

GEORGY SVIRIDOV

Compiled by David C F Wright DMus

Georgy Vasilyevich Sviridov was born on December 16, 1915 and died on January 6, 1998 was a Russian neoromantic composer, active in the Soviet era. He is most widely known for his choral music, strongly influenced by the traditional chant of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as his orchestral works which often celebrate elements of Russian culture. Sviridov employed, in his choral music especially, rich and dense harmonic textures, embracing a romantic-era tonality; his works would come to incorporate not only sacred elements of Russian church music, including vocal work for the basso profundo, but also displayed the influence of Eastern European folk music, 19th-century European romantic composers, as well as neoromantic contemporaries outside of Russia. He wrote musical settings of Russian Romantic-era poetry by poets such as Lermontov, Tyutchev and Blok. Sviridov enjoyed critical acclaim for much of his career in the USSR.

Sviridov was born in 1915 in the town of Fatezh in the Kursk Governorate of the Russian Empire (present-day Kursk Oblast) in a family of Russian ethnicity. His father, Vasily Sviridov, a Communist and sympathizer of the Bolshevik cause during the Russian Civil War that followed the Russian Revolution, was killed when Georgy was four. His grandfather and brother died in the subsequent fail and epidemic. His mother wanted Georgy to be well educated and introduced him to many topics including music. The family moved to Kursk, where Sviridov, still in elementary school, learned to play his first instrument, the balalaika. Learning to play by ear, he demonstrated such talent and ability that he was accepted into the local orchestra of Russian folk instruments. He enrolled in a music school in 1929, and following the advice of his teacher, M. Krutinsky, came to Leningrad in 1932, where he studied piano at the Leningrad Central Music College, graduating in 1936. From 1936 to 1941, Sviridov studied at the Leningrad Conservatory under Peter Borisovich Ryazanov and Dmitri Shostakovich. Mobilized into the Soviet armed forces in 1941, just days after his graduation from the conservatory, Sviridov was sent to a military academy in Ufa, but was discharged by the end of the year due to poor health.

In 1935 Sviridov composed a cycle of lyrical romances based on the poetry of Alexander Pushkin which brought him first critical acclaim. During his studies in Leningrad Conservatory, 1936–1941, Sviridov experimented with different genres and different types of musical composition. He completed Piano Concerto No. 1 (1936–1939), Symphony No. 1 and the Chamber Symphony for Strings (1940). Later Sviridov would turn to the rich Russian musical heritage, including the folk songs, for inspiration.

Among Sviridov's most popular orchestral pieces are the Romance and the Waltz from his *The Blizzard*, musical illustrations after Pushkin (1975), that were originally written for the eponymous 1964 film based on the short story from Pushkin's *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*. A short segment from his score for the 1967 film *Time, Forward!* (Время, вперёд!) was selected as the opening theme for the main evening TV news program *Vremya* (Время, 'time') and became the staple of Soviet life for several generations.

Poetry always occupied an important place in Sviridov's artistic universe. He wrote songs and romances to the lyrics of Mikhail Lermontov (1938, 1957), Alexander Blok (1941), William Shakespeare (1944–1960), Robert Burns (in Russian translation, 1955). Despite the popularity of Sviridov's instrumental works, both the composer himself and the music critics regarded vocal and choral music to be his main strengths. *Pathetic Oratorio* (1959) after Vladimir Mayakovsky has been called a masterful musical rendering of one of the most popular Russian revolution poet. Sviridov's prolific vocal chamber and vocal symphonic output includes *Oratorio To the memory of Sergei Yesenin* (1956), *Little Cantata Wooden Russia* (1964) after Yesenin, *Cantata Songs of Kursk* (1964), *Spring Cantata* (1972) after Nikolai Nekrasov, songs, romances, and cantatas after Fyodor

Tyutchev, Sergei Yesenin, Alexander Blok, Boris Pasternak, Alexander Prokofyev, Robert Rozhdestvensky. He also wrote one opera, *Twinkling Lights* (1951).

While Sviridov's music remains little known in the West, his works received high praise in his homeland for their memorable lyrical melodies, national flavor and mainly for great expression of Russia and Russian soul in his music. His piece *Winter Road* was allegedly plagiarized by Tappi Iwase and used as the theme for the popular video game series *Metal Gear Solid*.

His Piano Sonata of 1944 has been described as a war sonata. It is in three movements, the first being hindered by a rhythmic bass cliché which becomes irritating. The finale is too aggressive with annoying repeated high notes on the piano and has been compared to the finale of a Chopin's sonata no 2 as a whirlwind. In its own way the Sviridov Sonata is impressive.

The Music for Chamber Orchestra of 1964 must be mentioned. Its weakness, if it is a weakness, is that it ends with a slow movement after two very powerful fast movements with an important piano part. This is sensational stuff.

In 1946 Sviridov was awarded the Stalin Prize for his Piano Trio, said to be heavily influenced by Tchaikovsky which I cannot see. The Lenin Prize of 1960 was bestowed on the composer for his *Pathetic Oratorio*. Georgy Sviridov was awarded the USSR State Prize in 1968 and 1980 and honored with the title People's Artist of the USSR. He became a Hero of Socialist Labour (1975) and was twice awarded the Order of Lenin. That he was a left winger being a Communist is certainly against my ethos

The Piano Trio is inferior to the Piano Quintet which is often intense and symphonic, a very fine chamber work.

