

Article

Progressive Rock from the Union of Soviet Composers

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Abstract: This article focuses on the influence of Western progressive rock music on some innovative members of the Union of Soviet Composers, who were open to new trends and influences. These Soviet composers' interest in progressive rock was not only intellectual, but also had serious practical implications. During the 1970s, several composers made attempts to create original works following various styles of prog rock. Occasionally, they incorporated elements of prog rock into their otherwise experimental compositions. One can see the influences of prog rock in the works of prominent composers such as A. Pärt, S. Gubaidulina, V. Martynov, V. Silvestrov, V. Artemiev, G. Kancheli, and A. Schnittke. After discussing the development of the prog rock tradition in the USSR and dwelling on the peculiarities of prog rock as a genre, I focus on three works created by Soviet composers under the influence of prog traditions: the 4th Symphony for orchestra and rhythm section by Latvian composer Imants Kalniņš, which follows the traditions of symphonic rock; an avant-garde rock opera titled "Flemish Legend" by Leningrader Romuald Grinblat, written to the lyrics by dissident bard Yulii Kim and heavily influenced by the twelve-tone system; and a suite of art-rock songs titled "On the Wave of My Memory" composed by pop composer David Tukhmanov, based on the poems of poets with a "decadent" reputation in the Soviet ideological context. All of these composers had to create within the Soviet ideological restrictions on modern and rock music, in particular, and all of them had to engage in their own trickster-like antics to produce and perform their works. Although they are little remembered today, these works stand as unexpected and singular achievements of Soviet composers during complex times.

Keywords: soviet music; progressive rock; popular music; classical music; soviet culture; union of soviet composers; censorship; highbrow



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The popularity of Western and, particularly, Anglo-American rock music in the Soviet Union is well attested and described in numerous journalistic articles, books, scholarly works, memoirs, and oral histories. Therefore, we will take this popularity and its overall influence on different levels of Soviet cultural production as given and as something that currently does not need to be discussed in detail.

In musical circles, the influence of Western rock music generally spread in two rather unrelated though occasionally intersecting strata of musicians involved in musical production during the past 30 years of the Soviet regime. These artists were the ones who were primarily deeply affected and inspired by Western rock music in their own creative processes.

The first stratum consisted of the self-thought underground musicians who, inspired by the sounds coming from the West, first attempted to recreate this sound to the best of their abilities and later started making music of their own, often departing to various degrees from the initial Western paradigms. We are mainly talking here about the young people often making their music clandestinely or semi-clandestinely and trying to avoid being noticed and sanctioned by the all-seeing eyes of Soviet ideological watchdogs.

The watchdogs themselves went through periods of different attitudes towards rock music in the USSR, ranging from surprised watchfulness to cautious acceptance and attempts to direct and co-opt this new musical fad sweeping the country's youth; to

direct hostility, severe criticism, bans, ostracism, and more attempts to co-opt the musical movement; and eventually to KGB surveillance and persecution.

The ones in the underground rock milieu that the ideological overseers of musical culture managed to co-opt were herded into so-called “professional” musical collectives known in the country as VIA (Vocal Instrumental Ensembles) that would sign up with official Soviet performance organizations such as regional Philharmonic societies. This would allow the VIA musicians to openly perform in official venues and earn money for their performances as well as royalties for their recordings on state recording label Melodia and for radio play. Such work often turned out to be quite lucrative, though the musicians had to surrender their artistic freedom and harness their free-wheeling rock ‘n’ roll spirit by playing tame watery ersatz of the music they were initially hoping to play.

VIA production is characterized by an overwhelming emphasis on Soviet-style earnest and unaffected pop vocals with the front man (or occasionally woman) almost never playing any instruments, minimizing electronic sound, and avoiding any distorted sound effects (electric guitars were especially hated by the music overseers), taming the work of the rhythm sections though giving certain liberty to a bass guitar, slowing down tempos, and turning down the music’s volume. But the most disagreeable of all elements of VIA musical products is the instilled and demanded uniformity of the musical sound, vocal stylistics, and upbeat, life-affirming lyrics imbued with optimistic KOMSOMOL romanticism. Another element uniformly encountered in VIA music is the insistent introduction of local, often ethnic, folkloric traditions to signify the multiethnic diversity of the brotherly family of Soviet nations. These attempts often struck as fake and insincere nods towards Soviet multinational policy.¹ Musicians who made a conscious choice to remain “unprofessional” and unaffiliated with concert organizations chose the road of struggle: struggle to practice their skills, to perform, to avoid persecution, to be heard, and to remain relevant to their fans.

We will find the second stratum of Soviet musicians affected and influenced by Western rock among so-called “official” composers, who were members of the prestigious and powerful Union of Soviet Composers.

Most of these composers received classical musical training via numerous Soviet music schools, conservatories, and music institutes. Many of them were writing music in classical veins, such as symphonic, chamber, choral, and so on. Others, upon receiving rigorous classical music education, moved towards writing popular music of different sorts in genres allowed in the Soviet Union.

These composers, whom we will call “academic” composers for the sake of complicity, like everyone else in the country, received their dose of Western rock music starting with Elvis Presley and Little Richard and moving through artists such as the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Kinks, and Beach Boys. They found some of this music interesting, and they rejected some of it, until the late 1960s when they finally started to really pay attention to the new sounds coming from the West: the sounds of psychedelia and progressive rock.

