

Michael Meylac. *Euterpe*. Ecrits sur art. Entretien avec des artistes de l'émigration russe. T. 1. Moscou: Editions de la Nouvelle revue littéraire (NLO), 2008, T. 2 (870 p.), *ibid.*, 2011.

SUMMARY

Two years have passed since the publication of volume I dedicated to Ballet. It contained a wealth of interviews with dancers and choreographers involved with or influenced by the *Ballets Russes*, or with Russian ballet tradition outside Russia; some of these people had started with Diaghileff, other with the company re-launched by Colonel de Basil in the early thirties, still others came later. The Author spoke to more than sixty dancers and choreographers who had worked with the companies that had emerged from the *Ballets Russes*, but also to stars of the Bolshoi and Mariinsky theatres. The subjects covered include the excitement of working for Diaghileff and such great Russian choreographers as Balanchine, Massine and Nijinska, a dancer's life under Stalin, and stories of the artists who defected to the West during the Soviet period. This first volume followed the expansion of the Russian ballet tradition through the whole world, corroborated by the defection, in the seventies, of several great stars like Baryshnikov or Makarova, also included in the book. Hailed by the press, the book was enthusiastically received not only by the ballet community but by a much larger audience as well.

This second volume treats four more arts, Music and Opera, Theatre (with a bit of Cinema) and Fine Art. Like Ballet in volume 1, those arts are presented, alongside some fifty Author's reviews, through eighty two dialogues with distinguished artists whom Michael Meylac (a Russian author from St Petersburg, living partly in France and teaching at the University of Strasbourg) has been meeting throughout the last twenty years. Many of them are Russian or of Russian origin, and many the Author's friends, which contributes to a more personal tone and to making conversation informal. Dialogues were recorded mostly in the West, but some in Russia. Dialogues with people whom the Author interviewed more than once make longer sequences, like those with Gennady Rozhdestvensky, conductor, Sofia Gubaidulina, composer, or Gidon Kremer, violinist: first talks with them going back to 1989 have been followed at various instances up to recent years. The Author claims that despite the Iron Curtain over the Soviet Union, cultural interchange between East and West never stopped. Massive emigration of artists both after the Russian revolution and after perestroika on the one hand, and artists, theatres and exhibitions on tour to the USSR on the other (visits re-started almost immediately after Stalin's death), contributed largely to cultural interchange between the two worlds.

Each section of the book is preceded by an Introduction going back to the Author's earlier years in Leningrad, ever rich, despite the Soviet ideological pressure, with true artistic events. As to Music, the Author recollects the concert life in this city, which brought together the cream of the intelligentsia, with concerts of outstanding Russian musicians like Gilels or Richter or the unforgettable Judina, but also of the great world orchestras and interpreters including Isaak Stern, Yegudi Menuhin and Pierre Boulez. Love for chamber and baroque music came into fashion at the same time as in the West, but interest in avant-garde music was even sharper just because officially it was almost prohibited, but was finding its way through efforts of musicians like Rozhdestvensky, Volkonsky or Lubimov. New talents like Gidon Kremer and Grigori Sokolov immediately attracted attention. Concert life had nothing of the industry it tends to be today.

To Music, *ars suprema* for the Author, he dedicates about one third of the book. Among composers, his nine interlocutors are the three major post-war avant-garde musicians, Schnittke, Gubaidulina and Denisov; two more traditional Petersburg rival masters Slonimsky and Tischenko; rather post-modernist minded Dessiatnikov; the Moscow iconoclast Martynov, but also Pierre Boulez and Heinz Holliger, both speaking about their connections with Russian music and the Russian musical world. For everybody Stravinsky remains an omnipresent deity. The world of conductors who always have to fly somewhere else after the concert, was able to provide only five interviewees, which scarcity is fully compensated by the four talks, one of them quite lengthy, with *maestro assoluto* Gennady Rozhdestvensky, a great musician, intellectual, writer and connoisseur of art who, alongside an international career, greatly contributed to introducing less known music to Russian public. To give just one example, the Author had the honour to review his world premiere of a complete cycle of nine Vaughan Williams' symphonies in Petersburg in 1989, some fifteen years before this happened in England. The Author recollects: anybody interested was admitted to introductory chamber concerts preceding all five evenings, beginning two hours in advance to play music by Vaughan Williams' contemporaries, and maestro lectured on the symphonies to be interpreted later that night: did not this prove rare enthusiasm for art both on behalf of the musicians and of the public? Another substantial conversation is with one more veteran, Rudolf Barshay who throughout the Author's younger years did so much for the revival of baroque chamber music in Russia, and later became a world famous conductor.

