Profile

Maria Yudina was a unique personality who could not be measured according to conventional standards. Mikhail Bakhtin summarised her activities in the following words: “Ну, прежде всего что в ней поражало? Что она вообще любила и исполняла музыку сильную [...], музыка, которая, так сказать, ну, была на пределе музыкального и чего-то более высокого, мифологического или религиозного. [...] основная черта Марии Вениаминовны как человека и как деятеля культурного – она никак не могла уложить себя в Fach, то есть в какую-то специальность, она не могла ограничиться одной музыкой, нет. Она все время пыталась вырваться шире: вот религия, потом общественная деятельность. Но уложиться в рамки одной музыки, стать профессионалом, только профессионалом, она не могла никак! Всякий профессионализм таким людям абсолютно чужд. И вот поэтому в музыке она брала все то, что лежит на границе музыки и других искусств, отчась – поэзии, романтической поэзии. [...] Романтизм ее страстино привлекал. А романтизм ведь все время, так сказать, бился о пределы, о грани литературы, поэзии, чтобы выйти за эти пределы и стать чем-то вроде религии и так далее. И вот то же самое и у нее. Она брала музыку там, где она была близка либо к поэзии романтического типа, к поэзическому откровению, либо к откровению религиозному.” (“What, then, was so astonishing about her? That she loved and performed powerful music [...] music that is located on the boundary between what is musical and something higher - something mythological or religious. [...] The most important characteristic of Maria Veniaminovna as a person and creator of culture was that she could in no way limit herself to only one area, only specialising in music: never! She always tried to overstep boundaries and conquer other areas, whether religion or public activities. But to restrict her activities to music and only become a professional musician, she could never do that! Professional activity is foreign to such people. For this reason, she was interested in everything in music that was on the borderline to other arts, such as poetry, romantic poetry. [...] She was passionately attracted to the epoch of romanticism. For the romantic movement continually expanded the boundaries of poetry and literature ever farther, attempting to overstep these boundaries and to make them into a kind of religion or something similar. Maria Yudina did exactly the same thing: for her, that music was truest...
that stood closest to romantic poetry, poetic or religious revelation.” Bachtin/Duvakin, p. 284)

He goes on to say the following: „[…] порыв Мари Вениаминовны […] на протяжении всей ее жизни к чему-то гораздо более высокому, что не укладывается в рамки никакой профессии, никакого профессионализма: ни в рамки поэзии, ни в рамки музыки, но в рамки философии. Она была больше всего этого. Она понимала, что это не все, что это не главное, что главное что-то другое.” ("[…] Throughout her entire life, Maria Veniaminovna sensed the impulse towards something higher that did not fit within the framework of a profession or professional activity – neither in the area of poetry nor music nor philosophy. She was greater. For her, that was not all - something else was the most important thing.” ibid., p. 289)

Cities an countries

Maria Yudina’s activities primarily extended over the territory of Russia and the Soviet Union. There are records of Yudina’s performances in July/August 1950 in Leipzig and East Berlin during the course of the Bach Festival. A travel ban was enforced on her in the Soviet Union from 1960 onwards.

Biography

Maria Yudina was born in Nevel into the large family of the highly regarded physician Veniamin Gavrilovitch Yudin (1864-1943). The family was very committed to the traditions of the old Russian intelligensia. Maria Yudina’s uncle, Yakov Gavrilovitch Yudin (1866-1930), for example, was a lawyer in Vitebsk, and all of Maria Yudina’s siblings received a tertiary education. Maria Yudina’s family did not have large capital resources, but her father earned good money and was able to afford a spacious house with a beautiful garden.

From 1912 until 1921, Maria Yudina received an extraordinarily thorough and multi-faceted musical education. She studied piano at the St. Petersburg (from 1914 Petrograd) Conservatory with Olga Kalantarovna Kalantarova (1877-1952), Anna Nikolayevna Essipova (1851-1914), Vladimir Nikolayevitch Drozdov (1882-1960) and Felix Mikhailovitch Blumenfeld (1863-1931). She completed her instruction at the Conservatory with Leonid Nikolayevich Nikolayev (1878-1942). In addition, Maria Yudina studied organ, music theory, composition, score-reading and conducting. The completion of her studies in 1921 became a great success for the young pianist, who presented both volumes of Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Well-Tempered Clavier” at her public examination. This appearance was rewarded with the Anton Rubenstein Prize that Maria Yudina shared with another favourite pupil of Leonid Nikolayev, Vladimir Sofronitsky.