The interest of Soviet “academic” composers and performers in progressive or art or symphonic rock in the late 1960s and early 1970s is well documented through the testimonies of many such musicians found in interviews and memoirs, and is described in studies by Western scholars such as Kevin Karnes, Peter J. Schmelz, and others.

This interest was the most vocally attested by Moscow composer Vladimir Martynov [1946], his comrade in arms and wife violinist Tatiana Grindenko [1946], their colleague pianist and new music promoter Alexey Liubimov [1944], and Latvian composer Imants Kalnins [1941].

Martynov remembered his introduction to progressive rock via his affiliation with the Scriabin Museum and Electronic Music Studio in Moscow (Martynov 2015, p. 188)², stating “. . . the musical preferences of the studio (the electronic music studio named after Scriabin) started shifting from Stockhausen, Varese, and Pierre Schaeffer towards German electronic-psychedelic groups like ‘Tangerine Dream’ and towards Klaus Schulze, with whom some correspondence even began”. He also stated the following: “I joined the studio in 1973

and found myself in the midst of this process, and by 1974, from the former composition staff at the studio, only Artemiev remained, who by that time had also changed his attitude towards the avant-garde. Our idols became Fripp, McLaughlin, and Gabriel, who, as we believed then, “returned music to music”, freeing it from avant-garde convulsions and eruptions. I was convinced that with rock music, not only a fundamental renewal of music was connected but also a renewal of life itself, and many ideas of the ‘End of Time of Composers’ emerged precisely because of the studio situation at that time”.

Martynov particularly stressed the influence that the English prog rock band King Crimson, especially their highly innovative 1974 album titled “Red”, had on him and his colleagues. He also mentioned the influence of quintessential English prog bands such as Yes and Gentle Giant.³

Martynov’s wife and musical collaborator violinist Tatiana Grindenko also recalled the deep impression that prog rock left on the musicians gathered around the Scriabin Museum Electronic Music Studio and vividly described her own initial exposure to the genre as follows:

“In principle I was an extraordinarily academic musician, but once, after a concert at the Scriabin Museum (it was a “normal concert), I had already put my coat on in the cloakroom and from behind the walls there were these completely phenomenal sounds. I was so floored, was taken by surprise, turned around, and it turned out to be the electronic studio and one of the discs by—I don’t remember, either the group Yes or Pink Floyd (it was completely old)—was playing. In general, I was floored and generally understood that without that I could no longer exist—quite simply couldn’t live. And thus, with that music began my general interest in new music, teal new music—from there [to] Stockhausen [and] Cage”.⁴

Something similar was recalled by the pianist Alexei Liubimov (Liubimov 2015, pp. 174–75), one of the musicians gathered around Scriabin Museum/Studio: “Through Volodya Martynov and Eduard Artemiev, my first encounter with rock music happened: these were classic rock bands like ‘King Crimson’, ‘Genesis’, ‘Pink Floyd’, the first electronic groups. . . . I craved the energy of rock and a different kind of communicativeness. It didn’t happen immediately; one thing grew out of another”.⁵

Another member of the Scriabin Museum/Studio group, the electronic music composer Edward Artemiev [1937] (known for his film scores for Andrei Tarkovsky cult films), described the influence of prog rock on his colleagues as follows: “Naturally, Pink Floyd was the first such shaker. Then—Genesis, Yes. There was the German group Ash Ra Temple that then became Tangerine Dream, the same group—Klaus Schulze, [Bryan] Eno, Bryan Adams, Robert Fripp with King Crimson, such intellectual rock music. It was a very strong influence. . . and later . . . [] that side of the music grew more. Not academic, intellectual music, but more connected with . . . rock”.⁶

As a result of these impressions and influences in the early 1970s, Martynov, Grindenko, and Artem’ev, with the help of other musicians, created their own prog rock band at the Scriabin Museum named Boomerang, which was supposed to become the first Russian prog/art rock band. Unfortunately, very few recordings of this original line up of the band have survived, and Artem’ev’s later work with the band of the same name as the 1986 Melodia LP *Teplo Zemli/Warmth of the Earth*,⁷ does not represent the early avant-garde King Crimson-influenced prog rock experimentations from the Scriabin Museum/Studio group but rather ventures into the realm of “cosmic” pop electronica.

Peter Schmelz describes the importance of these early attempts at prog rock as follows: “Although they were not the first Soviet rock group, Boomerang was one of the first to cross the boundaries separating “serious”, “academic”, “intellectual” music from more “popular” genres in the Soviet Union” (Schmelz 2009, p. 267).

This particular terminology, namely “serious,” “academic,” and “intellectual”, brings us to the point of why it turned out that progressive rock particularly became the one genre of rock music that left the strongest impression on Soviet “academic” composers.

Bearing in mind the preoccupation of these young (and sometimes not very young) Soviet composers with prog's tendency towards being "serious" and therefore "complex" (unlike primitive pop) music, it is easy to see why prog had such a grasp on their imaginations.

Let us consider what prog really was.