It is his vocal and choral works that demands the most attention. His songs for the low Russian bass are exemplary

His work is not well known in the west and that is yet another injustice. The BBC can give us over 200 broadcasts of Elgar in a year while better composers do not get one broadcast !

Asteroid 4075 Sviridov, discovered by the Russian astronomer Lyudmila Georgievna Karachkina in 1982, was named in honor of Georgy Sviridov.

The composer died of a heart attack in Moscow on January 6, 1998, where he had lived since 1956

Selected filmography

- Rimsky-Korsakov (1952)

List of works

Orchestral

- Chamber Symphony for strings (1940)
- Symphony No. 2 (1949/Unfinished)
- Triptych, a small symphony for orchestra (1964)
- "Snow Storm", musical illustrations after Pushkin for orchestra (1975)

Concertante

- Piano Concerto No. 1 (1936–1939)
- Piano Concerto No. 2 (1942)

Chamber

- Piano Trio (1945 - rev. 1955)
- String Quartet No. 1 (1945–1946)
- String Quartet No. 2 (1947)
- Music for chamber orchestra (1964)

Solo Piano

- Seven Small Pieces for piano (1934–1935)
- Seven Songs after Lermontov (1938)
- Piano Sonata (1944)
- Two Partitas for piano (1946 - rev. 1957, 1960)
- Children's Album, seventeen pieces for piano (1948 - rev. 1957)
- "Ruy Blas", serenade (1952)
- Partita in E minor
- Partita in F minor

Choral

- "The Decembrists", oratorio (1955)
- "Poem to the Memory of Sergei Yesenin", oratorio for tenor, mixed chorus and orchestra (1956)
- Oratorio Pathetique after Mayakovsky for bass, mezzo-soprano, mixed chorus and orchestra (1959)
- Song about Lenin ("We Don't Believe") after Mayakovsky for bass, mixed chorus and orchestra (1960)
- "Songs of Kursk", cantata after folktexts for mixed chorus and orchestra (1964)
- "Wooden Russia", cantate to words of Yesenin for tenor, men's chorus and orchestra (1964)
- "Sad Songs", small cantata to words of A. Blok for mezzo-soprano, female chorus and orchestra (1962–1965)

- "It's Snowing" small cantata to words of B. Pasternak for female chorus, boys'chorus and orchestra (1965)
- "Five Songs about Russia", oratorio after Blok for soprano, mezzo-soprano, baritone, bass, mixed chorus and orchestra (1967)
- "Four Folksongs" for chorus and orchestra (1971)
- "The Friendly Guest", cantata to words of Yesenin for solovoices, chorus and orchestra (1971–1976)
- "Spring Cantata" to words of Nekrasov for mixed chorus and orchestra (1972)
- Concerto in Memory of A.A. Yurlov for unaccompanied mixed chorus (1973)
- "The Birch of Life", cantata to words of A. Blok for mezzo-soprano and orchestra (1974)
- Three Miniatures for solo voices and mixed chorus (1972–1975)
- Three Pieces from "Children's Album" for mixed chorus a cappella (1975)
- "Ode to Lenin" after R. Rozhdestvensky for narrator, chorus and large orchestra (1976)
- Hymns to the Motherland for chorus (1978)
- "Pushkin's Garland", choral concerto on verses by Alexander Pushkin (1979)
- "Nightly Clouds", cantata after A. Blok for mixed chorus a cappella (1979)
- Ten Songs after Alexander Blok for singer and piano (1972–1980)
- "Ladoga", poem for chorus after A. Prokofiev (1980)
- "Songs From Hard Times", concerto after Alexander Blok for chorus a cappella (1980–1981)

Opera

- "Bright Lights", operetta in three acts after L. Sacharov and S. Poloski (1951)

Miscellaneous Music

- Original soundtrack to The Blizzard (1964) film after the Alexandre Pushkin's story
- "Time, Forward!", suite of the film score (1967)
- "Othello", incidental music after Shakespeare (1942)
- Music to the Play "Czar Fyodor Ioannovich" after Tolstoi (1973)

Songs

- Six Romances on Texts by Pushkin for voice and piano (1935)

- Three Songs after Alexander Blok (1941)
- "Shakespeare Suite" for singer and piano (1944)
- "Country of My Fathers", poem after A. Issaakian for tenor and bass with piano accompaniment (1949–1950)
- Songs after Burns for bass and piano (1955)
- "My Father is a Farmer", song cycle after Yessenin for tenor and baritone with piano accompaniment (1957)
- "Suburb-Lyrics", seven songs after A. Prokofiev and M. Issakovsky for singer and piano (1938–1958)
- Eight Romances to words by Lermontov for bass and piano (1957–1958)
- Five Choruses to Lyrics by Russian Poets (1958)
- "St. Petersburg Songs" for soprano, mezzo-soprano, baritone, bass, violin, cello and piano (1961–1963)
- "A Voice from the Chorus", monolog after A. Blok for bass and piano (1963)
- "Songs of Petersburg" after A. Blok for bass and piano (1975)
- "Cast off Russia", poem after Sergei Yesenin for tenor and piano (1977)
- Twenty-five Choruses for bass and piano (1939–1979)
- "Russia Cast Adrift", cycle on poems by Sergei Esenin for baritone and piano (1987)
- "Petersburg", a vocal poem (1995)

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(1719)

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