



number 29

july 2015

29



## **The Tale of the Stone Flower**

published by the serge prokofiev foundation

# summary

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"Concert," Oleg Prokofiev (1997)



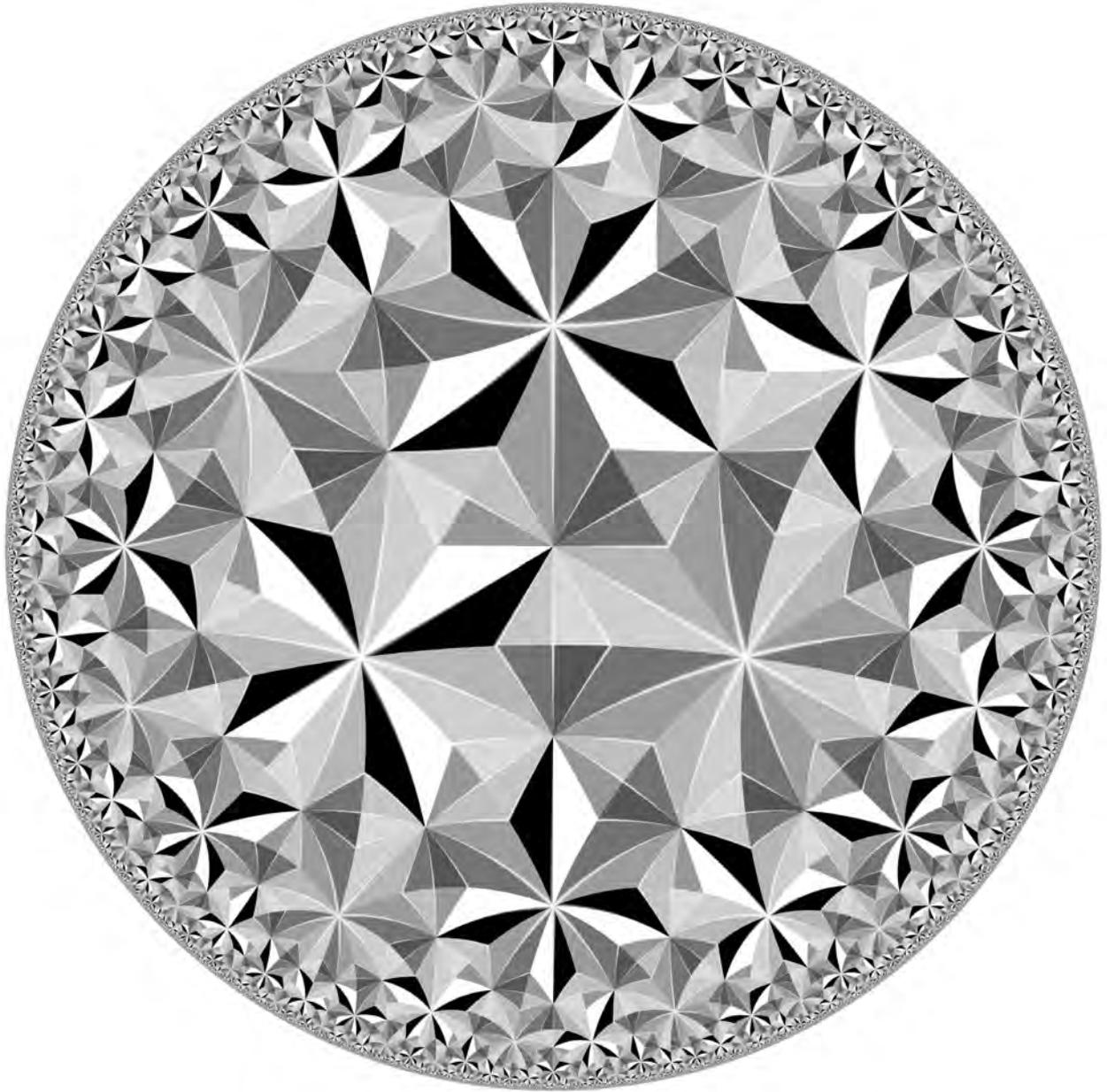
# Editorial

Prokofiev began work on his final ballet, *The Tale of the Stone Flower* (*Skaz o kamennom tsvetke*), in 1949, but he did not live to see it performed. The plot was drawn from a prize-winning collection of stories native to the Ural Mountains, as collected by Pavel Bazhov and published under the title *The Malachite Casket* (*Malakhitovaya shkatulka*). The attractively illustrated tale had already appeared on the big screen in 1947: *The Stone Flower* was the first-ever Soviet movie in color, and deemed enough of a success for transposition to the grand theater.

The Mistress of the Copper Mountain guards a cache of fabulous jewels and stones buried beneath the rugged terrain. The hero is a stonecutter, an artist-laborer obsessed with chiseling a dazzlingly life-like flower out of malachite for his betrothed; the villain a corrupt bailiff doomed to be swallowed up by the mountain on the Mistress's command. The symbolism might seem opaque—Mother Earth subdues the lawless outback within the dark, deep context of the mining folklore of the nineteenth-century Russian interior—but it comes down to good versus evil and, at a stretch, art versus life. Together with the wild trio of gypsies who take over the central market scene, the death of the people's enemy would become, over time, a tremendous *coup de théâtre*, accompanied by the copper instruments of the orchestra and illuminated in glistening malachite green. In concept and realization, *The Stone Flower* suggests an alchemical project, with everyone involved seeking a magical artistic and political formula to make ballet an exciting adventure.

But it had a difficult path to the stage, as Christina Ezrahi demonstrates in the pages ahead. Her feature article, which reveals new details about the music of the ballet by exploring its choreography in the 1950s, is joined in this issue by pioneering research into a much earlier era. Laura J. Brown examines one of Prokofiev's first compositions, the symphony that he composed as a student in 1902. This work remains unrecorded and unpublished, although Brown makes an impressive case for its realization as a precursor of the "Classical" Symphony. The two other articles in this issue concern long-time musical friendships. Prokofiev and Vladimir Dukelsky, also known (on Broadway and in Hollywood) as Vernon Duke, began as rivals, but of a good-natured and ultimately mutually beneficial sort, as Klára Móricz explains in her chronicle of their correspondence. Viktoria Zoya describes Prokofiev's indispensable additions to the international violin repertoire and his work with violinists Joseph Szigeti and David Oistrakh. The issue is rounded out by a report on the opening of the Prokofiev Archive at Columbia University.

