

NIKOLAY ROSLAVETS

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I have encountered some false and absurd information about this composer on various sites and Rob Barnett of Music Web, who reviews Roslavets two violin concertos played by Alina Ibragomova, talks his usual nonsense saying that this music is avant garde and surreal. Others wrongly use the expression avant garde. Avant garde means something that is technically advanced of usual standards. That is a ridiculous statement for it that is true, Mahler and Prokofiev and even Debussy are avant garde and I have never heard them called that. Many thought that Mossolov and Loure were avant garde.



Surreal means very strange, dream like and ideas put together that are not normally put together. Strange could mean not known before, but it is essential that composers are original. However, the word strange implies odd and not experienced before. There are works before Roslavets that have appeared before and been heard. And this composer's work is not dream like.

Barnett talks about the violin concertos being rhapsodic which means freely structured and emotional, never to a set plan such as sonata form. Roslavets music is not freely structured but usually carefully structured and his music is not overtly emotional. Emotional means governed by feelings rather than rational and clear thinking. Behind all the Roslavets scores I know there is clear thinking.

Some other ignoramus says that Roslavets is the Russian Schoenberg and that erroneous remark is somewhat senseless and illogical and no real musician would say such a thing. There may be a slight resemblance in one place to Schoenberg's Transfigured Night but no evidence of strict dodecaphonic procedures.

To many musicians and music lovers to be either modern or original is a crime.

Nikolay Andreyevitch was born in Dushatino, Ukraine on 4 January 1881, a place he did not like and referred to as God-forsaken. He was self-taught to begin with, but, during the 1890s. He attended classes in Kursk and went up to the Moscow Conservatoire where he studied violin and composition with Sergei Vassilenko and Ippolitov-Ivanov. In 1910 he completed his Symphony in C minor. He graduated in 1912 and won the Grand Silver Medal for his cantata Heaven and Earth based on Lord Byron. His music was labelled daring.

Any modern composer in Russia was termed avant garde which was a comment of disdain levelled at original composers who were breaking away from the predictability of traditionalism.

As a student, he wrote some daring works such as In the Hours of the New Moon (1913) but most composers start their careers this way. There was the song cycle Paysages tristes after Verlaine (1913), the String Quartet no 1 (1913) and the Nocturne for harp, two violas and cello. There are two early violin sonatas.

It was not modernism that Roslavets was after but the seeking of originality and a new method of expression. It has been said that his music was influenced by Scriabin but the only comparison is the extreme chromaticism. Some of his early piano music is aphoristic and very original. There were five piano sonatas but numbers 3 and 4 are lost. The first sonata of 1914 might be mistaken for Debussy. Does that make either compose avant garde?

There are two cello sonatas of 1921 and 1922.

Any Scriabin influenced soon went and, in Roslavets amazing Violin Concerto no 1 of 1925, we are clearly in the realm of Romanticism and tonality. The Russian composer Edison Denisov said that this was the finest violin concerto of the twentieth century and second only to the Berg.

It is a truly impressive work in three movements lasting just under 40 minutes. The first movement is an allegretto and diffuses delight and joy. It is not rhapsodic because it is in sonata form with the second subject in the Piu mosso section. There follows a scherzo-like passage marked allegro vivace and the soloist has many refined and grazioso sections. Previous material is recalled and this leads into the adagio with its clear evolving structure. As I have said the Romanticism may slightly hint at Schoenberg's Transfigured Night but only slightly.

One can only marvel at the violin writing, the fine use of the orchestra and its colours. The finale, Allegro moderato, risoluto has tremendous energy and onwards drive. There is a sublime lyrical passage and a stunning coda.

Roslavets supported the revolutions of 1917 in Russia and was immediately made the director of the Kharkov Conservatory where he stayed until 1924 when he returned to Moscow to work for the State Publishing House directing his political department. He was an extreme left-winger, a rank Communist as was his friend Miaskovsky. He also received the support of Mossolov, Popov and Shostakovich.

On the tenth anniversary of the October 1917 revolution, a concert contained Roslavets cantata October and, in the same programme, was Shostakovich's Symphony no 2 entitled Dedication to October and Mossolov's Iron Foundry.

The idea that he was the Russian Schoenberg may stem from his interest in the Second Viennese School and also because of some of his provocative articles. This made him unpopular, just as today if someone admires say Stockhausen, he will be unpopular. For some years, Roslavets' music came under attacks particularly from the Russian Association of Proletarian Music. This, and the political upheavals, created problems for Roslavets and others. In 1929, he was declared an enemy of the people and, the following year, was forced to publicly apologise for his so-called serious indiscretions. He spent some years in a sort of self-appointed exile in Tashkent, Uzbekistan as a musical advisor to the Opera and Ballet Theatre.

He composed his only stage work, Pakhta, a ballet-pantomime in 1931 and 1932

When back in Moscow in 1935, he composed his Chamber Symphony and his Violin Concerto no 2 which also evokes central Asia. It is a shorter work and lighter but it is never banal. Someone has said that it is a Technicolor work. To those who say the work is rhapsodic they should note the slow movement, adagio, which is in simple ternary form. The finale is full of optimism.

He composed five string quartets, six violin sonatas, three of which are lost, five piano trios and two viola sonatas.

In Moscow, he was a lecturer at the Polytechnic Institute and was also employed to train band leaders. He was eventually admitted to the Composers Union in 1940 the year he suffered a severe stroke and was thereafter a semi-invalid until his death of kidney cancer on 23 August 1944 in Bryansk, Oblast. Upon his death, his house was ransacked by proletarian musicians who confiscated many of his manuscripts save those which his widow concealed. His name was expunged from all records.

With perestroika, Roslavets was gradually accepted and his grave in the Vagankovo Cemetery was identified in 1990. Many of his compositions were restored, edited and published.

A strikingly original composer not lost in traditionalism or in anachronistic music but who was

progressive, original and wrote in coherent and logical ways with music of insight and character, one whom I have marvelled at for twenty years. A remarkable composer and do buy the Violin Concertos on Hyperion.

[*\(PDF of Piano Sonata no 1\)*](#)

[*\(PDF of String Quartet no 3\)*](#)

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