

Opera as the highest stage of Socialism

In the 1930s, the USSR undertook a crash program to build opera theatres – and create national operas – across the Union’s newly created republics. The creation of national operas and ballets was just one of the many cultural policies of the 1930s. By following the debates on the proper cultural forms for the new republics, the musical and literary sources for the new operas, and the relationship between European and local musicians, one can trace many of the tensions and contradictions of the Soviet experiment.

Artemy M. Kalinovsky



Above: The Opera in Dushanbe, *Architektura SSSR*, October 1972.

THE FIRST FEW MONTHS I spent in Tajikistan in the summer of 2011 I paid little attention to the Saddridin Ayni Theater of Opera and Ballet. Situated on a square off its main thoroughfare, Rudaki Avenue, the white neoclassical structure was impressive, but its existence seemed unsurprising – after all, every Soviet republican capital had an opera theater, and many medium sized provincial cities did too. (My father, an opera singer, had first fallen in love with the form attending performances in Donetsk in the years after the Great Patriotic War. Donetsk was the closest city to the factory town where he grew up.) In any case, it was already June when I arrived and the season was winding down, so for the moment the theater became for me what it was for many of the city’s residents – a backdrop to the beer and kebab tents spread out along the fountains in the square.

A year later, I was sitting in a Moscow archive when I came across a surprising document: an order to speed up construction of the opera theater in Stalinabad (as Dushanbe was known between 1929 and 1961), and several other cities. What surprised me was the date – didn’t the Soviet Union have bigger things to worry about on the eve of war than building opera houses in far-flung parts of the USSR? I became fascinated with the story of the opera; whilst tracing the history of the theater through archives in Dushanbe and Moscow, Soviet periodicals, and tracking down people who still remembered Soviet-Tajik opera in its heyday, I realized that it held important lessons for me as someone researching economic development in the Soviet era. In the history of Tajik opera, I would find echoes of all of the major contradictions and dilemmas of the Soviet era: between the promise of anti-colonialism and the persistent legacy of imperialism, the celebration of national difference and the drive towards homogenization, the goal of rapid development and transformation and the reality of persistent material shortages.

National liberation and European civilization

The Soviet idea of development was revolutionary – defined by a break with the past – but also teleological. Literary culture was higher than oral culture; polyphony was more advanced than unisonal music. These were, however, not firm beliefs, and the emphasis on the development of ‘high’ culture, even at its height in the 1930s, sat uneasily with a veneration of everything ‘folk’, while the need to define a sharp break with the past often gave way to a reverence of ‘classical’ cultural

production, major literary and artistic figures, and even forms. This confusion helped limit the dominance of any one cultural idea and created the space where the definition of ‘national culture’ could be contested and negotiated.

Although the 1920s are seen as the decade of freedom and experimentation in the arts and the 1930s that of Stalinist bureaucracy bringing the arts under strict control, Katerina Clark reminds us that the latter decade, despite a growing xenophobia and isolationism, saw the biggest push to not just engage with ‘universal’ culture in literature, architecture, and other arts, but also to make Moscow (and, by extension, the Soviet Union) that culture’s centre. This bid for cultural leadership took place in the context of continued insecurity about Russia’s culture advancement relative to Europe.¹ In attempting to bring European techniques to Central Asian music, Soviet composers were not simply looking for fusion, but for the connections that showed the universality of cultures just as they were insistently celebrating their individual particularities.

The 1930s was the decade when major Russian composers like Glinka, Tchaikovsky, and ‘the mighty handful’ were ‘rediscovered.’ Marina Frolova-Walker connects the mission of these Russian composers, who drew inspiration from traditional Russian folk music, with the ‘national opera’ projects of the Soviet period. Glinka’s and Rimsky-Korsakov’s operas drew on epic and heroic Russian legends; these were lionized in the 1930s and formed a model for the new ‘national’ operas. Taking their cues from German romanticism, these composers codified the music they heard in Russia’s villages and found ways of incorporating them into their own composition (either through ‘quotation’ or ‘assimilation’).²

The creation of Russian opera and ballet had put Russia on the cultural map of Europe; European audiences and critics appreciated the touch of exoticism developed within familiar and respected cultural forms. It was proof that Russia was an equal in cultural terms, not just as a military power.³ For the USSR in the 1930s, the creation of ‘national’ operas for its newly ‘liberated’ peoples was thus simultaneously proof that Moscow was the true centre of a ‘universal’ culture (and not of a more provincial, imperialist, bourgeois European one) and that the Soviet Union was helping these nations achieve the kind of elevation that Russia itself had reached vis-à-vis those people who had once looked down on it as something rather wild and uncultured.

