2 – The Masculinization of the Stalinist Opera

2.1 Contextual Framework

It was in the mid-1930s, or the year of 1936, as precisely positioned by Frolova-Walker, that the Soviet or Stalinist opera project[55] was instigated, following a series of meetings of the State Committee for Artistic Affairs.[56] Suddenly, Soviet opera became a target of meticulous control and enormous ambitions, evolving into a "matter of prestige and consequence in the Stalinist hierarchy of artistic genres."[57] This sentiment is paralleled by musicologist Mikhail Tarakanov, who, in describing the state of Soviet opera during the Stalinist era, concludes that "it is not easy to name another genre of musical production that has been under such pressure from political leadership and its representatives."[58] As explained by Seinen, the goal of the opera project was "to

55 Both the terms "Stalinist" and "Soviet opera project" exist simultaneously in the literature on the topic. While Marina Frolova-Walker and Nathan Seinen employ the latter term, for instance, Russian musicologist Yekaterina Vlasova uses the term "Stalinist opera project." See Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project"; Seinen, *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*; Yekaterina Vlasova, "The Stalinist Opera Project," in: Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker (eds.), *Russian Music since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, Oxford 2017, pp. 164–187. Throughout the text, I will continue using the term "Stalinist opera project," as I aim to accentuate and keep a clear distinction between the operatic cultures of the Stalin and post-Stalin eras.

56 Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project," p. 182.

57 Ibid., p. 192.

58 Mikhail Tarakanov, "Opera 40-kh i 50-kh godov," in: Mikhail Tarakanov (ed.), *Istoriîa sovremennoĭ otechestvennoĭ muzyki*, vol. 2 (1941–1958), Moscow 1999,

Published in: Meašić, Magdalena Marija: Femininity Resurgent. The Heroines of Soviet Russian Opera During Stalinism and the Long Sixties. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2026, pp. 19–133. (Heidelberger Schriften zur Musikwissenschaft, vol. 4).
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1722

draw on opera's traditional symbolic status in representing a great nation, and to employ music and drama for the purposes of grandiose nationalist propaganda," while the role of Soviet composers was "to celebrate a glorious past and inspire an even brighter future."[59] However, for a better understanding of the Stalinist opera project, its core elements, and the creation of masculine narratives and landscapes that this study aims to explore, it is necessary to briefly delve into the 1920s. This period marks the initial formulation of the idea of creating a genuine Soviet opera and the birth of key ideological, thematic, and musical features that would ultimately shape the opera project.

The 1920s can be considered a period of exploration, as Soviet composers sought to uncover not only their distinct artistic voices but also their roles in the new era and society.[60] In the newly established and still relatively experimental Soviet culture, opera quickly gained recognition as an ideologically fertile genre, providing composers with access to the wider masses.[61] Tarakanov elucidates that "a new form of opera needed to emerge, one that could stage musical performances aligning with the contemporary times and meeting the demands of the intense class struggles of the era."[62] Indeed, the 1920s witnessed a notable surge of interest in socially critical operatic plots that engaged with pivotal moments in domestic history, including popular uprisings and resistance against oppressive regimes.[63] Specifically, Schwarz notes a growing demand for operas centered around contemporary Soviet themes such as war, revolution, or social progress,[64] while Redepenning identifies the crystallization of two primary operatic themes in the

pp. 332–380, here p. 332. Original Russian text: Нелегко назвать другой жанр музыкального творчества, который находился бы под таким давлением политического руководства и его эмиссаров, [призванных направлять творческий процесс и руководить деятельность создателей художественных ценностей.]

59 Seinen, *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*, p. 11.

60 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 61.

61 Mikhail Tarakanov, "Opera 20-kh i 30-kh godov," in: Mikhail Tarakanov (ed.), *Istorîâ sovremennoĭ otechestvennoĭ muzyki*, vol. 1 (1917–1941), Moscow 2005, pp. 297–388, here p. 297.

62 Ibid., p. 299. Original Russian text: Необходимо было создать оперу нового типа, найти пути к воплощению на сцене музыкальных спектаклей, созвучных современности, отвечавших требованиям эпохи ожесточенных классовых сражений.

