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Amid Hard Work and Favourable Circumstances: Looking at the Bigger Picture in Musicology. Interview with Professor Richard Taruskin

The Musics of Power. Music and Musicians in Totalitarian Regimes in 20th Century Europe – a subject that occupies an increasingly large space in the picture of concerns of international musicology* – was debated in Bucharest, during an international conference organized by the National University of Music and the New Europe College on October 18-19, 2018.** The guest of honour of the event, who gave, on October 19, a lecture entitled *Prokofieff's Problems... and Ours*, was the renowned American musicologist Richard Taruskin – Emeritus Professor at the University of California-Berkeley – who came to Romania for the first time on this occasion. Richard Taruskin is the author of an impressive number of essays and volumes on Russian music, and is perhaps the last to have successfully undertaken and accomplished the mission of rewriting, independently, a complete *History of Western Music*.

I had the privilege of talking to Professor Richard Taruskin at the end of the Festive Meeting at which he was offered the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of the National University of Music in Bucharest.***

* Theme that has already been reflected in several large international events held in Bucharest, such as *Music in Dark Times. Europe, East and West, 1930-50*, New Europe College, October 31 – November 1, 2014.

** A comprehensive account of the event can be found in Văidean 2018: 271-280.

*** Excerpts from this interview were published, in Romanian, as Diaconu 2018, and were broadcast on Radio Romania Music on October 26, 2018.

Ana Diaconu: Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me and for coming to Bucharest to take part in this conference about *The Musics of Power*. Subjects as music and power, music and ideology, music and politics are becoming more and more popular among musicologists nowadays. How important do you think it is that we rewrite, rethink some parts of the music history considering more carefully these ideological aspects?

Richard Taruskin: I think it's very important. You have to realise that I've lived through the Cold War. I remember how polarized thinking was on both sides and now of course we can reassess things from a very different perspective. For a while the reassessment took the form of a kind of exchange of positions in the old Soviet bloc where people had to fulfil a mandatory ideological requirement in all subjects; they were so glad to cast off all ideology and just look at the music itself. Whereas in the West, we were always looking at the music itself and discouraged from placing the music in social context. So we were delighted to stop looking at the music itself and look at it in social context – so we kind of changed places. And now I think we're getting towards a kind of convergence in the middle, where we think both are important: to learn as much as we can about music in its various contexts, but not lose sight to music in its artistic integrity.

A.D.: You were involved in an impressive number of musicological projects, you wrote on a vast diversity of subjects, but it looks like you're always returning to Russian music. How did you become this close to this thematic area?

R. T.: Many people think it's because of family; many people noticed that my name is Russian. And indeed, I descend both on my mother's and father's sides from Jews who lived in the Russian Empire. But the territories where they lived are no longer Russia. My father's family came from what is now Latvia, whereas my mother's family came from what is now Ukraine. But I always thought of myself as a descendent from Russia, although my grandparents who came from there did not speak Russian. They spoke Yiddish.

I was born in the United States and so were my parents. It's my grandparents who were the immigrants. But we discovered, when I was 13 years old, that we had many relatives in Russia that we did not know about and we began to correspond with them. My father could write to his cousins in Yiddish, a language I didn't know. I've always had a wish to learn Russian; this gave me a reason to learn the language and I studied it in school. And then, when it

came time to write my doctoral dissertation, I had a great wish to meet my Russian relatives. And so I thought the only way I could afford to go to Russia and spend any time there is to write a dissertation on Russian music and get a fellowship to travel to the USSR, as it was then. And this is what I did. I spent a year in Russia, I wrote a dissertation on Russian opera (Taruskin 1981) and that was the beginning of my actual interest in it. So at first it was somewhat cynical. I wanted a chance to go over and meet my relatives. So I learned Russian and I studied Russian music, but I did become, as you can tell, sincerely interested in this subject and I've stayed with it ever since. Especially when I began to realise that I had a special piece of equipment to study the work of Stravinsky, who was always a very special composer for me. In America he was hardly thought of as a Russian composer, because he had lived most of his life outside of Russia. And he discouraged a view of him as a Russian because he was very much opposed to the Soviet regime and he was a very influential composer in France before he came to America. We always thought of him as very cosmopolitan, but I understood that he had Russian roots, especially because I knew a lot of music by his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov. I could see where he was coming from, so that became my project and I wrote a book about Stravinsky's early work (Taruskin 1996); after that I was really established in the field of Russian music so I stayed there. But as you also know, I have branched out into other things as well.