Specialists and melodists

Like other development projects, the creation of theatres, orchestras, and especially operas involved groups of specialists who came to organize, teach, and supervise. The idea was that the development of local culture could be accelerated through the exchange of knowledge and expertise: Europeans brought the technical and professional skills, the Tajiks the local knowledge. Stage directors and voice teachers, young composers and choreographers all became a part of this cultural mission. In the periphery these relatively young composers, directors, and musicians could find room for experimentation and creativity that would be limited in the more crowded cultural capitals of Moscow and Leningrad.

The best known of the specialists was Sergei Artemevich Balasanyan, an Armenian born in what became Soviet Turkmenistan and product of Moscow Conservatory’s department of musical theory and history. Balasanyan volunteered to go to Tajikistan in 1936 to help prepare the republic for the festival of Tajik culture that was to be held in Moscow, excited by the opportunity to be a part of the creation of professional Tajik music. Once there he took on the roles of “composer, social-musical worker, [obschestvenno-muzykal’nii deiatel’], folklorist, and pedagogue.”⁴ He would stay in Tajikistan until 1943, serving as the first chairman of the Tajik Composers Union and the artistic director of the opera theatre. Balasanyan’s work with ‘Eastern music’ did not end with Tajikistan. Moscow’s engagement with post-colonial states (and cultures) from the mid 1950s gave Balasanyan new opportunities, and a list of his compositions in the late 1950s and early 1960s seems to follow the itinerary of Nikita Khrushchev’s travels: ‘Afghan suites’ for orchestra in 1956, scoring for radio plays in India and Indonesia, arrangements of children songs from the latter country, a ballet, and a series of songs based on poems by the Indian writer Rabindranth Tagor. He would also write several pieces on African and Latin American themes.

If Balasanyan became the most famous of the ‘specialists’ to work in Tajikistan, Aleksandr Lensky is the composer who remained the longest and had the biggest influence on the musical institutions created in Tajikistan. Like Balasanyan, Lensky came from the periphery (the Mordavian SSR) to Moscow to study, then went to Tajikistan in 1937. He worked as artistic director of the Lahuti Theatre from 1937 to 1941, and later directed the Tajik Philharmonic. Lensky was the

composer of the first Tajik ballet as well as an opera and a number of orchestral pieces. He also became the first secretary of the Tajik Union of Composers after it was founded in 1954, which he tried to use as a bully pulpit to advance the cause of 'modernization' in Tajikistan. Lensky's relationship with local cultural figures became increasingly strained, however, and his failure to learn any Tajik cost him the respect of intellectuals.⁵

What's so revolutionary about opera?

Whatever the project of creating national opera was supposed to be in theory, its realization in practice was a process of constant challenge and renegotiation. For one, there was the problem of defining what was the proper source of national culture. Was it the folk music that ethnographers and musicologists tried to record in villages? Or was it *Shashmaqam*, the music favoured by the elite of cities like Bukhara and Samarqand? And what about plot – did one draw on local legends, socialist themes, or great historical epics like the *Shahnama*? Moreover, how did one combine Central Asian music, which was unisonal, with European forms that called for polyphony? Indeed, the first productions focused on safe 'socialist' themes: a musical called 'Lola' which celebrated the life of Tajik peasants, and the Vose Uprising, "a heroic uprising of the Tajik people against the Emir's oppression."⁶ The libretto for the latter was written by Mirzo Turson-Zade and A. Dekhoti, both of whom had already made names for themselves creating the new Tajik-Soviet poetry and were leading figures in the Tajik Union of Writers.

Poets like Mirzo Turson-zade, Abdulqasem Lahuti, and A. Dekhoti may have been enthusiastic about adopting new forms, but they also stood their ground to see that those forms were used to preserve and spread what they saw as their cultural heritage. They criticized the composers working in the musical theatre and the opera for focusing only on 'folk' elements. "The problem is that the classical [heritage] of Tajikistan is completely forgotten," Lahuti complained in 1939. "It is not right that everything is being built entirely on folklore. The inheritance of world culture needs to be used, and we need to pay attention to classical compositions."⁷ This applied both to themes and to the music itself. Turson-zade called it a travesty that party officials had labelled *Shashmaqam* 'music composed for the Emir' and refused to support musicians who could play it. "They do not understand that this music comes from the people."⁸ Turson-zade and Lahuti's views won the day. Balasanyan's next opera, 'The Blacksmith Kova,' was based on episodes from the great Persian epic *Shahnama*.

