

## INDISPENSABLE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RUSSIAN COMPOSERS

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### THE MUSIC OF 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RUSSIAN COMPOSERS: INDISPENSABLE?

In today's lecture we will be listening to music written in times of social change, wars, revolutions, the ending of some nations, and the birth of others. The twentieth century was a period of seismic changes, and those changes in history provoked changes in the arts and artists, especially those of Russia.

Some of those artists endured persecution and political purging, some escaped to America, here to enrich the arts from Broadway to Hollywood to Carnegie Hall.

And the arts responded in kind.

As we continue our journey through *The Essential Composers* let us listen to "difficult" Russian music born in difficult times. More than in any other era, the works, and the lives of 20th century composers from Eastern Europe were marked by momentous events in the history of their countries.

One more thing, there is one more lecture on Russian composers coming next in this course one on **Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Borodin, Cui, and Balakireff.**



Soviet "art" from the 1920's

In the visual arts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were many styles and movements, most not readily welcome at first: **Cubism...Surrealism...Symbolism...** and other "isms." Many people held these new tendencies in art suspected of being elitist, immoral, or just plain incomprehensible.

But now, almost a century later, we look at and admire many of these art works on the walls of museums next to Rembrandts, and we likewise listen to the music of **Stravinsky** and **Prokofiev** and **Shostakovich** and even the post-Romantic hold out **Sergei Rachmaninoff**, with as much interest as we listen to the symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven.

Enjoyment of the arts is all about holding our minds and ears and eyes open.

The artists who lived in and survived those difficult times were not content to provide soothing, relaxing music for the masses. How in the world, one wonders could artists continue to ply the trade of their parents' generation with the same set of tools, born as they were into a world filled with uncertainty?

In the sixties here in America the music that we listened to and danced to, could no longer be the bebop of our parents' generation but the hip-swiveling gyrations of **Elvis Presley**.



In the sixties, most of us in our twenties, we saw the good and the terrible: the advance of Civil Rights, *Female Lib*, Stonewall, and the start of the Gay Rights movement, along with the Vietnam War, political assassinations, and rioting.

And the arts responded in kind.

Our American sixties produced the art of **Andy Warhol**...the music of **John Cage**...the plays of **Edward Albee**...



**Andy Warhol** – “Soup Can” .... **John Cage** and his “prepared piano” **Elizabeth Taylor** and **Richard Burton** in **Edward Albee’s** *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf?*

Did not some of us, at one time or another, sport long hair or a beard or wear a mini-skirt Grandma would have deemed scandalous? The European 20th century was equally challenging...unsettling...often catastrophic. And the arts responded in kind.

**THE MUSIC IN TODAY'S LECTURE****Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943): *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*****Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971): *The Rite of Spring*****Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) ) *Peter and the Wolf*****Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) *Piano Concerto No 1 in C minor, Op 35*****Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

Moscow-born Sergei Rachmaninoff (pr: Sehr-**ghei** rachh-**mah**-nyee-noff) was a 20th century composer, pianist, and conductor whose works have become staples in the music repertoire of concert pianists and orchestras.

Born into a musical family, Rachmaninoff took up the piano at the age of four, graduating at the age of nineteen from the Moscow Conservatory.



**Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory**

Within the next sixteen years, Rachmaninoff relocated to Germany, toured the United States for the first time and, following the Bolshevik Revolution, he and his family left Russia and settled in the United States, where they eventually became American citizens.

With his main source of income coming from piano concerts and conducting Rachmaninoff did not have time for composing, so that for twenty-five years he completed just six works, including the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, which he himself played at its premiere in Baltimore, MD on November 7, 1934, with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by **Leopold Stokowsky**.

The *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* is a set of 33 variations for piano and orchestra written in a continuous movement, and closely resembling a concerto.

<https://youtu.be/ppJ5uiTLECE> Ukrainian pianist **Anna Fedorova** in concert at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw performs Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* with the *Philharmonie Südwestfalen* Gerard Oskamp, conductor. Recorded: Sunday in March of 2018.



**The photograph is of the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Leopold Stokowsky**



**Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)**

His music, whatever we may think of it, and whether or not we find it to be our cup of vodka, and even if we claim it to be more food for the brain than nurture for the soul, can still bring the audience in a concert hall up to its feet for a standing ovation.

Igor Stravinsky began his musical career in Imperial Russia, finding inspiration in Russian folklore and in the music of the Russian Orthodox Church. When the Bolshevik Revolution arrived in 1917 along with the about-to-end Great War, Stravinsky and his family sought asylum in Switzerland literally hours before that country closed its borders.

In collaboration with his countrymen and Russian émigrés **Sergei Diaghilev** (impresario), **Vaslav Nijinsky** (choreography), and **Nicholas Roerich** (sets and costumes) Stravinsky created the ballet *The Rite of Spring* which caused a riot in its Paris premiere in 1913.



**Diaghilev and Stravinsky**

**Nicholas Roerich's costumes for The Rite of Spring**

The Rite of Spring <https://youtu.be/EkwqPJZe8ms>

Sir Simon Rattle conducts the London Symphony Orchestra in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, recorded live at the Barbican Centre in 2017.



