

Ustvolskaya, hero, not of, but against the Soviet Union

The myth came into being in Leningrad, in the old Europa Hotel on Mikhailovskaya Street, which in 1988 had not yet been restored, with excessive gold and glitter, to its so-called former glory, but rather existed in an irresistible state of decay. From my room with a view of Arts Square, I rang my heroine-to-be.

Although I was familiar with only a handful of her compositions, most of them, moreover, only through scores, the sparing sounds that did manage to reach me via copies of copies of copies of obscure tapes, and the sound formations, as though hewn from granite, that glared from the staff paper in ominous silence, had made such an impression upon me that I wanted to know everything, but really *everything*, about this music. Don't ask me what kind of impression exactly. It had nothing to do with beautiful or ugly. It did have to do with something existential, something inevitable, something genuine – in short, with something that makes you take suddenly refuge in words you would normally be circumspect in using, like a prudent composer would be with a cymbal crash.

I did not, by the way, ring her myself: ignorance of the Russian language made me no more than the co-pilot of the telephone call. Although I could not understand a word of the conversation I was attempting to steer, its tone led me to conclude that my request was in vain. And I was right. No, the composer could not receive us. Certain circumstances prevented a personal encounter. She had a difficult life behind her, and fate had once again dealt her a heavy blow. Case closed: her inaccessibility was a *fait accompli*.

Fortunately notes can speak for themselves, so that a year later, on a sweltering June day, the music of Galina Ustvolskaya was heard in the Netherlands for the first time. And not only for the first time in the Netherlands: save a few sporadic performances in Germany, her music had only ever been played in Russia. And even there only by rare exception, for if, in that country, with its socialist-realist hoorah aesthetic, one single music was *non grata*, then it was this one, with its indefatigable hammering on the anvil of what must have been a hair-raising truth. From that first concert forward, Ustvolskaya's name would long be bungled (no, the

accent lies, unlike with Shostakóvich, on the second rather than third syllable), but the music itself was rock-solid.

I still get a knot in my gut when I think back on how, in Amsterdam's Paradiso, the brave little Oleg Malov – the pianist whose résumé invariably reports that he was born as an artist thanks to Ustvol'skaya – did his best to turn the enormous pages of the score to the *Second Symphony* from behind the keyboard and how, under the gaze of a horrified audience, he tore one page after the other of that recalcitrant mass of paper to shreds and in doing so, while hammering desperately on the keys, provided an unintentional but highly dramatic counterpoint to the ruthless screams of a plethora of flutes, oboes and trumpets. 'True and Eternal Salvation' is the symphony's subtitle, and you can bet your boots that the Holland Festival audience, sweating from both temperature and trepidation, was praying for Malov's salvation.

Conspicuous by her absence was Ustvol'skaya herself. The composer had, indeed, expressed her pleasure with the unexpected interest in her work in that unfamiliar little country on the North Sea, but she wasn't about to go all that way for just a concert. She was, in her own words, '*menschenscheu*'. The request to send a recent photo for the programme book was firmly refused. She would rather have her teeth pulled than be photographed. When Cherry Duyns made a documentary about her some years later, we did get to hear her voice, but did not see her face, excepting that split-second when the camera caught her opening the door to her house.

I spoke to her just once, in German. It was during a concert dedicated exclusively to her work in what by that time – April 1991 – was once again called St. Petersburg. To my surprise, immediately after the first piece on the programme, the *Violin Sonata* from 1952, a small, thick-set woman in a rust-brown checked pinafore dress with a starched white collar bounded up on stage, and stood straddle-legged, like an obstreperous child, bowing mechanically left and right to the applause. When, in the interval, I introduced myself to her via an interpreter and attempted to express my admiration for her work, and explained that her music had amassed a modest but dedicated band of devotees in the Netherlands, her reaction consisted only of an

endless refrain of *spasibo, spasibo, spasibo* (thank you). I saw panic in that childlike face with the dyed red hair, as though she wanted to say: do please just go away.

As unforgettable as this first and last rendezvous was the concert itself. The closing work that evening was the premiere of the composition that at the time of her death, fifteen years later, would definitively prove to be her last. It was called *Fifth Symphony*, but contrary to the title might suggest, it was a sombre and sparing ritual of not quite a quarter-hour, for a handful of instruments. A man dressed in black dolefully repeated the words *Otche nash* (Our Father). A violin played 'as though from under the ground' and *de profundis* rose a single unfathomably deep tuba tone. There were archaizing melodic formulas, slow-gaited rhythms, stringent trumpet trills, threatening drumrolls, a single crescendo and a panicked acceleration towards the end. Wasteland all round. Music of, as well as against, the Dark Ages of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist Soviet Union, where the Supreme Being had been declared dead by authority of the state and thereafter was, in turn, revived by artists and other troublemakers.