"Progressive rock ("prog") was very much a product of the late-1960s *Zeitgeist*, wherein virtuosity, complexity and the "album art form" assumed greater significance within the newly named "rock" field", as put by Stuart Borthwick and Ron Moy in their book *Popular Music Genres: An Introduction*.⁸

They continue describing the specifics of this genre as follows:

"Much of prog's complexity resulted from broad appropriation of previous forms—some "popular", such as psychedelic pop and R&B, and some less mainstream, such as jazz, avant-garde, folk and classical. From psychedelia, prog took its willingness to experiment within the studio, particularly regarding effects, overdubbing and stereo imaging. The studio-as-instrument approach allowed to produce complex solo works by composers or multi-instrumentalists such as Todd Rundgren, Rick Wakeman and Mike Oldfield. From jazz and avant-garde, it took both virtuosity and experimentation in atonality and *musique concrete*. From folk, it took timbres, some lyrical concerns and the use of pre-classical modes and intervals. From Western classical tradition, it took extended structures, complex and shifting time signatures, and formal concepts such as counterpoint, recapitulation, the tone poem, and the figure. In addition, the genre was heavily influenced, both structurally and spiritually, by what we could loosely term "the East" in all its 1960's manifestations. Literary and artistic genres such as gothic and the pastoral also had an influence, partially upon instrumentation, lyrics, and implied identity" (Borthwick and Moy 2004, p. 63).

"The defining features of progressive rock, those elements that serve to separate it from other contemporary styles of popular music, are all drawn from the European classical tradition. These hallmarks include the continuous use of tone colors drawn from symphonic or church music, the employment of lengthy sectional forms such as the song cycle or the multimovement suite, and the preoccupation with dazzling metrical and instrumental virtuosity", as Edward Mocan puts it in his magisterial study of progressive rock titled *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (Macan 1997, p. 16).

The fact that this "European classical tradition" so dear to Soviet conservatory-trained composers "was crucial to many musicians, particularly classically trained keyboardists such as Keith Emerson, Tony Banks and Rick Wakeman" (Borthwick, Moy, p. 64), made prog an acceptable form of pop music, which, in its basic mainstream non-prog forms, was generally looked down upon by highbrow "academic" musicians.

This sense of hierarchy of musical genres, particularly pop-musical genres, played a crucial role in the processing and acceptance of prog by these Soviet musicians.

Alfred Schnittke [1934] notoriously had difficult relations with rock that ranged from interest and acceptance to utter rejection, as Peter Schmelz attested: "Throughout his life, Schnittke veered back and forth between more positive and more severe attitudes to popular genres. His sister said, "... Alfred said to me: "You know, there are neither bad nor good genres, there is only bad and good music in any in any genre" (Schmelz 2021, p. 46).

Schnittke's slightly younger contemporary Latvian composer Imants Kalnins (b. 1941) was not only known for accepting rock music in all its diversity and complexity, but also writing it for a variety of underground or semi-underground Latvian rock bands including 2xBBM, Menuets, Perkons, and Turaidas Rose. He is also credited as the first Soviet composer who authored a rock opera titled *Ei, jus tur!/Hey, you there!* based on the play by William Saroyan (1971) long before the much more well-known Soviet rock operas by Alexander Zhurbin Orpheus and Eurydice (1975) and Alexey Rybnikov Juno and Avos (1981) were written.

I remember how he notoriously pronounced in conversation with my father musicologist Elkhonon Yoffe during which I was present in the composer's apartment in Riga, that for him (similarly to Schnittke), there is no high or low music, but only good or bad music, and that he does not see the difference between Mozart and The Beatles. These words,

which became well known in Latvia, caused an entire revolution within my 16-year-old brain as well in the minds of many of my contemporaries and led to liberation from the yoke of genre hierarchies.⁹

In 1974, I was also present at a virtual meltdown that classical traditionalist composer Boris Tishchenko [1939] suffered after I introduced him to Kalnins's 4th (rock) Symphony (which will be discussed later in this text), which he slammed with disgust for being a "bacchanal of anarchy where one moment the author is imbibing wine, the other frolicking naked in the woods and another is having sex with a woman".¹⁰

The abovementioned statements by Kalnins and Schnittke, however, exactly underline the perception of genre hierarchy that dominated the views of musical culture by classically trained Soviet composers.

Peter Schmelz particularly pays attention to how Schnittke characterized the presence of polystylistic pop music elements in his work. He quotes from Jurgen Kochel's undated interview with the composer, where he says, "The First (Symphony, 1969–1974, M.Y.) is the central work for me, because it contains everything that I have had done in my life, even the dad and the kitschy—film music too—as well as the most sincere. All of this occurs in this composition" (Schmelz 2021, p. 150).

What is very important here, as Schmelz points out, is that "His word choices—bad and kitschy—reflect a stratified sense of musical styles that had calcified over the late 1970s" (Schmelz 2021, p. 150).

Nevertheless, despite such cultural prejudice and highbrow suspicion towards "lower" genres, numerous Soviet "academic" composers turned to prog and occasionally used its elements to some degree in their compositions.

Aside from the purely prog rock work of the abovementioned Scriabin Museum/Studio-based rock band Boomerang, we can find certain rock elements in Schnittke's Symphony No. 1 (1969–1974), his 3rd Symphony (1981), Concerto Grosso No. 2 (1981–82), Credo from his Requiem (1975), and some of his film music. In all of these compositions, Schnittke uses instruments borrowed from traditional rock's inventory such as an electric guitar, electric bass, drum kit, and synthesizer.

