

Masculinity Versus Femininity: An Overriding Dichotomy in the Music of Soviet Composer Galina Ustvolskaya

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The issue and explanation of the shortage of female composers in the musical canon has been relentlessly stated since the latter part of the twentieth century. As many of these writings have been by female musicians themselves, perhaps the search for an explanation has often been personal at the sacrifice of the professional. Despite the change of social circumstance in Western Europe since the nineteenth century, little has been done to encourage the contribution of female musicians to such a male-dominated music culture; the music world has long since been regarded as ‘masculine’. There have been many reasons suggested to explain a lack of female composers in this occupational field: Jill Halstead devotes a chapter in her book ‘The Woman Composer’ (1996, pp.3-31) to obliterating the myth of biological difference as the major factor of the disparity of male and female achievement in this discipline. Numerous scholars, including Halstead, have continued to explore gender issues including the question of what affects women’s ingenuity, creativity and equal partaking in music culture. Of course, sociological restrictions were imposed upon women for centuries, yet Ustvolskaya’s life as a woman and her expected role within the Soviet regime differed enormously from women in the rest of the world.

Despite an apparent recent trend for these gender studies, much opposition, criticism and skepticism is evoked by such research, not least by Ustvolskaya. Ustvolskaya fiercely comments on gender issues in music:

With regard to the ‘Festival of Music by Women composers’ I should like to say the following: Can a distinction really be made between music written by men and music written by women? If we now have ‘Festivals of music by Female Composers’ then shouldn’t we have ‘Festivals of Music by Male Composers’? I am of the opinion that such a division

should not be allowed to persist. We should only play music that is genuine and strong. If we are honest about it, a performance in a concert by Women composers is a humiliation for the music. I hope very much that my comments will cause no offence – what I say comes from my innermost soul.¹

Ustvolskaya's father, Ivan Mikhailovich Ustvolski, was a lawyer, but came from a family of priests. Her mother, Ksenia Kornilyeva Potapova, came from a poor family and was a schoolteacher. Ustvolskaya began her musical studies in 1926, graduating in cello and composition at the Leningrad Choral College and continuing her music education at the Professional School of Music, a college connected to the Leningrad Conservatory. From 1940-1947, Ustvolskaya studied music as a student of Dmitri Shostakovich, although here her studies were interrupted by the Patriotic War and the Leningrad blockade of 1941-1944. Lee (2000, p.8-9) notes Ustvolskaya was uprooted to Tashkent with the conservatory during the war, which caused her to live with her father in Tikhvin. She returned to her studies in 1945, and graduated in 1947, when she was accepted into the composer's union. Her postgraduate studies came to an abrupt end when Shostakovich was dismissed from teaching amidst accusations of formalism.

To fully understand the motivations and inspirations behind Ustvolskaya's musical output, it is necessary to study the political and social context in which she functioned as professional and person. The entire basis of Soviet society was the idea of collective equality. Women, as well as men, were forced to work for the government and spend as much time as men at their jobs. Their salaries constituted an essential part of the family's budget. At first glance, this seems a remarkably forward-looking venture for any society. The role of the woman broke from the repressive prevailing customs apparent in most societies through history, and women were given access to education, promotion and employment. Soviet ideology certainly entitled

¹Galina Ustvolskaya, *Sikorski: Galina Ustvolskaya*, <http://www.sikorski.de/composers/composer25.html>, (28th June, 2005).

Ustvol'skaya to study, work and teach at the most favoured Soviet conservatories, alongside the most prolific male composers of the twentieth century. However, despite the theoretical emancipation in the Soviet Union and Ustvol'skaya's apparently equal education, others would argue that the socialist regime did not offer any progress for women. The Soviet writer (and mother) Alla Sariban (1984, pp.205-215) rebukes this regime as any form of progression for women. Sariban certainly has a point, despite the official change of the role of women through opportunities of employment posed by the Soviet government, traditional women's work still needed to be completed. The government's failure to recognize and offer compensation for their domestic roles (to say nothing about material recognition) meant women were subjected to an element of social contempt. This issue has a wider resonance: If any regime represses the individual's role as the history of society had dictated for centuries, then the individual is left without the ability to realise their potential as an individual and as a member of society. As a result, true equality between men and women was *never* fully achieved in the Soviet Union despite the ideological prevalence of equality.