Next come the interpreters. Of all violinists, the Author limited himself to most interesting talks with Gidon Kremer embracing a period between his first return to Russia after perestroika, and

the fifth and last *Muséïques*, a Festival he founded in Basel, itself an event: concerts corresponding with works of art on exhibition were taking place in the town's museums. More numerous are pianists, among them, some veterans like the Viennese Badura-Skoda, or the charming Shura Cherkassky, one of the Jewish Wunderkinder from Russia who gave his first concert at Baltimore at the age of eleven. Others include Victoria Postnikova, maestro Rozhdestvensky's wife and irreplaceable soloist at his concerts, or Alexey Lubimov, another enthusiast preoccupied with authenticity of ancient and baroque music interpretation, but also with introducing to the public works of Anton Webern and Schoenberg, almost unknown in Russia during the Soviet period. There are also conversations with Mikhail Rudy, a romantic pianist who recently published his interesting memoirs, with Valery Afanassiev, also known as author of essays, novels and several books of poetry (both defected from the Soviet Union in the seventies), and with Kremer's partner Oleg Maisenberg who followed them slightly later; with Evgeny Kissin, a former child prodigy, probably the last one, and with Nikolay Lugansky, also belonging to a younger generation, who unlike older musicians, had never suffered from suffocating pressure of the Soviet regime controlling artists and often preventing them from performing in the West. The only French pianist represented in the book is Pierre-Roland Aymard who shares his interesting ideas about Russian music and about music in general. There are also talks with the famous cellist Natalya Gutman and with Bulat Okudzhava, a writer who, in the sixties, created his own genre of lyrical songs informally recorded on magnetic tapes which circulated all over Russia.

The heroes of the next little section are some outstanding ladies. One of them, Alexandra Bouchene coming from an aristocratic family, was educated at an Institute for young ladies from noble families opening the way to the Court. Both she and her brother broke with the milieu and family, he to become an artist, and she to study music at the Conservatory, both vocations only accepted as amateur hobbies by the nobility. She developed into a musicologist specialized on Verdi and Russian pianism, while her brother Dimitry who had emigrated after the revolution became a French artist and stage designer; both died aged over hundred years. The other *grande dame* of about the same age whom the Author visited in Portugal, was the marchioness Olga de Cadaval whose ancestors belonged to European royal families including the Russian empress Catherine the Great, but also the Field-Marshal Kutusoff who defeated Napoleon. A music lover respected for her ancestry even by the Soviets managed to arrange private visits of great Russian musicians like Gilels and Oistrakh to her manor near Sintra, and this at the time of the Salazar dictatorship when neither Portugal nor Spain had diplomatic relations with the USSR!

The Music part of the book is concluded by the Author's accounts of various musical events, like the Jerusalem Festival or the less known but no less interesting La-Chaise-Dieu Musical Festival. At the latter, for instance, singers and chorus from St. Petersburg performed, after almost two hundred years' oblivion, the Napoleon's *Coronation Mass* (the score found by chance on one of the less visited shelves of the Paris Conservatory Library proved to have more of an historical rather than musical value). The Opera section mostly consists of Author's reviews of various productions, like Prokofiev's *Fiery Angel* at the Mariinsky, *Prince Igor* at Covent Garden or the yearly Haendel festivals in Karlsruhe. The Author is in no way a partisan of operatic scenography altering the period by filling the stage with modern furniture and dressing singers in today's casual costumes: a disappointing Frankfurt production of Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* induced him to muse on the advantages of having to listen a classical Opera with an eye-band rather than with ear plugs. This section also includes dialogues with Serguei Leiferkus, the Author's former dacha-neighbour near Leningrad, as well as with Georgy Isaakyan who turned the God-forsaken Perm Opera in the Ural (where in Soviet times the Author spent four years in GULAG) into one of the best in Russia. It also contains another dialogue with maestro Rozhdestvensky on the occasion of his conducting Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* at the Paris Opera.

