

2021

Music Education in Russia: A Recent Perspective

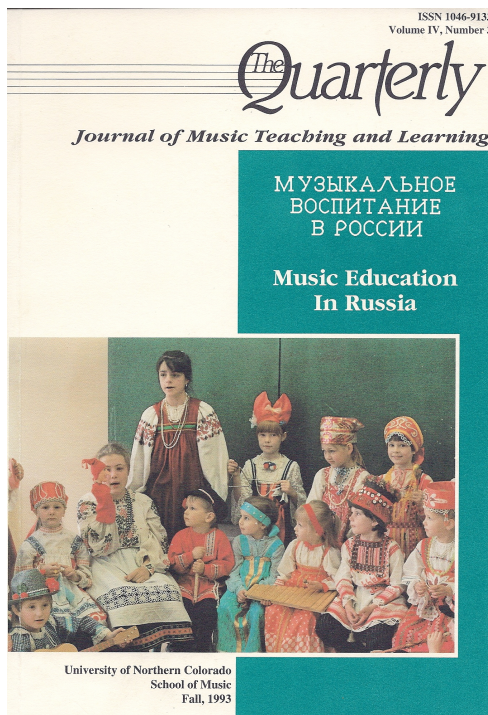
Frances Larimer
Northwestern University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme>

Recommended Citation

Larimer, Frances (2021) "Music Education in Russia: A Recent Perspective," *Visions of Research in Music Education*: Vol. 16 , Article 33.

Available at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol16/iss4/33>



Title: Music Education in Russia: A Recent Perspective

Author(s): Frances Larimer

Source: Larimer, F. (1993, Fall). Music education in Russia: A recent perspective. *The Quarterly*, 4(3), pp. 64-68. (Reprinted with permission in *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 16(4), Autumn, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/>

It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.

Music Education In Russia: A Recent Perspective

By Frances Larimer

Northwestern University

In the spring of 1991, I spent five weeks in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) as a guest lecturer at several institutions of higher education, including two of the leading professional music schools in the city, the Conservatory and the Institute of Culture. During the summer of 1993, I was invited to return as co-sponsor of a two-week seminar designed for American pianists on the history of Russian piano music, in collaboration with administrators Vladimir Shlyapnikov of the International Center for Russian Musical Culture and Valentina Azovskaya of the Philharmonic Society. During these visits, I met with many music administrators, teachers, and students in St. Petersburg and the neighboring city of Pushkin. In comparing visits, I am struck by the magnitude of changes now taking place in the system of musical education since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Since the state no longer controls cultural study programs, each of the 15 republics that comprised the former Soviet Union now is free to change music educational systems to reflect differences in culture and in economics. The Russian ministries of culture and of education continue to provide some financial support and serve as advisory groups, but no longer do the ministries dictate curricula in the schools.

Frances Larimer is Professor of Piano and heads the graduate program in Piano Pedagogy at Northwestern University. She is the first American to be invited to give lectures in the former Soviet Union on the subjects of piano pedagogy and group piano in the United States. She is co-author of "The Piano Pedagogy Major in the College Curriculum" published by the National Conference on Piano Pedagogy. Professor Larimer is also a member of the editorial board of The American Music Teacher.

Russian music students at all levels now have wide choices in selecting study programs. They no longer are locked into a single, rigid curriculum leading to one specialization. Prior to 1992, the state controlled the curricula of all schools, including institutions of higher education, and regulated traditional music study and pedagogy, requiring the study of philosophy, aesthetics, Soviet folk music, and Russian music history. Forbidden were studies in psychology and learning theory. Now, students may take elective course work outside their area of specialization, and the study of ideology and political theory has been abolished.

Administrators and faculty of each school have the freedom and are motivated to make changes in entrance requirements, study programs, and graduation requirements. Throughout the various schools, there is a strong desire to explore better teaching and teacher training.