When speaking about Estonian composer Arvo Part [1935], musicologist Kevin Karnes says that "Picking up on the model of Schnittke's Requiem, Part scored Calix (originally created in 1976 and later became a part of larger work Miserere created in 1989 M.Y.) for electric guitar and bass, and Tallinn premiere of Modus (1976 M.Y.) featured an extended electric-guitar break at its climatic moment" (Karnes 2021, p. 28).

Georgian composer Gya Kancheli [1935] utilized a similar array of rock instruments in his 4th Symphony (1974), 7th Symphony (1986), and composition titled Styx (1999).

Vladimir Martynov wrote the rock opera *Seraphic Visions* from St. Francis of Assisi (1978), which was performed by Boomerang. Unfortunately, I could not find any recordings of this opera nor any mentions of it ever being recorded.

What is obvious is that all of these composers used rock instruments and idioms in a creative and experimental manner rather than in a conventional way to create a contrast, to add expressiveness to their works, and to create dialogue between different musical worlds and emotional realms.

Even if progressive rock did not have a major influence on the works of these Soviet "academic" composers, it provided them with inspiration and an appreciation for different musical expressions, styles, and genres. Progressive rock also reflected the cultural and artistic diversity and dynamism that these composers experienced and contributed to in their own ways.

Indeed, for all of the suppression and repression of culture during the Brezhnev era, known as the "time of stagnation", the 1970s was a time of remarkable experimentations and unexpected discoveries and achievements.

As pianist, modern music enthusiast, and promoter Alexey Liubimov remembered, the 1970s was the "time of incredible discoveries" for him and many of his fellow musicians (Liubimov 2015, p. 168).

In this context, I will focus on the little known or well-forgotten 1970s forays by Soviet “academic” composers into the territory of prog or symphonic or art rock. There are several reasons why such forays were very few and far in between, why the ones that were made could only be undertaken by “academic” composers who achieved official status, and why they all belonged to the prestigious Union of Soviet Composers, and these need to be briefly touched upon.

The main reason is that prog, as mentioned above, is a complex form of rock music and requires technological and financial bases that were absolutely inaccessible to Soviet underground “basement” bands and even to official Soviet pop VIA bands. Thus, musical works in this genre could only be produced with the support and approval of major Soviet musical and cultural organizations, such as symphony orchestras and musical theaters, and with access to recording studios of the state recording firm named Melodia. Prog rock required modern musical equipment and instruments; large ensembles of professional classically trained musicians from string sections, ensembles, chamber orchestras, or symphony orchestras; and sophisticated modern electronic instruments, recording equipment, and recording engineers. And these were only accessible to “official” composers and only if they were particularly lucky and smart about convincing Soviet musical authorities that their music did not present any ideological danger to the populace.

As I said above, all composers that engaged in prog-like activities in the USSR were influenced or even obsessed with the Western prog rock that they were well familiar with. And all of them, being seasoned actors on the Soviet musical scene, knew that it would be very hard to produce works like Western prog rock classics in their country, which they were influenced by at the end of the 1960s and through the 1970s.

Indeed, in the USSR, it was impossible to make music similar to that of Procol Harum, Moody Blues, Pink Floyd, Electric Light Orchestra, Deep Purple, or most of all, King Crimson, which had a cultish following among some Soviet composers. Soviet composers could try to make prog, but to try that, they had to lead a double existence, which was quite typical at that time for a variety of Soviet cultural actors. For the most part, at their day jobs, they were writing music that did not challenge accepted socialist realist standards be it symphonic, film, or pop music. But then, on their days off, they would allow themselves to foray into the forbidden zone of experimentation.

From the late nineteen-sixties through the nineteen-seventies and into the early nineteen-eighties, the hottest idea possessing these prog rock aficionados was the idea of fusing rock music with symphonic, chamber, Neo-Baroque, choral, or big band music. This was achieved very successfully in the West by numerous prog bands, and this idea was heavily in the air. Think in this regard of straightforward fusions of rock and symphonic music as it is found in Procol Harum’s album *Procol Harum Live: In Concert with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra* (1972), John Lord’s of Deep Purple album *Windows* (1974), the Mahavishnu Orchestra’s *Apocalypse* (1974), or *Eldorado*, a symphony by the Electric Light Orchestra (1974). Many of the greats of Soviet experimental music from the 1960s and 1970s engaged in this fusion to some degree. As I mentioned, you can find elements of rock (mostly the sounds of drum sets, bass guitars, and, occasionally, electric guitars) incorporated into the works of Arvo Part, Gya Kancheli, Alfred Shnitke, Vladimir Martynov, and Eduard Artem’ev.

“We live in the gaps between the gears,” as stated by the pianist Alexei Liubimov, who was responsible for organizing series of concerts and festivals of unofficial and semi-official music in the 1970s’ USSR (Liubimov 2015). Kyiv composer Valentin Sil’vestrov [1937], whose music was performed at these festivals, added the following: “We could do anything, because we lived in the holes in the system” (Karnes, p. 1).

As an example of such an attempt to escape the system and to produce works that did not fit in it, I am going to touch on the works of three Soviet composers who are little known in this context.