Although Ustvol'skaya was not subject to conventional discrimination as a woman, she suffered significant restrictions imposed by the regime as did all her contemporaries, regardless of gender, because of her role as a composer. These restrictions manifested themselves in her life and compositions in such a way that her works before 1970 are separated by Lee (2000, p.14) into two categories: those 'Socialist Realist' Works, transmitting overt Socialist themes, and those that were composed at the same time, but convey her own personal style – effectively the antithesis of the Socialist style – but were not known to the general public. Her compositions after this time are so overtly religious they are categorized separately. Socialist Realist works, often charming or heroic, although written conservatively, convey Ustvol'skaya's technical brilliance, which she employed when she needed. Ustvol'skaya has, in fact, renounced these

works, forbidding the library of St Petersburg Conservatory to exhibit some of her scores, and a new catalogue was reissued without several of her earlier compositions featured. Her first catalogue, issued by Sikorski in 1990, indeed does not include a single one of these early Socialist Realist works, other than *Symphony No. 1*. Her more recent biography, however, includes four more scores from this category: *The Dream of Stepan Razin* (1948), *Fire of the Steppes* (1958) (renamed *Symphonic Poem No. 1*), *A Suite for Orchestra* (1959) and *The Exploit of a Hero* (1959) (renamed *Symphonic Poem No. 2*) (Sikorski, 1990). Her original renunciation of these works can easily be explained as she had to comply with government pressure and consequently suffered due to extreme creative suppression.²

Aside from any sociological constituents, it is crucial that the music itself is considered. Can musical sounds themselves, or their organisation, actually convey a sense of sex or gender? Halstead (1996, p.215) distinguishes between these two terms:

Sex is the biological fact of being either male or female, whilst gender is a range of characteristics, behaviours, roles and values - masculinity and femininity - which are imposed on the sexes through conformity to social norms and through social interaction.

This implies several questions in need of consideration: Is the compositional process affected by the sex or gender of the composer? Does the musical composition itself replicate the sex or gender of the composer? How are sex and gender communicated, articulated and represented in the organisation of sound by the composer? This is a subject that is somewhat exhausted by feminist musicologists. Yet in a reality where objects, mannerisms, behaviours and traditions are frequently considered in terms of the

² Ustvol'skaya's compositions were published only sporadically. The year 1968 saw the first publication of her non-conformist works although it was fifteen years after they had been composed. Although her *Violin Sonata* (1952) was used to welcome the visiting American delegation to the Soviet Union in 1958, the acceptance and use of such dissonant works was not the norm. Resistance to such dissonant and 'modern' works delayed the premier of her *Symphony No. 1* (despite its overtly anti-capitalist message) for ten years (Lee, 2000, p.17).

masculine and the feminine, the perception of gender in musical gestures is also somewhat unavoidable. It is for this reason Halstead hypothesises a gender-diagram in which a number of possible gender equivalent categories which are found in music are listed.

Source	Male	Female
Body Size	Large	Small
Body size	Dominant	Submissive
Body size/Voice	Harsh sounds	Mild sounds
Body size/Voice	Booming sonority	Soft sonority
Body size	Large gestures	Small gestures
Body Size	Slow, sluggish	Quick, agile
Body type	Hard, angular	Soft, rounded
Body type	Strong	Weak
Sexuality	Active	Passive
Sexuality	Striving	Yielding
Sexuality	External	Internal
Psychology	Complex	Simple
Psychology	Transcendent	Bodily
Psychology	Separation	Continuance
Psychology	Abstract	Tangible
Tradition	Norm	Other

Table 1: Halstead's Table of Gender Attributes

According to Halstead (1996, p.237), all these terms, despite reference to the male and female body, as well as culturally imposed elements attached to sexuality and psychology, can be applied to musical gesture and go some way toward imposing a gender equivalent upon a musical example. For this reason, it will be used as a broad categorical model by which to interpret gendered musical gestures.

With one quick glance at this table, it becomes noticeable that Ustvolskaya's music resides in the 'Male' category, which contradicts Halstead's hypothesis. The attributes describing a male body correspond entirely with Ustvolskaya's musical language. Her repetitive, steady pulse is strong and angular; the addition of percussion instruments elevates the booming sonority already created by this rhythmic universality. The dynamic

markings *fffff* render many of her compositions large and dominant, and her implementation of extremity of tessitura give rise to harsh sounds. Ustvol'skaya complies with almost every attribute in the 'Male' class, but to a greater intensity as both she, as a person, and her music, are considered the antithesis of the 'Female' attributes.

