

Stravinsky and Khrennikov: An Unlikely Alliance

by Alexander Ivashkin

Stravinsky left prerevolutionary Russia in 1914. In August 1925, he received an unexpected letter from Nadezhda Briusova, then deputy vice-chancellor of the Moscow Conservatory:

In response to your letter to [...] comrade Novitskii:
[...] The Government has agreed to your return to Russia. It agrees to give you a full amnesty for all your past actions if such actions ever took place. Of course the government cannot guarantee your immunity in the case of any antirevolutionary behavior on your side. What is guaranteed is your full freedom in terms of traveling from and to RSFSR as you wish [...].¹

Stravinsky replied within a week, on 18 August 1925:

Madam, I was very surprised to receive your kind letter sent on the 10 August, as I have never written to Mr. Novitskii, or anybody else, with such requests [...].²

This kind of “blackmailing” was perhaps one of the reasons why Stravinsky did not make a return visit to Russia until 1962. His critical attitude towards the communist regime in Russia developed even further in 1930, when he acquired *Kniga o Stravinskom* (A Book about Stravinsky) by Igor Glebov (the pen name of Boris Asaf’ev). Stravinsky made numerous sarcastic comments in the margins, e.g. “Eto – dlia kommunistov” (This is for communists) (*Plate 1*).³

In June 1961, Stravinsky conducted a performance of his own works at a festival in Los Angeles. The event was attended by a group of Soviet musicians – composers Tikhon Khrennikov⁴ and Kara Karaev, and the musicologist Boris Yarustovsky. In a letter to his old friend Piotr Souvchinsky, Stravinsky wrote on 12 June 1961:

Yesterday the festival was concluded with [...] hopeless music by Tikhon Khrennikov and Kara Karaev. This is incredible rubbish, which I could not escape, particularly because they visited our place the day before for dinner, and they invited me to celebrate my eightieth birthday with them in Moscow [...]. What a horror [...]. I do not believe that this invitation signals a sincere and final change towards me and my music: because Khrennikov isn’t Yudina, and because the Shostakovich cult isn’t a myth. It is horrible to have to smile when I want to vomit.⁵

Khrennikov's account of this first meeting is quite different:

We were so happy to be able to attend a concert of Stravinsky's music. [...] I liked his Violin Concerto. This is a great work, as is *Symphony of Psalms*, a piece I knew before the Second World War [...]. The following night Stravinsky attended our concert. It was a great success. Stravinsky [...] gave me a hug and kissed me.⁶

Soon after that, Stravinsky received a translation of Khrennikov's paper published in 1948, through his friend, the composer Nicolas Nabokov:⁷

In *Petrushka* and *Les Noces* Stravinsky, with Diaghilev's blessing, uses Russian folk customs in order to mock at them in the interests of European audiences, which he does by emphasizing Asiatic primitivism, coarseness, and animal instincts, and deliberately introducing sexual motives. Ancient folk melodies are intentionally distorted as if seen in a crooked mirror.⁸

In his memoirs, published in 1994, Khrennikov accused Boris Yarustovsky of being responsible for writing these negative comments on Stravinsky for Khrennikov's speeches in 1948.⁹ Yet he read these speeches himself, and with great enthusiasm. In 1963, the same Yarustovsky (then a member of the USSR Communist Party Central Committee) published a book on Stravinsky's music. Full of mistakes and discrepancies, this book was nevertheless the first Russian study of Stravinsky's music since Asaf'ev's *Kniga o Stravinskoi* (1929). Yarustovsky sent the book to Stravinsky, asking for his comments. Stravinsky almost certainly never opened it: the copy is now in the Paul Sacher Foundation and is in pristine condition.¹⁰

For some reason, Stravinsky mistakenly believed Shostakovich and Khrennikov to be Soviet officials of the same rank. Shostakovich, however, always admired Stravinsky's music and named him as one of his favorite composers on numerous occasions.¹¹ It was he who supported Khrennikov's invitation to Stravinsky at a meeting of the Soviet Composers' Union in 1961 (Kabalevsky, by contrast, was very much against Stravinsky's visit).¹² Shostakovich was unable to meet Stravinsky on his first day in Moscow, and sent a telegram with his apologies.¹³ When Stravinsky died, the only telegram sent to the family from Soviet Russia was from Shostakovich:

I am shocked by the news of the death of the great Russian composer Igor Fedorovich Stravinsky. I share your heavy grief. Dmitrii Shostakovich.¹⁴

Khrennikov arranged for Stravinsky to meet Nikita Khrushchev, then the head of the Soviet state. The meeting took place just before the composer's departure back to Paris on 11 October 1962. Khrushchev allegedly offered Stravinsky permanent residency in the USSR, and urged him to come back to his motherland, promising even to return his family mansion in Ustilug. According to Khrennikov, Stravinsky agreed.¹⁵ However, Khrennikov's statement is not corroborated by any archival sources. Khrennikov also claimed that he asked Vera Stravinsky if her husband could be buried in Russia, but again there is no documentary proof that the conversation took place.¹⁶

Stravinsky continued to receive occasional letters and telegrams from Khrennikov until December 1968. Up until 1967, Khrennikov repeatedly

tried to discuss the possibility of another Stravinsky visit to Russia: “Rady privetstvovat’ Vas v Moskve v liuboe udobnoe dlia Vas vremia” (I would be happy to greet you in Moscow at any time).¹⁷ Stravinsky politely wrote: “Regret impossibility coming Moscow at the moment.”