Although the mass reception of the opera and other performances at the ten-day festival in 1941 are unknown, it was celebrated in *Pravda* as one of the finest of the 'national' festivals. Samuil Samosud, the conductor who would one day lead the Bolshoi, wrote a glowing response, noting that while

it was clear that the performers still needed more training, what he had seen was already a remarkable achievement. Samosud also underlined that the opera's very existence testified to the USSR's commitment to blend egalitarianism with respect for and promotion of high culture: "We have already gotten used to the fact that every republic, every large oblast centre has an opera theatre. At the same time the largest theatres of Europe and America – not just now, during wartime, but even during peacetime – did not have permanent opera companies. This is easily explainable: in capitalist countries, everything, including art, is translated into the language of money. And opera does not bring big profits. Here, in the USSR, opera theatres are surrounded by the most serious attention on the part of the party and government. That is why the Tajik people were able to so quickly educate its own conductors, musicians, singers, and ballet performers."⁹ The economic irrationality of creating an opera theatre, even in conditions as unfavourable as those in Stalinabad, was actually something to celebrate, something that showed how different Soviet power was from European imperialism and Western capitalism in general.

Who is the opera for?

Within Tajikistan itself, responses to the project ranged from wholesale resistance to engagement. The director of the musical theatre complained in 1938 that "bourgeois nationalists" had been carrying on a "fierce battle" against the introduction of vocal training and notation because it "perverted national culture...Singers were intimidated, their lessons were deliberately interrupted, they were provoked, bullied...everything was done to discredit and disgrace the elements of musical and vocal culture that are so necessary for each artist of a musical theatre."¹⁰ There were those who saw polyphony as "foreign to Tajik music, as ruining and distorting Tajik music... as Russification of Tajik music."¹¹ And many years later, the Tajik Union of Composers was confronted with the fact that radio stations in Tajikistan largely avoided playing its members compositions, "limiting [their broadcasts] primarily to one-voice singing."¹²

The creation of a Tajik Union of Composers in the 1950s was supposed to strengthen the position of Soviet-Tajik music within the republic. To an extent it did this, giving the remaining Russian composer in Tajikistan, Aleksandr Lensky, a bully pulpit from which to agitate for harmonic music and the institutional basis to find resources and reward composers who went along with the scheme. But it also provided a venue for Tajik composers, musicians, and occasionally other cultural figures to challenge these priorities and define what was acceptable as Tajik-Soviet music. Every new piece was now performed for a committee that repeatedly challenged music for not being 'Tajik' enough. Eventually some of these critics would challenge all of the assumptions of the Soviet musical project: that a 'professional' was someone who had studied

at the conservatory and knew how to arrange music. At the Union's second congress in February 1956, Lensky's complaints were rebutted by cultural figures and officials. Why were *Shashmaqam* singers any less professional than those trained to sing in the Italian style? A culture that had risen so high, and valued in so many countries, said one speaker "was a great achievement of our ancestors that we have no right to reject." The poet Abdusalom Dekhoti agreed, adding "is this the way that cultured peoples act towards their ancestors?"¹³

Dekhoti's challenge to Lensky's notions of culturedness and professionalism proved timely. The thaw was underway, and the room to define and redefine these terms was growing. In 1957 the Tajik Union of Composers held a plenum in which they denounced the 'attacks on heterophonic music' that had previously been so prominent. The plenum sparked a whole series of articles in *Tajikiston soveti* on the future of Tajik music. Z. Shakhidi, the chairman of the Union (and composer of the opera 'Komde and Modan,' which premiered in 1960) noted that the composers, scholars, writers, and listeners who took part in the debate on the pages of *Tajikiston soveti* were right in their criticism of Tajik composers who ignored unison, which is the "basis of national music."¹⁴ As the first Tajik head of the Union, and among the first Moscow trained composers to work in Tajikistan, however, Shakhidi defended the project of 'modernization' with the zeal of a convert, and felt that the criticism had gone too far. Composers had to know the musical culture of the people, he would argue, but "if they don't master modern musical theory, if they do not know world musical culture, they will never be able to raise the musical culture of their people."¹⁵ Likewise, he advocated professionalizing vocal culture, which he did not see as incompatible with maintaining national characteristics: "uniting the virtues of one and the other, one can create something whole and wonderful."¹⁶ His successor similarly had to fend off criticism that Tajik composers failed to find an audience because they were neglecting classical and folk traditions.¹⁷

Opera never achieved a mass following in Tajikistan, or even much support among the elite. It seems that performing for a nearly empty theatre was more or less the norm throughout the Soviet period (the Lahuti theatre, which performed drama in translation as well as original Tajik pieces, was supposedly much more popular). Of course, the theatre would be filled on occasion by groups of pioneers, workers, and visiting dignitaries. The proponents of opera and polyphony in Tajik music complained that the problem was with the listener, or more precisely, the institutions that were supposed to educate the listener. They complained that radio stations did not play enough symphonic music, to which station directors replied that their programming was based on requests from the public, and the public preferred either 'Tajik' music or popular songs.