Is it possible, therefore, that Halstead's hypothesis is somewhat amiss? If the implication that Ustvol'skaya is anomalous to the norm has substance, then other female composers must be scrutinised in a similar manner so Ustvol'skaya's gendered content can be verified accordingly. In order to ensure the masculine traits of Ustvol'skaya's music are not merely a characteristic of Ustvol'skaya, it is most appropriate to examine the music of another Soviet female composer. The first movement of Sofia Gubaidulina's *Hommage à T. S. Eliot for Soprano and Octet* (1987) (which is similar to Ustvol'skaya's adopted musical language due to its chamber instrumentation with added vocal line, rendering it an appropriate point of comparison), *does* adhere to Halstead's categorisation of feminine attributes in music: the opening song captures a mood that is the absolute exact opposite of much of Ustvol'skaya's writing.³ This, therefore, recognises that there is perhaps some truth in Halstead's model and Ustvol'skaya exists as an anomaly to this hypothesis. If this is the case, then it is possible that Ustvol'skaya's use of a masculine musical language equals a denial of her own womanhood.

Feminist scholars such as Ruth Solie are constantly reminding us of the male appropriation of female characters throughout the musical canon as male composers create and speak through female character. According to Solie (1992, p.220), it is:

³ The opening violin melody, although accented, has *small gestures*: a sequentially descending semitone motif. The second violin provides a texture in the accompanimental backdrop with warm tremolo oscillations, doubling the notes in the first violin, providing *mild sounds* and a *soft sonority*. A sustained chord in the lower strings render these lines *submissive*, in contrast to the *quick* and *agile* semi-quaver motive based on a descending minor sixth, that appears at *Rehearsal 1*. The collection of works in its entirety has a cyclic feel: the closing stage of the final song uses incredibly similar musical material to that described above (cycles, of course, always having been associated with the feminine).

Entirely the point that these songs were not made by a woman – in which case they might conceivably (though not necessarily) convey the authority of experience – and they are not even a man's portrait of a woman – in which case they would make no pretensions to that authority: rather, they are the *impersonation* of a woman by the voices of male culture, a spurious autobiographical act.

Indeed, in Schumann's *Frauenliebe* songs (the subject of Solie's comments) the main subject is a female character who has been designed to fulfill Schumann's creative effort. In a very similar manner, every vocal part written by Galina Ustvolskaya, save one, is written for a male narrator. Resultantly, we are left with a distorted version of Solie's assertions. Here we have an active female agent (Ustvolskaya) who, by shifting gender relations (caused by the Soviet regime's social demands of women), has entered the historic process, yet has chosen to appropriate a *male* voice in her work thus silencing an opportunity for an authoritative illustration of a woman. Are we left with merely an *impersonation* of a male character in her work that cannot be verified by the authority of Ustvolskaya's own experience? Are these representations therefore rendered misleading depictions? Or is it possible that there is no relevance to Ustvolskaya's male portrayals and that her created personas act rather as a depiction of collective humanity as her chosen texts suggest?

The fact that only one work includes a vocal line for a female voice is wholly relevant. If Ustvolskaya's gender selection had no significance, then a more even distribution of vocal parts between the genders could be observed. However, the only time Ustvolskaya employs a female cantor is in her *Symphony No. 4 – 'Prayer'*, involving a prayer from an individual to God (an antithesis of her previous *Symphony*, a collective prayer from all humanity). With this in mind, it is very difficult not to view her *Prayer* as her personal entreaty and the alto cantor as a representation of Ustvolskaya herself. The intensity of this quartet transcends the usual expressive limitations implied by the genre: The constraints encountered by a group of

only four players strengthen the notion of an individual's intimate prayer.

With her female cantor representing her own voice, the male voice, therefore, adopts the expression of all humanity. By presenting Man in this fashion, Ustvol'skaya places 'the male' as a universal representation of humanity's sin: the male cantor pleads to a merciless God for redemption on behalf of all humanity. As a result, she embraces the conventional concept of the male 'predator' and the female 'conscience' and consequently reproaches the male appropriately by forcing him to answer directly God's condemnation. Indeed, the entire notion of collective expression adopts a male persona in Ustvol'skaya's writing. However, as a result of Ustvol'skaya's denunciation of Man, she abandons *any* representation of the female. Her music is saturated in 'predatory male' aggression – the excessively loud dynamics, brutal pounding of the crotchet beat, violent striking of the wooden boxes – reflecting both the sins of Man and the wrath of God. This furthers Ustvol'skaya's rejection of womanhood, which is equivalent to her masculine musical gestures. Indeed, the intensity of masculine gestures is heightened until her composition is entirely centred upon traditionally masculine attributes. As if to reassert these observations, Ustvol'skaya even indicates that she would prefer only for men to play her compositions.⁴