63 Ibid., p. 303.

64 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 63.

mid-1920s: operas depicting Soviet revolutionary times and those delving into the origin story of the same revolutionary period.[65]

Several early Soviet Russian operas epitomized Soviet themes. In 1925, the alleged inaugural Soviet opera, *Za Krasnïy Petrograd* (*For Red Petrograd*), was staged.[66] Authored by Arseny Gladkovsky (1894–1945) and Yevgeny Prussak (1890–1942), it revolved around the defense of Petrograd against the White Guardists. That same year witnessed the emergence of two more operas, though not ones directly addressing Soviet topicality in a narrower sense: *Orlinïy bunt* (*The Revolt of the Eagles*) by Andrey Pashchenko (1883–1972) delved into Pugachev's Rebellion in the eighteenth century, while *Dekabristï* (*The Decembrists*) by Vasily Zolotaryov (1872–1964) focused on the Decembrists' Revolt in 1825. Redepenning identifies these three pieces as prototypes of Soviet opera, not solely due to their musical style but also because of their role in shaping the Soviet identity.[67] Moreover, in 1929, Sergey Pototsky (1883–1958) completed his opera *Prorïv* (*The Break*), addressing events of the Russian Civil War. Vladimir Deshevov (1889–1955) wrote *Lyod i stal'* (*Ice and Steel*, 1930), set against the backdrop of the 1921 Kronstadt rebellion, while Lev Knipper (1898–1974) crafted *Severnïy veter* (*The North Wind*, 1930), which unfolds in Baku during the Civil War.[68] As Schwarz points out, despite efforts to create opera that reflected and suited the tumultuous contemporary political and cultural landscape, these attempts failed, as can be seen by observing the destiny of these works.[69] Nevertheless, the quest for an opera on a revolutionary topic was instigated, and Soviet opera on a Soviet subject was born.

Yet, it would be narrow-minded to assert that operas centered solely on broader revolutionary themes defined the exclusive path of domestic operatic development in the 1920s. Consider, for instance, Reyngol'd Glier's (1875–1956) *Shakh-Senem* (1927), inspired by Lermontov's short story "Ashik-Kerib," Dmitry Shostakovich's (1906–1975) experimental masterpiece *Nos* (*The Nose*), completed in 1928, written on a classic literary template by Gogol', and Ivan Shishov's (1888–1947) 1929 opera *Tupeynïy khudozhnik* (*The Toupee Artist*), adapted from Nikolay Leskov's (1831–1895) eponymous short story, just to name a few examples. Naturally, it remained crucial for composers and librettists to establish a connection between the original

65 Dorothea Redepenning, *Geschichte der russischen und der sowjetischen Musik*, vol. 2 (Das 20. Jahrhundert), Laaber 2008, p. 270.

66 Ibid., p. 263.

67 Ibid., p. 262.

68 Operas by Deshevov and Knipper were written using the contemporary musical idiom. Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era*, p. 81.

69 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 63.

text and the contemporary Soviet context. However, as themes incompatible with Soviet contemporaneity gradually faded from the repertoire, the prominence of Soviet topicality and the emergence of a Soviet operatic style were on the rise.[70]

According to Tarakanov, it was during the 1920s that the pivotal concept of *pesennost'*[71] gradually made its way into Soviet operatic production.[72] Raku defines *pesennost'* as a "particular lyricism and simplicity in vocal parts along with the characteristic accompanying function of the orchestra."[73] The new trend subsequently gave rise to a new genre known as the 'song opera' (*pesennaya opera*) in the 1930s, with the inaugural song opera being Ivan Dzerzhinsky's (1909–1978) *Tikhiy Don* (*Quiet Flows the Don*, 1935). The emergence of the song opera on the Soviet stage stemmed from a drive to democratize both operatic style and dramaturgy. As the very name suggests, the song opera, as described by Tarakanov, hinges on the song as its fundamental unit, with the strophic form often becoming its predominant, and sometimes exclusive, structural framework.[74] Raku offers an intriguing interpretation of the importance of the two genres, asserting that the song and the opera "formed the 'semantic vertical' of the classicist hierarchy of musical art in the Stalinist era," with each of them representing fundamentally opposing types of musical landscape, one being "the 'open' space of the street" and the other being "the 'closed' space of the theater."[75] Furthermore, as described by musicologist Richard Taruskin, the song opera, aligning with the "didactic aims of Socialist Realism," is characterized by structural simplicity, or, as he quite cynically describes it, it took "for its basic unit of construction such doggedly accessible forms as strophic couplets and patter

