



Lecture-Recital: *The Forgotten Ones*: Slavic Women Composers and Poets from the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Centuries

Theodora Nestorova

Abstract

With the onset of the first wave of feminism in the mid-nineteenth century, women in the Western World gained visibility fighting for equal rights. Concurrently, Eastern Europe was undergoing a period of sociopolitical turmoil with no such feminist movement. Furthermore, Slavic art and literature at this time were heavily scrutinized and paternalized.¹ Female artists and writers were not considered to be part of the national Renaissance or Revival periods of the time in many Slavic-speaking countries. Often overlooked and confined to household entertainment, Slavic women musicians were limited to composing works with romantic ideals and themes. Texts by Slavic female authors and poets were often set by male composers who heavily edited or censored their original works. Yet, even in this unfavorable nineteenth-century environment, Slavic female artists' profound impact on the next generation of women musicians and writers was not lost.

Through the effort of several Slavic women composers and poets, which, unfortunately, has not seen the popularity of their western counterparts, the next generation of twentieth and twenty-first century female artists were inspired by the oeuvre of their predecessors. This research explores and propagates the canonic contribution and sociopolitical effect of twentieth-century to modern-day Eastern European, Slavic women poets and opera/art song composers, a novel field of study in the interdisciplinary conjunction of literature and music.

In examination of the works of Polish, Czech, Croatian, Serbian, Ukrainian, Russian, and Bulgarian women composers and poets, this lecture-recital presents the chronological advancement of their music and poetry text settings and how they develop into inspirational source material for twentieth and twenty-first century Slavic female artists. The aim of these lecture-recital musical performances is to concretely close the existing gap in knowledge and underrepresentation of contemporary Slavic women composers and poets. By charting their historical legacies through their diverse repertoire and oeuvres, *The Forgotten Ones*, or the Slavic Women Composers and Poets from the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries, are brought to musical justice.

Introduction and Background

You just heard “Солнце комнату наполнило”/ “The Sun has Filled my Room,” the first song from Sergei Prokofiev’s Five Poems of Anna Akhmatova, Op. 27 recorded by me in

collaboration with pianist Margarita Ilieva in the Bulgarian National Radio in Sofia, Bulgaria in 2019.

The poet of this song, Anna Akhmatova, is featured in my lecture-recital today entitled “The Forgotten Ones: Slavic Women Composers and Poets from the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Centuries.” Hello, my name is Theodora Nestorova, I’m entering my second year as an Interdisciplinary Ph.D. student at the McGill University Schulich School of Music and I’m thrilled to be here with you today presenting this lecture-recital as a recording for the 10th International Congress of Voice Teachers proceedings.

I’d like to begin this performance presentation within the conceptual or scaffolding framework of the five essential questions who, what, where, why, when, and how? That’s the sixth.

Who?

With the onset of the first wave of feminism in the early twentieth century, women in the Western World were fighting for equity and equal rights. Concurrently, Eastern Europe was undergoing a period of sociopolitical turmoil between two world wars and the Soviet Union’s Communist invasion, occupation, and territorialization of the Eastern Bloc countries. In this turbulent environment, the Eastern European feminist movement became an inherently politicized platform.² Feminism in Eastern Europe was subject to socialist ideology, straying far from the roots and motives of its Western feminist movement counterpart.

In recent years, there has been a much-needed call for visibility of underrepresented or historically marginalized composers in the Classical Music sphere. Unfortunately, Eastern European female composers and poets have not typically been included in this surge of popularity. They haven’t been provided the same amplification as their Western counterparts. Still today, Slavic female composers and poets remain relatively unknown, under researched, and seldom performed.

What?

The Slavs are a European ethnolinguistic group who speak the various Slavic languages you can see here under the Slavic language branch or umbrella, circled in red. These stem from the larger Balto-Slavic linguistic group of the Indo-European language family.

Where?

Let’s situate and orient ourselves. The Slavs are native to the vast Eurasian landmass mainly inhabiting central and Eastern Europe, with the Balkans to the West and the Siberia to the east.

Here you can see, circled in black, the countries, and on the right, the markers, for each of the nations from which the Slavic women composers and poets I am presenting today come from.



Many of their works draw on the folk music and rich text idioms, as well as the harmonies and musical and literary cultural backgrounds of their respective nations.

Why?

Historically, Slavic art and literature has been heavily scrutinized, censored, and paternalized under oppressive sociopolitical regimes. Female artists and writers were not considered to be part of the national Renaissances or Revivalist Movement of the time in most Slavic-speaking countries. Often overlooked and confined to household entertainment, Slavic women musicians were limited to composing works with subservient feminine romantic ideals and themes.