Simon Morrison



# Prokofiev's Last Gift

Christina EZRAHI



**On January** 14, 1953, some two months before his death, Sergey Prokofiev wrote in his diary: "I finished up the 'Russian Dance' for *The Stone Flower*... The dance was played for members of the corps de ballet, who said that it was less like Prokofiev than Tchaikovsky. Thankfully, it wasn't like Minkus."<sup>1</sup> The composer's sarcastic quip about nineteenth-century ballet composer Ludwig Minkus, whose tuneful, coffeehouse rhythms were loved by dancers and balletomanes but scorned by many musicians, reflected the unhappy circumstances surrounding Prokofiev's last and most conservative ballet score. Prokofiev conceived *The Tale of the Stone Flower* in collaboration with Leonid Lavrovsky, choreographer of *Romeo and Juliet*, during the fateful summer of 1948. At the time, he was struggling to come to terms with the artistic and practical consequences of the Central Committee Resolution issued that February, which had attacked him and other members of the Soviet musical elite. Prokofiev had been condemned as an anti-Soviet representative of the "contemporary modernist bourgeois [culture] of Europe and America"<sup>2</sup> who championed modernism and abstraction while ignoring Russian folk traditions.<sup>3</sup> Afterward, according to the musicologist Simon Morrison, the composer no longer wrote freely, but only in response to criticism, accommodating the demands of helpers and critics.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Prokofiev's final works were characterized by a decline in melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic invention as his music clung close to the parameters of his commissions.<sup>5</sup>

Yet *The Stone Flower*, Prokofiev's last ballet score, proved much more than a melancholic, accommodating afterthought to *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella*, the two glorious works he had contributed to Soviet ballet in the 1930s and 1940s. Within *The Stone Flower* lay the seeds of a choreographic revolution that would infuse new creative life into Soviet ballet. Initially, this seemed less than likely. Leonid Lavrovsky's 1954 production of the ballet at the Bolshoi was a flop, symbolizing everything that had gone stale in *drambalet*, the highly pantomimic, Stalinist genre of dramatic ballet that put narrative plausibility above choreographic interest.

By 1955, however, currents of change were beginning to stir the quiet waters of the Kirov Ballet. Complaints about the stagnant artistic climate found support from the company's newly appointed artistic director, Fyodor Lopukhov, who had been at the helm before in the 1920s. One of the most important choreographic innovators of the time, Lopukhov lost his position at the Kirov (then known by the acronym GATOB) in 1931 owing to his production of Dmitriy Shostakovich's factory ballet *Bolt*. In 1936, he was publicly denounced as a formalist in the infamous Pravda editorial "Balletic Falsity" for his production of another Shostakovich ballet, *The Bright Stream*.

Back as the Kirov's artistic director in 1955 and 1956,<sup>6</sup> Lopukhov commissioned the young, unknown choreographer Yuriy Grigorovich, a member of the Kirov Ballet, to choreograph a new production of *The Stone Flower* for the company. Based on Pavel Bazhov's *The Malachite Box*, a 1939 collection of folk tales from the Urals, *The Stone Flower* tells the tale of the stonemason Danila, who dreams of creating a perfect malachite vase resembling a real flower, but finds himself unable to decipher the mysteries of nature and so unlock the secret of artistic creation. Even when engaged to Katerina, he remains obsessed with trying to understand nature's artistic genius. In his pursuit, Danila ends up in the subterranean kingdom of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain. Katerina goes to the mountains to search for Danila, pursued by the evil steward Sever'yan, whom the Mistress of the Copper Mountain sinks into the earth. In the meantime, the mistress has disclosed the creative secret of beauty to Danila. She admits her love for him, but he confesses that he loves Katerina

and the mistress turns him into stone. Katerina enters her kingdom. Impressed by her devotion, the Mistress lets Danila and Katerina go.

*The Stone Flower* is a parable for artistic creation and its ultimately unattainable goal of perfection. As interpreted by Grigorovich and his collaborator, the set and costume designer Simon Virsaladze, it became a harbinger of the new. Grigorovich tried to tell his story primarily through dance, challenging the pantomimic conventions of *drambalet*, while Virsaladze's designs looked dangerously non-realist to Soviet eyes accustomed to the painstaking realism of Stalinist-era set designs. Most shockingly, presiding over her mountain kingdom wearing in a revealing, green leotard—the first time a ballerina appeared dressed only in a leotard and tights on the puritan stage of the Kirov<sup>7</sup>—the lizard-like Mistress of the Copper Mountain ruled over a corps de ballet of precious stones in a sharp, angular ensemble of pure dance that was immediately attacked as formalist. It seemed too Western, too abstract, too modern. As the battle between the *drambalet* old-guard and their "symphonic"<sup>8</sup> challengers unfolded, one could imagine the Mistress of the Copper Mountain striking a majestic pose in her offensive costume, triumphant in this posthumous act of revenge against the Soviet cultural establishment for the insults it had hurled on the ballet's composer.

## The Kirov Ballet and *The Stone Flower*

The path *The Stone Flower* took to the stage of the Kirov proved arduous. In September 1949, the theatre had unsuccessfully applied to the Committee on Arts Affairs to include the ballet in its repertoire for 1950, but the request was rebuffed because the ballet was unfinished and had not yet been approved for performance.<sup>9</sup> In 1951, the theatre signed an agreement with Leonid Lavrovsky to stage the ballet by November 1, 1951.<sup>10</sup> On July 5, 1951, the theatre's artistic council and the ballet company held a meeting to discuss Lavrovsky's exposition of the ballet and its music.

The piano score had met with approbation at a first run-through on June 24, 1949, at the Bolshoi Theatre, greeted enthusiastically by a member of the Committee on Arts Affairs as "a celebration, not only of [Prokofiev], but of all our art."<sup>11</sup> But its reception at the Kirov in July 1951 was initially much cooler and more guarded. Many of those present (including Konstantin Sergeyev, the Kirov's ballet director at the time) would have been mindful of the debacle that had followed the run-through of Prokofiev's opera *A Story of a Real Man* at the Kirov in December 1948, bringing a disastrous year for Prokofiev to its nadir. Intended to appease his critics, the opera was denounced as proof that Prokofiev was unwilling to renounce his modernist tendencies and refusing to reform.

