

Valeria TSENOVA

EDISON DENISOV

Music and Ideas

Edison Denisov's art is one of the basic landmarks of Russian music. His name stands in the row of outstanding Russian composers of the 20th century after Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Just Denisov told his own weighty musical word in the certain period of a history of Russian culture. Just Denisov opened a new page in Russian music and made it at such level of highest professionalism and skill, which can be peculiar only to genius. The bright and absolutely individual style, created by Denisov, has no analogues neither in Russia nor abroad. This fact only does him already a rare phenomenon in the world music of our time. This style is recognised at once, it cannot be confused with any other.



A major intellectual substratum of the Denisov creativity is a trend in Russian culture initiated by tsar Peter the Great, who connected Russia with West Europe. Igor Stravinsky, himself belonging to that trend in Russian culture, made an apt observation on the subject: Peter the Great <<conceived to mould together the most characteristic features of the Russian civilisation and the intellectual wealth of the West>>. Stravinsky called Peter I <<the ancestor>> of such personalities as Pushkin, Glinka and Tchaikovsky.

An artist feeling himself a Russian as it was comes to find himself fully merged at the same time with the forms of Western-European culture, and then his spirit hovers over the whole world.

Like in Leo Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* with its extensive fragments written in French, Denisov has produced an opera, *The Froth of Days* (*L'écume des jours*, 1981) with its original libretto based on the French rather than Russian text; also his opera *Four girls* (*Les quatre filles*, 1986) after Pablo Picasso is running in

French, while his *Requiem* (1980) has been written in several European languages (english, french, german and latin).

Certainly, getting used to the sounds of a foreign language is a particular detail and an outward sign, but it is no accident with Denisov; it is a manifestation of <<universal openness>> of Russian culture (which was delineated by Fyodor Dostoevsky back in his time). For Denisov such openness is one of the leading signs of creativity. His cantata *The Sun of the Incas* (1964) to the verse of the Chilean poetess Gabriela Mistral, which brought the composer wide recognition, bears out the spontaneity and freshness of non-European emotions. But on a characteristic par with *The Sun of the Incas* stand out his *Laments* (1966), a work profoundly permeated with the Russian mentality and written to the Russian folk texts. In the context of the cultural life prevailing in Soviet Russia in the 1950's - 1960's such <<Europeanism>> (persecuted as <<cosmopolitanism>>) was a safety valve for an artist to keep alive in the stagnant atmosphere of the official dogmata inherent in <<socialist realism>>. The composer's striving to keep abreast of the cultural achievement in the whole world is not an evidence against his national Russian essence, rather, on the contrary, it fosters its free and unrestrained development.

Denisov is genuine Russian composer, his blood is pure Russian without any admixture. He was born in deep Siberia. The Siberian city Tomsk is about 3 thousand kilometres far from Moscow. Since 1951 Denisov constantly lived in Moscow.

At all that Denisov is an European composer. An external demonstration of his European nature is the deep connection with France. Some facts of his biography will demonstrate this line of his life and creativity.

He learned French language during his study in Moscow Conservatoire. He wrote a lot of compositions not simply on French plots, but also in French language. He had a lot of friends among French musicians - composers and performers: Pierre Boulez, Henri Dutilleux, Iannis Xenakis and many others. Many Denisov's compositions had their premiere in France, among them are opera *The Froth of Days*, staged in Paris, and *First symphony*, devoted to Daniel Barenboim.

Simultaneously in Moscow, Denisov worked intensively, he taught at the Conservatoire, organised various actions, concerts. In the beginning of 90th, in Russia began a new wave of emigration. And Denisov was a sole Russian composer of the world level, who did not left Russia (from famous so called <<Moscow Trinity>> - Denisov, Schnittke, Gubaidulina - Schnittke was the first, who left Russia, Gubaidulina hold for some time, but then also left for Germany). Denisov remained. But it happened so, that two last years of his life were tightly connected with France.

In the age of 65 in July 1994 composer crashed under Moscow in terrible auto accident, which almost cost him life. For more than 10 days he lay unconscious in a reanimation unit with multiple fractures and internal ruptures. In spite of several operation, his condition was deteriorating from day to day. On the initiative of French embassy in Russia from France to Moscow was sent a special

medical plane, which transported the unconscious Denisov to Paris to military hospital *Begin*. Composer recovered step by step. He regained consciousness and gift of speech, stood up and started learning to walk and work again. French doctors did their utmost to save the Russian musician. Municipal administration of Paris helped a lot (since 1993 Denisov was an honorary citizen of Paris).

To some extent it was his strong Siberian constitution that enabled him to overcome the consequences of auto accident. But all the same his health had been undermined. And the next two years the hospital *Begin* became for Denisov a second house. The French capital warmly accepted the Russian musician. All the municipal services and known French musicians helped him in solving medical and everyday problems.

In fact, his enforced stay abroad was not to the composer's liking. He was homesick for Moscow, but could not leave Paris for long because of the need to report regularly to the Paris hospital for courses of treatment. In different situations and to different people he constantly said that if it had been up to him he would never have left Russia, that he felt best of all in Moscow and was longing to return, but the doctors would not let him. In one of his last letters the composer exclaims tragically: <<I want to come back to Moscow!>>. In the same letter Denisov wrote: <<Only the hospital keeps me here. Otherwise, today I would collect all my things and left for Moscow. It is nice here, but everything is alien. Everywhere is bad except Russia...>>. Denisov died on November 24, 1996 in the same Paris hospital *Begin*. Agreement could not be reached on where he should be buried - in Moscow or in Paris. As a result it was decided to leave him in Paris. And thus Russian composer Edison Denisov was buried in the cemetery *Saint Mande* on the outskirts of Paris.