From early in his career as a composer Stravinsky became interested in native Russian folk and sacred music. He uses much of it here, often overlaying, and superimposing tune upon tune and rhythm upon rhythm, all to create an effect of something wild, primitive, even savage.

Igor Stravinsky's overall contributions to 20th century dance music are enormous, collaborating with some of the greatest theatrical artists of his time to create his ballets: *Petrushka* and *The Firebird*, among others. Much later, in America, Stravinsky worked with **Georges Balanchine** on the ballets *Agon*, *Orpheus*, *A Game of Cards* and *Apollo*.



**Balanchine and Stravinsky**



**Billy Rose with 7 ft. tall Siri**



**Bert Lahr and Bea Lillie**

Stravinsky's music provided a musical canvas upon which some of the great choreographers of the 20th century could expand the boundaries of traditional 19th century ballet. Stravinsky even wrote a ballet for Broadway: the 18-minute-long *Scenes de Ballet* for the 1944 **Billy Rose** extravaganza, *The Seven Lively Arts*.

In a show in which **Bea Lillie** and **Bert Lahr** were the featured stars, the music of a bespectacled Russian émigré famous for his intransigence and withering way with words, along with the randy humor of Lillie and Lahr could have been uneasy bedfellows. The show, nevertheless, was a hit, even though producer Rose and the cantankerous Stravinsky had a series of rough patches, among them the following telegram exchange:

**Rose to Stravinsky:** "YOUR MUSIC GREAT SUCCESS STOP COULD BE SENSATIONAL SUCCESS IF YOU WOULD AUTHORIZE ROBERT RUSSELL BENNETT RETOUCH ORCHESTRATION STOP BENNETT ORCHESTRATES EVEN COLE PORTER."

**Stravinsky to Rose:** "SATISFIED WITH GREAT SUCCESS STOP NO NEED FOR SENSATIONAL SUCCESS STOP NO NEED FOR ROBERT RUSSELL BENNETT STOP NO NEED FOR RETOUCHING STOP"



**Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)**

Sergei Prokofiev (**pr**: Sehr-**ghei** Pro-**koh**-fee-eff) was in his mid-20's and at the top of his career when the October Revolution broke. Amazingly, he was allowed to go abroad with his family by a high-ranking Communist Party apparatchik who also happened to like his music.

Prokofiev was a master of accommodation and that ability allowed him to get by with musical and political escapades that would have sent anyone else on a one-way trip to Siberia.

He went back to Soviet Russia and was given all the perks that an *Artist of the People* could get: the *Dacha* in the countryside, the nice apartment in Leningrad, the latest model Lada to get him back and forth, and the latitude to compose his music.



But then one day, one of his compositions fell out of favor with the Russian Union of Composers – a nest of non-entities in charge of keeping all music composed and played in Soviet Russia free of “Western Bourgeois Decadence.”

The composer who had given the world the film scores of *Alexander Nevsky* and *Lieutenant Kije* and gems such as *Peter and the Wolf*, the *Classical Symphony*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, found himself having to write wallpaper music to keep Comrade Stalin and his dogs off his back.

As we gradually listen to the music of 20th century composers, we will become aware that even ones from the same country and even from the same generation wrote in diverse styles. While Stravinsky was breaking new musical ground Prokofiev remained a 19th century holdout, writing much deeply *Romantic* music that could also have been written years earlier.



*Peter and the Wolf* <https://youtu.be/oZ5WMZUbKy4>

Conductor: Richard Stamp Orchestra: Academy of London Narrator: Sir John Gielgud





**Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)**

Dmitri Shostakovich (**pr**: duh-**mee**-tree shoss-tah-**koh**-veech) has a life story that reads like a Tolstoy novel.

He grew up in the early days of the Soviet Era, when a short-lived burst of creativity and creative freedom injected new life into Russian music, theater, the visual arts, cinema, and literature. But soon a systematic repression of anything remotely resembling “Formalism” began to plague the arts in Soviet Russia, with the official line dictating the creation of *Social Realism*.

Shostakovich fell out of favor, and, to redeem himself he wrote his Symphony no. 5. No one would say this composition is an exultant hymn of praise to life in Mother Russia during Comrade Stalin; its last movement having such a tragic tone. But the Soviet officials approved it and Shostakovich got by with just a reprimand published in *Pravda*.

Dmitri Shostakovich, born in 1906, aged fourteen and in his youth a fervent supporter of the Bolshevik Revolution, could not later escape and barely survive the horrors of the Stalin years. Like **Rachmaninoff**, **Prokofiev** and **Stravinsky**, his personal story is expressed through his music.

Shostakovich’s Concerto for Piano, Trumpet and String Orchestra, written by the 26 year old composer, is a lively composition that pokes fun at different musical styles – a concerto for piano in which the trumpet runs away with the show,

**Dmitri Shostakovich Piano Concerto No 1 in C minor, Op 35** <https://youtu.be/yA5QlaFywOA>

Khatia Buniatishvili, piano Wiener Symphoniker, Philippe Jordan, conductor Paris, November 2014