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## The Futurist Movement in Russia: Futurism's Role in the Work of Composer Alexander Mosolov

### Abstract

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia has been known for its tumultuous political, social, and economic climates. Coups, revolutions, and uprisings were so commonplace that "the man on the street seemed to feel that it made no difference who was in charge, since things were so bad they could not possibly get any worse." While this volatility may have been a nuisance to the common man, it was both a blessing and a curse for Russian artists. While it sometimes encouraged them to explore different modes of artistic expression, it also often resulted in the brutal repression of artists' works, if not the artists themselves. Alexander Vasil'evich Mosolov, a Russian pianist and composer, is a prime example of this. While he is not usually labeled as a Futurist composer, Mosolov was renowned in the early half of his career for his experimentation with the Futurist music, and it was this connection with the Futurist movement that led to his downfall.

# The Futurist Movement in Russia: Futurism's Role in the Work of Composer Alexander Mosolov

*Tia Sprengel*

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia has been known for its tumultuous political, social, and economic climates. Coups, revolutions, and uprisings were so commonplace that “the man on the street seemed to feel that it made no difference who was in charge, since things were so bad they could not possibly get any worse.”<sup>1</sup> While this volatility may have been a nuisance to the common man, it was both a blessing and a curse for Russian artists. While it sometimes encouraged them to explore different modes of artistic expression, it also often resulted in the brutal repression of artists' works, if not the artists themselves. Alexander Vasil'evich Mosolov, a Russian pianist and composer, is a prime example of this. While he is not usually labeled as a Futurist composer, Mosolov was renowned in the early half of his career for his experimentation with the Futurist music, and it was this connection with the Futurist movement that led to his downfall.

Born on July 29, 1900 in Kiev, a time when “artists from Ukraine were heavily involved in... [the] waves of the artistic revolution that swept through Europe,” Mosolov was influenced by artistic experimentation and exploration from an early age.<sup>2</sup> His father, Vasiliy Alexandrovich, and mother, Nina Alexandrovna, were both very interested in the current artistic and musical movements and encouraged their son to be as well. This involvement with the arts became even more explicit when, after a move to Moscow and Vasiliy's death in 1903 and 1904 respectively, Mosolov's mother became the companion of composer B.V. Podgoretskiy and then painter Mikhail Varfolomeevich Leblan.<sup>3</sup> Through his introduction to these two men, Mosolov became enveloped in the most prestigious artistic circles in the Ukraine and was “exposed to the widest possible currents and schools of thought” affecting art in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> This experience with some of the most famous and influential artists and artistic movements in Ukraine left an impact on Mosolov that would be displayed throughout his school years and well into his adulthood.

After attending and graduating from a high school in Moscow, Mosolov carried his sense of innovativeness and open-mindedness towards art with him into the Moscow Conservatoire. Starting in 1921, Mosolov studied composition under N.Y. Myaskovsky and R.M. Gliere and piano under G. P. Prokofiev and K.

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1. Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995),

2. Myroslav Shkandrij, “Kyiv to Paris: Ukrainian Art in the European Avant-Garde, 1905 – 1930,” Zorya Fine Art, [http://www.zoryafineart.com/publications/view/11/app/webroot/Zorya\\_Inc.pdf](http://www.zoryafineart.com/publications/view/11/app/webroot/Zorya_Inc.pdf) (accessed April 10, 2012).

3. Larry Stisky, *Music of the Repressed Russian Avant-Garde, 1900 – 1929* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 60.

4. Ibid.

Igumnov. Gliere especially became a source of “constant support and inspiration” that allowed Mosolov to compose a symphonic poem *Twilight*, a series of five sonata for the piano, a piece called *The Legend* for cello and piano, three lyrics pieces for viola and piano, and settings of verses by Blok and Gumilev while still at the Conservatoire.<sup>5</sup> At this point in his life, “Mosolov was familiar with the futurist movement in art.”<sup>6</sup> The compositions listed above as well as the later works of his Conservatoire years, such as a trio for clarinet, cello and piano, pushed the boundaries of traditional music and “made very clear his affinity with the latest modernist tendencies in Europe, including parodistic elements, fiercely nontonal language, a highly dramatic and intense sweep to the music, combined with an eerie nocturnal quality.”<sup>7</sup> Though these compositions were not quite Futurist in and of themselves, they did display some Futurist elements and paved the way for Mosolov’s future experimentation within the genre.

Though innovative and aesthetically pleasing in their own right, these compositions were met with mixed responses from critics. While his professors Gliere and Myskovsky prided Moslov’s works, others criticized his “ivory-tower attitude, and a question raised as to why he should not be excluded from the Conservatoire, in view of his unsuitable artistic aims.”<sup>8</sup> If it had not been for Gliere and Myskovsky intervening on his behalf, Mosolov would not have completed his course at the Conservatoire. For the time being, though, Moslov was safe, and he was elected to full membership within the Association for Contemporary Music (ACM) on September 23, 1925.<sup>9</sup> However, the foundations of Mosolov’s future destruction were being set in his early experimentation and the backlash that resulted.

Despite this criticism and his uneasy truce with the ACM, Moslov went on to experiment even further with Futurist and avant-garde elements in the latter half of the 1920s. At this time, the Futurists were concerned with “the impact on life and art of mechanism, technology, and speed... [and] a work of this kind by Mosolov was ‘The Iron Foundry.’”<sup>10</sup> Written between 1926 and 1927, “The Iron Foundry” (“Zavod”) was initially part of a larger work, the ballet *Steel (Stal)*, and exemplified Mosolov’s movement towards a distinctly Futuristic style. Moslov’s aggressive utilization of atonality and dissonance alongside a buildup of ostinatos gives the feeling of the screeching speed found on a factory floor.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, “The Iron Foundry” succeeded “by its raw energy and the then startling use of the orchestra to produce a machine piston-like sound”<sup>12</sup> as well

5. Ibid.

6. Peter Deane Roberts, “Alexander Vasil’evich Mosolov (1900 – 1973) in *Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*, ed. Larry Stisky (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 2002), 315.