During this past summer's various meetings, I was told about what was referred to as the "negative side" of Russia's new freedom. Many with whom I spoke emphasized that the main problem is financial. With freedom comes the loss of most of the state funding for arts education and for cultural events, as the current position of the state, according to one music administrator, is that "the people should now invest in education and in culture." Thus, music programs at all levels must struggle to find ways of funding their programs. Outside financial support is not yet available, since there is no mechanism to raise funds for cultural programs such as the arts in the schools, concerts, or museums.

All cultural organizations, including music schools at all levels, have begun charging

fees that have risen dramatically in the past year, compromising the ability of individuals to pay tuition for music and other arts study and to purchase tickets to cultural events. Students and faculty have been severely affected by these changes. For example, one music administrator related that students who are suddenly facing the necessity of paying all fees for music study, especially in higher education, experience the change as a major psychological trauma. Moreover, due to the withdrawal of state funds, faculty have seen their salaries drop.

As cultural organizations seek to increase income, many have developed a fee structure that features a wide gap between the amount charged to Russian citizens and the much higher charge to foreign visitors. Concerts and other such offerings also are serving as increasingly important opportunities for schools of music to earn money for their own purposes. For instance, the Glinka Boys' Choir School in St. Petersburg recently used revenues from such events to purchase a bus for use on concert tours throughout Russia and Europe.

In spite of the multitude of economic hardships in education as well as in everyday life, I was told repeatedly that the vast majority of Russian citizens (both the average worker and the highly educated) treasure their new freedom and have no desire to return to the former system. Russians I spoke to believe that a new and better system will evolve.

Innovations in Music Schools for Children

At present the most dramatic changes and innovations are occurring within the various music study programs for children. The seeds of this ongoing transformation were sown in 1989, when several children's music schools were given permission by the state ministries to experiment with new curricula. In these schools, teachers wrote their own materials and worked together as teams to form a comprehensive approach to music

study by interconnecting course work in solfege, theory, and choir with performance studies. Children were encouraged to use the information learned in other courses during performance and when writing original compositions.

Four-, five-, and six-year-olds continue to be taught with an eye toward future instrumental study through an emphasis on singing. This approach is believed to promote development in musicality and sensitivity to the shaping of phrases that can be trans-

ferred easily to an instrument. As a result of successes in the more progressive music schools, there is increased emphasis on comprehensive music study for all, not just the gifted. The successful experimentation with curricula in these selected music schools has encouraged those in other schools to offer broader and more comprehensive music study for all children, regardless of degree of talent.

Many music schools for children have expanded their curricula even further and become schools of fine arts. These schools offer not only comprehensive music study programs but also studies in dance, art, and drama. One of the most successful study programs now being offered in many of the fine arts schools is that of musical theater. Children enrolled in musical theater programs study instrumental music, singing, acting, composition, set building, and costume making. I was fortunate to see in one school a production of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." Everything in the production was composed, created, built, and performed by a cast of young students ages 7 through 17.

Each town or district now sets tuition fees for these schools. While a limited number of scholarships are available and offer partial tuition, most students pay full tuition. As varied study options have been introduced in the new fine arts schools, some parents have become more willing to pay tuition and seem

In comparing [my] visits, I am struck by the magnitude of changes now taking place in the system of musical education since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

I was fortunate to see in one school a production of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." Everything in the production was composed, created, built, and performed by a cast of young students ages 7 through 17.

particularly interested in enrolling their children in the musical theater programs. One administrator from the Ministry of Culture related that these new programs are producing more talented children because teachers are more interested in working with the philosophy of common musical training for all students, not just the gifted. While the gifted do continue to receive special attention in fine-arts schools, quality training is now available for students of all abilities.

Festivals and competitions are being organized and presented in the concert halls to raise the level of music literacy and training for all children. Some of these are non-competitive and offer participants the opportunity to perform in ensembles as well as solo. Gifted young students now may enter international competitions, whereas in the former Soviet Union little information about these events was available, and travel was discouraged.

