

THE SOVIET REVIEW

A Journal of Translations

VOLUME 3

APRIL 1962

NUMBER 4

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LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

Kabalevsky's Piano Pieces for the Young

By Leonid Roizman

In a field where much of the pedagogical work is traditionally uninspired, a major Soviet composer has consistently, since his own youth, been making a tremendous contribution. The writer discusses in detail various piano pieces which Dmitri Kabalevsky composed, mainly for his young students, at various stages of their technical development. *Sovetskaya Musika*, 1960, No. 12.

WE GIVE very little thought to music for children. If a distinguished composer does give it attention, the critics tend to underestimate his efforts or ignore them.

Our future is communism, our youngsters the future citizens of a communist society. Think of the spiritual riches with which we should be endowing them in order to develop and nurture their innate talents. Musically, this new generation of Soviet men and women, who will be called upon to make humanity's dreams come true, deserves something very special indeed.

Of course our piano literature for children does have many achievements to its credit. Its foundations were laid by the splendid masters of an older generation of Soviet composers—Samuel Maikapar, Reinhold Glière, Alexander Gedike, Yelena Gnesina and Alexander Goldenweiser. Their compositions for children have become the classics of our teaching repertory. The educational piano literature of pre-revolutionary years had been cluttered with such stuff as the dreary *School* by F. Beyer and "program" pieces on the order of Foerster's *Favorite at an Examination*, but Maikapar, Glière and Gedike turned to the folk song and folk dance, capturing in their work the world of the child, his games, amusements, sorrows and joys. Theirs was a rich, truly creative continuation of

the traditions of Schumann and Tchaikovsky, masters who have taught all composers, present and future, a practical lesson in thoughtful, loving and serious approaches to the musical training of children.

Destined to have a fresh impact on Soviet piano literature for teachers was a composer who came into his own in Soviet times, who, still a boy during the October Revolution, reacted with emotion and sensitivity to the romanticism and heroic tempo of those exciting days.

Dmitri Kabalevsky began publishing his pieces for young piano students some thirty years ago, and it became evident at once that here was a talent which would set the fresh winds of contemporaneity blowing through children's musical literature. I want to make it clear right from the start that I am speaking of a major composer in whose overall work children's music holds only a minor place. Nevertheless it is this aspect of Kabalevsky's creative output that is the subject of this article.

Writing in *Sovetskaya Muzika* (1953, No. 2) about Kabalevsky's *Third Piano Concerto*, Marina Sabinina has this to say: "An artist who addresses himself to children and young people must always remain the teacher, never losing sight of the ethical goals of his art." Yes, we agree. But neither must we lose sight of the fact that it takes consummate skill to keep from imposing upon the children our wish to teach them—the purpose must be cleverly camouflaged. This as a matter of fact is a secret of all successful works of art written for children. Arkady Gaidar expresses this idea beautifully, fully and with wisdom when he wrote: "Let people someday later on think of us that here were men who called themselves children's writers out of sheer cunning—that in reality they were training a solid red-star guard."

It is an interesting point that Kabalevsky's earliest youth pieces were published at the same time as Gaidar's own first stories for the "new little boys and girls." Kabalevsky's *Preludes*, Op. 5, came out in 1929 and his *Sonatina in C major*, Op. 13, in 1932; whereas Gaidar's first fine story, "Revolutionary War Council," appeared in 1926 and his *School*, one of the finest Soviet children's books, in 1930.

This I feel was more than mere coincidence. For it was toward the beginning of the Thirties that the first generation of children brought up in the Soviet era was reaching maturity. Their mothers

and fathers had fought at the front in the Civil War, they had rebuilt the towns and villages from ruins and ashes, had constructed kindergartens and schools. Those children were delighted to meet in Kabalevsky's music some of their favorite new heroes—the dashing Budenny cavalymen (*Song of the Cavalymen*, Op. 27) and the romantic Young Pioneers (the cycle *From the Life of Young Pioneers*, Op. 14).