Latvian composer Imants Kalnins, Latvian–Leningradian composer Romuald Grinblat [1930], and Moscow composer David Tuchmanov [1940] came from different musical

realms. All of them were what was known in the USSR as “official” “academic” composers, classically educated products of Soviet music schools and conservatories, and all of them were members of the prestigious and powerful Union of Soviet Composers, a membership which assured a comfortable lifestyle and many perks that could only be dreamt of by most of their Soviet compatriots.

Musically, however, these composers could not be more different: Kalnins, the author of several symphonies and oratorios, could be viewed more as a classical Russian-European-style traditionalist in the Dmitri Shostakovich vein and appreciated by the master himself. However, in the mid-1960s, like many of his contemporaries, he fell under the spell of Western rock, specifically art rock (which is often interchangeably referred to as prog rock). The composer said the following in a 2019 interview: “I like rock, the so-called rock genre, but this genre is also very broad. I love art-rock, Pink Floyd, ELP, Yes—a wonderful group. . . I even like Deep Purple because they have a kind of symphonic element” (Savitskaia 2019)¹¹.

In an adventurous twist that is unusual for a Soviet composer, Kalnins managed to share his successful career as an official classical composer with the countercultural existence of a cult-like figure in an underground rock music scene in Latvia, where he composed and performed with a variety of rock bands.

Grinblat, who moved to Latvia after he was expelled from the Leningrad Conservatory in the mid-1950s for being “professionally unsuitable”, also tended to lean towards classical forms and authored numerous symphonies and a very well-received ballet titled *Rigonda*, all of which were openly performed in Soviet Latvia. He had a chip on his shoulder, however, because he was one of very few if not virtually the only Soviet composer who wrote mostly in the dodecaphonic style, and he was a strict adherent of the 12-tone system, which is known for its inaccessibility and was frowned upon by the Soviet musical watchdogs, which clearly hampered the advancement of his career.

David Tuchmanov, the most well known of the three, does not need much introduction as he is beloved in the USSR as a classically trained author of hugely popular pop songs such as his greatest hit, “Victory Day”, which is probably the most popular Soviet song dedicated to the country’s victory in WWII.

As different as these composers were, they were united in their art by their apparently common interest in the stylistics and practices of Western prog.

All three came to artistic maturity to the sound of rock written in this tradition, which, in the West, was manifested in overwhelming interests in musical virtuosity, structural and tonic complexity, and a tendency towards large forms, which often blended rock/pop or jazz with Western symphonic or Baroque traditions. Many Western bands of the times worked with string sections or incorporated chamber or symphony orchestras and choruses into the bodies of their work.

These three basically ideologically loyal members of the Composers’ Union (Grinblat was even a member of the Communist Party) fell under the spell of Western prog/art/symphonic rock and created works that were officially produced in the USSR, which, according to the Soviet socialist realism logic, could never have been produced in this country. By not being composers with dissident tendencies grounded in spirituality, such as their contemporaries with strong devotional and religious bent, namely Estonian Arvo Part, Muscovite Vladimir Martynov, or Georgian Gya Kancheli, they managed to convince the Composers Union’s “khudsovet”/“creative council” (a council which was supposed to approve or disapprove proposed musical compositions) to give them the green light for their three unique pieces. Thus, the first (and only) Soviet symphonic rock album (“4th Symphony” by I. Kalnins, the first Soviet avant-garde rock opera *Flemish Legend* by R. Grinblat with libretto by Soviet dissident singer-songwriter Yuliy Kim) and the first art rock/art song suite (the studio LP *On the Wave of my Memory*) by D. Tuchmanov came to existence.

All three, as it was traditional with prog music, had a very strong interest in the interconnection of music and poetic word, and all three set poems to music in these

compositions. Rather, I should say that they attempted to do so because things did not always work out the way the authors planned.

Let us consider each of these works in detail.

Kalnins's "4th "rock" Symphony" please insert the appropriate (#12) footnote number here and also put this reference in footnotes followed the traditional four-part symphonic form, and in it, the composer partially reused some of his earlier rock material. The first movement, based on the 1970 song "Septinas Skumjas Zvaigznes/Seven Sorrowful Stars" by Kalinins's rock band 2xBBM, intensely builds in ostinato toward a grandiose dramatic finale. The rock element was enhanced by incorporating sounds of a drum set and bass guitar into the symphony orchestra that combined rock-like tempos and rhythms of the symphony, which created an intensely rock-like musical experience that was unheard of until then. And there was a problem and a scandal built into the composition's original idea. The fourth part was supposed to be a song cycle of English-language poems by American beat poet Kelly Chery with whom Kalnins was in a romantic relationship. Understandably, the "hudsovet" would not have any poems by any American poet, let alone in English. In order to save the symphony, Kalnins had to rewrite the fourth part without lyrics, which led to the creation of an entirely new work retaining most of the same music in the end. (In my opinion, it is actually a better work, and today, both recorded versions are available.) Imants Kalnins states that he was encouraged by Arvo Part himself to be as daring as he was: "Write the craziest thing that enters your head, Arvo Part told me. Only then will your work be worth anything. And I listened, as if to my teacher. And I wrote it".¹²