70 See Redepenning, *Geschichte der russischen und der sowjetischen Musik*, vol. 2, pp. 270–273.

71 Can be roughly translated from Russian as song-like quality, melodiousness.

72 Tarakanov, "Opera 20-kh i 30-kh godov," p. 303.

73 Marina Raku, "Poiski sovetskoĭ identichnosti v muzykal'noĭ kul'ture 1930–1940-kh godov," in: *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 6 (2009), pp. 184–203, here p. 196. Original Russian text: [Таким образом, под «песенностью», с таким воодушевлением воспринятой идеологами, ими подразумевался] особый лиризм и простота вокальных партий вкупе с характерной аккомпанирующей функцией оркестра.

74 Tarakanov, "Opera 20-kh i 30-kh godov," p. 342.

75 Raku, "Poiski sovetskoĭ identichnosti," p. 184. Original Russian text: [К началу 1930-х годов именно эти два жанра] образовали «смысловую вертикаль» классицистской иерархии музыкального искусства сталинской эпохи. [Олицетворяя два принципиально различных типа музыкального пространства —] «открытого» пространства улицы и «закрытого» пространства театра, [— они одновременно воплощали идею всеохватности советского воспитательного проекта.]

songs, and employed them dramaturgically in blatantly 'expository' fashion."[76] Redepenning asserts that the central characteristic of the song opera is its relying on the mass song, which was "understood as a contemporary form of national folklore,"[77] but also that the focus on the mass song caused substantial changes to the operas' dramaturgy, causing creation of a line of rather vapid characters.[78] Nevertheless, song opera has already been criticized by Soviet musicologists. As Yury Keldïsh writes, adherence to the principles of the song opera resulted in the rejection of operatic diversity and expressive richness, leading to a simplification of the operatic language.[79] The "healthful trend" in operatic evolution, as coined by Boris Asaf'yev, led to a substantial oversimplification of musical expression: Recitative lost its vitality and became mere prosaic speech; rhythm turned monotonous; the mass song's marching movement transformed into a cliché representing heroic sentiments; ensemble artistry waned; and the aria, once a vessel of profound emotions, was abandoned.[80]

The early to mid-1930s, however, were the years when Soviet opera received its ultimate normative stamp—the Socialist Realist doctrine was born. Specifically, it was in 1932 that the principles of Socialist Realism were codified during the inaugural plenary session of the Organizing Committee of the Union of Soviet Writers. These principles were formally presented to writers at the first all-USSR Congress of Writers in 1934, with the keynote address delivered by none other than Soviet politician and cultural ideologist Andrey Zhdanov (1896–1948), one of the key figures in shaping the Soviet culture of the Stalinist era.[81] At the time, Zhdanov held the position of secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. His influence and power will become more evident later in the decade, as he will play a vital role in Stalin's Great Purge of 1937 and 1938. Furthermore, the Zhdanov doctrine, or *Zhdanovshchina*, an ideological campaign launched in 1946 and in effect until 1953, substantially affected Soviet cultural and

76 Richard Taruskin, *On Russian Music*, Berkeley, CA 2009, pp. 252–253.

77 Redepenning, *Geschichte der russischen und der sowjetischen Musik*, vol. 2, p. 377.

78 Ibid., p. 378.

79 I͡Urij Keldysh, "Opera," in: *Muzykal'naīa ėnt͡siklopediīa*, vol. 4, Moscow 1978, pp. 20–45, here p. 40.

80 Boris Asaf'ev, *Ob opera. Izbrannye stat'i*, Leningrad 1976, p. 62. Original Russian text: [Конечно, верно, что] здравое направление, [о котором идет речь, в своем юном задоре, кликнув клич к правде и непосредственности, не справилось с задачей и пришло к опрощенчеству в самом строительстве советской оперной культуры.]

81 See Victor Terras, "The Twentieth Century: The Era of Socialist Realism, 1925–53," in: Charles A. Moser (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, rev. ed., Cambridge 1992, pp. 458–519, here p. 493.

scientific production, introducing even stricter governmental control and a harsher anti-Western stance.