The work of Gaidar and Kabalevsky, who by the way are contemporaries, both born in 1904, has a great deal in common. Both artists knew how to impart romantic flavor, an aura of achievement, to a child's workaday school life. That is why Kabalevsky's children's songs and choral pieces are always popular with youngsters, why youthful pianists play his gay, dashing marches, his buoyant pieces that so entertainingly picture the life of our youth (*March, Physical Culture Game*, Op. 14) and even his more difficult, dramatic works at least as often as they play *Granny's Fairy Tales* and *Bunny Rabbit*. One of the more dramatic pieces is the *Novella*, Op. 27, which to the children of the Thirties used to seem a dedication to the heroes of the Civil War, while the generation growing up in the Forties saw it as a musical description of the death of a partisan scout. One of Kabalevsky's most successful variation cycles, *Light Variations in A minor*, Op. 40, No. 2, first published in 1945, with an original theme heroic and tragic in character, unquestionably reflects the composer's own impressions of the difficult days of the Great Patriotic War.

The theme, conceived in the manner of a broad-flowing Russian folk song, has an inner dynamism to which an undercurrent of march rhythms adds considerable power. In one of the variations we discover the fanfare motifs that again seem to alert the listener, recreating the disturbing atmosphere of the war years. The finale is marked by a broad sweep of virtuosity—of course using the word in a relative sense, for it is virtuosity in terms of an advanced piano student in a children's music school; its folk melodies in the introduction and finale contrast beautifully with the rapid bubbling triplet movement which conveys the excitement of battle, the triumph of the chase, the joy of victory.

Notwithstanding the fact that many of these pieces were composed during the early phase of his career—the second work he ever wrote was the children's piano piece *The Gay Voyage*, later included in his Opus 39—the maturing of his "youth line" did not

proceed smoothly and simply. It is interesting and significant that he did not progress from the simple to the complex but rather to some extent reversed the pattern. The young, while forever passionately searching, do not always quickly find their true artistic direction, and this was true of Kabalevsky. "There was a time," he wrote in "The Creative Individuality of the Composer," an article published in *Sovetskaya Musika* (1955, No. 8) "when I felt I could find my creative milieu only in the realm of the dominant sevenths."

He was brilliantly successful with the *Sonatina in C major*, published when the composer was already the author of a number of impressive works, including the *First Piano Sonata*, the *First Quartet* and the *First Piano Concerto*. The *Sonatina* is played widely in music schools, but it is also often heard on the concert stage both in the USSR and abroad, the author himself as well as Grigori Ginzburg, Gleb Axelrod and other Soviet pianists performing it with invariable success. And though in the Thirties and Forties children had some difficulty in grasping the unaccustomed harmonic language of some of the episodes, it would seem that in the past few years their ears have become attuned to such modern music. At any rate teachers no longer have any problem with them in relation to this piece.

With the *Sonatina* Kabalevsky seems to be saying: see what our Soviet children are like, see how happy, bright and eager they are! They dream, they love to wander, singing, through the woods and the fields, and later get back to school and work with a will! This smiling quality, this sunniness, this brightness of palette has become a characteristic of all of Kabalevsky's children's pieces.

Indeed the *Third (Youth) Piano Concerto*, written in 1952, is reminiscent of the *Sonatina*. Of course the *Concerto* is far more mature and gives deeper delineations; it dwells less on childhood games and capers and speaks of youthful energy, a promise of future achievements, a joyous sense of life. But the *Concerto's* protagonist nevertheless remains the older brother of the protagonist of the *Sonatina*.^{*} Between the two works lies a gap of two decades, and during those years everything Kabalevsky has written

^{*} Immediately upon publication of the *Concerto* serious critical evaluations of it appeared in the press. The critics were wrong, however, in assessing its technical difficulties. It has remained beyond the capabilities of average music school students and has been included in the repertory of first-term music college courses.

for children has received publication. Yet it is interesting that the *Twenty-Four Light Pieces*, Op. 39, intended for the very young, did not go into print until 1945. The artist, who has always felt that giving children an education in music as an art was a serious responsibility, did not feel ready until then to publish those very simple pieces, some of them consisting of no more than a single line. And of course even among these trifles some are less successful than others: the final choice has been determined in practice. But most of the pieces have become highly popular and have gone into innumerable printings both here at home and abroad.

The cycle *Thirty Children's Pieces*, Op. 27, first published in 1938, is an important contribution to our educational music literature. It is as though the very keys of the pianos in children's music schools could of themselves play the funny *Clowns*, the graceful *Little Polka*, the naive *Song* and the now-famous *Joke*—this last, incidentally published separately in New York in 1946.