In a conversation with an administrator in the Methodics Department of the Ministry of Culture in St. Petersburg, I commented upon the speed of change occurring in the schools. "Were you thinking about these changes before the new government in Russia?" I asked. "Oh, yes, for a long time we have been thinking of ways to change, long before we were allowed to make any changes," my colleague replied with a smile. It seems that the seeds of change are beginning to bloom.

Changes in Institutions of Higher Education

Some of the institutions of higher music education continue to receive some support from the state ministries of culture and of education, but this support is increasingly limited while fees are regularly increasing. In the music colleges, students who pay full tuition may compete for awards of free tuition in their third and fourth years of study. Soon, students will be able to study for a fifth year, becoming better qualified for higher levels of employment opportunities.

Music colleges and cultural institutes traditionally had lower entrance standards than conservatories and have had to accept less-prepared students into their programs. Now these institutions are seeking to raise their entrance requirements, especially in performance areas, and all who apply will not automatically be accepted.

As the pace of change accelerates, faculty members are experimenting with innovative funding and teaching approaches. In the fall of 1992 a team of faculty members in piano and theory at the St. Petersburg Institute of Culture introduced a new specialization in piano pedagogy. The course of study includes piano performance, teaching methods and materials, keyboard theory, and creative activities. Supervised student teachers are being placed in some of the more progressive music schools for children.

In addition, teachers—as well as other individuals—are now free to form independent associations. In the fall of 1992, a small group of faculty members from the Institute of Culture and the Conservatory formed a society entitled "Music for Everyone." This is a remarkable development, for prior to 1991 no such group or organization could be established without the approval and backing of a government ministry.

The primary goal of the new group is to provide low-cost music study for all levels of society. The founders recognized that enrollments in the music schools for children were falling, in part because of the high tuition but also because some parents were no longer satisfied with the restrictive traditional approach to music study characteristic of some of these schools. Also, fewer Russian families are now able to afford musical instruments, especially pianos, and the founders sought ways to provide practice instruments to students. "Music for Everyone," as an educational organization, also pays its instructors for teaching.

Highly motivating forces remain in evidence, especially the traditional Russian pride in the nation's history and cultural heritage. Clearly, the Russian people have a strong dedication to preserving the best of their nation's cultural traditions.

Nina Berger, the principal founder of "Music for Everyone," was intrigued by a videotape I showed in a 1991 lecture describing the American system of group piano instruction in a digital piano laboratory. Subsequently she obtained a grant from the Program for Cultural Initiatives, funded by an American business. The grant provided a small keyboard laboratory built to Berger's specifications for use in group piano instruction—a real innovation in Russian piano study—along with teaching space and the funds to develop piano teaching materials for children and amateur adults.

Children from five general education schools in St. Petersburg, as well as several evening classes of adults, now study group piano in the tiny laboratory. The major emphasis in the program is on listening, creative activities, and ensemble playing. Both children's and adult classes meet once a week; because students do not have instruments at home, all work is done within the classes and there is no outside practice. Truly impressive were the degree of musicality and the amount of progress these students were able to achieve through class work alone. Student teachers from the newly formed piano pedagogy program at the Institute of Culture can observe experienced teachers as well as lead supervised teaching assignments within these classes. The "Music for Everyone" society also has introduced piano study programs for the blind and plans to introduce studies in music therapy at the Institute of Culture.

Improvements in Teacher Training

Prior to 1991, new graduates from the music colleges, institutes, and conservatories were placed in teaching positions by their schools. Graduates had little or no choice in location or position, and most often they were assigned to small towns or cities throughout the former Soviet Union, far from

the larger metropolitan centers. These were dreaded assignments for young musicians just beginning their careers, because they abruptly left the exciting cultural environment of the city and found themselves teaching in areas of near desolation. It is no wonder that many graduates sought to surreptitiously circumvent these rural assignments. Placements usually were in children's music schools, general schools, or culture palaces (amateur study programs not connected with schools), depending upon the credentials of the graduates. Those with the lesser training offered in music colleges usually were assigned to children's music schools or culture palaces. Institute graduates received assignments teaching choir, orchestra, or other music courses in the general schools. Conservatory graduates sought positions in conservatories, but most often had to accept lesser positions until they gained more experience.