The birth of the Socialist Realist method, or the new normative "aesthetic concept"[82] of almost dogmatic proportions, quickly spread beyond the confines of literature, also influencing music and opera in extent.[83] According to the literary scholar Leonid Heller, Socialist Realism is based on three main pillars, all profoundly transcendental at their core: ideological commitment (*ideynost'*), Party-mindedness (*partiynost'*), and national/popular spirit (*narodnost'*).[84] Historian of Russia and the Soviet Union Sheila Fitzpatrick characterizes Socialist Realism as opposition to formalism, another key term in the Stalinist dictionary of culture, labeling it as "the code word for a composer who strayed in the direction of the modern, wicked West."[85] According to Fairclough, "modernism—now dubbed 'formalism', or music that was considered complex, atonal or jazz-inflected—was to be judged inappropriate for Soviet audiences and misleading for the Soviet composers who were supposed to serve them."[86] Nevertheless, despite an active quest to apply Socialist Realism to the realm of music, musicologist Irina Kotkina concludes that the boundaries of the doctrine, as well as the precise requirements regarding how a Socialist Realist opera should appear, remained rather unclear.[87]

The uncertainty surrounding the Socialist Realist musical language is arguably one of the primary reasons why, in the development of the new Soviet opera, significant emphasis was placed on the libretto. This is hardly surprising, given that the doctrine of Socialist Realism originated in literature. However, the prevalence of the text over music had significant consequences for the evolutionary path of Soviet opera, with some arguing that these consequences were detrimental, ultimately leading to a decline in the quality of this new revolutionary genre. Musician and scholar Lubov Keefer, in her insightful 1945 critical analysis of the contemporary state of Soviet opera—particularly noteworthy due to her dual Russian and Western perspective—explained, "the climb to the operatic Parnassus must be via the road of subject matter. The ascent has hardly begun, but there would

82 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, Ithaca, NY and London 1992, p. 213.

83 Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, pp. 312–313.

84 Leonid Heller, "A World of Prettiness: Socialist Realism and Its Aesthetic Categories," in: Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (eds.), *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, Durham, NC 1997, pp. 51–75, here p. 51.

85 Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, p. 213.

86 Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, p. 118.

87 Irina Kotkina, "Soviet Empire and Operatic Realm: Stalinist Search for the Model Soviet Opera," in: *Revue Des Études Slaves* 84/3–4 (2013), pp. 505–518, here p. 509.

seem to be general agreement that this is the road. Nor could it easily be otherwise."[88] The excessive focus on "extra-musical criteria" and the opera's subject matter at the expense of music resulted in a peculiar situation where, as the author pessimistically concluded, "Russia is willing for the moment to close its eyes on sloppy musicianship."[89]

Keefer's pioneering observations echo in writings by contemporary scholars as well. Specialist in Russian music and literature Philip Ross Bullock highlights the growth of 'truly' Soviet operas by the mid-1930s and the successful establishment of an independent canon.[90] He pinpoints two key events that initiated this process: firstly, the transfer of operatic production from Leningrad to Moscow, "where the dissemination of culture and ideology could be more carefully controlled,"[91] and secondly, and more pertinently to the content presented in this study, the emerging trend of adapting libretti from Socialist Realist novels.[92] Although Schwarz approaches the phenomenon of mass adaptation of literary body of work for the operatic stage as a Russian "long-standing tradition," calling it "quite natural that Soviet composers would turn to Soviet literature in their search for opera topics,"[93] Bullock claims that opera became intricately involved in a robust promotional campaign for the Soviet novel.[94] In that way, one could look at the opera as promoting not only the Soviet novel but also the Soviet master narrative in general, playing a significant role in shaping the development of the new Soviet mythology.

Although the entire dogma of Socialist Realism was built upon the pillars of simplicity and intelligibility, operatic plots became even more condensed than their literary counterparts.[95] For instance, Bullock does not solely attribute the simplicity of Stalinist operatic plots to the inherently

88 Lubov Keefer, "Opera in the Soviet," in: *Notes* 2/2 (1945), pp. 110–118, here p. 115.

89 Ibid., p. 114.

90 Philip Ross Bullock, "Staging Stalinism: The Search for Soviet Opera in the 1930s," in: *COJ* 18/1 (2006), pp. 83–108, here p. 90.