At this time, Maria Yudina made a lasting impression on Dmitri Shostakovich, who also studied piano with Leonid Nikolayev and frequently played piano four hands with Maria Yudina. The composer later remembered: "Nikolayev often said to me: 'Go on, listen to how Marusya plays.' (He called Yudina Marusya and me Mitya). 'Listen closely, very closely. In a four-part fugue, she plays each part with its own timbre.' That surprised me. Could such a thing be possible? I went to her and listened. Of course with the intention of convincing myself that the Professor was wrong, taking his wish to be reality. Instead, to my immense astonishment, I heard that each part did indeed have its own timbre in Yudina’s interpretation, although that was unimaginable.” (Shostakovich, Testimony, p. 80) Shostakovich admired Maria Yudina’s interpretation of compositions by Franz Liszt as well as her “excellent understanding of Beethoven” of which she had already given proof during her period of study at the Conservatory (ibid., p. 80).

The intellectual education of Maria Yudina was, already during her early years, strongly influenced by the literary scholar and philosopher Lev Vassilyevich Pumpyansky (1891-1940), who mastered several foreign languages and had an excellent knowledge of literature. Pumpyansky, who gave Maria Yudina private instruction in foreign languages, amongst other things, appraised her talent and abilities as "brilliant". Pumpyansky’s tendency towards Russian Orthodoxy and the philosophy of the Slavophiles proved especially important and decisive for Maria Yudina. In Nevel in 1918, Maria Yudina met the young philosopher and philologist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975), who later became one of the most important and influential Russian scholars.

Bakhtin, in those days a convinced advocate of Kantian and Neo-Kantian philosophy, had just arrived in Nevel in order to deliver a lecture on philosophy. The outward appearance of the young woman alone deeply impressed the scholar: „[…] девушка, молодая очень, полная, правда, полная, большая, она была в совершенно черном платье. Вообще, вид у нее был тогда совершенно такой… монашеский, правда, контрастирующий с ее молодым лицом, молодыми глазами и так далее."
(‘[...] a girl, very young, but corpulent and tall, and dressed completely in black. She almost had the appearance of a nun, which formed a contrast to her young face, young eyes, etc.’ Bakhtin/Duvakin, p. 259f.).

Maria Yudina attended Bakhtin’s lectures, and they discussed philosophical, religious and theological subjects. Together with Bakhtin, Maria Yudina appeared at the Nevel community centre: Bakhtin gave lectures and she played the piano. The young philosopher was especially fascinated by the “unbelievable, unfeminine power of her hands” (ibid., p. 269). Bakhtin attested to Maria Yudina’s ability in the area of philosophical thinking and to her active interest in literature and foreign languages, including Latin and Ancient Greek; later on, probably in the years 1921/22, Maria Yudina taught Ancient Greek in Petrograd.

Maria Yudina was especially interested in the philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling and the Jena romantics, whom she read in the original. The circle of those interested in philosophy in Nevel included, alongside Maria Yudina, Bakhtin and Pumpyansky, the philosopher Matvei Issayevich Kagan (1889-1937), the linguist and philosopher Valentin Nikolayevich Voloshinov (1895-1936) and the mystic Boris Mikhailovich Zubakin (1894-1938).

During the years 1921/22 Maria Yudina attended lectures at the historical-philological department of Petrograd University and, as a result, completed studies in theology after she had already converted to the Russian-Orthodox faith in 1919. The choice of this denomination had ripened within Maria Yudina for a long time: despite the attractions of Catholicism and a certain tendency towards the Lutheran church, Maria Yudina felt a strong sense of inner belonging to Russia as well as a profound sympathy with the tragic fate of her homeland as a result of the February Revolution of 1917. This is shown in a journal entry of Maria Yudina from the period after the February Revolution: „Россия! Неужели она погибнет?. Господи, Боже! Просвети меня! Что дороже: родина или интернационал? Я еще недавно говорила, думала о «вырывании личности из государства», а теперь нет для меня ничего дороже России! Родина! Какое чудесное слово.” („Russia! Is it possible that it will perish? Lord God, illuminate me! What is more important: one’s homeland or the world? Not long ago, I still thought about the separation of personality and the state, but today there is nothing more important to me than Russia! Homeland! What a beautiful word.” Maria Yudina. Luči božestvennoj ljubvi, p. 28).

