

Nikolai Sidelnikov

A MAN OF READY WIT, A FASCINATING STORYTELLER ENDOWED WITH A LIVELY ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT, HE IS ALWAYS THE CENTRE OF A GROUP OF EAGER YOUTHS. PROFESSOR NIKOLAI SIDELNIKOV NOT ONLY TEACHES YOUNG COMPOSERS THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THEIR CRAFT, BUT STRIVES TO INSTIL INTO THEM THE IDEA OF SERVING MUSIC AS HER TRUE KNIGHTS. HIS TEACHING IS DEVOID OF ACADEMICISM, JUST AS IS HIS OWN WORK, SO THAT IMAGINATION AND INITIATIVE ARE GIVEN FREE REIN.

The old Russian town of Tver (now Kalinin) in the early thirties, the memories of childhood—all this seems so recent and yet so long ago... Little Nikolai grew up in a musical atmosphere, for his father was a versatile musician—a conductor, singer, and theoretician, who could play many instruments—and his mother a singer who had graduated from the famous Umberto Masetti's class at the Moscow Conservatoire. Choosing his path in life presented no problem for Nikolai Sidelnikov, who came to Moscow to study composition at the Conservatoire with Anatoly Alexandrov, Yuri Shaporin and Aram Khachaturyan. He composed his first works as a student at the Conservatoire and now has been teaching composition there for over a quarter of a century.

Nikolai Sidelnikov began his career in the late fifties, a period of avant-garde ideas and the most diverse trends replacing one another with kaleidoscopic rapidity. The young composer was not dazzled by this display of fireworks and showed a preference for lasting values. His interest in philosophy, history and early music did not prevent Sidelnikov from availing himself of contemporary techniques, but his approach to them was all his own. Thus it was only in his concert symphony *The Duels* for cello, double-bass, two pianos and percussion that he

consistently employed the twelve-note method treating it, however, in a way that showed him an opponent of Schoenberg rather than his follower. The interplay of the instruments in *The Duels* suggests the philosophical idea of the conflict of opposites, the composition scheme is disrupted by the elemental forces of improvisation throughout the work.

His *Romantic Symphony* (1964-65), defined by the composer as "a divertimento in four portraits" (Vivaldi, Ravel, Berg and Stravinsky), proved a landmark in Sidelnikov's evolution, the first manifestation of his gift for allusion, for the utilization of characteristic elements of other masters' idiom, not as a means of stylization but as a natural channel for self-expression. Synthesis of styles has gradually developed into a main characteristic of Sidelnikov's work, other components being Russian folklore, pop music, jazz and the latest composition techniques. The composer acknowledges the influence of Alban Berg, the master who, at the turn of the century, discovered a way to attain universality, to unite means and forms in artistic creation.

For all its multiformity, Nikolai Sidelnikov's style is quite original and pronouncedly national. Its predominant factor is the Russian theme which finds realization in various genres,

both classical such as the oratorio, the cantata, the opera and the ballet, and essentially modern, 20th-century products such as the vocal symphony and the concerto for orchestra. His composition method is the same in whatever genre he chooses; his music derives from the Russian melos, but with very few quotations; laconic themes, *ostinato* as the main development device, metric and rhythmic variation and colour effects. For Nikolai Sidelnikov folklore is not something to be venerated at a distance but a living language which can be used to express serious ideas, as well as humour. In his epic legends, fairy tales, satirical sketches, dramas and tragedies Sidelnikov is a worthy continuer of the fine traditions of Russian literature and music, from Gogol and Leskov to Mikhail Bulgakov (incidentally, the composer's favourite author), from Glinka and Mussorgsky to Stravinsky and Prokofiev.

And it is quite natural that landmarks in the composer's career should be associated with works on Russian subjects: his first major composition, *All That Take the Sword* (1961), an oratorio to texts from ancient chronicles describing dramatic events which occurred in 11th-century Russia, is actually a Russian passion. Speaking of this work, composer Roman Ledevyov remarked that "Sidelnikov has resolutely mounted his Pegasus—he has discovered his own theme which manifests itself in each of his compositions."

True enough, this theme reappeared, although in a somewhat different guise, in Sidelnikov's *Russian Tales*, a concerto for twelve instrumentalists (1969), which scored a tremendous success and won enthusiastic reviews in the press. The "characters" acting in this Concerto inhabit a fairy land and are presented in the subtitles of its three movements, written in the style of Russian fairy tales and resembling authentic quotations. The work's subject-matter gives wide scope to poetic musical imagery, examples of which abound in traditional Russian music: the composer makes his instruments imitate the persistent buzzing of gnats, the call of the cuckoo, the sound of a flock of cranes approaching and receding, the howl of the forest goblin, etc. The listeners are entranced by unexpected turns in the development of the "plot", for instance, the forest goblin dancing with the mermaids a roundelay in the style of boogie-woogie or an idyllic pastorella assuming jazz rhythms. As in a genuine work of the popular genius, here, too, epic episodes and sound landscapes alternate with moments of robust good humour,

fantastic horrors and boisterous buffoonery.

In the seventies the range of Sidelnikov's interests expanded: the Russian theme which hitherto had been treated in epic narratives and fairy tales acquired elements of drama and tragedy in his two main works of that period—the ballet *Stepan Razin* (1974-77) and the vocal symphony *The Poet's Rebellious World* (1973). The Cossack uprising which broke out under the leadership of that remarkable man, Stepan Razin, in 17th-century Russia, has served as the subject for many works of art, one of the most significant being Dmitry Shostakovich's oratorio *The Execution of Stepan Razin*.