91 Ibid., p. 104.

92 Ibid., p. 91.

93 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, pp. 261–262.

94 Bullock, "Staging Stalinism," 98.

95 Throughout this study, there will be numerous instances in which I compare the original literary template to the newly crafted libretto. While I will continuously approach these differences with a critical and analytical lens, seeking to uncover deeper reasons behind the decisions to alter the original text during the construction of the libretti, I will do so with the goal of not overinterpreting the text. Therefore, I will continue to emphasize the fact that the changes made in the libretto may stem from a purely practical perspective and the nature of the operatic genre itself. These changes do not necessarily have to possess a deeper meaning beyond their functional nature.

simple libretto. Instead, he explains, using the case of Mikhail Sholokhov's (1905–1984) *Podnyataya tselina* (*Virgin Soil Upturned*) and the operatic version by Dzerzhinsky from 1937, that the simplicity arises from the nature of opera itself. Given its slower pace compared to a novel, opera could only focus on its core elements,[96] and "the resulting clarity and accessibility of imagery was exactly what guaranteed the successful elimination of ambiguity, a key goal of socialist realism in the 1930s."[97] As concluded further, "opera become a key propaganda medium, usefully stripping novels of extraneous and even inconvenient material and thereby focusing the audience's attention on the most important details of plot and character."[98] In his seminal work *Architecture in the Age of Stalin. Culture Two*,[99] art historian Vladimir Paperny diagnoses the whole Stalinist culture as word-obsessed. He asserts the implicit hierarchy of Stalinist arts "based on their verbal possibilities,"[100] positioning literature, as anticipated, on its top. As he explains further: "What, ultimately, did the affirmation of the word and the emulation of literature by all the other arts mean? It meant that none of the arts [...] should possess any other type of content than that which could be retold in words. Furthermore, this meant that Culture Two [Stalinist culture] needed only those arts that were capable of expressing, in that art form's own language, a verbal text."[101]

In the context of Paperny's observations, the focus on the text at the expense of music is not surprising. However, music was not merely pushed into the background; it also endured various restrictions, significantly impacting its quality and halting its development. The main factor that contributed to the intelligibility and simplicity of the music of the Stalinist era was the evident focus on bygone musical idioms, which was a symptom of the specific aesthetics of the so-called 'imperial sublime.'[102] According to Clark, the Stalinist era is characterized by a culture that "depends on intense, epiphanic moments and is essentially resisting normalcy," and the sublime imagery was a crucial part of the new vogue, permeating every art form of the time.[103] In music, the aesthetics of imperial sublime were reliant on the

96 Bullock, "Staging Stalinism," p. 100.
97 Ibid., p. 101.
98 Ibid.
99 Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, Cambridge 2002, original edition: *Kul'tura 'Dva'*, Ann Arbor, MI 1985.
100 Ibid., p. 176.
101 Ibid., p. 177.
102 For more information on the 'imperial sublime' within the context of Stalinist culture, see Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*.
103 Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, p. 303.

bygone styles of Baroque, Classicism, and Romanticism, the choral oeuvre in particular.[104] As explained by Fairclough: "Articles published at this time extravagantly praising eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian and Western composers at the expense of their Soviet counterparts consistently make the point that while composers of the past wrote in clear, comprehensible language that appealed to the mass public, Soviet composers were still entranced by the decadent modernism of the West."[105] To add on Fairclough's remark on clear and comprehensible musical language, Frolova-Walker states that the Soviet opera was stripped of virtuosity, particularly in the vocal sphere, as opera "violently distorted normal speech patterns, and was therefore inappropriate for the representation of robust and healthy Soviet characters."[106] In contemporary music scholarship, the term equivalent to the 'imperial sublime' is the *"bol'shoi stil'*," or the 'big Soviet style.'[107] Musicologist Igor' Vorob'yov describes the "big style," or better yet, "big styles," as it was tied to a multiple totalitarian cultures, as "aimed to express a utopian worldview with the goal of replacing reality through a grand aesthetic project" and "based on the principle of synthesizing styles with a deep 'historical memory,' which in turn contributed to the illusion of historicism."[108]

In explaining the creative 'stagnation' of Soviet opera of the Stalin years, Schwarz offers an ironic, yet somewhat apologetic, conclusion: operatic protagonists cannot "sing a twelve-tone row," because it would be simply incompatible with the prescribed vernacular story lines. "The chorus—whether partisans or peasants—cannot break out into atonal sophistry; it would make no sense."[109] Indeed, as a significant issue of contem-

104 See Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, p. 120. For a detailed elaboration on the repertoire politics regarding the European and Russian classics, but even more importantly, how the classics were chosen and used to set a foundation for the Soviet music culture, see Raku, *Muzykal'naĭa klassika v mifotvorchestve sovetskoĭ ėpokhi*.