Romuald Grinblat's rock opera *Flemish Legend/Flamandskaia legenda*, please insert footnote number and an appropriate footnote see me response in references based on the Charles De Coster novel *Legend of Thiel Ulenspiegel*, was written in 1977–78 for the Leningrad VIA Poiushchie gitary/Singing guitars that was somewhat surprisingly specialized in rock operas. The libretto was written by the well-known underground dissident bard (singer-songwriter) Yuliy Kim [1936], which already guaranteed a certain element of ideological subversion. Grinblat was notoriously fascinated by prog rock, though his opera can mainly be called prog because it was produced by means of rock band elements and was conceptually meant to be a rock opera (which is the genre entirely based on prog tradition). Grinblat, being a follower of Arnold Schoenberg, was a strict adherent of the dodecaphonic system and was averse to melodicism. Therefore, it was said that the opera had "lots of music but no melodies. . .".¹³ Indeed, there is nothing singable in the entire opera; the songs are mostly cantillations (recitative) to music *terce*, often striking and emotionally loaded. In the production of this opera, numerous miracles occurred, the greatest of which being that such a difficult and sonically demanding and unusual work was allowed to be performed, and that the story it told was permeated with Aesopian allusions to the present-day social and political circumstances in the country.

One can say that Grinblat's work probably came out much before its time and was therefore not well understood by Soviet rock opera enthusiasts and only lasted through a meager 150 performances before the opera was discontinued. Yuliy Kim remembers that he sadly joked at that time: "Lovers of rock were hearing opera, and lovers of opera were hearing rock." He added "This music will find its listeners later".¹⁴

Indeed, today, it is being reevaluated and even has a certain following in Russia.¹⁵ Opera's production dramatist Iurii Dimitrin [1934], who is responsible for working on numerous Soviet musicals in retrospect, said the following about Grinblat's work: "Yet the [Griblat's] music is complex, unusual for the average musical lover. Nevertheless, today there are already over a dozen websites dedicated to it. Listening and re-listening to this music, I gradually realized that it's the wonderful work of a genuine innovator. It opens new pathways in the development of rock music and rock opera. Surprisingly, this is the only 'rock' composition by Greenblat. Yet it's composed from the standpoint of high music. Some academic musicians, after examining the opera's score, call it ingenious and even a great operatic composition".¹⁶

As mentioned above, there were earlier and later examples of Soviet rock operas, the first being *Ei, jus tur!/Hello out there!* which was written in 1971 (performed 1983) by the same Latvian Imants Kalnins and based upon William Saroyan's 1941 one-act play. Far more well known in the USSR was Aleksandr Zhurbin's 1975 rock-opera/musical *Orpheus and Euridice*, which was also performed by the same Leningrad VIA Poiushchie Gitary at the opera studio of the Leningrad Conservatory. Another hugely popular Soviet rock opera was Alexey Rubnikov's *Juno and Avos*, which was based upon the poetry of Andrei Voznesensky and first performed in 1981 in Moscow's Lenkom Theatre.

These two operas certainly enjoyed greater public appreciation and success, and the question arises why I choose to bypass them and to focus on the far more obscure work of Romuald Grinblat. My answer is simple: Zhurbin's and Rybnikov's works were still created in VIA manner with all of the shortcomings of the style inherent in VIA, which is based on the VIA-specific sonar and stylistic limitations common to Soviet pop music.

Grinblat's music, even if performed by the same Poiushchie Gitary VIA, is not even comparable to the light pop of Zhurbin and Rybnikov. The complexity of his music is based, in its core and essence, on highbrow avant-garde tradition inspired by Arnold Schoenberg and his ilk, putting it entirely in its own category, which certainly has nothing in common with Soviet VIA pop. Reminiscences of the Russian journalist M. Sadchikov in which he describes the first encounter of the Poiushchie Gitary musicians with Grinblat's music are very telling in this regard:

"When Romuald Grinblat introduced the musicians to opera, the guys were simply stunned. "Orpheus" was still based on familiar pop music material for them. But Grinblat proposed such an opera which, in a different orchestration, could easily have made it onto the repertoire of academic theaters. The complexity of intonation, rhythm, the external angularity of melody—these non-pop characteristics of the orchestration—were something that yesterday's VIA musicians could easily lose their composure over".¹⁷

According to his own account, pop music composer David Tuchmanov decided to create his prog rock suite *Po volne moei pamiati/On the wave of my memory* please put here footnote #18 because of his assertion of his own growing confidence in his craft and his ability to write music that was not worse than that of his Western colleagues: "There existed Soviet song with its specific characteristics, but our music began to be influenced by another type coming from the West. The 'Melodiya' label relaxed its censorship in selecting works. At that time, having composed several well-known tracks, I realized that I was not fully fulfilling my creative ambitions. I attempted to experiment—to merge what I knew in the realm of classical music with electronic sound and arrangements. But back then, I thought that my works were too complex to be understood, that people simply wouldn't grasp them properly".¹⁸

His idea was to create a concept album in a suite form by focusing on poems selected specifically for this purpose. He attributed his attraction to the suite form to The Beatles' influence: "Of course, this idea was inspired by the Beatles because it was, they who began releasing albums with conceptual titles and a suite-based approach".¹⁹

Most of the poems selected were by Russian and European poets of dubious reputation from the Soviet point of view, including ones that were generally viewed with suspicion for their decadence, frivolity, and even amorality. Basically, most of the poets selected fall under this category: Maximilian Voloshin, Anna Akhmatova, Sapfo, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Noeholas Guillen. The poems were set to music featuring robust electronic sounds, synthesizer special effects, and string sections. And the songs were performed by top-notch Soviet-official and semi-underground musicians and singers, several of whom emigrated to the West right after the completion of the album. Being a seasoned member of the Composers' Union, Tuchmanov knew that as a prog rock concept album, his project could not be executed. Therefore, he undertook simple but effective deceit: he told the "knudsovet" that he had written a cycle of classical art songs in which a number of international poems of high quality were set to music. Then, he played his cycle for the "khudsovet" as a classical piano set in a much slower tempo and somber

tonality. Tuchmanov remembers, “I was afraid that anything related to pop would be prohibited. But I managed to mislead the artistic council. I said it would be a classical performance—and sang it in a classical style. Then the rhythm was changed”²⁰.