The notion of gendered equality within the Soviet Union has already been touched upon in this article, yet it becomes significantly weighted in light of Ustvol'skaya's rejection of femininity that has been proved thus far. This attitude of refusing to accept that she, as a woman, should include any feminine traits in her music resonates with the ideological position of the Soviet Union. Ustvol'skaya was born only two years after the establishment of the Soviet Union, and consequently developed as part of it. Her personal desperation to be seen as a genderless composer is a reactionary attitude fuelled by fear of being pigeonholed 'a female composer', as well as a

⁴Ustvol'skaya, quoted in Hugh Macdonald, 'The Lady with the Hammer: The Music of Galina Ustvol'skaya', found at <http://siue.edu/~aho/musov/ust/ust.html>, (28th June, 2006).

response to the political climate that promoted similar values. As Solie (1992, p.219) repeatedly claims in the course of her scholarship: ‘Gender relations...are constructed by culture and are always among the most fundamental ideological structures operating in any society.’

The denunciation of men continued in Ustvol'skaya's personal life. Much has been written about the relationship between Ustvol'skaya and Shostakovich, particularly in the West. It is evident that he greatly valued her as a fellow composer rather than merely as a student. Boris Schwarz (1972, p.315) observes that Shostakovich send scores of his work to her, including *The Gamblers* (1941) and *Preludes and Fugues, Op.87* (1950-51), prior to their completion in order to receive sound criticism and judgment. This act conveys the element of definitive respect and trust he bestowed upon her. The profound effect of Ustvol'skaya and her music on Shostakovich can be further seen in his *Fifth String Quartet* (1953), where he quotes Ustvol'skaya's *Trio* (1949). Shostakovich used her Trio theme again more than twenty years later in his *Michelangelo Suite, op.145* (1953). Indeed, Blois (1991, p.221) points out that it was Shostakovich who wrote to Ustvol'skaya: ‘It is not you who are influenced by me; rather it is I who am influenced by you.’



Example 1: Rehearsal 31, Galina Ustvol'skaya's *Trio*

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The image displays two systems of musical notation for a string quartet. The first system includes staves for Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Cello. Each staff begins with the dynamic marking *fff* and the instruction *espressivo*. The music is written in 3/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines. The second system continues the notation for Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Cello, showing further development of the musical themes.

Example 2: Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet Number 5

STRING QUARTET NO 5 IN B FLAT, OP.92 © COPYRIGHT 1952 BY BOOSEY & HAWKES MUSIC PUBLISHERS LTD.

Ustvolskaya and Shostakovich's relationship changed from the initial teacher/student affiliation to a strong personal connection, which lasted for nearly fourteen years after her studentship. This resulted in a marriage proposal from Shostakovich in 1954, shortly after his first wife died, which Ustvolskaya rejected. Shostakovich went on to marry Margarita Kainova shortly after the end of his relationship with Ustvolskaya. This might offer an explanation to Ustvolskaya's bitterness to Shostakovich right up until her death in 2006, but this was an explanation that she denied, according to Wettstein (2000, p.66). Ustvolskaya argued that he did not defend her strongly enough against the censorship and limitations imposed by the Soviet regime. When Shostakovich joined the Communist party, Ustvolskaya considered it his a sign of his moral weakness. Thea Derks (1995, p.34) quotes a colourfully-worded letter in which Ustvolskaya criticises Shostakovich to his publisher.

Then, as now, I determinedly rejected his music, and unfortunately his personality only intensified this negative attitude...One thing remains clear as day: a seemingly eminent figure such as Shostakovich, to me is not eminent at all, on the contrary he burdened my life and killed my best feelings.

To reiterate this attitude towards Shostakovich, she also signed Victor Suslin's article objecting to the notion that Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony had any lasting musical significance.⁵

⁵ Ustvolskaya: 'I, Galina Ustvolskaya completely and entirely agree with this article by Suslin', Gladkova, (1999). For all her professional life, Ustvolskaya had been in Shostakovich's shadow.