The Theatre section comes next. In the Introduction, the Author recalls his early impressions of the Royal Shakespeare Company coming to Leningrad, then the Old Vic guest performances, forever shaping his penchant for the English theatre, but no less was he impressed by Marie Bell, the last great French tragic actress, or by Jean-Louis Barrault. There follows a survey of the leading Leningrad theatres and theatrical life, and some reflections on the impact of Western cinema with its intimate fixation of "reality", on the consciousness of people behind the Iron Curtain. As to emigration, unlike in the worlds of Ballet, Music and Painting with their international language, few were Russian actors who, due to a language barrier, could perform abroad, but the Author found at least one in Paris. Even if not Russian, many actors and stage directors were of Russian origin, like Peter Brook and his wife Natasha Parry, or Marina Vlady, or Masha Meril, all having spoken to the Author in Paris, while Oleg Basilashvili and Misha Kozakov did so in Russia (the Author's friendship with the latter goes back to his childhood). Other most interesting dialogues are with the three great stage directors of the older generation still working in Russia, Youri Lioubimov of the Taganka Theatre who, when exiled from the USSR also made an international career, Peter Fomenko and Kama Ginkas. The section is completed by some unique testimonies of very intensive theatre life in post-revolutionary Moscow, as well as by those of Jewish theatre flourishing in Soviet Russia only to be erased by Stalin in the late thirties and, finally, by seven reviews including that of Peter Brook's *Cherry Orchard* with its international team of brilliant actors. As to the Cinema, the

Author concentrates on documentaries which were particularly interesting during the perestroika period. Among film-makers, interviewees were Tonino Guerra, screenwriter for Fellini and Antonioni deeply involved with Russian art and artists and speaking, among others, of the great Paradzhanov at whose home in Tbilissi the Author first met him in mid-seventies; his colleague Andrei Khrzhanovsky who recently produced films about the Nobel Prize Russian poet Joseph Brodsky; and Alexei Guerman, director of the epoch-making "*Khrustalev, a car!*", who lived in a flat next to that of the Author's family in St Petersburg.

The Fine Art section is a panoply of interviews and reviews centred on the Russian avant-garde. In the Introduction and further, some pages are dedicated to the Hermitage which, after having been forced by Stalin to sell so many masterpieces abroad (the Author was to discover them later in Lisbon or in Washington, D.C.) had to wait for Khrustchev's thaw even to divulge its precious impressionist collections (under the tyrant, impressionists had been considered as dangerously radical, and this after "the great experiment" of the Russian avant-garde!) The Author proceeds with the story of the re-discovery of the Russian avant-garde which, to obtain a legal status, had to wait for still another political shift, that of perestroika, but was already open to post-war amateurs of art through private collections like those belonging to Choudnovsky in Leningrad and to Costakis in Moscow (there were some important collections even in Kiev). Then, the Author switches to non-conformist artists among his contemporaries and friends, to home exhibitions, to the special atmosphere of Rabin's Lianosovo and of the Sterligov-Glebova atelier. This for the Introduction. The art section itself follows the same way starting by seven talks with artists of the older generation or their heirs including Zinaida Serebriakova's daughter and Karl Fabergé's granddaughter, but then inevitably turns to the Russian avant-garde. Various dialogues and exhibition reviews focus on Alexandra Exter, Ivan Pougny, Vladimir Tatlin, Iouri Annenkov, Mikhail Matiushin and school, Pavel Mansourov and of course, Malevitch. Quite remarkable are conversations with Nikolai Khardzhiev, an outstanding connoisseur of Russian avant-garde who while living in Moscow was robbed by Bengt Jangfeldt, a Swedish slavist who had stolen four of his paintings by Malevitch, and upon emigration to Amsterdam was abused and probably killed by the Russian and Dutch mafias. More talks and articles are dedicated to Russian Theatre Art: some to the amazing Prince Nikita and Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky Collection, other to Leon Bakst and Mstislav Doboujinsky. Contemporary art is covered by reviews of some perestroika exhibitions where artists who had not yet emigrated could at last show their works without any censorship, and also by extended dialogues with some central figures of the non-conformist movement, namely with Oskar Rabin, Mikhail Shemyakin, Eduard Steinberg and Mikhail Koulakov.

The book is illustrated with 257 pictures, most of them (as in volume I) unique and many never reproduced before. In St Petersburg, the Author explored the photographic archives of the Philharmonic Library and those of the Theatre Museum, but also used many private sources; he also has an important collection of his own. For the Music section we find Stravinsky, or Shostakovitch as a soloist, or Richer with Fischer-Diskau, or Isaak Stern, or Vladimir Horovitz at both magnificent Leningrad Philharmonic halls; for Theatre – pictures of legendary performances at the two leading theatres of the time, Akimov's and Tovstonogov's, but also of no less fabulous ones of the visiting Royal Shakespeare Company, the Old Vic or Renault-Barrault Theatres, plus pictures representing most of the interviewees or their production. Further surprises with the Arts section, with reproductions of works discussed, starting with Italian and Dutch Old Masters and old Russian primitives, following with the classical Russian twentieths-century avant-garde, and concluding with non-conformist artists of the later Soviet period.

Like the First volume, the book is supplemented by an annotated Index of names and a List of illustrations.