A.D.: Your public talk in Bucharest will be centred around Sergei Prokofieff. Are Prokofieff's biography and music subjects that preoccupie you for a long time?

R.T.: It's a very old interest. I knew Prokofiev long before I knew Stravinsky because, when I was just a little child, I knew *Peter and the Wolf*, like every child in America. And for the one year that I was an exchange student in Russia, I actually unexpectedly met his first wife, Lina Ivanovna. And that of course has made a big impression on me. I'll be reading about her this afternoon as well as about him, but what's interesting to me is why he decided, after living abroad for almost 20 years, to go back to the Soviet Union. And he actually picked a very bad time to go back and suffered greatly. His career is kind of emblematic, that's one of the reasons why I find him to be such a fascinating figure. Besides, I love the music just the way I love Stravinsky's music. Studying the composer is something that one does in part through the music.

A.D.: You chose a catchy title for your lecture – *Prokofieff's Problems… and Ours*. What did you mean by it?

R.T.: Prokofiev's problems were about confronting the realities of Soviet life. He went back pretty well convinced because he was made a lot of promises and one of the things he was promised was that he would have many privileges and patronage from the government and for a while that was the case, but he lost his privileges and he was eventually denounced. His wife was arrested and sent to the camps for many years, so it was a terrible blunder going back and he was, I'm sure, made miserable by it. And yet, he wrote most of his famous music as a Soviet composer, *Peter and the Wolf* being an example of it. He never would have written that piece had he not gone back to the USSR. We have this gold mine of wonderful music as a result of his miserable mistake to go back to the Soviet regime where he suffered so greatly. So what do we make of this music which we love and enjoy but which was such a cost to him? And this applies especially to the music that he wrote glorifying Stalin, the Soviet government and party, which is now performed a lot because it's very good music. Does the fact that the music belongs to and celebrates something which we now find distasteful affect the way we relate to the music, even if we may like this music? Should it affect it or not? That's our problem…

A.D.: A project of yours that all my colleagues – musicology students – look at with great reverence is *The Oxford History of Western Music*.[1] Not many authors today would have the courage or resources to embark on such a monumental, encyclopaedic undertaking on their own. What did this project entail?

R.T.: I should say, first of all, that when I started writing it I didn't know what it would end up being. I actually had a contract from a publisher to write a college music history text so that would have meant a book of maybe 800-900 pages in one volume. But I became so fascinated about the project, that I just started writing what I wanted to write and I realised quite quickly that what I was doing would not fulfil the terms of my contract and that it may even mean that this work I was writing would never get published; but once I started it I couldn't stop. I just continued and continued and I was just hoping that my

[1] The 6 volumes of *The Oxford History of Western Music* – spanning over 4000 pages – were initially published by Oxford University Press in 2005.

publisher would become as crazy as I was being and they did. Fortunately, it was Oxford University Press, which is a university press, but only in name; it's actually a very large publishing outfit. They publish the *Grove Dictionary of Music* – that is 20 volumes. They also publish the *Grove Dictionary of Art*, which is 30 volumes. So publishing my little six volumes was not a problem for them. They decided they would take a chance.

A.D.: But if I remember correctly from a story you told on another occasion, the initial contract for a "history of Western music" was not with Oxford University Press.

R.T.: No, it was not. I went to three publishers but I always knew that I would finally do it with Oxford because, just to make the long story very short, when I first signed it was with a different publisher but with a certain editor who commissioned it. And my editor ended up at Oxford, so I went with my editor. And then before the book was published, my editor went to a different publisher, but I stayed with Oxford. That's the way it is all the time, things take unexpected turns, you can never predict what will happen. And you have to be open to all kinds of serendipities and sometimes unexpected obstacles, but you have to remain somewhat adaptable and somewhat flexible in a way you approach the events in your life. I was very lucky to get this thing published to such a length. I didn't have the assurance of publication, I was in the grip of something irresistible.