Although the motivations behind her acidity towards him cannot be absolutely identified, it may very well be indebted to this, as she struggled to establish her career independently. However, it is widely known that Ustvolskaya was responsible for the preservation of Shostakovich's withdrawn 4th *Symphony* (1934) until it was eventually premiered. It is possible that the strong feelings Ustvolskaya publicly cites regarding Shostakovich are the result of years of bitterness towards him: a personal friendship that went wrong. It would be very surprising if indeed Ustvolskaya had harboured such profound thoughts towards the

To discover more about the Shostakovich and Ustvolskaya connection, we should revert to Shostakovich's quotation of her work as mentioned earlier. Shostakovich's integration of Ustvolskaya's theme from her *Trio* in his *Fifth Quartet* is only deployed in recitative despite significantly influencing the structure in its entirety. The first movement of Shostakovich's *Fifth String Quartet* is rhythmically belligerent, oscillating between short, faltering motifs and a waltz-like subject. The tension between these ideas mounts as the development expands to an unreserved pinnacle where it culminates in a declamation of Ustvolskaya's theme as if it provides respite to the diametrically opposed. To Louis Blois (1991, p.219) Shostakovich's decision was undeniably autobiographical. Ustvolskaya 'provide[d] the [spiritual] grace that transcends the irreconcilable. The symbolism of Ustvolskaya's bringing comfort to a troubled Shostakovich is difficult to ignore.' Ustvolskaya's theme is also heard in the last bars: a violin in duple metre plays over an accompaniment fortified in triple metre. It appears again in the final movement following an ephemeral fanfare featured in the finale of the *Fifth Symphony*.

When this theme resurfaces in *Michelangelo* nearly twenty-five years later, Ustvolskaya's theme is realised in the ninth song, this time as the principal theme. Every note is centred upon her theme, making her the cornerstone of the composition. In light of Shostakovich's previous quotation of Ustvolskaya, this inclusion must have had autobiographical relevance to him. Indeed Blois (1991, p.221) argues that in this depiction, Ustvolskaya's theme 'acquires a mournful, pathetic quality as if it had withered the passage of time since the days of the fifth Quartet'. Indeed, the musical portrait has lost the charm and youthful glow of its appearance in the *Fifth Quartet* as the song terminates in an inconclusive manner transmitting the broken relationship of these composers, perhaps even the broken character of one he once held in such high regard.

man and his music, and yet had respected his composition enough to harbour it safely for years until it could eventually be played.

Elizabeth Wilson's recent presentation of an unpublished paper (2006) draws attention to a further quotation featuring in the quartet. The viola motif in the second bar of the first movement is a derivative of a theme in Ustvolskaya's *Piano Sonata No. 1*, effectively an anagram of Shostakovich's notorious DSCH monogram. In bar 8, the notes G and A are added in a way that musically intertwines both of the composer's names (DSCH and GALina), and consequently develops into a characteristic of the movement in its entirety.

Ustvolskaya shunned society throughout her entire career, refusing interviews, declining to travel, satisfied with her hermetic existence in her St Petersburg apartment. This, when added to her refusal of Shostakovich's proposal and her nun-like, personal devotion to God, is a distinct demonstration of her rejection of her role as a Soviet woman. This assertion becomes increasingly likely when the role of a Soviet woman, as promoted by the regime, is considered: Ustvolskaya would not compromise her role as a composer in favour of a typical domestic role. The Soviet attitude towards equality explains Ustvolskaya's adopted attitude and consequent rejection of femininity. As has been elucidated, this is not typical of every Soviet female composer. Neither Sofia Gubaidulina nor Azerbaijani composer Frangiz Ali-zadeh reject their womanhood in such an overt fashion⁶; yet both are representative of different generations and cultures, respectively. The complex situation surrounding gendered politics has undoubtedly manifested itself in her work as demonstrated above. In order to fully comprehend Ustvolskaya's 'gendered self' in her music, it is necessary to take into account her biographical experiences as a woman. Nevertheless, whatever the motivations for her implemented musical language, Ustvolskaya expresses herself as a woman in a masculine language conveying contempt, in many ways, for both the male and the female.

⁶ Ali-Zadeh, a female composer from the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, has a personal preoccupation with this issue. Her *In the Style of Habil* (1979) inspired by a virtuosic Kamancheh player, explores male sexual desire through musical examination of the *maqam* form, which has traditionally been regarded as a symbol of male sexuality.

Perhaps Ustvolskaya's approach is ultimately a denunciation of Mankind and its culturally imposed values, reinforcing Ustvolskaya's personal and constant assertion through her overtly spiritual music her earthly focus should constantly remain upon the very opposite of man: God.

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