Texts by Slavic female authors and poets were rarely, if ever, published, most often being set by male composers who heavily edited or censored the women's original works. Yet, even in these unfavorable conditions, Slavic female artists have had a profound impact on future generations of women musicians and writers.

Now, of the known 6,196 women composers to date, listed in Aaron Cohen's Encyclopedia of Women Composers, Slavic women constitute the smallest fraction.³ Moreover, they are rarely considered to be a part of the classical music canon. In a presentation and performance of the works of Polish, Czech, Croatian, Serbian, Ukrainian, Russian, and Bulgarian women composers and poets.

This lecture-recital aims to chart the chronological progression of music and poetry written by Slavic women in the contemporary era. Today, we will examine the when and the how from the early to mid-twentieth century, composers and poets to the mid to late twentieth century, and into the modern era, with composers and poets who are alive and well and working today.

Dora Pejačević

We will start at the beginning of the twentieth century, with Croatian composer Dora Pejačević. Living from 1885-1923, Dora was born into a noble family of Austro-Hungarian barons and baronesses. She began as an organist in the Croatian Music Institute in Zagreb, but was largely self-taught, and was a voracious reader. She left 58 compositions; orchestral, vocal, instrumental, chamber, and keyboard music. According to her anthology;

... her late Romantic idiom enriched with Impressionist harmonies, Expressionist stylistic resource and lavish orchestral tones made Dora Pejačević a true child of the European fin-de-siècle, and her work developed in parallel with European Modernist trends in literature and Art Nouveau in the visual arts.⁴

Dora Pejačević is regarded by musicologists Kos and others as “opening up new horizons for Croatian music, in which she set new standards of professionalism”⁵

Most of her songs are often performed in German, but you will now hear my and pianist Kerry Agnew's performance earlier this week of "Niknula ljubica" / "A violet sprouted" from her Op. 23, no. 3 in the original Croatian, to the text of an Austro-Hungarian countess. Feel free to follow along with the text and translation, which is my own original work throughout this presentation, unless otherwise indicated.

Анна Ахматова / Anna Akhmatova

Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) is an extraordinary Russian female literary and cultural figure who withstood oppressive Communist rule and censorship to remain contributing to the cultural fabric of her native Russia. Rather than flee, as many Russian artists did during her lifetime, she steadfastly remained in the USSR, and this cost her and her family their lives in enduring and withstanding Soviet labor camps and death sentences. According to the Poetry Foundation, Akhmatova started writing poetry at the age of eleven, under pseudonym chosen at the request of her father. In addition to poetry, she wrote prose including memoirs, autobiographical pieces, and literary scholarship on Russian writers such as Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. She revered true pre- and anti-Stalinist Russian art. She also translated Italian, French, Armenian, and Korean poetry. In her lifetime Akhmatova experienced both prerevolutionary and Soviet Russia, yet her verse extended and preserved classical Russian culture during periods of avant-garde radicalism and formal experimentation, as well as the suffocating ideological strictures of socialist realism. Anna Akhmatova is regarded as one of Russia's greatest poets and tied to the Acmeist movement in poetry by way of her late husband.

Here, cellist Alex Fowler and I offer the final movement, No. 6, "Смерть" or "Death" from British choral composer John Tavener's *Akhmatova Songs for Soprano & Cello*. Akhmatova's poetry is incredibly moving, as is John Tavener's musical setting using Eastern Orthodox Christian religious cantorial motives.

Vítězslava Kaprálová

Arguably the most commercially well-known of the group, Vítězslava Kaprálová was a child prodigy who started composing at nine, and at fifteen she entered the Brno Conservatory where she studied composition with well-known great composers such as Nadia Boulanger and Bohuslav Martinu. Even in her short life span of 25 years (1915-1940), Kaprálová left behind an impressive body of about 50 works. Kaprálová's creative output includes her highly regarded art-songs and music for keyboard, chamber music (for cello and piano, violin and piano, flute and piano, reed trio, string quartet, and a voice and instrumental quintet) and orchestral music: two piano concertos, a concertino for clarinet, violin and orchestra, two orchestral suites, a sinfonietta, two choruses, and a cantata for soloists, mixed choir, reciter, and orchestra. Her music is much admired today and has gained more mainstream traction thanks to efforts of The

Kaprálová Society, a Canadian non-profit music organization that was founded in 1998 in Toronto. In Kaprálová's music, one can hear the post-impressionistic style and blurring of tonalities.