Not surprisingly, the meeting at the Kirov about *The Stone Flower* on July 5, 1951, therefore focused on the thorny question of whether or not the score proved that Prokofiev had reformed himself. Was the Kirov listening to a new Prokofiev who had resurrected himself from the ashes of the Central Committee Resolution as a Russian composer decidedly national in tone? Or not?<sup>12</sup> Asked by Sergeyev about his personal thoughts on Prokofiev's music, Lavrovsky tried to argue that the score was an important step forward, demonstrating a genuine desire by the composer to respond to the party's resolution. According to the choreographer, the first act was "completely Russian," while in the second and third acts there were also moments characterizing "the new Prokofiev."<sup>13</sup>

In its attempt to assess Prokofiev's score, the theatre faced a problem typical of the Soviet cultural system: No

one could predict which way the ideological winds would blow, but passing the “wrong” verdict could have serious consequences for the theatre and its artistic decision-makers. Sergeyev, as the ballet director and chairman of the meeting, framed the dilemma quite succinctly in the ideologically correct language of the day when he juxtaposed the theatre’s love for the composer, who had given them *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella*, with the devastating criticism heaped on Prokofiev in recent years: “A Story of a Real Man posed the question of the further fate of his works. This is a remarkable Russian composer, who simply hasn’t managed yet to pull himself out of the formalist quagmire.”<sup>14</sup>

Sergeyev, who had not only created and become identified with the role of Romeo but also choreographed the Kirov’s production of *Cinderella*, seemed to have been tentatively in favor of the production, pointing to the combined talents of Prokofiev, Lavrovsky, and the designer Simon Virsaladze. Similarly, the ballet conductor Pavel Fel’dt raved that especially in the first act, Prokofiev was simply not recognizable, pointing to the music’s warmth, melodiousness, intonation and use of folk songs. But he warned that Prokofiev had returned to his old language in some parts: a master of instrumentation, he should not repeat what he had done to the introduction to the first act of *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>15</sup>

The ballet company’s other main conductor, E. A. Dubovsky was less charitable, and announced that the score was not a step forward; there was still formalism, and asceticism in the instrumentation. The big folk scene did not sound as it should, the orchestration did not use the right instruments in some places, and the danced equivalent of recitatives predominated over self-contained dance numbers.<sup>16</sup> The director (*rezhisser*) I. Yu. Shlepyanov welcomed the project in principle, but concluded that Prokofiev needed to work on the music because it did not correspond to the Russian theme of the ballet. He bemoaned that even though the ballet was about folk creativity and the power of the people, Prokofiev’s music left a sensation of pessimism and his use of Russian themes was insufficient: even when Russian themes were used, they soon disappeared into an international language.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the administrative director of the ballet company, Vladimir Tomson, emphasized how badly the company needed a ballet on a Russian theme as there was not a single one in its repertoire, but went on to criticize the score as not Russian enough.<sup>18</sup>

Voice after voice criticized the score as insufficiently national in character, as lacking Russian melodies. Someone recommended the “miracle-working” influence national musical sources would have on the composer and warned that the ballet would take a bad end if it was created in isolation from the public [*obshchestvennosti*], concluding that Prokofiev needed the “kind council of the community [*obshchestvennost*].”

As the meeting came to an end, Lavrovsky commented on the emerging consensus that the score’s national material was insufficient. Conceding that someone should talk to Prokofiev about composing some dance numbers, he warned that one had to remember that Prokofiev was a huge

musical talent with his own individual qualities and peculiarities; his dances would sound different from Tchaikovsky’s.<sup>19</sup> Sergeyev closed the meeting by summing up the different opinions, which all seemed to lead to the same conclusion: the ballet did not develop the theme of the Russian people sufficiently, its material was not yet convincing. The music for this Russian ballet was insufficiently Russian, while in some places the score diverted back to Prokofiev’s former positions. But the theatre remained interested in the production. Sergeyev concluded that if Prokofiev would rework the score and if Lavrovsky told the composer what the theatre needed, the result could be a good production: “I ask you to convey to Prokofiev: we dream to have this production on Leningrad’s stage.”<sup>20</sup>

Prokofiev did not live long enough to see his ballet premiere at the Kirov. On May 30, 1952, the Kirov Theatre’s director G. N. Orlov wrote to Prokofiev once again that the Kirov was interested in including the ballet in its plan for 1953,<sup>21</sup> but for the time being, the plan came to nothing.

## The Komsomol and Choreographic Innovation

Nothing in *The Stone Flower*’s initially painful history at the Kirov pointed toward the score’s unwitting role in the choreographic revolution against the *drambalet* establishment that unfolded at the Kirov Ballet during Khrushchev’s Thaw. As a musical score, *The Stone Flower* reflected the narrow room for artistic maneuverability of the late Stalin period, but ironically, as a ballet, it would become the choreographic

symbol of the battle between different generations that lay at the heart at the paradigm shift from *drambalet* to choreographic symphonism.

The ability of artists to exploit political forces reflecting the dynamics of the Thaw played a crucial role in overcoming those forces at the Kirov Ballet that were resistant to change. Work on *The Stone Flower* and on two other ballets central for the rise of “symphonic dance,” Igor’ Bel’sky’s productions of Andrey Petrov’s *Coast of Hope* (premiere: Kirov Ballet, April 16, 1959) and of Shostakovich’s *Leningrad Symphony* (premiere: Kirov Ballet, April 14, 1961) initially proceeded parallel to work on the theatre’s official production plan, leading to serious problems in getting the necessary allocation of rehearsal space, rehearsal time, and pianists. The artists involved in creating *The Stone Flower* were to trick the cumbersome machine of the Kirov



Yuriy Grigorovich, undated. RGALI

by using ideological rhetoric—the emphasis on youth during the Thaw—and instruments of ideological education—the Komsomol—for attaining their purely artistic goal of staging a ballet that was challenging the ossified parameters of *drambalet*.

The designation of Grigorovich’s production of Prokofiev’s *The Stone Flower* (premiere: April 25, 1957) as “youth production” played an important role in ensuring the ballet’s successful staging. The involvement of the Kirov’s Komsomol organization and the decision to dedicate the ballet to the VI International Youth Festival to be held in Moscow and Leningrad facilitated the creation of adequate working conditions, culminating in an order by USSR Minister of Cul-



ture Mikhailov in February 1957, instructing the Kirov Theatre's leadership to do everything necessary to ensure the ballet was finished in time.