Interestingly, Maria Yudina’s religious conversion caused no indignation in her Jewish family. Yudina’s father, a highly educated man and a positivist with sceptical-agnostic tendencies, showed a liberal attitude towards every faith.

The intensive intellectual exchange of ideas with the representatives of the “Nevel philosophical school” including Bakhtin, Pumpyansky and others was also continued in Petrograd, later renamed Leningrad. At this time, these kindred spirits were particularly enthusiastic about the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George.

During the 1920s Maria Yudina performed as an active New Music propagandist and participated in the work of the LASM (Leningrad Association for Contemporary Music). From 1921 until 1930 she taught piano at the Petrograd (later Leningrad) Conservatory (as a professor from 1923 onwards). In May 1930 she was barred from her teaching post, having been accused of being an "exponent of religious mysticism”. From 1932 until 1934, then, she moved to Tiflis where she served as professor of piano at the Conservatory there. Maria Yudina maintained her permanent residence in Moscow from 1934 onwards, teaching piano from 1936 until 1946 at the Moscow Conservatory as well as chamber music from 1944 to 1960 and art song from 1947 to 1951 at the Gnessin Institute in Moscow. During these years, Maria Yudina concertised extensively and frequently appeared in radio broadcasts (especially during the Second World War). She participated in the music brigade during the war years, giving concerts on the front. In 1943, for example, she had herself flown into besieged Leningrad with a military aircraft in order to appear as pianist there and to give aid to the city’s inhabitants in all areas of life. This was completely in accordance with Maria Yudina’s self-conception, according to which she regarded her task as an ascetic service and self-sacrifice to God, music and humanity, especially suffering people and those in the greatest need.

During the Thaw (1956-1964), Maria Yudina was one of the most active advocates of the New Music in the Soviet Union: those with whom she corresponded in the West included Theodor W. Adorno, Pierre Boulez, Fred K. Prieberg, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Igor Stravinsky and others. Of special significance was the intensive exchange with
one of the most important representatives of Russian emigrants, the art and music critic Pyotr Petrovich Suvchinsky (1892-1985), whom Maria Yudina called "Vergil in questions of modern art" and to whom she turned with the humility and devotion of a pupil [Pyotr Suvčinskij i ego vremja [Pyotr Suvchinsky and His Times], ed. A. Bre- tanickaya, Moscow 1999, p. 355). During this period, Maria Yudina became the central figure in a circle of Soviet musicians who established connections in the West; together with interpreters such as Igor Blashkov, Alexei Lyubimov, Gennady Roshdestvensky and Andrei Volkonsky, she presented a series of formerly unknown and/or banned works to the Soviet public. Thus Maria Yudina performed numerous Soviet premieres of works of Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and others. From 1961 onwards, she occupied herself intensively with the music of Béla Bartók; she later also studied the compositions of Alban Berg, Arnold Schönberg and Anton von Webern, playing several works of Igor Stravinsky, whom she admired. At the same time, she committed herself to the distribution of the works of her fellow countrymen such as Alexander Lokshin, Arvo Pärt, Alfred Schnittke, Andrei Volkonsky and others.

At her concerts, Maria Yudina frequently read aloud from philosophical and religious works, or recited poems by authors such as Nikolai Sabolotsky and Boris Pasternak, who were her friends. An official ban followed Maria Yudina's concert on 19 November 1961 in the Small Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonia, at which she played the "Musica Stricta" by Andrei Volkonsky and the Variations, Op. 27 by Anton von Webern, also reading aloud poems by Sabolotski and Pasternak; thereafter, Maria Yudina was no longer allowed to perform at this prestigious concert hall. One year prior to this, in 1960, she had been fired from her teaching activities because of her commitment to the New Music.

