ravel.

As a pianist Vladimir Blok performed on tours a lot and made many records, solo as well as together with other musicians. Nevertheless, he did not perceive himself a pianist, composition was always his top priority.

Vladimir Blok was one of Emil Gilels’s favorite apprentices, as well as his close friend. The day Gilels died Blok wrote “Elegy” for piano and dedicated it to the memory of his teacher. He also initiated the

collection “Emil Gilels. In memoriam” containing the articles related to the name of Gilels. The book was published many years after Vladimir Blok’s death, in 2009.

Blok connected the names of Gilels and Grieg in one of his articles of 1986. He wrote, “Edvard Grieg once said that the best representatives of the nation were Science and Art. Precisely this kind of son of his country ... Emil Gilels was and remains in grateful human memory”. In his another article about Grieg of 1994 Blok recalls Gilels’ performance during the Bergen Concert Hall inauguration on the 28th of May of 1978. In the presence of the King of Norway Emil Gilels played Grieg’s Piano Concerto, and the second part of the Concerto was encored. It is known that for many years Gilels declined to play in his concerts Grieg’s piano pieces. Once the pianist explained it “I am playing the “Lyric pieces” at home only, for my own pleasure”.

Blok devoted a number of articles and conference papers to Edvard Grieg. Among them are “About Edvard Grieg and not only about him” (1994), “Grieg and Russian music culture” (1993) and others. It is worth paying special attention to his speech at the International Grieg Symposium dedicated to Grieg’s 150 years jubilee in 1993. It was titled “Grieg – Bartok; Grieg – Prokofiev. Aesthetic Parallels”. This speech is remarkable because of the connection of two particularly important for Vladimir Blok names: Edvard Grieg and Sergey Prokofiev.

One of Blok’s last articles was titled “Never breach! About a pirate performance and publication” (1995). “On December 19, 1980, in Moscow, Grieg’s Symphony was performed for the first time. It was followed by radio recording and performing the Symphony in other cities of the Soviet Union. Finally, the score of the Symphony was released by Moscow publishing house “Muzyka” in 1985. We could be happy for this Moscow premiere and score publishing, if international copyright standards would not have been violently breached”. Blok tells the story how one of Russian conductors got the copy of Grieg’s Symphony manuscript and performed it in Moscow and how the publishing house “Muzyka” released the score without any permission and without even mentioning the Norwegian publication of 1984. It is worth noting that Vladimir Blok was the only Russian musician who expressed his opinion on the issue publicly. He called Russian publication of the Symphony “an international level theft”. That fact also made Vladimir Blok a true successor of Edvard Grieg who was never afraid to express his opinion on professional, political, religious or ethical matters.

I suspect that the special attitude of the Russian public to Grieg’s music at the turn of the 19 and 20th centuries (the general admiration and its perception as a native) were inherited by Vladimir Blok. He assimilated this great love to Norway and Norwegian music from his teachers. One way of such inheritance going from Peter Tchaikovsky through his pupil, a composer Vassily Prokunin, and to his apprentice, a pianist Alexander Goldenweiser (who, by the way, made records of all the “Lyric pieces” in 1950s), and who was a teacher of Maria Itkina, Blok’s mother, at the Moscow Conservatory. Another branch, that is beginning from Tchaikovsky as well, goes first to Sergey Taneev and his pupil Nikolay Zhiliayev, who always admired Grieg’s art (tried to learned Norwegian and came to Norway to visit Grieg in 1904), and

further to Zhiliayev's friend and pupil, a composer Anatoly Alexandrov, Blok's teacher at the Music College.

Vladimir Blok died in August 1996. In the obituary was written, "It is impossible to identify the profession of this man of unprecedented energy and initiative. Just a Musician, a Musician from a capital "M". Because he applied his talent in all the flows of music and public life. <...> He loved the life he lived. Mr. Blok's impulsive and exploding character was not letting him to stay indifferent towards the subjective judgments, wrong actions and injustice".