The young Grigorovich owed his commission to stage *The Stone Flower* to Lopukhov. Grigorovich was barely thirty at the premiere of the ballet, his first major work, and the decision to entrust him with the production was far from unanimous.<sup>22</sup> Originally, Konstantin Sergeyev had been tasked with choreographing a new version of the ballet, after Lavrovsky's production for the Bolshoi under the title *Skaz o kamennom tsvetke* had proven a failure at its premiere in February 1954. Lopukhov initially insisted that Sergeyev take Grigorovich as his assistant, but according to Lopukhov, when it became clear that Sergeyev was not able to propose anything interesting while the young Grigorovich had an attractive plan, Grigorovich was entrusted with the ballet.<sup>23</sup> It is not clear when exactly Grigorovich took over the production from Sergeyev, but he did so at the latest by the end of the 1954/55 theatrical season.

A battle between the innovators—supported by Lopukhov—and the defenders of the choreographic status quo ensued. People obstructed the project both secretly and openly. Grigorovich's opponents shook their heads, complaining, that an "obscure" choreographer ought not to be preferred over a People's Artist, they doubted whether Grigorovich's and the artist Simon Virsaladze's plans were realistic, they did not like that young dancers were brought into the project and some criticized the introduction of changes of Prokofiev's score necessitated by alterations in the stage action.<sup>24</sup> The young dancer Alla Osipenko created the part of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, choreographically the most innovative and controversial part of the ballet. She was threatened by Sergeyev and others: "If you will dance like you dance *The Stone Flower*, you will no more be able to do anything. Not *Swan Lake*, not *Raymonda*."<sup>25</sup> In this environment:

Every step of Grigorovich was under the threat of "fire" by numerous skeptics "out of friendship" and "out of duty." But the choreographer as well as the artist manifested extraordinary endurance and worked productively. They succeeded in the most difficult thing—to fight opponents with the weapon of creative work. With every month, the number of foes and skeptics dwindled, the quantity of those sympathizing with the new cause grew, although many obstacles remained right up to the premiere and even after it.<sup>26</sup>

The ballet also marked the beginning of Grigorovich's collaboration with the set and costume designer Simon Virsaladze. A narrative, evening-filling ballet, *The Stone Flower* offered by no means a complete, radical break with *drambalet*, but both the ballet's choreography with its emphasis on dance over mime and the much more modern designs appeared radical to Soviet eyes because they broke with the ossified conventions and slavish realism of recent *drambalet* productions, a sometimes subtle difference which was entirely lost to Western audiences when they first saw the ballet. For example, in addition of trying to express the ballet mainly through dance and to introducing the type of large, classical ensemble criticized as formalist in a scene depicting the kingdom of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, Grigorovich tried to break with *drambalet's* performance conventions by insisting that his dancers concentrated the maximal impact of their expressiveness in their movements and gestures, and not in dramatic mime of their faces.<sup>27</sup> Especially the angular choreography for the Mistress of the Copper Mountain in her revealing, minimalist costume looked

revolutionary on a Soviet stage. Alla Osipenko, who created the part of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, remembers the long period of private rehearsals in Grigorovich's flat in a strange room that was fully tiled as the golden age of her creative life. After Grigorovich had shown the results of their private experiment—packaged in the ideological language of the day as a "Komsomol-youth work"—to the company, he got an ovation and the permission to proceed with rehearsals as part of the theatre's normal working plan.<sup>28</sup>

It is difficult to assess to what extent work on *The Stone Flower* was deliberately obstructed or whether certain problems were simply caused by overstretched work schedules and insufficient planning. *The Stone Flower* was designated to be staged by the young artists of the theatre and rehearsals were to proceed parallel to Yakobson's work on *Spartacus*.<sup>29</sup> While the idea to work on two productions simultaneously might have been good in theory, especially given the government's call to "increase the production" of new operas and ballets, it created serious problems for the secondary, "youth production," which was supposed to have its premiere only after *Spartacus*. Until the premiere of *The Stone Flower* one-and-a-half years later, in April 1957, the Kirov Theatre's newspaper repeatedly reiterated the same concerns. Initially, uncertainties about the production of *Spartacus* prevented *The Stone Flower* team from working at full speed.<sup>30</sup> Once work on *Spartacus* had begun in earnest by the end of 1955, hardly any rehearsal time was left for *The Stone Flower*. If Grigorovich had previously been able to rehearse with the soloists in the studio for two hours, he no longer had even this little time at his disposal.<sup>31</sup> Over the next few months, less and less rehearsal time was given to *The Stone Flower*. Instead of being able to rehearse with three different casts, Grigorovich had only two incomplete casts at his disposal.<sup>32</sup> *The Stone Flower* team was not given the necessary rehearsal time, rehearsal space, or pianists.<sup>33</sup>

Whoever was to blame, the Komsomol organization of the Kirov began to lobby for political support for the production in the hope that it would translate into better working conditions. It would be too much to argue that the young artists of the Kirov consciously thought of subverting the Soviet system by exploiting the Komsomol organization within the theatre for their own, artistic purposes. Instead, they simply played according to the rules of the game. Artistic innovation that challenged Soviet cultural ideology should not be equated to outright political opposition to the Soviet system as a whole, even though some artists were surely led to reject the system because it infringed on their artistic autonomy. At least on the surface, some of the dancers involved in staging *The Stone Flower* were perfectly loyal Soviet citizens playing the political game successful artists usually had little choice but to participate in, but they nonetheless tried to push the boundaries imposed on cultural production. It is important to remember that membership in the Komsomol did not necessarily say anything about the private political inclinations of a dancer: talented young dancers were often simply told to join the Komsomol. Bolshoi ballerina Yekaterina Maksimova, who writes in her memoirs that she never had particular faith in the official party ideals because her grandfather had been arrested and shot, remembers that she was pushed into the Central Committee of the Komsomol after she won the All-Union Ballet Competition in 1957 without anyone ever asking her whether or not she wanted to.<sup>34</sup> At the Kirov, fifty-eight dancers were members of the Komsomol, including two young dancers creating leading roles in *The Stone Flower*, Irina Kolpakova (Katerina) and Alla Osipenko (Mistress of the Copper Mountain).<sup>35</sup>

Seeking political patronage was a powerful strategy in the game of Soviet life. Finding that the theatre was not pro-