105 Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, p. 137.

106 Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project," p. 214.

107 See Igor' Vorob'ëv, "'Bol'shoĭ stil" i totalitarnoe iskusstvo," in: *Dom Bulgakova. Prostranstvo kul'tury* 4 (2012), pp. 9–20; Part 2, Chapter 3 of Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era*; Richard Taruskin, "How to Win a Stalin Prize: Shostakovich and His Piano Quintet in G-Minor (1940)," in: *IRASM* 50/1–2 (2019), pp. 19–46.

108 Vorob'ëv, "Bol'shoi stil'," p. 13. Original Russian text: [Они по-прежнему были] направлены на выражение утопического мировоззрения с целью подмены реальности масштабным эстетическим проектом. [Они по-прежнему объединяли в своих рамках почти все виды искусства. Они по-прежнему] зиждились на принципе синтезирования имеющих глубокую «историческую память» стилей, что, в свою очередь, способствовало созданию иллюзии историзма.

109 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 267.

porary Soviet opera, Schwarz states that composers have not yet found the appropriate musical idiom:

> They deal with twentieth-century topics in a nineteenth-century language. They are trapped in an idiom made up of different ingredients—part verismo à la Puccini, part Russianism à la Borodin, a bit of exoticism, when needed, à la Rimsky, and a new self-conscious Sovietism with flag-waving rhetorical declamations, while the new Socialist hero triumphs over the evil enemy, either a fascist or a capitalist. This does not apply, of course, to the best contemporary works, but all too often Soviet opera retreats into a bland, conventional, predictable sameness.[110]

All of the occurrences and trends described thus far are woven into the tissue of the Stalinist or Soviet opera project, which lays in focus of the first part of this study. Although the circumstances and the results of its inception will be further elucidated in the first opera analysis presented within the framework of this study, for the sake of this brief introductory text, it is hard not to highlight the fact that one of the key factors contributing to the development of the Stalinist opera project was Shostakovich's *Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uyezda* (*Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*), premiered in 1934. However, the opera did not influence the evolutionary trajectory of the Stalinist opera in the sense of providing inspiration for what it *should be*, but quite the opposite. As explained by Frolova-Walker, while Dzerzhinsky's opera *Quiet Flows the Don* was propagated as the model Stalinist opera, Shostakovich's magnum opus served as a pinnacle exemplar for all composers indicating what the new Stalinist opera should *not* be.[111] The scathing denouncement of the opera, titled "Sumbur vmesto muzyki" ("Muddle Instead of Music") and published in *Pravda* on January 28, 1936,[112] wielded direct influence over the redirection and evolution of Soviet music in the ensuing decades. Its scope transcended the boundaries of a typical newspaper music review, functioning as a cautionary message to the entire musical community.[113] Yet, Shostakovich was not the sole victim of public scrutiny—many others fell prey to the 'formalism paranoia' that surfaced in 1936, including figures like Gavriil Popov (1904–1972), Genrikh Litinsky (1901–1985), and Valery Zhelobinsky (1913–1946).[114] Shostakovich's opera and the scandalous *Pravda* article remain some of the most

110 Ibid.

111 Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project," p. 192.

112 For the full translated text, see "Muddle Instead of Music: Concerning the Opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District (Pravda, 28 January 1936)," in: Kevin M. F. Platt and David Brandenberger (eds.), *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*, Madison, WI 2006, pp. 136–138.

113 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 124.

114 See Part 2, Chapter 3 of Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era*.

(in)famous episodes of Russian and Soviet music history, and it is hard not to attribute to them—especially considering the topic of this study—a strong symbolic significance, in shaping not only the Stalinist opera project but also gender representation on the Soviet stage for the decades to come.