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Below: The Opera Square, Pavel Yevteyev, 1974. USSR Tajikistan. Novosti Press Publishing House.



Opera as the highest stage of Socialism *continued***Temples of modernity**

The most difficult aspect of researching the story of Tajik opera is trying to understand what it meant to Tajiks beyond the elite. While I did meet some Tajiks who reported attending the opera frequently and who seemed to know the biographies of all of the theatre's major performers, even most of the relatively Russified intelligentsia seemed to be at best lukewarm about the theatre. But the response of one film director was particularly interesting. Although he said he hardly attended the opera, he was not immune to the effect that it produced: "When I was first brought here as a young pioneer, I remember that the inside of the theatre, the performance – it took my breath away." In his view, it did not matter if Tajiks did not attend the opera; the purpose was rather to demonstrate what Soviet power was capable of, both in terms of raising the building, but also in terms of creating an art form that was so dependent on a high level of professional training and organization.

According to a legend that appears to have some currency in Dushanbe, the opera building was constructed using bricks from recently demolished mosques. While this is almost certainly false, the legend's existence is instructive. As my interlocutor suggested, the building was constructed as a 'temple' to Soviet power. Similar things could be said about other facilities that were constructed as part of the Soviet modernization and nation-building programmes, such as libraries, universities, government buildings, and palaces of culture. They served simultaneously as markers of the people's advancement to national consciousness and socialist consciousness, and as a reminder that their liberation came with the help of Soviet power. In the post-war period especially they would also serve to demonstrate the USSR's egalitarian modernization to the outside world. The anthropologist Bruce Grant engages this contradiction in a helpful way; on the one hand, he points out that "the Soviet cultural project was unabashedly public, reified, intended for mass consumption and intended most importantly to be widely shared." Yet in his own fieldwork he found libraries of atheistic literature where he was consistently the only visitor and houses of culture where musicians brought in by helicopter played to an empty hall. Nevertheless, Grant argues, by their existence and place in the city both institutions helped advance a "perceived project of Soviet civilization."¹⁸

Similarly, the opera theatre did not stand alone. Rather, it was a symbolic centrepiece of all of the investment that went in to cultural construction in the republic. In the 1950s, composers and other cultural figures fought for the creation of a conservatory, which they eventually got.¹⁹ Meanwhile educators and local party activists from across the republic

Above:
Opera Dushanbe,
2016, photo by
Irna Hofman

petitioned for music schools, theatres, and resources to put together local choirs and mount amateur productions.²⁰ The logic was clear – to create an opera theatre, one needed to train musicians, singers, and composers – and to find potential professionals one needed music schools and amateur productions. (The latter, too, helped to train new listeners). The fact that, like the radio, these schools may have professionalized 'traditional' music, rather than created professionals for Soviet Tajik culture, is almost besides the point. Development always has unintended consequences. All of these cultural institutions together are what made up 'Soviet Tajik' culture, with the opera theatre as its main temple. It did not matter that it often stood empty or that the local interpretations of its faith differed significantly from what was proselytized in the capital.

All Soviet republics developed national operas, and their fates since independence have varied. Kazakhstan, whose budget until recently was flush with money from hydrocarbons and where the president's daughter is a devoted opera fan, has invested in the opera and even built new facilities. In Turkmenistan, opera was banned between 2001 and 2009. In Tajikistan the theater of opera and ballet survived not only the civil war (1992-1997) and economic chaos that followed, but even the persistent effort to define an authentic Tajik culture. With help from foreign donors, the government even refurbished the theater and hired an Italian conductor to serve as artistic director for three years. Since my initial visit in 2011 I have gone to over a dozen performances. Russian and European classics such as *Eugene Onegin* and *La Traviata* share the schedule with 'national' operas like *Komde and Madan*. Often, the theater was almost empty, except it seems, for myself and some friends of the performers. Other times it was almost full, with an enthusiastic and engaged crowd. Although it seems far from the lives of most Tajiks today, the theater has its supporters. When I interviewed the theatre's director in 2013, he proudly gave me a glossy album that had been published to celebrate the theatre's 70th anniversary. It was called 'The Temple of Fine Art'.

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