Khrennikov clearly used his connections with Stravinsky to further his own interests in Soviet Russia, and made efforts for Stravinsky to be seen as his “family friend.” In one typical maneuver, an anonymous telegram was sent to Stravinsky on 29 May 1963 saying: “Tikhon Khrennikov will be fifty on June 10. Union of Composers of the USSR.” Stravinsky replied from Dublin: “Our very best wishes and congratulations to Tikhon Nikolaevich Khrennikov for his fiftieth anniversary. Stravinsky.” Khrennikov’s daughter, Natasha, a theater designer, sent Stravinsky her sketches for costumes for a new stage production of Stravinsky’s *The Fairy’s Kiss* in Ruse, Bulgaria, in 1966.

The very last telegram from Stravinsky to Khrennikov was sent on 12 December 1968 to convey New Year’s greetings:

Warmest wishes for the New Year to you and your family and please convey the same to all the members of the Composers Union.
Igor Stravinsky.

However polite, Stravinsky had no illusions regarding Soviet officials, Khrennikov included. When Nicholas Nabokov asked Stravinsky to recommend him to Khrennikov for a possible trip to the USSR, he replied by a telegram from Vienna, dated 3 January 1963:

I have not written anything to Khrennikov yet because unfortunately circumstances have changed and there has been a shift to the right in the realm of the arts ...

It is true that Stravinsky’s visit to Russia helped to dramatically change the situation for new music in the USSR. Paradoxically, Khrennikov, Iarustovskii, Kabalevskii, and other reactionaries in the Soviet Composers’ Union used Stravinsky’s visit to draw a veil over their own previous activities and to give themselves an undeserved “aura.” Khrennikov, who strongly criticized Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Stravinsky, and who made life almost impossible for both Prokofiev and Shostakovich in the 1940s and 1950s, later claimed to love their music and made untrue statements about his friendship with all of them.¹⁸ Clearly, Stravinsky understood the situation well, and treated each of Khrennikov’s advances with due caution. His reaction provides a salutary example for researchers today, especially those intent on rewriting history through excessively literal interpretations of archival materials without proper consideration of their context.

¹ Igor Stravinsky Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation (henceforth: PPS).

² RGALI (Rossiiski Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]), Moscow, Fund 2009, opis’ 1, edinitsa khraneniia 6.

³ Igor Glebov, *Kniga o Stravinskoi* (Leningrad: Triton, 1929), p. 97. Stravinsky’s copy of the book is held in the Igor Stravinsky Collection, PSS. Similar comments can also be found on p. 108. “Bells sound – is an innate social thing,” wrote Asaf’ev. Stravinsky com-

mented “this is again for communists.” Asaf’ev wrote, “Stravinsky can continue and create a great festive symphony for the modern times,” and Stravinsky commented: “Why to make myself a communist?”

⁴ Tikhon Khrennikov (1913–2007) was the head of the Soviet Composers’ Union from 1948 to 1991.

⁵ Igor Stravinsky Collection, PSS. Maria Yudina (1899–1970) was a Russian pianist who promoted Stravinsky’s music in the USSR.

⁶ Tikhon Khrennikov, “On umer drugom svoei Rodiny” [He has died as a friend of his motherland, interview with Svetlana Savenko], *Muzykal’naia Akademiia* (1992), no. 4, pp. 218–20, here pp. 218–19.

⁷ With Nabokov’s note “please, read” (Igor Stravinsky Collection, PSS).

⁸ Tikhon Khrennikov, “Za tvorchestvo, dostoinoe sovetskogo naroda” [For creative arts which Soviet people deserve], *Sovetskaia Muzyka* (1948), no. 1, pp. 58–59.

⁹ Tikhon Khrennikov, *Tak eto bylo* [The way it was] (Moscow: Muzyka, 1994), p. 127.

¹⁰ Igor Stravinsky Collection, PSS.

¹¹ Cf. *Story of a Friendship: The Letters of Dmitry Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman 1941–1975* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 181.

¹² Karen Khachaturian, “Ia byl rozhden dlia muzyki” [I was born for music, interview with Svetlana Savenko on Stravinsky’s visit to the USSR], *Muzykal’naia Akademiia* (1992), no. 4, pp. 220–22, here p. 221. Karen Khachaturian, an official of the Composers’ Union, accompanied Stravinsky at most of the official meetings in Russia.

¹³ Igor Stravinsky Collection, PSS.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Khrennikov, “On umer drugom svoei Rodiny” (see note 6), p. 220.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* All documents related to Stravinsky’s funeral can be found in the Igor Stravinsky Collection, PSS.

¹⁷ This and the following quotations from correspondence in the Igor Stravinsky Collection, PSS.

¹⁸ See for example his last interview for the documentary “Russkii Vek” (Russian Century), shown on a Moscow TV Channel TBLI (TVTs) on the day of Khrennikov’s death, 14 August 2007.