The cycle was approved without reservation, and then he ran to the studio and recorded his prog suite. Thus, with an official blessing and with the utilization of Soviet state equipment, probably the most successful and popular rock recording of the Soviet era was born, which was not supposed to exist, and the fact that it was made is still a miracle.

None of these three composers had a political agenda beyond their artistic aspirations to expand the framework of what is familiar, possible, and permissible in the USSR. They learned a lot from their Western musical colleagues and possessed the skill and professionalism that allowed them to function in a seemingly unfamiliar musical realm on par with their Western peers, but also to create unique works of art of enduring value. What is the most remarkable in their achievement was the very fact that their musical compositions even saw the light of day under Soviet ideological restrictions that constricted creative processes in the country. Although they are forgotten today (except for D. Tuchmanov’s album), they contributed to expanding and enriching the cannon of Soviet underground or semi-underground culture, which was paradoxically created in an open view officially and above the ground with support and financing by the Soviet cultural authorities.

On their way to accomplishing their projects, all three composers encountered their own types of hurdles that had to do specifically with the lyrics that they chose to use in their compositions: 1. Kalnins had to deal with a total ban of the lyrics he wanted to use. And in the end, his initial work was fully transformed by censorship, which led to a production of an entirely new musical entity, an unexpected production of work that was different from the author’s initial intent. 2. Grinblat and Kim heavily relied on the use of Aesopian language to avoid censorship restrictions. 3. Tuchmanov engaged in the full-fledged use of trickery, where he used deceit to obtain the Composers Union’s commission’s permission to record his album.

In all three cases, we observe peculiar mimicry (to use Serguei Alex. Oushakine’s concept put forth in his article titled “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat”)²¹ of rock music when these composers were hiding their prog rock experiments in plain view under the cloak of “classical music”, which is the type of art that was accepted and encouraged by the Soviet cultural tradition. In the 19th century, classical music, particularly romantic and nationalist symphonic music, was the bread and butter of Soviet symphony orchestras, was popularized among the population, taught and studied in conservatories and music schools, and was accepted by the musical establishment and audience as the golden standard of “serious music” that masses of so-called “cultivated” (kul’turnyi) Soviet citizens were supposed to be exposed to and enjoy.

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Notes

¹ Only a lazy person does not criticize VIA. See more about this Soviet musical phenomenon in Sergei Zhariov’s article (<https://web.archive.org/web/20170816000330/http://soz-data-ccount.livejournal.com/61042.html>) (accessed on 20 March 2024). Aleksei Petrov’s article on VIA can be found at <https://web.archive.org/web/20090209003336/http://soviet-via.ru/page.php?id=56> (accessed on 20 March 2024).

² (Martynov 2015) Martynov, Vladimir. 2015. *Povorot 1974–1975 godov*. In *Eti Strannye Semidesiatye, Ili Poteria Nevinnosti: Esse, Interv’iu, Vospominaniia*. Edited by G. Kizeval’ter. Moscow: Novoe literarturnoe obozrenie, p. 188. passage in Russian: “. . . музыкальные пристрастия студии (электронной музыки имени Скрябина) стали перемещаться от Штокхаузена, Вареза и Пьера Шефера к немецким электронно-психоделическим группам типа «Tangerine Dream» и к Клаусу Шульце, с которым завязалась даже какая-то переписка.” «Я попал на студию в 1973 году и оказался в середине этого процесса, а к 1974—му из прежнего композиторского состава на студии остался один Артемьев, который к тому времени тоже изменил отношение к авангарду. Нашими кумирами стали Фрипп, Маклафлин и Габриэл, которые, как

мы тогда считали, «вернули музыку музыке», освободив ее от авангардистских конвульсий и пуканий. Я был уверен в том, что с рок-музыкой связано не только кардинальное обновление музыки, но и обновление самой жизни, и многие идеи «Конца времени композиторов» возникли благодаря именно тогдашней студийной ситуации”.

³ (Martynov 2011) Vladimir Martynov talks about the role of King Crimson’s album *Red* and other influential prog bands at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFChZpiG3Js> (accessed on 6 December 2023).

⁴ See Tat’yana Grindenko, interview by author, Moscow, 12 January 2001 in Schmelz, Peter J. 2009. From Scriabin to Pink Floyd: The ANS Synthesizer and the Politics of Soviet Music between Thaw and Stagnation. In *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties*. Edited by Robert Adlington. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 266.

⁵ (Liubimov 2015) Liubimov, A. 2015. *Vremia radostnykh otrytii*. In *Eti Strannye Semidesiatye, Ili Poteria Nevinnosti: Esse, Interv’iu, Vospominaniia*. Edited by G. Kizeval’ter. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, pp. 168–84.