Listen to the evocative nature text setting in my and pianist Kerry Agnew's performance of "Rodný Kraj" / "Native Region" from her cycle *Vteriny roku / Seconds of a Year*; Op. 18, No. 2.

Стефанія Туркевич-Лукіанович / Stefania Turkewich-Lukianovych

Stefania Turkewich-Lukianovych (1898-1977) was born into a priestly family active in Ukrainian choral music. She studied in Vienna with Guido Adler, in Berlin with Arnold Schoenberg, and in Prague with Vítězslav Novák. She taught theory, musicology and composition in Lviv but at the outset of World War I, in 1944 she fled Ukraine and settled in the United Kingdom in 1946. Her music combined elements of traditional Ukrainian music with the avant-garde compositional techniques of the Second Viennese School, making her the most experimental and innovative Ukrainian composer of her generation, and also Ukraine's first professional woman composer. Her output includes seven symphonies, four children's operas, five ballets, chamber music, solo piano music, art songs and sacred choral music, some of which was lost during the Second World War and little of which has been published. A composer, pianist, and musicologist, recognized as Ukraine's first woman composer, Turkewich's works were banned in Ukraine by the Soviets. Her compositions are modern, but recall Ukrainian folksongs despite the expressionistic quality.

Let's listen to my and pianist Kerry Agnew's performance of "Серце" / "Sertse" / "Heart," with text by her second husband.

Grażyna Bacewicz

Grażyna Bacewicz (1909-1969) is an "interesting case in the history of Polish music"⁶ according to the Polish Music Center at the University of Southern California. Like Fryderyk Chopin, she came from a bi-national family and, with a Lithuanian father and a Polish mother, she could choose her national identity (which she decided to be Polish). She is the second Polish female composer to have achieved national and international recognition, the first being Maria Szymanowska in the early 19th century. Also a child prodigy violinist and pianist, she studied with Karol Szymanowski and Nadia Boulanger, and boasts a long list of varied compositional works. In 1969, Bacewicz is quoted as saying:

I divide my music into three periods – (1) youth – very experimental, (2) – inappropriately called here neo-classical and being really atonal, and (3) the period in which I'm still located. I arrived at this period by way of evolution (not revolution)...⁷

Here now the miniature, “Inna” / “Different” from *Trzy piesni do slow arabskich z x wieku / Three Songs to Arabic Words from the 10th Century*, No. 2 performed by myself and pianist Kerry Agnew.

Борислава Танева / Borislava Taneva

Professor Dr. Borislava Taneva (1965-) is a pianist-performer, a composer, a pedagogue, a chamber musician, vice rector, and Bulgarian cultural ambassador. Her active role in contemporary cultural life has earned her a laureate of national and international competitions for piano, chamber music and composition in Bulgaria, Italy, Japan, Greece, Luxembourg. She is a Professor of piano at the National Academy of Music “Professor Pancho Vladigerov” and studied with the great Bulgarian composers including Professor Parashkev Hadjiev.

Actively and creatively involved, Dr. Taneva was commissioned by the 2019 European Capital of Culture, Plovdiv, to write a composition (song cycle for soprano, piano, and cello). She set the works of the three most famous Bulgarian female poets, Dora Gabe, Elisaveta Bagriana, and Blaga Dimitrova.

Dora Gabe, Elisaveta Bagriana, & Blaga Dimitrova

Дора Габе / Dora Gabe

Dora Gabe was a Bulgarian Jewish poet. She is a cherished poet, publishing poetry for adults and children as well as travel books, short stories and essays. In her later years, she also did extensive work in translation.

Елисавета Багряна / Elisaveta Bagriana

Elisaveta Bagriana, a Bulgarian poet who became her nation’s most popular female poet in the post-World War I era.

Блага Димитрова / Blaga Dimitrova

Blaga Dimitrova, Bulgarian poet, novelist, political activist, and a politician; she was the 2nd vice-president of Bulgaria, whose slow evolution from literary Stalinism to dissent is seen as a case study in intellectual disillusionment as well as a chronicle of one writer’s moral evolution.

I had the immense pleasure of premiering Borislava Taneva’s song cycle, *Дали е сън / Is it a dream*, alongside pianist Margarita Ilieva and cellist Teodora Atanasova as a part of the curated recital on Slavic Female Composers and Poets, entitled “Musical Magic with Female Names” at

the 2019 Balabanov's House Music Days International Festival. Here we will listen to the second song from the with text by Elisaveta Bagriana.

