

## TROTZKY'S TRAIN by David Avshalomov

(Note by the Composer, 2007)

This is a tragic, bittersweet neo-romantic piano sextet reflecting on the 1917 Russian Revolution and the resulting tragedy of Stalinist oppression. It runs the gamut from foreboding to loss, sad memory, sweet farewell and acceptance, to an increasingly grim dialectic between the truth of Stalinism (*not* real Socialism) and the sweet tragic Russian soul, with a deadly and inevitable end.

This piece generally uses the established resources and techniques of the string players and piano, with a few minor modern tricks. Writing for a string quintet allowed me to get an almost symphonic sound from the strings, because of the 16-foot octave of the bass. When the bass is not doubling the cello line at the bottom in traditional manner, in five-voice textures I ask the bassist to be more of a soloist and play what one might call a “lower second cello” part, in the tradition of string quintets with two cellos.

The work is yet another in my series about the slow morbidity of Russia since the Revolution (previous ones include my *Torn Curtain* suite for viola and piano, which I wrote for my brother Dan, about the fall of the Iron Curtain, and *The Last Poet's Farewell*, for solo violin.) These works all grew out of melodies which just started coming to me, feeling channeled from someone else or some other time, and very derivative somehow, old fashioned, having a deeply ethnic folk or bourgeois feeling from Russia itself and from Russia's subject nations and regions. To permit myself to write each of these pieces, I had to get past the fear of being thought too derivative; but I always remember the comment of Joel Smirnoff, then of the Juilliard Quartet, who said of my viola piece, “yes, the tunes sound European, but you *organize* them in a very American way”. I try to make something fresh and write from my own viewpoint as a caring visitor in the styles I am echoing. I agree with Howard Rosen that great Western Classical music has always been “rich in allusion”—which is a very different thing from slavish imitation or rote echoing.

So yes, you will hear all my Romantic influences in this piece: Smetana, Dvorak, Janacek, hints of Bartok, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky and the others in the Five, Rachmaninoff, occasional touches of Prokofiev, a touch of Khatchaturian, definitely Mahler, very Shostakovitch, etc. But only hints, allusions as I said. I don't impersonate or imitate them on purpose, they are just among the greats who have shaped the musical language that I have come to speak when I want to express the kind of soul message you will hear in this piece: I occasionally borrow a jacket or a scarf for the cold. And sometimes I make fun gently and with affection.

**1. Romanovs' Last Ball:** Here in a tragic dance is the end of the Tsar. To be fair, Nicolas and Alexandra were not voluptuaries given to excess, but almost ascetic in their last years. And the actual last formal ball of the Romanovs was late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So I have simply used this image to conjure up the desperation and abandon of the final times of that dynasty as the War ate their resources and the Revolution surged up around them. This is a relentless waltz, mostly in the “diminished” scale, even more minor than the minor key, full of sudden jolts and fierce drive, between passages of sweeping, aching lyricism that will make you sway and lift you off your feet.

The form is a series of melodies, some with almost violent energy, some free and wildly lyrical. They return in varying order and varied guises. In the middle there is a nagging little pulsating figure that could be the spying eye of the Revolutionaries outside the Palace; this becomes a crabbed little fugue before the waltz tune resumes. This is largely an ensemble movement, but along the way the pianist bursts forth with bravura passages in octaves. For the “Last Dance,” the opening waltz theme returns to build up in a long, sweeping, repeating pattern, back and forth, rises to reprise an earlier climax, and then dies away to almost nothing, no motion, stasis . . . rest? And then we are battered all the way to the end, pounding like the bullets that dropped the family at Yekaterinburg.

**2. Memento Mori (Adagio):** I conceived this movement as a memorial to the millions of victims of the Stalinist purges, to remember their fear, their suffering, their disappearing, the waste of souls. But let it also

be a remembrance for all victims of all social oppression. This is an elegy, and it belongs almost entirely to the string quintet. It begins with the deep bitter sadness of loss, and memory of the horrors the victims suffered, in a slow narrow chromatic melody over aching harmonies, rising to a sweeter melody/harmony that sets the stage for a simple accompanied piano recitative. The strings resume with bitter counterpoint, the piano joins them as they become more overwrought, they all reach a ghastly climactic death chord, then fall in giant atonal unison leaps to a quiet low note in the bass.

Now we remember our disappeared loved ones with sweetness. A slow, hypnotic, ritualistic dance rhythm starts in the low instruments. Then the piano utters a simple, structured melody in a sadness-tinged major key; it is like a slow group circle dance. The strings have a turn with aching harmonic touches under sweet simple piano filigree, then all fade away again to the low bass note. Now the sadness of the opening theme returns in a canon of individual string parts that builds, rises, yet at its peak suddenly evaporates to a high dead chord over an even deader bottom-bass melody. The early sweet high melody returns, rising to a last cry, then breaks off. And the opening phrase returns gently as a final farewell cadence, sweet as honey cake. *Memento Mori*—remember the dead.

**3. Trotsky's Train:** Here is an intractable dialectic between the grim relentless grind of the bureaucratic Marxist cant that the Bolshevik Bully Boys brandished as they hijacked a democratic revolution, and the sweet sadness of the ancient Russian soul with its endless capacity to absorb suffering. Trotsky's Train is merely the symbol. Join us as Commissar Trotsky and his staff roll around the Russian countryside in his customized train-headquarters, rallying the troops and rebuilding the demoralized Russian Army for the dual war against the Axis and the Mensheviks.

The piano lays out a choppy, rhythmic, minor-key Soviet theme over a simple trainlike accompaniment in the low strings. This becomes the Rondo theme, which I vary every time it returns. The in-between tunes represent the Russian soul (in a folk-like tune), a local dance, and the choir and bells of an Orthodox Church blessing the troops. The soldiers march off into battle singing a brave version of Trotsky's theme, get shelled and machine-gunned, and this music fades and transforms into the Night Train, rolling quietly through a forest under the moon while Trotsky writes his great victory speech as in a dream, with a lonely young *apparatchik* humming the folk tune and another plucking a balalaika in between. They roll into a big city to more great Russian Church bells, "Ourah"! and the Commissar gives his great peroration—as a big Romantic piano cadenza. Then the train starts up again, very slowly, loud and mechanical, builds relentlessly to top speed, rolls over a mountain pass trumpeting his speech theme, and vanishes. And then hurtles back down the other side in a grim relentless grind-down—with Stalin's mustache painted on the front of the engine. The rest is history. *Memento Mori*.