Appreciation

Maria Yudina was one of her country's most important interpreters. The pianist made a major name for herself as the only female representative of the "Russian religious philosophy" and of the philosophical avant-garde. Many leading Russian philosophers, philologists, poets, authors, translators and painters belonged to her circle during the 1920s and '30s. Her close relationships with Pavel Floresnky, Alexei Lossey, Lev Karssavin and Mikhail Bakhtin were of decisive importance for her personal development. No less important were her contacts with poets such as Boris Pasternak and Nikolai Sabolotsky, with painters such as Vladimir Favorski and Lev Bruni. At the same time, Maria Yudina was intensively committed to the promotion and distribution of New Music. She became the embodiment of nonconformity in Soviet musical culture, and her later appearances resembled protest actions. At the centre of focus of her extensive repertoire were the works of the German classics and romantics as well as the oeuvre of Igor Stravinsky. She was the first Russian pianist who committed herself passionately to the compositions of Béla Bartók, Alban Berg, Pierre Boulez, Arthur Honegger, Paul Hindemith, Karlheinz Stockhausen and others.

Maria Yudina understood the interpreter's task as "stimulation of the listener to intellectual activity" (M. V. Yudina: Stat'ı. Materially Vospominanija, p. 302). According to this view, each genuine contact with music should lead to a new understanding of the world. Maria Yudina's art of interpretation was characterised by a special originality that was occasionally also felt to be arbitrariness. This special quality, however, corresponded to Maria Yudina's most profound convictions. She did not use her virtuosity and her enormous technical abilities in order to create extrinsic effects and gain popularity. Her choice of repertoire alone was very characteristic: the thought of playing current, common salon pieces would have been utterly foreign to her. This musician almost fanatically avoided success and, with extreme consistency, placed her talent at the service of philosophical interpretation, enlightenment and, ultimately, the intellectual education of her listeners. Anything extrinsic, haphazard or superfluous was anathema to this artist.

As a teacher, Maria Yudina encouraged creative element in her pupils and she conveyed to them her knowledge from many areas of culture. At the beginning of study, she placed great emphasis on the solution of purely technical difficulties and ensured the training of an essentially pianistic foundation in her pupils. When rehearsing and practicing, she aimed to attain a profound understanding of the musical text, its architectonics and logic, as well as to grasp the expressive side of the work. Alongside expressively verbal depictions, she used poetical or prosaic epigraphs for the visualisation of pieces of music. Her informative commitment was also shown in her pedagogical activity; Maria Yudina went to great lengths to develop versatility in the repertoire of her pupils, and public performances of her class always met with a great re-
Maria Yudina appeared as the artistic and musical director of the "concertante" version of Sergei Taneyev's opera "Oresteya" at the Moscow Conservatory (1939), amongst other works in which she was involved in the rehearsal and direction. In addition, she was also active as a translator and journalist and wrote her memoirs, parts of which are published on the internet (see links).

Reception

Maria Yudina's art of interpretation, like her repertoire, made great demands on the public. On the one hand, she was deeply venerated for this; on the other hand, it led to rejection by the officials and also by some colleagues, who considered this attitude strange at best, but also not infrequently as "abnormal" or "mentally ill", deriding Maria Yudina as "Yurodivaya" (God's fool). Dmitri Shostakovich also reacted dismissively to Maria Yudina's religiosity: "It always made me sad when I met Maria Yudina. She was such a magnificent musician. But we never became friends; this was impossible. Maria Yudina was a very decent, good person. But her goodness had a hysterical streak. She was stricken with religious hysteria. It is distressing to speak of this, but it is the truth. At any opportunity, Yudina could fall to her knees or kiss someone's hands. [...] When Nikolayev made a critical remark to her, she sank to her knees. I didn't like her clothing, either, this whole nun cult." (Testimony, p. 207)

It bothered Shostakovich a great deal when Maria Yudina continually said to him: "You are too far from God. You absolutely need the closeness of God." (ibid., p. 207)

A certain degree of extravagance in the lifestyle of Maria Yudina became a source of inspiration for the philosopher Alexei Lossev, who wrote the novel "Ženščina-Mysli tel" ("A Female Thinker") in 1933. Maria Yudina, for her part, found the manner of representation too personal and grotesquely exaggerated; she felt insulted and, from that time onwards, maintained a distance from this philosopher to whom she had been close until then. Lossev's novel was not published until 1993.