The libretto of Shostakovich's grand oeuvre was written by the composer himself, in collaboration with Aleksandr Preys (1905–1942), based on the eponymous 1865 Leskov's short story. There were indications as early as 1933, before the opera premiered, that its fate might be problematic, primarily due to the portrayal of the main heroine. For instance, Soviet critic and musicologist Aleksandr Ostretsov published a relatively in-depth analysis of Shostakovich's opera, resolutely identifying the "ideological fluctuations" in composer's vision.[115] He states, in regard to the main protagonist,

> The dramatic line of the opera is based on a controversial principle: Katerina Izmaylova is presented as a positive character. She is interpreted as a woman trying to find her way in life and destroying all obstacles of civil and domestic order. However, Katerina Izmaylova is a socially inferior character. Therefore, she is not perceived as a truly positive individual.[116]

However, in the two short years after its premiere, the opera was still regarded as a grand success (and was even considered a Socialist Realist opera for the time being![117]) with around 200 performances in Moscow and Leningrad only.[118] At this point, Shostakovich even announced his plans to write an operatic trilogy or tetralogy dealing with the fates of Russian women

115 Aleksandr Ostretsov, "'Ledi Makbet Mt͡senskogo uezda'. Opera Dmitriĭa Shostakovicha," in: *Sovetskaĭa muzyka* 6 (1933), pp. 9–32, here p. 32. Original Russian text: [Указывая на эти] мировоззренческие колебания, [мы не хотим, чтобы эти указания были поняты, как указания на порочность творческого метода в целом или формирующегося стиля Шостаковича.]

116 Ibid., p. 11. Original Russian text: Драматургическая линия оперы построена на спорном принципе: Катерина Измайлова дана как положительный тип. Она трактуется как женщина, пытающаяся найти свою дорогу в жизни и разрушающая все препятствия гражданско-правового и бытового порядка. Но Катерина Измайлова социально неполноценный тип. Поэтому она не воспринимается как действительно положительная личность.

117 As can be read in the stenographic records from a line of meetings of the Union of Composers in April 1935, subsequently published in *Sovetskaya muzïka*, Shostakovich's opera was still considered as a Socialist Realist opera at this point. "Diskussiia o sovetskoĭ opere (po materialam stenogramm)," in: *Sovetskaĭa muzyka* 7 (1935), pp. 38–55, here p. 50.

118 Laurel Fay, "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District," in: *Grove Music Online*, print publication 1992, published online 2002, ‹https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O002507›.

throughout history.[119] Nevertheless, opera's destiny changed rapidly on January 26, 1936, when Stalin himself attended a performance of *Lady Macbeth* with a delegation of government officials at Moscow's Bolshoi Theater and left before the fourth act. Although Shostakovich viewed Katerina Izmaylova as a positive character worthy of pity and empathy, stating that "no work of Russian literature [...] more vividly or expressively characterizes the position of women in the old pre-revolutionary times than Leskov's" and interpreting the main heroine "as an energetic, talented, beautiful woman, who is destroyed by the gloomy, cruel family surroundings of serf-holding-merchant Russia,"[120] the anonymous author of "Muddle Instead of Music" did not share Shostakovich's apologetic view. As stated in the notorious article,

> Everyone, both the merchants and the people, is presented in the same animalistic mode. A predatory merchant woman who has murderously clawed her way to wealth and power is presented as some kind of "victim" of bourgeois society. New meaning, which is absent from Leskov's tale of daily life, has been foisted upon the story. And it's all just coarse, primitive and vulgar. The music wheezes, hoots, puffs and pants in order to depict love scenes with a maximum of naturalism. "Love" is smeared over the entire opera in the most vulgar manner. The merchant's double bed takes center stage in the set. It is here where all "problems" are resolved.[121]

Shostakovich's vision resonates in the feminist readings of the opera by contemporary scholars. For instance, in her analysis of the *Pravda* article, Redepenning explains that the opera's plot directly contradicted the Stalinist gender politics, claiming that "in his work, Shostakovich clearly takes a stand for the oppressed woman, implicitly calling for resistance against a male-dominated society, even if not openly expressed."[122] As asserted by literary scholar and Slavist Caryl Emerson, Katerina Izmaylova is a "lyricized heroine in a satirized world," and she "is more sinned against than sinning; her laments are introspective, needy, in touch with a deeper truth, and confessional."[123] Musicologist Elizabeth Wells analyzes Katerina Izmaylova

119 Ibid.

120 Cited from Andrew B. Wachtel, "The Adventures of a Leskov Story in Soviet Russia, or the Socialist Realist Opera That Wasn't," in: Kevin M. F. Platt and David Brandenberger (eds.), *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*, Madison, WI 2006, pp. 117–134, here p. 119.