Nikolai Sidelnikov's ballet, the first important choreographic work on this subject written to libretto by Stepan Zlobin and script by Maxim Gorky, was produced at the Moscow Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theatre. Its highly dynamic plot abounds in theatrical effects (murder, disguise, unexpected meetings, unmasking, pursuit, hallucination and exotic Oriental scenes) and at the same time contains markedly psychological and colourful crowd scenes. Sidelnikov's music commands the audience's interest by its stylistic integrity, well thought-out conception and dynamic drive.

The Poet's Rebellious World, a symphony for baritone or bass and chamber orchestra, and *The Death of the Poet*, an oratorio-requiem for soloists, chorus and orchestra to the verse by Mikhail Lermontov, make up a diptych telling of the poet's life, creative work and tragic death. The counterposition of dramatically contrasting moods ("Prayer", "War" and "Regimental Marching Song") and the abrupt transitions, embrace the whole gamut of Lermontov's poetic images—philosophical lyricism, irony, scepticism and prophetic premonition of his own destiny. The Symphony ends quite unexpectedly with the hit song "Farewell, Unwashed Russia", with its closing stanza whistled, coming after the work's dramatic events and transferring the whole to a grotesquely sarcastic plane. Both the ballet and the diptych generalize the Russian intonation on a grand scale, exploring it from the draw-out peasant song and *Znamenny* chant to the urban art song and military march. The quotations and allusions (Glinka, Chopin and Mozart) result in a musical atmosphere rich in associations.

Of late Nikolai Sidelnikov has repeatedly and highly successfully turned his attention to the unaccompanied chorus or accompanied by a small group of

instruments, producing the two books of *Szechwan Elegies* to verses by the 13th-century Chinese poet Tu Fu, and *Romancero of Love and Death* to words by Federico García Lorca. Although differing in content and form, the two choral cycles reveal an inner relationship, which suggests the emergence of new stylistic elements in the composer's work. These are, in the first place, the choice of texts, which vary in form but have many things in common: far removed from each other in time and space, both poets dwell on the eternal subjects of love, suffering, loneliness and death. The composer seeks to express the emotional essence of the poetry. The "Chinese" pentatonic scale is not used in the *Szechwan Elegies* but there is brevity, transparency and meditative mood with occasional flashes of drama. The "geographic" suggestions come from the solo flute, commonly associated with Chinese poetry, and the predominantly diatonic nature of some of the themes.

The Spanish colouring is more overt in the *Romancero* (though, here, too it is used with great tact), for example, in the guitar solo as a postlude to the chorus "The Weeping Guitar" which creates a sad intimate atmosphere. The castanets, the guitar and characteristically Spanish tones come with a refreshing naturalness. The music is in the manner of free declamation, aptly conveying the pulse of poetic speech, the choral writing is highly inventive and varied (there is an episode in the *Romancero* where part of the chorus imitates a guitar accompaniment), with effective contrasts between individual choral groups and between soloists and the chorus, with melismata and humming. The choral cycles show the composer's new approach to musical sound and to intervals, a return to ancient monodies, the medieval organum and the Renaissance contrapuntal style. But this music also contains some elements of neo-Romanticism such as intense emotionality, stirring lyricism and the effective contrasts between diametrically opposed poles of expressiveness.

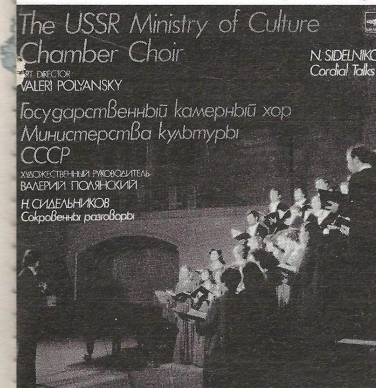
The combination of the exalted and the comic, the epic and the grotesque, is characteristic of Nikolai Sidelnikov's two latest works—his operas *The Chertogon* (exorcising the evil spirit) based on Nikolai Leskov's story of the same title (1983) and *Flight* (1985) based on Mikhail Bulgakov's play.

The composer looks upon his *Chertogon* as a kind of summing up. Defined by him as *opera mista*, it combines fantastic events and occurrences of everyday life, the ridiculous and the horrible, reviving the *satirae menippeae*. The numerous quotations employed here

(ranging from passages from Liszt's and Tchaikovsky's piano concertos to the arias of Khan Konchak and Germont) constitute a system of symbols, and the device of "a stage on the stage" is used, in which the opera's conductor is to play the leading part. Whereas *The Chertogon* is a satirical opera-pamphlet, *Flight* is in the tradition of the Russian psychological drama. Like Bulgakov's play, the opera consists of eight "dreams", but the composer has added popular scenes and slightly altered the message. He explains this by a desire to make Bulgakov's chamber play a popular tragedy. The opera has been written on commission from the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theatre.

In an interview Nikolai Sidelnikov said: "A composer must work hard, constantly and persistently." These are not mere words, but describe exactly what he is doing, proof of which are pages and pages of written music embodying his ideas, quests and discoveries.

Tatiana Baranova, musicologist



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