'My works are not, it is true, religious in a liturgical sense, but they are infused with a religious spirit.' This is one of the few existing and consequently oft-cited utterances of the composer. Followed by the plea: 'God grant me the strength to compose.' In re-reading the notes I made following the concert, I see: 'I didn't think it was possible, but it is overwhelming, a whole evening of Ustvolskaya. It is – taking into account the place, time and circumstances – the most radical thing I've ever heard. But radical without being calculatedly so – very un-Western. Everything in this music is real, terribly and painfully real.'

In later years – by then Cherry Duyns had made his documentary, her work had definitively taken root in the Netherlands, and the composer herself had broken her reclusiveness in 1995 by, at the Amsterdam premiere of her *Third Symphony*, climbing up to the stage of the Concertgebouw unannounced – I did have the occasional opportunity to shake her hand, but I never entertained the illusion that this could in any way be construed as communication.

Only the music remained – and that was good. Because in this way the myth could remain intact, and 'the lady with the hammer', as I had dubbed her, could dovetail with her work. The less I knew about her, the better. Nothing that could

distract from her work. Nothing that could put these inhospitable plains of sound into perspective, contextualize or biographically enhance them. Although 'made' right down to the tiniest fissures, human labour thus, this music had the aspect of a natural wonder, like dolmens or pyramids.

Composition No. 2 – Dies irae: monomaniacal music for an impossible instrumentation of eight double basses, piano and a wooden box which is struck *fffffsfz* – in good English: loudloudloudloudloud-*and*-accented.

Piano Sonata No. 5: always returning to that one immutable D-flat, the hard core of a horsewhip of lashing chords that *pars pro toto* function as a complete oeuvre.

Sonata for violin and piano: a falling interval of a third and the dry plock-plock of the frog of a bow tapping against the violin. Quiet-as-a-mouse upbeat to the great Nothing, or is it the great All? Whatever the case, far beyond the realm of the beautiful, the interesting, the clever, the experimental, the progressive, the conservative and all the other concepts with which we are wont to describe our aesthetic experiences.

If these works already belong to a category, then it is that of the ritual and the religious. If this music already has kin, then look for it with Dostoyevsky, with Musorgsky, with the Stravinsky of the *Symphony of Psalms*, *Zvezdoliki* and *Les noces*. By the way, would he, the eighty-year-old Stravinsky, have picked up on the kinship, when during his first and last visit to the Soviet Union in 1962, he was confronted by a recording of Ustvolskaya's *Violin Sonata* in the Leningrad Dom Kompozitorov (House of Composers)?

Not artists, but their works, were and are my heroes. Idols are of flesh and blood, heroes are not. Idols are human and thus imperfect, and contrast with their work, which does make a claim to perfection. We forgive our idols their shortcomings, because these only augment the mystery of their work. Idols are just people, if of the extraordinary type that can transcend themselves and their own epoch.

Not so heroes. Heroes are not people. Heroes are aided by abstraction and epic invention. They exist solely in their works, and everything that detracts from their work detracts from their heroic status. Heroes are made of larger-than-life chronicles. This also holds true for Ustvolskaya and her work. Just have a read through the

scarce literature about her. Always the same sparing and unassuming biographical data; always, by way of aesthetics, the same three or four quotes; and as the lone bit of piquancy – not coincidentally, just as thinly documented – always the same old story of Shostakovich. Shostakovich her mentor, admirer and, it's rumoured, unrequited lover, and the quotes from her music that he smuggled into his own. But at the end of her life she repudiated him bitterly. In a letter to her publisher, later made public, she rejected both the man and his music. Instead, this 'seemingly eminent figure' had burdened her life and 'killed my best feelings'.

Not only Ustvol'skaya herself, but also commentaries on her and her work, exist mainly in the form of larger-than-life chronicles. Speaking for myself: if I reread what I've written over the years in lectures, programme notes and commentaries, then I am struck by its ritual uniformity. Never a new viewpoint or unexpected angle. Nowhere a discernable need for critical distance or intellectual reflection. No single move to subject the admired work to the torture rack of musical analysis, in the hope of uncovering its laws or patterns. None of that. I just hear that it's right as rain, and that will simply have to do.