Maria Yudina was tolerated by the establishment, at best, as a marginal phenomenon. Mikhail Bakhtin aptly designated her as "a completely unofficial person" who "found everything official bothersome" and was "utterly incapable of building up a career" (Bakhtin/Duvakin, p. 295). Maria Yudina's standard of living and self-concept must have seemed particularly strange: although she earned relatively good money by Soviet standards, she lived in poverty and owned neither her own flat nor furniture nor piano. The outward appearance of this artist alone was a provocation to musical officials as well as musicians; at a ripe age, she appeared in tennis shoes, an old black dress resembling a nun's robe, and a large cross on her chest, reading philosophical-religious texts as well as poems by (half) banned poets at her concerts. The performances of Maria Yudina, who in her late years used the traditional form of the concert for religious messages and transformed them into a kind of church service, was found to be scandalous by the officials; this ultimately and inevitably led to her being excluded from musical life.

For Maria Yudina, however, this kind of self-sacrifice was highly typical. "She was of the conviction that each person exists in order to burn, to give himself completely, to sacrifice himself" (Bakhtin/Duvakin, p. 294). It must have appeared peculiar, if not downright suspicious, that Maria Yudina always helped those who suffered, especially those who experienced reprisals. She did not hesitate to use her connections, despite the danger of falling into disfavour or being subjected to reprisals herself.

Interestingly, Maria Yudina was Stalin's favourite pianist, which surely contributed to her being saved from the worst. Dmitri Shostakovich reported: "He [Stalin] once rang up at the radio committee [...] and asked if they had a record of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 that he had heard on the radio, played by Maria Yudina, he added. They told Stalin, of course there was a record available. That was a lie. There was no record, because the concert had been a live broadcast from the studio. No one dared tell Stalin the truth. Everyone was mortally afraid of the unforeseeable consequences of a 'no'. Human lives meant less than nothing to him. One could only say 'yes', concur in the most subservient manner, subject oneself to the madman. Stalin commanded that the record with the Mozart Concerto interpreted by Yudina be sent to his dacha. The radio committee panicked. The situation must be mastered somehow. They rang up Yudina, gathered the orchestra together and produced the record at night in the greatest haste. Everyone shook and trembled with fear except Yudina. She was a special case; the ocean only went up to her knees at most. Maria Yudina told me later that they had sent the conductor home — he was
incapable of conducting due to fearful trembling – and got another one. This one also trembled and confused the orchestra. It was only the third conductor who more or less took care of the whole thing. This is surely a unique case in the history of record production: changing conductors thrice for a single recording. At any rate, early the next morning, a single record of this performance was pressed in historical record time and sent to Stalin, also a record in toadyism. Shortly thereafter, Maria Yudina received an envelope with 20,000 roubles by personal command of Stalin. Then she wrote him a letter. She told me about this letter herself. I know that the story sounds improbable. But with all her eccentricities - she didn't lie. I am convinced that she told the pure, unadulterated truth. She wrote something like the following:

'I thank you, Yossif Vissarionovich, for your help. I shall pray for you day and night and ask God to forgive you for your grave sins against the people and country. God is merciful, he will forgive. I shall donate the money for the renovation of the church where I go.'

Maria Yudina sent this suicidal letter to Stalin. Stalin read the letter and didn’t say a word. They only waited for a movement of his eyebrows to arrest Yudina. The arrest warrant was already prepared. The smallest gesture would have sufficed – and nothing would have remained of her. But Stalin remained silent. He laid the letter aside, silently. There was no movement of the eyebrows, Nothing happened to Maria Yudina. It is believed that the record with the Mozart concerto played by her lay on his record player when he was found dead in his dacha. The last thing he heard.” (Testimony, 213f.)

Maria Yudina, a marginal figure during her lifetime, has become a cult figure since Perestroika. In particular, her recordings and numerous publications about the artist enjoy ever greater popularity through the distributional possibilities of the internet.

Need for Research

The connections between biography, politics and artistic activity require, in the case of Maria Yudina, still more detailed research. In addition, a complete repertoire list would be helpful in order to more concretely appraise Maria Yudina’s commitment to New Music.

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