A.D.: What did the writing of this *History* mean in terms of duration, of forces involved?

R.T.: It's hard to answer that question because my whole life had been my preparation for it. But I wrote the first words that ended up being in the book in 1994, and I wrote the last words of the first draft of the book in 2001. So it took seven years to write the first draft of the book. It was published in 2005, so it was a very long time in production. It may seem like a short amount of time for a book of 4000 pages. I wrote every single day. This is what I always told my pupils, too. If you have to write for a big project, the secret – if it's a secret – is to be extremely regular in your habits and very constant and consistent in all ways. Write everyday, whether you feel like it or not. And I had my little quota: "I have to write five pages, or I couldn't go to bed."

A.D.: This was the routine for every day?

R.T.: Every day, let's just say six days a week. I didn't take a specific day off, but there were days I missed. Even on days when I went and did my teaching, I would come back and spend the evening writing. Because I knew that unless I was very consistent and made it into a daily ritual, I would never finish this. "The other secret" is to never think of it in terms of its totality, always think of it only in terms of the part that you're writing now, because if when I wrote the first sentence I was thinking "Oh, God, this is the first sentence of a 4000-page book", I don't think I would've written the second sentence. But I never thought of it that way. I told myself: "Well, you have a little story that you want to tell, that's going to come at the beginning, so tell the story and then the next story". I also had a very detailed chapter outline, which I made because the publisher required it from me. I was very glad I did it because that way I always knew what I had to do next. So yes, it's true that on many days I wrote without really wanting to and without enjoying it. There was an American writer named Dorothy Parker who said something that I had repeated to my pupils at least a million times. She said "I hate to write, but I love to have written." That has got me through many days when I didn't really feel like doing it.

A.D.: As we come to the end, I suggest we move the discussion to a more "mundane" register. Your writings reach a very wide readership. In addition to valuable, substantial content, you rely on a language that is both appropriate and attractive to the musicians or musicologists' niche, and to a non-specialist audience. I am aware that there is no universal formula that you can share and yet I can't help but ask about the difficulties that you had to overcome in achieving this kind of balance.

R.T.: I'm really glad to hear you say it because I worked very hard at that… I think Valentina quoted this in her Laudatio (Sandu-Dediu 2018: 284). I used to tell my students that there is nothing easier than to be difficult. And it's very hard to write so that people find you easy to read. You have to have extremely high standards in order to achieve that. You have to be able to find an easy way of saying things that sometimes are very complicated. The best practice for me was writing for the newspaper, because when you write for the newspaper you cannot use a technical vocabulary, you have to use ordinary language. So it always became a challenge for me: how to talk seriously about

music without using the technical language in music. I never found it to be impossible. Solving this problem over and over again is very good for your writing technique.

This is the reason why I think it was possible for me to get that book published; that my editors at Oxford University Press appreciated that I was writing something that was accessible and interesting to read. That's where the hard work comes in, making it interesting and accessible. So when people tell me that I have succeeded in that, that is the best compliment anybody can give me. I feel triumph when I hear "I found your book easy to read", because that's where the work was, making it easy.

A.D.: If you agree, I would like to conclude with a research topic that you are currently passionate about.

R.T.: I'm actually writing about a sad subject, that classical music is losing its audience for all kinds of reasons. And what I want to do with the time I have now is learn what those reasons are. One of the reasons, or better said symptoms is that the audience is getting older and older. At least that's the case in America, I don't know what it's like in Romania…

A.D.: I think it's the same.

R.T.: I'm not surprised. No one has ever told me that it's different, no matter where I raised this question. The audience is getting older and young people are not coming. I was visiting a doctor's office once and I left with two other men of my own age. The three of us old men were leaving at the same time and one of them said to the other: "When I go to the doctor's office I really feel old". And the other one said to him "If I want to feel young, I have to go to the symphony". What he meant, of course, was that at the symphony they're even older than I am! It is sad and I don't see that it could be reversed. But nobody really has ever tried answering the question, why is this happening. It's a sociological question as much as it is a musical one. So I'm reading a lot of music sociology and this is what interests me now.[2]

Interview transcript by Irina Buleac

[2] Interest later materialised in Taruskin 2020.

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