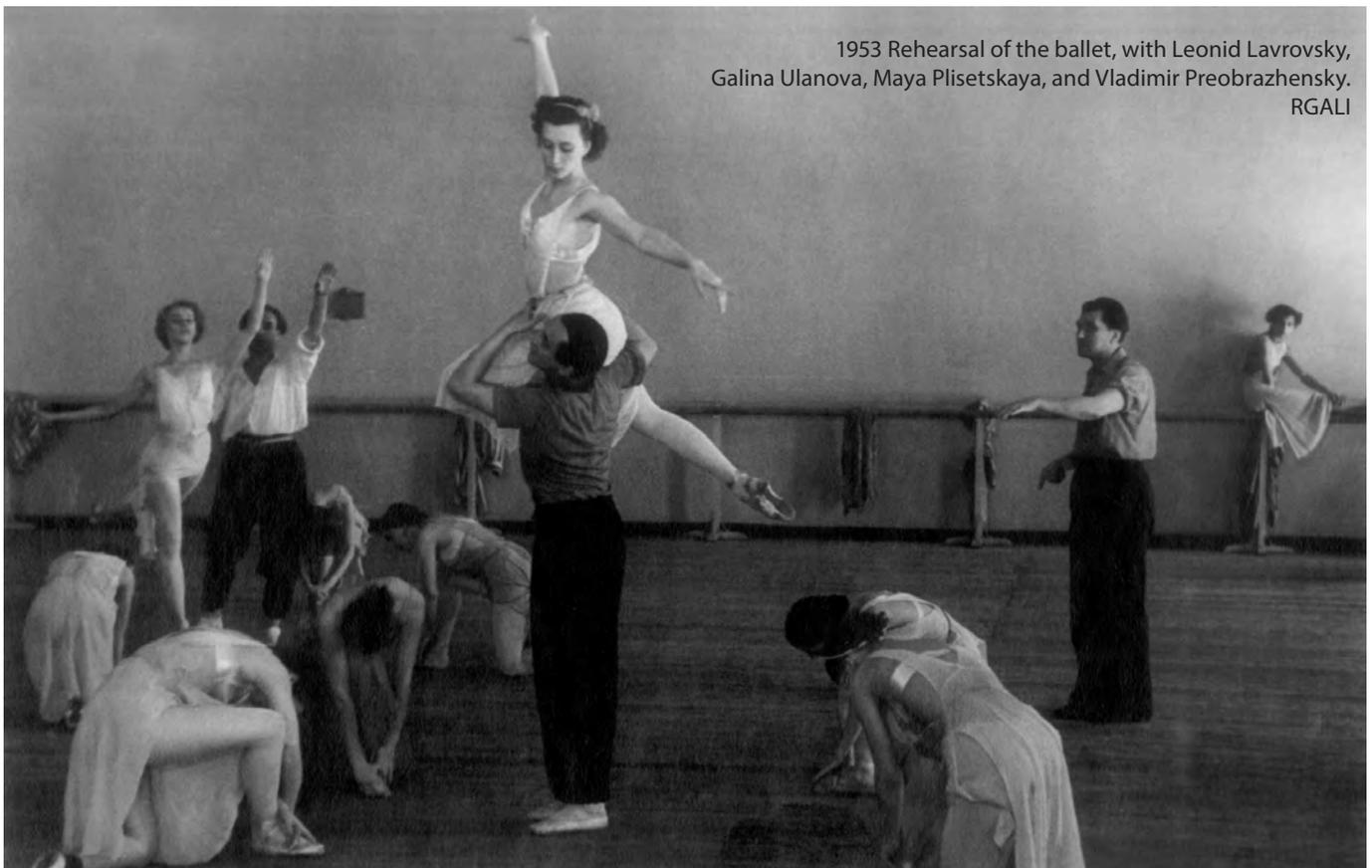
viding them with satisfactory working conditions in general and those necessary to stage *The Stone Flower* in particular, the theatre's Komsomol appealed to higher political organs for intercession with the management. On May 20, 1956, *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo* published the open letter "We are worried about the tomorrow of our ballet" from the Kirov Theatre's Komsomol Committee to USSR Minister of Culture Mikhaïlov.<sup>36</sup> The letter reiterated some of the complaints that had led to Sergeyev's removal as artistic director in 1955, protesting that there still did not exist normal conditions for the artistic growth of the young generation.

The unresolved pension question, keeping dancers in their job past their prime, was one of the main obstacles to the professional growth and systematic promotion of young dancers. As for *The Stone Flower*, the letter emphasized that the ballet ensemble had tried hard to end the creative stagnation of past years, but work was constantly hampered by the "defective system of allocation and utilization of creative cadres."<sup>37</sup> The Komsomol of the ballet had happily taken up Lopukhov's suggestion of a youth performance, *The Stone Flower*, and dreamt of showing the ballet at the International Youth Festival in Moscow. Mikhaïlov was then told that the young choreographer and his dancers had prepared all parts to music played from a tape-recorder, that they had been given almost no studio space and no pianists to rehearse.

The support of the theatre's Komsomol helped improve working conditions.<sup>38</sup> Grigorovich told *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo* on June 19, 1956 that more than half of the ballet had been staged despite difficult working conditions and that it was especially important to finish the ballet according to plan in order to show it at the International Youth Festival. He pointed out that the theatre's Komsomol organization and its secretary Gulyayev were now helping him in every possible way to put conditions in order – but at every meeting, the theatre's management continued to move the ballet's place in the theatre's performance plan.<sup>39</sup>

By October 1956, rehearsals were proceeding regularly and more productively, because the dancers creating the leading roles—Alla Osipenko, Irina Kolpakova and Aleksandr Gribov—were released from participating in rehearsals for *Spartacus*.<sup>40</sup> The most decisive progress, however, was made after the premiere of *Spartacus* on December 27, 1956, in the months leading up to the International Youth Festival to be held in Moscow and Leningrad in 1957. *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo* now wrote about *The Stone Flower* as a youth production dedicated to the VI International Youth Festival, adding that this obliged everyone in the theatre to adopt a more serious attitude towards the ballet.<sup>41</sup> The production was hailed as a present from the young artists to the International Youth Festival and as the first production created exclusively by the theatre's youth in the history of ballet theatre. A third cast of more experienced dancers was now added to the two youth casts and the Komsomol committee appealed to the whole company, especially the "older comrades" working with them on the production, to help the young achieve their goal.<sup>42</sup>