Denisov's artistic world, the same as with most contemporary composers, abounds in contrasts. It is the scope of his individual style that raises most objections on the part of his antipodes in music. Thus, along with the traditional vocal and instrumental cycles (concerto, sonata, ensemble and symphony), it includes *Birdsong* (1969), an unusual composition for prepared piano and magnetic tape, ranging from the enchanted elevation of his piano *Signes en blanc* (1974) to mass songs in his music for sound orchestra *The Ship Steams Past the Harbour* (1986). But such contrasts, as well as the patent evolution of his style, make part and parcel of its integrity inherent in the wholeness of the moral principles underlying the composer's inner world and rooted in a definite world-view, stable artistic principles which are kept intact in his persistent creative quests. This integrity gets stronger from upholding some general ideas.

In general Denisov's artistic world - it is a world of Light and Beauty. In contrast to the counter-cultural trends of the left-radical type, quite widespread in the second half of the 20th century, Denisov in his creative work is inspired by the idea of beauty. In his view, <<music without a beautiful idea, devoid of logic, is impossible>>. From today's perspective it is evident that this orientation of artistic ideas is likely to have been inherited primarily from Romantic aesthetics. But it is not a repetition of the old concept, in some respects it is even contrary to it. Thus,

Denisov's sense of beauty excludes <<outpouring emotionality>>. Otherwise, it would be quite a different trend, something as Rachmaninov, which diametrically opposite to Denisov's aesthetics. The composer himself advanced the conception of **new beauty** in modern music. In one of his interviews the composer said: <<Beauty is a major factor in art, and at the moment quite a few composers are looking for a new kind of beauty. This means not only beautiful sound, which, naturally, has nothing to do with outward prettiness, but beauty here means beautiful ideas as understood by mathematicians, or Bach and Webern>>. In pursuance of the composer's ideas one may as well add: <<An Artist is a Master of Beauty>>.

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Today, at the end of century, when we listen attentively to creations of our recent contemporary, in idioms of modern sound language we distinguish outlines of other fundamental bases of art and art ideology. First of all, it is **religiosity of his nature**. To many people, who personally knew the composer, it can seem unexpected: Denisov and religion. Everybody knew, that he always thought precisely and rationally. But it is so. Denisov is an author of numerous compositions on spiritual subject. Among them are: Russian Passion *The Story of the Life and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ* for tenor, bass, chorus and orchestra based on New Testament and Orthodox liturgical texts (1992), where for the first time in Russian music sings the God's Son; a cappella chorus *Peaceful Light* on Orthodox liturgical text (1988), *Three fragments from the New Testament* for vocal ensemble on French text (1989). Denisov completed the Schubert's Religious drama *Lazarus* (1995). With the religious theme are connected Variations on a Bach Theme *Es ist genug* for viola and piano (1984), Trio for violin (flute), guitar and organ *In Deo speravit cor meum* (1984). In one of the best Denisov's works, in *Requiem*, in the fifth movement on words *Requiem aeternam* (an image of the crucifixion is drawn with the power of orchestra and chorus (composer Sofia Gubaidulina told once, that she feels this fragment of the work as burning cross).

The symbolic sound of Denisov's music concerns also to the religious concept of his creativity. His beloved notes-letters *D* and *G* mean, in particular, French *Dieu* and German *Gott* (English God). By the way, the third beloved Denisov's note-letter is *A = La*; it hints at French *Lumiere*, Latin *Lux* and German *Licht - Light*.

Actually, Denisov continued, obviously not premeditated, tradition of Russian music - tradition of not his favourite Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninov, Liadov. It does not matter what are subjective tastes of the composer. He ontologically belongs to the cultural continent - to traditional Russian spirituality. The artistic embodiment of positive ideals, high moral principles, light and beauty - all this is most necessary in the times of troubles, amongst a cruel spiritual crisis. The fact, that art, music included, retains such moral function is an evidence of Edison Denisov's adherence to the traditional artistic concept, in the first place - the Russian tradition.

Denisov till his last days kept an ideological kernel of his art concept, which can be designated with one Werbern's word: LIGHT. Idea of Light plays a major part in the composer's aesthetics. He understood it himself and once told about his ideal: <<True artist must carry to people LIGHT. People require it very much, though often they do not know it>>.

Even the titles of his compositions shine, radiate by all colours of rainbow. Here are some of them: *The Sun of the Incas*, *Peinture*, *Life in red (La vie en rouge)*, *Signs on white (Signes en blanc)*, *Aquarelle*, *On a Snowy Bonfire*, *Light and Shadows*, *Blue Notebook*, *Peaceful Light*, *Christmas Star*, *From Gloom to Light*.

In Denisov's scores prevail light timbres: flutes and violins, high trumpets and clarinets, campanelli, bells, celesta, harp, vibraphone. These timbres mix up with each other in very characteristic Denisov's manner. They merge in one radiating timbre or spread in separate splinters, they form flickering sound constellations of magic beauty or unite in powerful sheaves of light. They cut through the sound space by dazzling flares or burn as furious fire in orchestral tutti. Very often the composition finishes by dissolution in the highest light heaven register with gradual sound attenuation till complete disappearance. Such example of the famous Denisov's coda we can hear in his Cello Concerto (1972).

Of course, we could just outline the basic moral substance of Denisov's inner world. This core has many varied and contrasting layers enveloping it. But the moral core is that light that breaks through and tinges the layers, with darkness inaccessible to it. Edison Denisov himself once wrote in his diary: You could write a long and serious work about the word <<Light>> in my music.