Passage (2015, pp. 174–75) in Russian: “. . . через Володю Мартынова и Эдуарда Артемьева—происходит мое первое знакомство с рок-музыкой: это были классические рок-группы «Кинг Кримзон», «Дженезис», «Пинк Флойд», первые электронные группы. [] . . . Захотелось энергетики рока и другой коммуникативности. Это произошло не сразу, а одно выросло из другого”.

⁶ Interview in Yegorova, Vselennaya Eduarda Artem’yeva in Schmelz, Peter J. 2009. From Scriabin to Pink Floyd: The ANS Synthesizer and the Politics of Soviet Music between Thaw and Stagnation. In *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties*. Edited by Robert Adlington. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 267.

⁷ Vinyl album *Artem’ev* (1986).

⁸ Borthwick and Moy (2004, p. 61).

⁹ As remembered by Mark Yoffe.

¹⁰ See note 9 above.

¹¹ Imants Kalnins 2019 interview in Russian (Savitskaia 2019): “Мне нравится рок, так называемый рок-жанр, но этот жанр тоже очень широкий. Люблю арт-рок, Pink Floyd, ELP, Yes—чудесная группа. . . Мне даже Deep Purple нравится, потому что в них есть своего рода симфонизм.” http://inrock.ru/interviews/imant_kalnins_2019 (accessed on 7 December 2023).

¹² A 2023 Review of Imants Kalnins’s 4th Symphony on the Site of National Library of Latvia (2023) (Kalnins 1973): <https://kulturaskanons.lv/en/archive/imants-kalnins/> (presently not accessible).

¹³ Anonymous author under the name “alvish” on the site connected to the memory of Soviet rock star Alexander Gradski (<https://alvisch.narod.ru/>). In Russian (Grinblat 1978): “В опере очень много музыки, но в ней нет мелодий.” <https://alvisch.narod.ru/other/flamand.html> (accessed on 7 December 2023).

¹⁴ Yuliy Kim in email interview with Mark Yoffe, 24 August 2016.

¹⁵ For detailed information about *Flemish Legend*, see the opera’s booklet at http://www.ceo.spb.ru/libretto/kon_lan/buklet_flamand.pdf (accessed on 8 December 2023).

¹⁶ Iurii Dimitrin’s memoir in “7 Iskusstv” online magazine in Russian (Dmitrin n.d.): “А ведь музыка сложная, непривычная для среднестатистического любителя мюзиклов. Тем не менее сегодня ей посвящены уже более десятка сайтов. Слушая и переслушивая эту музыку, я постепенно осознал, что это замечательная работа подлинного новатора. Она открывает какие-то новые двери на путях развития рок-музыки и рок-оперы. А ведь это единственное «роковое» сочинение Гринבלата. Но оно написано с позиций высокой музыки. Некоторые академические музыканты, просмотревшие клавиры оперы, называют ее гениальным и даже великим оперным сочинением.” <https://7i.7iskusstv.com/y2020/nomer7/dimitrin/> (accessed on 8 December 2023).

¹⁷ Memoir of M. Sadchikov in Russian (Sadchikov n.d.): “Когда Ромуальд Гринблат познакомил музыкантов с оперой, ребята просто опешили. «Орфей» всё-таки основывался на знакомом для них материале поп-музыки. А Гринблат предложил такую оперу, которая в другой оркестровке вполне могла попасть в афиши академических театров. Сложность интонации, ритмики, внешняя мелодическая угловатость», незрадный характер оркестровки было от чего растеряться вчерашним музыкантам ВИА.” http://www.ceo.spb.ru/libretto/kon_lan/buklet_flamand.pdf (accessed on 8 December 2023).

¹⁸ David Tuchmanov reminisces about the creation of his album *Po Volne moei Pamiati* in Russian (Tuchmanov 1976): “Существовала советская песня с её специфическими признаками, но на нашу музыку начала влиять другая, пришедшая с Запада. Фирма «Мелодия» ослабила цензуру в отборе произведений. Я, на тот момент написавший несколько известных треков, понимал, что не полностью воплощаю свои творческие амбиции. Попробовал экспериментировать—соединять то, что умел в сфере классики, с электронным звучанием, аранжировкой. Но тогда я думал, что мои произведения слишком непостижимы для понимания, люди их просто не воспримут должным образом”. https://dzen.ru/media/fuzz_music/po-volne-moei-pamiati-1976--istoriia-alboma-ispolniteli-interesnye-fakty-61928bbbe8d6436b1a27d5b6 (accessed on 8 December 2023).

¹⁹ David Tuchmanov’s interview in Russian (Tuchmanov n.d.a): “Конечно, на эту мысль натолкнули “Битлз”, потому что именно они стали выпускать диски с программным названием и сюитным принципом.” <https://novozhilov.at.ua/publ/5-1-0-8> (accessed on 8 December 2023).

- ²⁰ David Tuchmanov's interview in Russian (Tuchmanov n.d.b): "Я опасался, что будет запрещено все, что связано с эстрадой. Но мне удалось художественный совет ввести в заблуждение. Я сказал, что это будет классическое исполнение—и спел под классику. Потом ритм был изменен." <https://novozhilov.at.ua/publ/5-1-0-8> (accessed on 8 December 2023).
- ²¹ Oushakine (2001).

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