Using the Komsomol as a tool to improve working conditions necessary for staging an artistically innovative but ideologically insignificant work finally paid off. In a masterstroke of artistic manipulation, the involvement of the Soviet government was now used to the advantage of the young innovators. It even led to the minister of culture's direct involvement, something which would have been beyond imagination where the fields of cultural production and politics were less intimately linked. On February 15, 1957, the USSR Minister of Culture Mikhaïlov issued an order "About the creative initiative of the young ballet artists of the Leningrad State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet named after S. M. Kirov."<sup>43</sup> In the order, *The Stone Flower* had metamorphosed into an initiative by the Komsomol organization of the Kirov Ballet. Pointing out that the production was about to be finished, that it was dedicated to the international



1953 Rehearsal of the ballet, with Leonid Lavrovsky, Galina Ulanova, Maya Plisetskaya, and Vladimir Preobrazhensky. RGALI

youth festival, and noting the worthy initiative of the youth of the Kirov Theatre, Mikhaïlov ordered Orlov, the Kirov's director, to provide comprehensive help to the production team. Directors of other opera and ballet theatres were ordered to emulate the youth initiative of the Kirov dancers, and to organize youth initiatives for new operas, ballets, and concert programs running parallel to the theatres' basic production plan. Ministers of cultures of union republics were told to encourage such youth initiatives by ensuring good working conditions and by offering all necessary help.

Mikhaïlov's order paved the way for ensuring that the ballet's premiere would no longer be postponed. In response, the ballet's production team held a special meeting with the theatre's leadership. Grigorovich would now have the stage fully at his disposal for rehearsals from March 1 onwards, the premiere was earmarked for April 10-12 and the director of the theatre's workshop assured the team that the ballet's sets would be ready in time.<sup>44</sup>

If the party saw the Komsomol as a force of youthful ideological re-invigoration, within the context of *The Stone Flower*, politics and ideology are conspicuous in their absence from the rhetoric of the Kirov Theatre's Komsomol. On March 31, 1957, *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo* published an article by B. Gudkov, the secretary of Leningrad's Komsomol's Oktyabr'skiy district committee. Gudkov emphasized that preparations for the VI International Festival of Youth and Students had to be infused with profound political content. Instead, he pointed out:

In the preparation period for the festival, very serious mistakes were made on the side of the Komsomol organizations, which mainly consist in the fact that no serious attention was spared for the political side of the festival and people were carried away by the cultural enterprises among the masses.<sup>45</sup>

In a way, the Komsomol of the Kirov Theatre thus subverted the official purpose of the Komsomol. As youth wing of the CPSU, it was in theory responsible for instilling communist values and introducing young people to political life. Unconcerned by the political purpose of the organization, the Kirov Theatre Komsomol used the organization's clout for the purely artistic goal of producing *The Stone Flower*: dedicating the ballet to the International Youth Festival helped generate official political support for the production, which in turn contributed to creating the working conditions necessary for the ballet's timely completion.

### Ideology as Artistic Weapon

The premiere of *The Stone Flower* marked the beginning of an open confrontation between the defenders of *drambalet* and the supporters of symphonic dance. Different views about the correct path for choreographic development in the Soviet Union lay at the heart of this conflict, but the confrontation was intensified by the tensions inherent in any generational shift, and by the usual animosities and jealousies between competing artists. The struggle between the different camps was exacerbated by the Soviet attempt to impose an ideological framework on the arts, making it possible for artists to use ideology as a weapon to defend their position against challengers.

If for some, *The Stone Flower* represented the dawn of a new era wherein music drove the dramatic structure of choreography and where complex classical dance returned to the ballet stage, others looked at it askance, observing in it serious violations of the conventions of *drambalet*. Gavriyela Komleva, a Kirov ballerina who joined the company a few

months after the ballet's premiere, remembers the stormy atmosphere within the company at the time:

*The Stone Flower* revealed the dissatisfaction of a part of the company with the repertoire and offered a new direction for searches. A split appeared within the company: some thirsted for novelty, the usual suited the rest... "Like-mindedness" existed neither among the dancers nor among the choreographers. The theatre was boiling. The trade union meetings of the company in those years were eventful, each time they returned to heated debates about the fate of art and our ballet... The meetings lasted for hours and... they were often continued on the following day.<sup>46</sup>

Many talked about a crisis and Komleva realized only later that she had participated in one of the Kirov's most fruitful periods. Yet despite illusions of increased freedom during the Khrushchev Thaw, borders continued to exist, not just in party doctrines, but also within the artists' minds; passionate convictions often fused with intolerance into narrow-mindedness. The company was divided into two camps, corresponding not just to aesthetic preferences, but also to egoistic interests and human sympathies.<sup>47</sup>

Although the arguments ran high, Grigorovich by no means rejected all the characteristics of *drambalet*, notably "content-rich" drama and a focus on the psychology of a ballet's heroes. His artistic credo thus mirrored both the goals and limitations of de-Stalinization. If de-Stalinization aimed to renegotiate the country's Stalinist legacies to re-launch the Soviet project without challenging the core of the system itself—an ideologically driven one-party state with a planned economy—Grigorovich's ballets infused new life into the Soviet formula of content-rich, plot driven, full-length dramatic ballets by returning dance to its rightful place at the center of choreographic



expression without challenging the fundamental premise of Soviet ballet as narrative art form.

Even though *The Stone Flower* did not challenge the most basic, narrative demand made of Soviet ballet, Grigorovich's determination to develop the plot by means of dance alone and his refusal to obsess about presenting a realistic image of life in the *drambalet* manner bore the signs of "Western" heresy to some. Proponents of *drambalet* accused their symphonic challengers of a casual attitude towards a realistic presentation of reality, coming dangerously close to a flirtation with abstraction. The defenders of the established Soviet choreographic order tried to present the aesthetic struggle between choreographic symphonism and *drambalet* as a Manichean battle between Western-style formalism and Soviet realism. Framing the debate in these terms had potentially lethal ideological implications for the choreographer-innovators. At the All-Union Choreographic Conference held in Moscow in 1960, Grigorovich and Bel'sky were declared leaders of formalism. The criticism hurled at the two choreographers was at times preposterous and illustrates the absurd distortions of artistic debates by ideological dogmatism. For example, a choreographer from the Urals decided to take Grigorovich to task for the geological non-authenticity of *The Stone Flower*:

