

Zeitschrift: Dissonanz = Dissonance
Herausgeber: Schweizerischer Tonkünstlerverein
Band: - (2016)
Heft: 134

Artikel: Hey, we do exist! : Interview with Dmitri Kourliandski (*1976), composer and musical director of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-927510>

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Hey, we do exist!

Interview with Dmitri Kourliandski (*1976), composer and musical director of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow

Monika Pasiecznik

Monika Pasiecznik: Let's start with a recapitulation: Last summer, the opera-novel *Sverliytsey* was premiered in the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow. For this project you collaborated with the director and author Boris Yukhananov, but also with the other composers from the group *Structural Resistance (StRes)*: Boris Filanovsky, Alexey Sioumak, Sergej Newski, Alexey Sysoev and Vladimir Rannev. The project may be described as a circle of operas creating the mythology of an imaginary civilization called the Drillalians. How did the public react to this ambitious project?

Dmitri Kourliandski: I liked how it worked. It was received quite actively and positively. Of course there were not many people who really understood it at a musical level, mainly because of the theatrical situation. The Stanislavsky Electrotheatre is a "drama art theatre", so there were a lot of people coming from outside the musical world, which I found interesting. It's a very important gesture in today's Moscow, in today's Russia, to build up such a huge and abstract production. This is so

important because in some ways it is also a reaction to the present situation. Everything you do, actually, is a reaction to the current situation – sometimes political, sometimes social or otherwise. But in our case, in our country, in our city, doing art in the most abstract sense of the word is probably a sort of radical political gesture.

MP: Even though there are no direct references to that political situation in *Sverliytsey*?

DK: Exactly. Because today's situation raises so many themes for direct political reactions, we are forced to turn to a special field of communication which includes political aspects. Russia is moving back to the Soviet situation when the arts served state ideology. Many big (and not so big) artists publicly support certain political decisions. We don't deal with political issues directly, but at the same time we are not flying high in the sky. Doing abstract art now, keeping art at a high level, is probably the most radical political gesture nowadays. The premiere of *Sverliytsey* was also perceived in this way. There is an important question: when politics, when the situation in Russia will explode or fail – and it's just a matter of time – what will remain? I hope everything we do in our theatre, and all of what other artists and musicians do in Moscow, will survive this probable explosion of the concrete political situation.

MP: Did some members of the current government comment on this political gesture? Did they understand the opera as a certain reaction on what they're doing?

DK: I don't know, I didn't notice any direct reaction from the political side. The opera received nine nominations to the Golden Mask Award. This year, there was a scandal when the minister of culture forced the Golden Mask organizers to include some jury members. All these people had to come to our theatre and see our operas. I'm curious to know how they will perceive our work. We will see, the result of the competition we will be announced in mid April.

MP: About 5–10% of the whole budget of the *Sverliytsey* project was provided by the state. The rest came from private sources. Is the private patronage of new music always so important in Russia?



Dmitri Kourliandski, composer and musical director of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow © Danil Golovkin



Sverliytsey / The Drillallians, Part I (by Dmitri Kourliandski) © Andrey Bezukladnikov

DK: The theatre has its own foundation. Some theatres have panels of supporters. Usually, this concerns only big theatres like the Bolshoi – which is quite funny, because they are state institutions! In Russia there are no tax privileges for people who support culture and art so far.

MP: *Nevertheless your project has sponsors!*

DK: Yes, they just believe in Boris Yukhananov, the director of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre.

MP: *As a non-musical institution, the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre has commissioned and gave the premiere of five ambitious operas. What is the role of non-musical institutions like theatres and galleries in promoting new music events, in comparison to musical institutions?*

DK: Non-musical institutions are playing an important role in Russia nowadays, if not the crucial one. In the Soviet Union composers were big people, as far as they represented the ideology. After the fall of communism, the whole system of supporting composers and contemporary music, i.e. state commissions, distributions of apartments and dachas disappeared as well. Up to now, we still have no supportive structures, as if contemporary music didn't even exist in Russian culture. Inside the music conservatory, Vladimir Tarnopolski has founded the Center for Contemporary Music in 1993 and organizes a lot of events. In 2005 or 2006, young composers like me or Sergej Newski appeared and became quite active – it was a quite depressing time for contemporary music in Russia. And we decided to push the situation and to create some activities which would be recognizable in the public space. We invited journalists to our projects, a lot of people coming from outside the classical music world, but from contemporary arts and the theatre. We founded a group called Structural Resistance.

The goal was to make people see that the new music exists. Thanks to these activities, non-musical art societies, i.e. theatre and visual art societies, suddenly found out that there are people doing these things and got interested in avant-garde music. They could invite young composers to their activities, because their institutions had support. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the visual arts and theatres started organizing themselves in independent institutions outside of the Artist's Union or other old Soviet institutions. They found sponsors and other ways to get support, not excluding the state, and they lobbied in the ministry of culture. But there was no such movement to build new organizations in music. For example Tarnopolski organized a structure inside the conservatory. Yuri Kasparov founded the Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble inside the Union of Composers. They didn't start building new institutions from scratch. What does that mean? Tarnopolski for example says that he is wasting half of his energy struggling with this old institution. This is the biggest difference between music and visual arts in post-soviet Russia. Unfortunately, we still don't have independent contemporary music institutions.

MP: *You have mentioned the group Structural Resistance.*

Do the members have any common aesthetics or is it rather a political project?

DK: Our aesthetic is based on the acceptance of differences. It is an aesthetic statement: we don't have a common aesthetic. In comparison with the situation in the Soviet Union, our attitude is the complete contrary. This old way of thinking music as something that has common rules, that is taught in music schools and has its tradition, is still quite present in the conservatories or in the old Composer's Union. It is still something that matters. Ten years ago, it was even stronger and people pretended to know exactly what music must be like. For the StRes group, differences are like aesthetic statements. I wouldn't say it is political, but rather social. We just start shouting: hey, we do exist!

MP: *You are also the musical director of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre: Could you tell me more about its musical programme? Beside big projects like Sverliytsey, you are organizing regular music concerts ...*

DK: Yes, I initiated quite an active musical life in the theatre. In a certain way we're more active in the field of contemporary music than philharmonic organizations, which have special budgets and concert halls. Every month we have series of contemporary music concerts, electronic improvisations, jazz ... These series are mostly concentrated in experimental music both from young and also well-known composers. The Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble regularly performs contemporary classics. We also organize meetings, discussions, presentations etc. Most of the time we give our concerts in the staircase – a beautiful place with great acoustics. Electrostaircase became a serious point of attraction of the Moscow concert life – the place where you can hear something special and rare. And we have a very active and attentive audience.