7. Stisky, *Repressed*, 61.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Roberts, “Mosolov,” 315-316.

12. Stisky, *Repressed*, 61.

as its “attempt to capture industrial sound with a symphonic orchestra.”<sup>13</sup> Mosolov had pushed past the traditional tenets of musical composition and, with his imitation of the noises of the iron foundry, came ever closer to the mechanism, technology, speed, and “noise-sound” present in Futurist music.<sup>14</sup>

This concept of noise-sound and machine as music was the cornerstone of Futurist music, especially for artist Luigi Russolo. In *The Art of Noises*, Russolo’s personal manifesto concerning Futurist music, he says Futurists “delight much more in combining in our thoughts the noise of trams, of automobile engines, of carriages and brawling crowds, than in hearing again the ‘Eroica’ or the ‘Pastorale.’”<sup>15</sup> Even though Mosolov is not always labeled as a Futurist composer, his rejection of the traditional and embrace of the technological and mechanical in “The Iron Foundry” fits the Futurist philosophy perfectly and shows the amount of influence Futurism had on Mosolov’s musical career. Unfortunately, it would be this Futurist leaning that would later result in Mosolov’s imprisonment at the hands of the Soviet regime.

After a few decades of musical exploration and freedom, the Party declared that the national aesthetic had changed. At the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Party representative Andrey Zhdanov “declared that Socialist Realism was now the common aesthetic of all Soviet writers” and “the official Soviet aesthetic was declared binding and normative.”<sup>16</sup> While this directive was issued to Soviet writers, Soviet composers too were “directed to emulate russkaya klassika as a timeless model, signifying a return to healthy, ‘normal’ musical values after the excesses of early-Soviet modernism.”<sup>17</sup> Social Realism is based on the belief that art should be communal and see reality in its evolution toward the socialist ideal. The establishment of this Socialist Realist aesthetic is often considered the Party’s definite break with the avant-garde and, from this point on, art was subordinated to the Party and used as a means of training people in Soviet ideology.<sup>18</sup> Any artists who strayed from the Party line were declared enemies of the state, and they were often thrown into forced labor camps or had their names struck from historical records.

The Futurist works that Mosolov had produced prior to this 1934 declaration were distinctly modernist in nature and, as such, came into direct conflict with the new Party ideology. As early as 1927, “there were some murmurings about extremism, and music moving towards noise” in Mosolov’s compositions.<sup>19</sup> The following year, works such as “The Iron Foundry” and his “First String Quartet” came under question while “some harsh criticism about Mo-

13. Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 249.

14. Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), 25.

15. Ibid.

16. Maes, *History*, 255.

17. Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 518.

18. Maes, *History*, 255-259.

19 Stisky, *Repressed*, 62.

solov's 'extreme left' music appeared in the press."<sup>20</sup> Many of his new works, including three large-scale operas, were not published or performed as Mosolov came under increasing attacks from the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM). Well aware of what the consequences might be if he were to continue working within his Futurist style, Mosolov traveled to central Asia and began studying the folk music of such areas as Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan, Armenia, Dagestan, and Kirgiziya. There was a distinct change in style at this point in Mosolov's life, especially noticeable in such works as "Kirgiz Rhapsody" for mezzo-soprano, chorus, and orchestra; "Turkmenian Overture" for orchestra; and "Turkmenian Nights" for piano.<sup>21</sup> While Mosolov was "attracted to folk music as a source material earlier than many Composers of the time, who made change under some duress," it seemed as if "the folk aspect was just using Mosolov for musical cannon-fodder, and he did it to survive."<sup>22</sup> Moving out of Russia's direct sphere of influence and complying with the new Soviet aesthetic was an intelligent and strategic move on Mosolov's part and it bought him time. However, in the long run, it was not enough to save him from a confrontation with the Soviet authorities.

Throughout the early 1930s, Mosolov's Futurist tendencies caused even more strife for the composer. Eventually, his "modernistic outlook and perceived flirting with Western ideas, as well as increasing performances abroad, brought him into direct conflict with the RAPM."<sup>23</sup> In 1936, he was charged with public drunkenness and banned from the Union of Composers, and in 1938, he was accused of counterrevolutionary activities. Shortly thereafter, Mosolov was sentenced to eight years in a forced labor camp, but only served from December 23, 1937 to August 25, 1928. Fortunately for him, Gliere and Myaskovsky once again interceded on his behalf, "admitting Mosolov's artistic 'errors' and the influence upon him by 'by certain destructive trends of Western music...', but also stressing his great talent and his genuine attempt to reform."<sup>24</sup> The words of his close friends paired with his work involving Russian folk music quite literally saved Mosolov's life, and by 1939, he had even been somewhat forgiven for his previous trespasses. Despite his return to the Russian music scene in the same year, though, he was a broken man and was never able to achieve the same greatness he had with his Futurist compositions during the 1920s.

Regardless of the tumultuous conditions present in the early twentieth century, Russia produced some of the most innovative artists of the era, including composer Alexander Vasil'evich Moslov. While he is not commonly labeled a Futurist composer, Mosolov's experimentation with Futurist elements helped revolutionize the world of music while also leading to an imprisonment from

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20. Ibid., 63.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 64.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

which he never quite recovered. However, while Lenin and Stalin destroyed many artists in the same manner as Mosolov, it must be remembered that they were not able to completely extinguish artistic expression in Russia. The work of Mosolov and his contemporaries was not created in vain as it was able to live on in the future artist that they inspired.