What on earth is Grigorovich doing? Among his semi-precious stones there is a jasper. But there are no jaspers in these regions! I, for example, am now staging a ballet about the underwater kingdom of the Baikal. What would happen, comrades, if instead of an omul, I showed some sort of sprat?<sup>48</sup>

At the conference, a stormy debate between defenders of Grigorovich and Bel'sky's choreographic innovation and the *drambalet* old guard broke loose. Leonid Lavrovsky gave the keynote address at the meeting. In an effort to defend the tenets of *drambalet*—and his own position in the choreographic hierarchy—Lavrovsky railed against the so-called "theory of the world of agitated feeling." Singling out

the second act of *The Stone Flower* set in the subterranean kingdom of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, Lavrovsky, whose own production of the ballet for the Bolshoi in 1954 had widely been declared a failure because of its faithful observation of *drambalet* dogmas, accused Grigorovich of using the formal means of modernized acrobatics typical for this "theory of the world of agitated feeling" to express this hallowed topic of Russian nature.

Using typical Soviet rhetoric, Lavrovsky contrasted Soviet ballet's elevation to a serious art rich in content with the pointless demonstration of dance technique. He stressed that there were some people who had a simplistic view of ballet as something where one needed to jump around non-stop from curtain up to curtain down. Lavrovsky stated that the champions of this "danciness" had a confederate in the West, George Balanchine, who led a technically accomplished company that didn't dance music but naked rhythm without any content.<sup>49</sup> In his concluding remarks at the end of the conference, Lavrovsky stated that there was a struggle between two directions in ballet, a realist one and a formalist one. Lavrovsky called the ballet scholar and librettist Yuriy Slonimsky and the ballet historian and critic Vera Krasovskaya, who had had given talks strongly supporting recent innovations, the theorists of formalism, and branded Grigorovich and the choreographer Bel'sky as the practitioners of this formalism.<sup>50</sup>

The ideologically framed diatribes of the *drambalet* establishment belligerently claimed that the Soviet Union's ideological weapons needed to be safe-guarded for a struggle with the capitalist West, and showed an absurd preoccupation with biographical and other "realistic" details in ballets. Sergeyev was apparently disturbed by theories put forth at the conference which tried to rally everyone to the "world of agitated feeling," the world of emotions, the world of abstract images, devoid of biographical particulars, biography and profession."<sup>51</sup>

Sergeyev's words showed the absurd variety of meanings the abusive term "abstraction" could take in Soviet parlance: Sergeyev stated that Ostrovsky's *Snegurochka* could

Galina Ulanova



1954 production of the ballet, village maidens. RGALI



hardly be recognized in Lopukhov's "abstract" ballet on the play, *Spring Fairy-Tale*, because its heroes had no names, no identifiable place of residence and no clearly stated profession, but only showed random people who lived somewhere doing something in complete separation from concrete surroundings. Sergeyev added that tendencies of "abstract" ballet could also be seen in *The Stone Flower*.<sup>52</sup>

Even though Grigorovich and Bel'sky were attacked from many sides at the conference, the power of the old guard was waning. In his closing remarks, the chairman of the conference, Deputy USSR Minister of Culture A. Kuznetsov emphasized that contemporary topics should take the center of attention, but that did not mean depicting a man with a portfolio. Warning against abstraction and deviations to Western European modernism and American jazz, Kuznetsov also cautioned against demagogic attacks against those searching for new paths:

One ought to protect our principles of Socialist Realism in every possible way from attempts to distort them ideologically. But one mustn't attach labels and subject some comrades who are searching for new paths in art to demagogic criticism.<sup>53</sup>

The conference proceedings were published in 1962, incidentally the year that George Balanchine and New York City Ballet visited the Soviet Union for the first time. According to the editors, some of the comments at the conference underestimated Grigorovich's and Bel'sky's achievements, illegitimately trying to separate them from the principles of *narodnost'*, *partiynost'* and realism.<sup>54</sup>

In the same year when the proceedings were published, the grand dame of Soviet ballet, Galina Ulanova, published an article in *Izvestiya* that argued it was the duty of the older generation to support the younger in its progressive artistic experiments, which were bound to include some blunders; there ought not to be any antagonism between the generations, the older generation should be happy when the young generation tried to find its own voice. Ulanova explicitly condemned any attempts to brand Bel'sky as abstractionist and Grigorovich as modernist. "It is easiest to stick a label on somebody," she wrote. "For example: Igor' Bel'sky is sick with abstractionism, Yuri Grigorovich—is a modernist. That's it." Ulanova pointed out that the literal meaning of the word "modern" was positive, it only became negative when used in its metaphorical sense as denominator of bourgeois art. She defended Grigorovich's *Stone Flower* and *Legend of Love*. Pointing out that older generations had committed their own mistakes, she pleaded for the right of the young generation to commit their own artistic mistakes on a path that would lead to new discoveries.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

After his return to the Soviet Union in 1936, Prokofiev gave to history three ballet scores, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella* and *The Stone Flower*. All three scores embodied distinctive phases in Soviet ballet. Leonid Lavrovsky's production of *Romeo and Juliet* for the Kirov Ballet in 1940 marked the high-point of *drambalet*. Shown to Western audiences and professionals for the first time during the Bolshoi Ballet's first visit international tour, its visit to London in 1956, most professionals were entranced by the weighty, highly dramatic production and the total ability of each dancer from the corps de ballet to the principal to build a defined character. *Romeo and Juliet* was hailed it as an innovative alternative to the Western predilection for short, one-act ballets. Its impact on the development of narrative ballet in the

West, and in England in particular, was enormous. Also a perennial favorite with audiences, most large ballet companies today strive to have a production of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* in their repertoire.

*Cinderella* marked the return of both the Bolshoi and the Kirov to their home theatres after their evacuation during World War II. The ballet's premiere at the Bolshoi (1945) pointed toward the dead end *drambalet* was beginning to reach. Choreographer Rostislav Zakharov found himself trapped in his own dogmas, failing to produce interesting choreography and resorting instead to special stage effects to keep the interest of the audience.<sup>56</sup> Prokofiev himself considered Konstantin Sergeyev's production of the ballet for the Kirov (1946) to be the most precise implementation of his musical ideas. Begun during the difficult days of the Kirov's evacuation to Perm (Molotov), Sergeyev's first major ballet production would arguably remain his best, weaving together poetic lyricism, irony and emotionally infused virtuosity.<sup>57</sup> The score of *Cinderella* has presented a bigger challenge to choreographers than *Romeo and Juliet*, explaining why it has found its way into the repertoire of fewer companies, but even so, it has entered the international repertoire.