Even the very term "instruction" does not seem to apply to Kabalevsky's children's music. By and large "instruction" has come to mean something hopelessly dull, dry, joyless, even if useful. But compositions by Kabalevsky—a superb pianist trained by Goldenweiser—whether gay or sad, calm or mischievous, are always entertaining, provocative "narratives"—musical fairy tales, stories, poems. Of course they are instructive, but in the best sense of the word; for they come from the hand of a master pianist and are truly useful, since they teach an understanding of the rich language of music without slighting the technical problems involved.^{*}

All his adult life Kabalevsky has made friends with children, fascinated by the way their minds work, identifying with their world. In 1935 he wrote: "I have begun to visit general-education schools, keeping my ears open for what the children have to say during their music lessons." His visits to Artek [children's summer camp in the Crimea—Ed.] made an unforgettable impression on him.

Like many other composers of children's music he began by writing easy pieces for his own pupils. At the age of 21 or 22 he was already teaching at the Children's Music School of what

^{*} The *Joke* is a fast but smooth-flowing five-finger exercise, the *Scherzo* an exercise in sharp and pliant staccato; in the *Little Polka* the staccato and legato are counterposed in the parts for both hands.

is now the Music College of the Moscow Conservatory. In attempting to diversify the meager and boring repertory of the beginners' classes he composed numerous simple pieces, some of which were later included in the collection *From the Life of Young Pioneers*. Early in the Thirties he was for a time head of the Instruction Department of the Music College of the Conservatory, then called the Rubinstein Brothers Music School. There too he was drawn to the younger generation, observing with genuine interest the special world of their thoughts and feelings.

Before he is ready to publish—and this again demonstrates how exacting he is toward his own work—Kabalevsky invariably tries out his pieces on small performers. His long years of contact with the Conservatory Music School and its faculty, especially the veteran teacher V. Chertova, make it possible for him to hear many of his pieces played while still in manuscript.

Kabalevsky became sure of his own particular style early in the Thirties. Speaking of the Soviet school of composition, he wrote in *Sovetskaya Musika* in April 1934: "One of the distinctive traits of the Soviet style is concreteness of musical imagery." This applies very definitely to his own work. He tells us that from the very first he tried in his music for children to present "the most concrete possible images of men and events." It is this concreteness that is responsible for the popularity of his works among youngsters. This isn't of course a matter of titles alone. The cycle of variations Op. 51, for instance, is called simply *Light Variations*. The themes are borrowed from folk songs—two Russian, one Slovak and two Ukrainian, and they are characterized by well defined imagery, sparseness, clarity of line. In *Variations on a Slovak Theme*, for instance, the melody of the folk song comes to us now in the form of a dance, now as a march, returning eventually to its original mood. The composer is less successful with the *Variations on the Theme of Ukrainian Folk Songs*, Op. 51, No. 5, which concludes the cycle.

Some of Kabalevsky's most interesting piano transcriptions date back to the early Thirties. The repertory of piano music for children has been especially enriched by his arrangements of J. S. Bach's eight *Little Preludes and Fugues*, originally written for the organ, as well as the *Organ Prelude and Fugue in C minor*. Although himself not an organist, the composer shows here a fine understanding of the potentialities of the instrument. He has managed

to transcribe organ effects with the use of simple, economical piano methods completely within the grasp of senior class students of the Music School.

The character of some of the transcription may be open to argument, and consequently we may quarrel with some of the transcriber's directional and dynamic marks, but there is no gain-saying that the work is in excellent taste and shows a real understanding of the organ. I should also like to mention two cadences from Haydn's *Concerto in D major* in which Kabalevsky harmonically revises the thematic material while remaining faithful to Haydn's style.

As we have already said, Kabalevsky's music for children and young people is known far beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union. They are constantly being reprinted in other socialist countries. Ten of his pieces from the Op. 27 collection were published in 1951 in the United States, and the *Light Variations*, Op. 51, and the *Sonatina in C major*, Op. 13, are often played there.

Kabalevsky continues to compose in his favorite genre. He has recently published four pieces in the form of the rondo—*Rondo March*, *Rondo Dance*, *Rondo Song* and *Rondo Toccata*—and this tetralogy has already begun its gay triumphal march through children's music schools. An important contribution to the scanty Soviet repertory of polyphonic piano pieces is Kabalevsky's new *Fugue Song*.

Looking back over what Kabalevsky has already done and is continuing to do for the Soviet children who study piano, one is constantly amazed at the spiritual youthfulness and unfading freshness of the maestro whose work breathes warm love for our children and faith in their future.