Ana Sokolović

Last, but certainly not least, Ana Sokolović, Serbian composer born in 1968, ushers in the contemporary modern day living and working composer era. Ana is the 4th most performed female opera composer in the world in the last decade, according to Opera Base's annual statistics.⁸ Her music is steeped in rhythmic universes of Balkan folklore and multidisciplinary art, and she has a vast repertoire that is regularly performed both in Canada, in Montréal, where she is based, and internationally. For example, her opera *Svadba* for six female a capella singers grew to critical acclaim for women centric themes and feasibility of production during the COVID-19 global health pandemic. As a composer in residence at the Montréal Symphony Orchestra from 2020 to 2023, she was elected the First Canada Research Chair in operation at Université de Montréal, where she serves as a professor of composition for her as her position. She is also artistic director of the Société de musique contemporaine du Québec or SMCQ.

You can find her compositions vastly available on the Internet. I encourage you to reach out to go and find these artists' works and also stay tuned via my website theodoranestorova.com for future collaboration as I'm currently working with Ana Sokolović in a concert production for a world premiere composition of hers.

More Slavic Women Artists & Selected Resources

Now it must be noted that the works of these seven women represent only a small cross section, a sliver really, of the full of the Slavic female composers and poets who have shaped the modern era.

On the left hand side we can see more Slavic women composers such as Maria Szymanowska from Poland, Ljubica Marić from Serbia, Sofia Gubaidulina from Russia, Elena Firsova from Russia, Iris Szeghy from Slovakia, Jana Andreevska from Macedonia, and Dobrinka Tabakova from Bulgaria.

You can scan the QR code on your left hand side, as well, to be directed to the page on my website, which is dedicated to proliferating and propagating these female Slavic women composers' and poets' works as I continue my own musical and research endeavors. And on the right hand side, I can direct you to selected resources such as the capital of a society, the Ukrainian Art Song database, Song Helix, many, many books as well written upon women composers that may include some Slavic female composers and poets or will be added to them as an addendum to come where you can find and program your own works.



Collaborator & Bibliographic Resources Acknowledgements

I would like to thank especially my collaborators Kerry Agnew, pianist, Alex Fowler, cellist, Margarita Ilieva, pianist and Teodora Atanasova, cellist, for making the performances that I shared with you today possible.

Finally, there exist and are coming more to light, more and more excellent resources to explore these works and other Slavic female composers and poets. I'm currently contributing to these, but I have to stand on the shoulders of the giants of the references and bibliographic sources that have inspired my work, as well as the influence of music and the culture and the individuals who create them themselves.

Here is a list of reference links that that I can direct you to, as well as visit my website for the full Chicago Style bibliography provided as well in this transcription for the proceedings.

Conclusion & Discussion

This performance presentation highlighted and elevated the variety and diversity that exists in the art music domain, yet still remains unheard. With such a novel field of study in the interdisciplinary conjunction of literature and music, I seek to concretely close the existing gap and expand repertoire representation. "The Forgotten Ones" are the Slavic female composers and poets of the 20th to 21st centuries, whose voices and works deserve to ring and their stories deserve to be told.

Their tenacity through sociopolitical oppressive history and the significance for musical justice that they provide can give us inspiration in the current global health pandemic and going forward through the turmoil, socio-politically (such as the ongoing War on Ukraine) that we face, even in the 21st century today.

May the music and texts presented and performed today serve to celebrate the diverse Slavic cultures, languages, sonorities, and nations, and champion the Slavic women composers and poets who are a part of them.

Thank you very much. I look forward to hearing from you soon and thank you for this opportunity to share today.

¹ Olga Voronina, "Soviet Patriarchy: Past and Present," *Hypatia* 8, no. 4, 1993.

² Anna Krylova, "Bolshevik Feminism and Gender Agendas of Communism," in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

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- ³ Aaron I Cohen, *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers*, Books & Music (USA), 1987.
- ⁴ Koraljka Kos, *Dora Pejačević: Songs*, Zagreb: The Croatian Music Information Centre, 2008.
- ⁵ _____, *Dora Pejačević*, Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, Razred za muzičku umjetnos, 1982.
- ⁶ “Grażyna Bacewicz.” Polish Music Center. University of Southern California, July 22, 2021.
- ⁷ “Bacewicz’s Draft Answer to an Unknown Questionnaire,” *Ruch Muzyczny*, No. 7, 1969.
- ⁸ Operabase Annual Statistics, operabase.com, Retrieved 01 August 2022.

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