Of his three "Soviet" ballet scores, *The Stone Flower* thus turned out to be most specifically "Russian," not just in terms of its musical material, but also in terms of its significance. Composed during the low-point of Prokofiev's Soviet years, the score absorbed the pressures exerted on the composer during the time of its creation, but in Prokofiev's melodious use of Russian folk material, there lies a haunted beauty and hidden urgency. The score was the composer's last gift to ballet, inspiring a course of reform that made the 1950s and early 1960s a golden era for ballet in the Soviet Union.

*Adapted material from "Ballet Battles: The Kirov Ballet during Khrushchev's Thaw," by Christina Ezrahi from Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia © 2012. Used by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.*

1954 production of the ballet, *Mistress of Copper Mountain* and the doomed Sever'yan. RGALI



<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Simon Morrison, *The People's Artist. Prokofiev's Soviet Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 354.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>3</sup> Morrison recounts the history of the ballet's conception and discusses the score in *ibid.*, 349-57.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>6</sup> Lopukhov had also briefly been the artistic director of the Kirov in 1945-46.

<sup>7</sup> A. E. Osipenko, "Parizh v moyey zhizni" in *Alla Osipenko* (St. Petersburg: Terpsichore, 2007), 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Drambalet* condemned pure dance without clear narrative content in the name of logically developed and realistically presented dramatic content. In the 1950s, pure dance tried to fight back its way into Soviet choreography under the guise of the term choreographic symphonism. If *drambalet* in the 1930s looked toward the lessons of the dramatic theatre to give the "frivolous" art of ballet some "socialist realist substance," the proponents of symphonism in the 1950s sought to re-legitimize pure dance by stressing dance's artistic kinship to symphonic music, a genre well-respected in Soviet Russia.

<sup>9</sup> TsGALI (Central State Archive of Literature and Art, St. Petersburg), f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 2.

<sup>10</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 43.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Morrison, *People's Artist*, 356.

<sup>12</sup> The summary of this meeting and quotes are based on TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, ll. 8-12.

<sup>13</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 8.

<sup>14</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 8.

<sup>15</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 9.

<sup>16</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 10.

<sup>17</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 10.

<sup>18</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 11.

<sup>19</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 12.

<sup>20</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 12.

<sup>21</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Fyodor Lopukhov, *Shest'desyat let v baletе. Vospominaniya i zapiski baletmeystera* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966), 335.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Mikhail Meilakh, *Yevterpa, ti? Khudozhestvenniye zametki. Besedi s artistami russkoy emigratsii. Tom I. Balet* (Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2008), 535.

<sup>26</sup> Lopukhov, *Shest'desyat let v baletе*, 336.

<sup>27</sup> Osipenko, "Parizh v moyey zhizni," 31-48.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Lopukhov, *Shest'desyat let v baletе*, 336.

<sup>30</sup> "Balet Kamenniy tsvetok: Poka postavleno neskol'ko numerov," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, November 4, 1955, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> V. Katayev, "Kamenniy tsvetok—Nash spektakl!," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, December 15, 1955, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> "Balet Kamenniy tsvetok: Umelo planirovat' repetitsii," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, February 22, 1956, 1.

<sup>33</sup> "Balet Kamenniy tsvetok: Konturi budushchego spektaklya," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, April 14, 1956, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Yekaterina Maksimova, *Madam "Net"* (Moscow: AST-Press Kniga, 2003), 152.

<sup>35</sup> "V partorganizatsii baleta: Vospitaniye molodezhi—v tsentr vnimaniya," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, July 7, 1956, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> "Komitet VLKSM teatra: 'Nas volnuyet zavtra nashego baleta.' Otkritoye pis'mo Ministru Kul'turi SSSR tov. Mikhailovu N. A.," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, May 20, 1956, pp. 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> The team lost its supporter Lopukhov, who retired in June 1956. He was succeeded by Boris Fenster.

<sup>39</sup> "Yu. Grigorovich, 'Postavlena polovina numerov,'" *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, June 19, 1956, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> "Balet Kamenniy tsvetok: Repetitsii idut reguliarno," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, October 26, 1956, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> "Balet Kamenniy tsvetok: Pered vikhodom na stsenu," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, January 20, 1957, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> "Gotovit'sya k VI Vsemirnomyu festivalyu molodozhi," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, February 5, 1957, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> TsGALI, f. 337, op. 1, d. 442, l. 40.

<sup>44</sup> "Prikaz ministra budet vipolnen. Beseda s direktorom teatra G. N. Orlovim," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, February 28, 1957, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> "Navstrechu festivalyu," B. Gudkov, sekretar' Oktyabr'skogo RK VLKSM," *Za sovetskoye iskusstvo*, March 31, 1957, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Gavriyela Komleva, *Tanets—schast'ye i bol'... Zapiski peterburgskoy balerini* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000), 128-29.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-31.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Larisa Abizova, *Igor' Bel'skiy* (St. Petersburg: Akademiya russkogo baleta imeni A. Ya. Vaganovoy, 2000), 132.

<sup>49</sup> L. M. Lavrovskiy, "O putakh razvitiya sovetskogo baleta," *Muzikal'niy teatr i sovremennost'. Voprosi razvitiya sovetskogo baleta* (Moscow: Vserossiyskoye teatral'noye obshchestvo, 1962), 24-26.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 83

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.

<sup>55</sup> Galina Ulanova, "Dolg starshikh," *Izvestiya*, May 27, 1962, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Larisa Abizova, *Istoriya khoreograficheskogo iskusstva. Otechsetvenniy balet XX—nachala XXI veka* (St. Petersburg: Kompozitor, 2012), 86.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

Cover of the program of the Grigorovich production of the ballet at the Bolshoi Theater.



published by the serge prokofiev foundation



registered charity No.326370

CONTACT

Simon Morrison, Editor  
Department of Music  
Princeton University  
Princeton NJ 08544  
USA

E-mail: [simonm@princeton.edu](mailto:simonm@princeton.edu)

WEB

[www.sprkfv.net](http://www.sprkfv.net)

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