Under the new freedom, however, graduates must enter a competitive pool of applicants seeking the most desirable positions. Music schools at all levels are no longer required to accept teachers assigned to them by others but may interview potential candidates and select those who they believe are the most qualified for their particular positions. While this change is welcomed, schools and graduates are finding that the competition for teaching positions has created pressure for higher qualifications and better training. Teacher training programs are being affected within these very schools who wish to employ better teachers. It is expected that this spiral effect will result in better-qualified teachers at all levels who will produce more musically literate students, regardless of degree of talent. The stress on more comprehensive study programs for all music students in the early stages of music training is beginning to replace the primary emphasis on serious performance study only for the gifted. While the gifted continue to

receive special attention, the addition of quality music study for all is a relatively new attitude. With the increased interest in more comprehensive music study for children, teacher training programs are expanding beyond the traditional concentration on performance skill development to include the integration of general musicianship, theory, and creativity activities into teaching.

In order to retain their qualifications, St. Petersburg teachers in the children's music schools are now being required to attend continuing education seminars offered monthly by the Methodics Department of the Ministry of Culture. These seminars provide demonstrations and lectures illustrating the new or improved teaching techniques in various teaching specializations.

In spite of the fact that less qualified teachers traditionally have been assigned to the children's music schools, many of these schools have very high quality teachers, and their numbers are increasing. Some of the better and more forward-thinking teachers from various schools in St. Petersburg are teaching in the new piano pedagogy program at the Institute of Culture and are members of the new "Music for Everyone" society.

Beyond the Classroom

Changes in the government of Russia have also affected other musicians as well. For instance, in the past, composers who belonged to the Composers' Union had an easy time getting their works published, for the state funded such publications. These funds now are quite limited, and composers as well as performing artists are seeking sponsors to assist with the costs of publishing and promoting their works. As it now stands, the composer or performer must personally pay to publish or record and distribute his or her work, and a large number of copies must be produced. Very few musicians can afford this expense, and the result is music stores that are empty of scores by contemporary composers and lacking in recordings by contemporary national performing artists.

This shift toward a market-driven economy has affected even the most famous and well-respected of Russian musicians. I attended a lecture/discussion by Grigory Sokolov, Gold Medal winner of the 1966 Tchaikovsky In-

ternational Competition and professor at the Conservatory. Later, I discovered that recordings of his recent performances now are unavailable. Like many other professional musicians in Russia, he has been unable to afford to publish these recordings and distribute them to music stores, and no other method of financing these projects has yet evolved.

Summary

In summary, based upon two visits to St. Petersburg within the past two years, I have observed monumental changes occurring in the cultural activities as well as the day-to-day lives of the Russian people. Yet education in the arts remains a strong force in the lives of most Russians, regardless of social or educational status. Highly motivating forces remain in evidence, especially the traditional Russian pride in the nation's history and cultural heritage. Clearly, the Russian people have a strong dedication to preserving the best of their nation's cultural traditions. To this is being added a new and powerful eagerness to discover new ways of improving cultural education.

Sources

The author wishes to thank the following individuals for sharing information included in this article:

- Vagif Dadashev, Professor and Dean of the Piano Department, St. Petersburg Institute of Culture.
- Uri Kornakov, composer and faculty member of the St. Petersburg Institute of Culture.
- Oleg Koshelev, Headmaster, Piano Department, Rimsky-Korsakov Music College.
- Director of the Methodics Department of the St. Petersburg Ministry of Culture and a staff member, Svetlana Ibatullina, .
- Nina Berger, faculty member at the Conservatory and founder of the "Music for Everyone" Society. Other members of the society were helpful also.
- Galina Minsker, faculty member of the Institute of Culture and teacher in the new piano pedagogy program at the Institute of Culture. 