

Like Reich On Vodka

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2002 AT 4 A.M.



Anton Batagov: relentless rhythmic repetition for meditative purposes

photo: Courtesy Elena Dubinets

By coincidence I arrived in Moscow the day the *Nord-Ost* theater siege began. I found a population distracted and depressed, but not too traumatized to share musical enthusiasms. I hadn't heard a peep of Russian music in decades—only the occasional Estonian like Arvo Pärt and Lepo Sumera, or displaced Ukrainian like Virko Baley. So I was surprised, given Europe's still-modernist tendencies, to find Russia awash in simple tonality, in brash repetition, in its own cheeky form of post-minimalism. Such a large country, so crowded with musicians, is not so simply summed up in stylistic terms, of course. But in Vladimir Martynov, Pavel Karmanov, Anton Batagov, Georgs Peletsis, Alexander Rabinovitch, Sergei Zagny, and Alexander Bakshi, I found an entire generation of in-your-face tonalists.

I heard a few live performances, mostly by a scintillating and versatile string orchestra called Opus Posth at the Dom Foundation's Alternativa festival (in which I performed). Wider vistas were opened up by dozens of CDs given to me as I was trying to buy them, many of them by Dom's director, Nicolas Dmitriev, others by critic Dmitri Oukhov, sort of the Kyle Gann of Russia, as he described himself: the only person there whose job consists of writing about new experimental music. With typical European obliviousness to conflict-of-interest issues we're hypersensitive to, Oukhov is not only a leading critic but curator of Alternativa and other festivals. The country may be vast, but its new music scene, like everyone's, is a small world.

What's striking about Russian post-minimalism is its gleeful abuse of traditional European harmony. American minimalists drew on Asian and African music and distanced themselves from Europe, but the Russians suffuse Baroque idioms with heavy doses of repetition and gradual process, appending titles like *L'après-midi du Bach* (Martynov). A few composers take a quasi-American approach—notably Batagov, whose recent CD, *The Wheel of the Law*, luxuriates in relentless rhythmic repetition for meditative purposes, accompanied by texts which speak of Buddha-mind and voidness. One of the best young composers, Karmanov, is a lively cross between Bach and early-1980s Steve Reich (one of his pieces even bears the Reichian title *Different... rains*). More often, though, the Russians use minimalist ideas in the service of some theatrical situation in which the repetition seems to allude to madness or some altered mind-state.

For instance, Rabinovitch's *Musique expressive en hommage à Karl Orff* gets stuck on one romantic, arpeggiated riff and articulates it in a dramatic variety of manners, with dynamic explosions and occasional wrong notes. Bakshi goes much further; as he notes in the liner to his *Hamlet Is Dying*, "These sounds are actors, too." His music, recorded by no less than Gidon Kremer, repeats tonal gestures in a high state of tension, separated by portentous silences, suggesting a violinist going mad as a malevolent orchestra tries to follow him.

Often, continuing in the tradition of Shostakovich and Prokofiev, an element of satire seems intended, especially in lyrically tonal works that are so pretty and so obvious that they make you want to tear your hair out. Martynov's *Come In!* (recorded by Opus Posth) is lovely and sentimental in a Grieg-ish sort of way, but resorts to the same twinkly little celeste cadence over and over until you finally decide he's thumbing his nose at you for enjoying the pretty harmonies. Peletsis's *Correspondence Between Peletsis and Martynov* for Opus Posth, which I heard live, was similarly obvious in its square rhythms, but delightfully folk influenced with inventive interplay among textures.

There are also electronic ensembles like Vetrophonia (Nick Sudnik and Alexander Lebedev-Frontov) and Membrana, whose music, though noisy and full of found and environmental sounds, is also (what I heard of it) groove-related, repetitive, and slowly changing. Of course, there is free improvisation in Russia, and more traditional music abounds as well. There, as here, the published music is more conservative and connected to academia, somewhat reminiscent of Scriabin in the cases I discovered (Marina Shmotova and Vladimir Ivannikov, among others). They've got their own well-acknowledged Uptown/Downtown situation. But it was ear-opening to discover a body of post-minimalist music different from America's yet recognizable in its sources, like a distant reflection; a music on which neither 70 years of European serialism nor 70 years of Communist rule appear to have left the slightest lasting trace.



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