

Marina Frolova-Walker

Stalin's Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics

Marina Frolova-Walker. *Stalin's Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics*. (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2016. 384 pages. \$65.00 [€ 54]. ISBN 9780300208849).

Ten years ago, tasked with reviewing Marina Frolova-Walker's first book *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (Yale University Press, 2007), I praised the author for dismantling long-standing myths and questioning the activities of some of the sacred cows of Russian music history, and for writing about the topics that "annoyed" her in a most enlightening and gripping way. After reading Frolova-Walker's latest book, *Stalin's Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics*, I was thrilled to see that the author is still busting myths, charting the hitherto unexplored areas of Soviet music history, and narrating a fascinating and often hilarious story of the rise-and-fall of Stalin's prize for artistic achievements. Frolova-Walker provides brilliant insight into the inner workings of the Soviet institutional and cultural system, and the power play that affected the process of rewarding artists whose work was meant to stand for the best that Soviet culture had to offer.

For several years the author conducted research at numerous archives and libraries in Moscow, including RGALI, RGANI, RGASPI, GARF, the Glinka and Goldenweiser Museums and the Russian State Library, which fundamentally informs this volume. The book consists of eleven chapters, in addition to introduction and conclusion. After initial explanations on the origins of the Stalin prize, and the establishment of the system that supported it, Frolova-Walker focuses on several towering figures, including, as expected, Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich, but also Nikolai Myaskovsky, whose immense influence and stature in the Soviet context is revealed to Western readers for the first time. Her focus then shifts to composers from various Soviet republics other than Russia (including familiar names, such as Aram Khachaturian from Armenia, but also obscure ones like Juozas Tallat-Kelpša from Lithuania or Mukhtor Ashrafiy from Uzbekistan), the proliferation of prizes for composers and performers, the notorious 1948 anti-formalism campaign that condemned Prokofiev, Shostakovich and other top-tier composers and its impact on the prize-giving process, and finally how the Stalin Prize collapsed almost immediately after its namesake's death.

The most startling information for the lay reader is that the amount of 100,000 roubles was awarded to first prize winners, which was equal to an average worker's "lifetime earnings" (p. 12). As Frolova-Walker notes, by stimulating the artists so generously, the Soviet system sought to create "an elite among scientific and artistic intelligentsia" (p. 12), whose members would serve as role models, providing successful examples to

be followed or imitated. The method of choosing award recipients was deeply flawed from the outset, because the initial decisions made by the panel of experts (the Stalin Prize Committee, known as the KSP) were subject to five further stages of reviewing: “KSP → Ministries → Agitprop → Politburo Commission → Politburo → Stalin” (p. 19); each of the higher factions could overturn decisions made by the lower-ranked ones, regardless of their actual professional expertise or competence. The final list of prizewinners was always a result of long and unpleasant hours of negotiations and disputes, of balancing many concerns, whereas the actual quality of the music was often the last concern.

The chapter on Prokofiev is illuminating in many respects. Frolova-Walker describes how, at least for a limited period of time, Prokofiev was regarded as a model Soviet composer and received a total of “six Stalin prizes – more than any composer, and among the highest across all arts and sciences” (p. 63). While his status of a Soviet luminary came to a halt in 1948, the evidence supplied by Frolova-Walker shows that Prokofiev, far from being a naive artist tricked into repatriation by the Soviet officials only to be brutally let down and castigated, instead enjoyed the respect and privilege that came with the prizes. The fact that Prokofiev and other “formalists” of 1948 ran into financial difficulties immediately after the Resolution had nothing to do with their reckless spending of the previously awarded lavish sums, but rather with “the monetary reform of December 1947, which wiped out any substantial savings of individuals” (p. 143).

The next two chapters are dedicated to Shostakovich, which respectively feature Shostakovich as the multiple recipient of the prize, and as a member of the awarding committee. Both chapters offer real insight and put a final nail in the coffin of the long promoted mythical figure of “Shostakovich-the-dissident” in the West. Frolova-Walker proves that, regardless of his private opinions, Shostakovich was very much a part of the Soviet cultural system – indeed one of its most important and valued participants. Frolova-Walker shows that he knew how to milk benefits for himself (less successfully so for his followers, although he did try), and how to swiftly recover from setbacks. His Soviet contemporaries actually believed that the alleged dissident “had a direct line to Stalin” (p. 117), and while this belief might have been exaggerated, it was precisely Stalin’s personal intervention that lifted the ban on Shostakovich’s works only a year after the 1948 denunciation, and enabled him to resume his role as a staple of Soviet cultural life. As a committee member, Shostakovich was outspoken, even tactless, authoritative, unconcerned with etiquette, and eager to push for his disciples, even when their chances of award were slim.

The spotlight then turns on Myaskovsky. Not only did he win five Stalin prizes himself, but he also helped secure wins for a number of his students: “Khachaturian won four, Kabalevsky three, Shebalin, Muradeli, Knipper and Peyko two each, and so on” (p. 138), which is why some of his contemporaries regarded him as “a kind of Mafia don, operating from the shadows” (p. 144). Afterwards the author’s focus shifts to “other” Soviet republics, where Frolova-Walker highlights that the composers from Ukraine and Georgia won thirteen prizes each, while Kirghizia scored the “unfortunate nul *points*” (pp. 160–161). The author explains that this imbalance was caused by the fact that some

central-Asian republics were slow to Westernize, while others took long to develop their Sovietized national identities. The ensuing chapter is devoted to another imbalance, that between “high” and “low” varieties of art in the idiosyncratic Soviet context. Yet another interesting chapter is devoted to Tikhon Khrennikov’s decades-long presidency over the Association of Soviet Composers, but also to his failures as a composer, and the failure of Soviet opera in general. Frolova-Walker also analyzes the impact of the 1948 denunciation of “formalists” on the awarding process and the careers of a myriad of second- and third-rate composers who, at least for a brief period of time, managed to overpower the “formalist” elite and win a couple of prizes for themselves.

This stellar book offers numerous hilarious anecdotes, eye-opening facts, witty quips and brilliantly contextualized conclusions that are a real treat for the readers. By thoroughly researching and skillfully interpreting all the “highs and lows” of the Stalin prize, Frolova-Walker has single-handedly rewritten the history of Soviet music. Hence, this is one of the most informative – and most entertaining – musicology books in recent years, and it will be of interest to academics, students, and anyone interested in the workings of the Soviet cultural system.

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