I have decided that this music, in all its straightforwardness, deliberateness, uncompromisingness and shock-concrete passionateness, is exactly what it must be – disciplinarian and touchstone for musical conscience rolled into one. Yes, it is possible. It doesn't have to be so, but it *can* be. And sometimes it *must* be. It is music for which the memory is perhaps more important than the actual listening. Not hearing it, but *having heard* it, is the crux, because in this music it's more about the echo than the sound. (It is not the worst music that possesses this characteristic: think of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, Schoenberg's *Jakobsleiter*. Listening is also a form of self-examination.)

Heroes have courage. But what is an artist with courage – *real* courage, moral courage? Moral courage and art have less to do with one another than we post-Romantics would like to think. Provoke the public's scorn or make a fool of yourself: awfully Romantic, but courageous?

What comes close: making, against your better judgement, the most of a meagre bit of talent. Here, the courageous rubs shoulders with the tragic.

What comes closer: consistently paddling upstream. Unfortunately this is not so easy in our part of the world. Those amongst us who paddle up one stream find themselves at the same time bobbing down along yet another. And while going with the flow might be more comfortable, it hasn't much to do with courage. There's too little at stake for that. Not that there's anything against it: courage and art can do well enough without one another.

Ustvolskaya did paddle upstream, against one all-powerful current, and never once deviated from her course. That is why she is a Hero, not of, but against the Soviet Union. There was no less desirable music written in the imperium of Stalin and his successors than hers. And every subsequent piece was yet more undesirable, because it was more impossible and inaccessible than the previous one. The *Piano Sonata No. 1* was premiered twenty-seven years after its completion, the *Octet* twenty years, the *Violin Sonata* nine years and the *First Symphony* eleven years. Only in the 1980s, when the utopia was caving in, did the moment of completing a new work and its premiere date begin to converge, until with the *Fifth Symphony* the margin had finally reached the point every composer sees as a desired minimum.

I have often tried to imagine it: a dead-end life in a hermetically sealed world, every day in the queue for bread and cabbage, and meanwhile stubbornly notating sheet after sheet of manuscript paper – scribbling, eventually, when a tremor makes the handwriting nearly illegible – with music that is the only music that wants to be, no, *must* be written, but music you know no one is holding their breath for. Music that, if not denounced, will still be ignored. That you might never hear, and about which there's hardly anyone to talk to. Yes, with a single ex-student who compares her to the radiance of 'distant stars where the matter is so compact that a thimbleful would, on Earth, weigh several tons (Boris Tishchenko). And with a solitary loner who talks about 'the Truth made to wobble, the cleaved Existence that finds Peace' (Aleksandr Sanin).

Whatever exactly may have happened between Ustvolskaya and Shostakovich (she is hardly mentioned in literature about him), the fact is that the teacher left behind an impressive musical portrait of his pupil.

*Dear to me is sleep, and dearer – to be of stone.
Not to see, not to hear, is a great blessing
while wrongdoing and shame prevail.*

These are lines from 'Night', one of the poems by Michelangelo that Shostakovich set to music a year before his death. 'Night' is also the name of the sculpture of the sleeping woman that Michelangelo made for the Medici grave in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence. The melody of the homonymous song consists essentially of a series of endlessly slowed-down repetitions of the clarinet theme with which Ustvolskaya opened the third movement of her *Trio for clarinet, violin and piano* precisely a quarter-century earlier, in 1949. This theme had already showed up, fleetingly, in Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 5*, but in 'Night' it forms the backbone. The meaning is clear. This is no 'message in a bottle' from a spurned lover, but a tribute to a moral paragon. The marble woman has turned away from the scandalous reality, but she is not dead: 'She is of stone, but breathes within.'

At the end of December 2006 I was back in my beloved St. Petersburg. I had been back to the city a few times since 1991, but never saw Ustvolskaya there again. I asked around after her well-being, but no one had any news of her. That was not so strange. There is seldom anything particularly newsworthy to tell of an 87-year-old. Or was she still composing in secret?

On the way back to the airport I thought I recognized the anonymous council flats someone once pointed out to me as her residence. It was probably a different building entirely, but that didn't matter. My head started to hammer relentlessly again.

A few days later, back in Amsterdam, I heard that Ustvolskaya had died on 22 December. At the very moment I passed, or thought I'd passed, her house, I understood later, she lay in a coma. So my head had hammered at precisely the right moment.

I have in my possession a single youth photograph of Ustvolskaya. The same starched white collar as then. Polka hairdo à la Marina Tsvetaeva. Introverted

expression. Dramatic shadow over the face. A dab, I suspect, of retouching. This is what my Hero looks like.

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