121 "Muddle Instead of Music: Concerning the Opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District (Pravda, 28 January 1936)," pp. 137–138.

122 Redepenning, *Geschichte der russischen und der sowjetischen Musik*, vol. 2, p. 367.

123 Caryl Emerson, *All the Same The Words Don't Go Away: Essays on Authors, Heroes, Aesthetics, and Stage Adaptations from the Russian Tradition*, Boston, MA 2011, p. 354.

through the lens of the writings of feminist Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952) on the new Soviet woman, concluding that the changes in sexual politics were happening too quickly for Shostakovich to overcome them.[124] As she explains: "For Shostakovich, Kollontai's ideal of liberating love allows Katerina a human passion which makes her a sympathetic character, even if it cannot save her. But as she fails to bridge the gap between old and new, she unwittingly takes down the opera which brings her to life."[125]

It is verging on irony that it was none other than Katerina Izmaylova, a tortured and intricate female psyche, the quintessential 'Soviet' operatic heroine, who led, whether directly or not, to the birth of the Stalinist opera project and the era of dominancy of the 'male' and 'masculine' operatic perspective. In addition to the aforementioned Dzerzhinsky's *Tikhiy Don* and *Virgin Soil Upturned*, other operas that marked the birth of the Stalinist opera project and are based on a Soviet topic in narrower sense include Ukrainian and Russian composer Oles' Chishko's (1895–1976) opera *Bronenosets Potyomkin* (*Battleship Potyomkin*, 1939), Ukrainian composer Yuly Meytus' (1903–1997) collaborative opera *Perekop* (*The Trench*, 1939), Tikhon Khrennikov's *V buryu* (*Into the Storm*, 1939), and Sergey Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko* (1940); the last two will be thoroughly examined in separate chapters. Naturally, Soviet operas centered on Soviet subjects constitute only a narrow subgenre within the broader operatic landscape, albeit a dominant one. Authors have continued to compose operas that delve into significant historical events of domestic importance beyond the Soviet era, however, always with a connotation of a social or class struggle. Examples of such operas include Aleksandr Kas'yanov's (1891–1982) *Stepan Razin* (1939), following a real-life seventeenth century revolutionary leader; Marian Koval"s (1907–1971) *Yemel'yan Pugachyov* (1942), similarly following a historic figure and the leader of the eighteenth-century Pugachev's Rebellion; and Sergey Vasilenko's (1872–1956) *Suvorov* (1942), centered around the figure of Aleksandr Suvorov, Russian eighteenth-century general.

Although the war years hindered Soviet operatic production, they did not bring it to a complete halt. For instance, in 1942, Boris Mokrousov's (1909–1968) *Chapaev* premiered, following a real-life figure Vasily Chapaev amid the Russian Civil War, as did Dmitry Kabalevsky's opera *V ogne* (*In the Fire*, 1943), based on a World War II theme. Indeed, the most noticeable novelty introduced in 1940s opera is a new set of motifs—the ones of the Great Patriotic War. While there was a whole series of Soviet operas based on contemporary war narratives, Schwarz characterizes them as

124 Elizabeth A. Wells, "'The New Woman': Lady Macbeth and Sexual Politics in the Stalinist Era," *COJ* 13/2 (2001), pp. 163–189, here p. 187.

125 Ibid., p. 188.

"well-intentioned failures" and "hastily conceived and insufficiently matured." As explained further: "Current events cannot be transferred to the stage like a newsreel; they need artistic distillation and reflection […] Of all the war operas, only the titles have remained—like memorial plaques commemorating sincere but futile efforts."[126] Some of the other operas based on World War II topics include, for instance, Ivan Dzerzhinsky's *Krov' naroda* (*The Blood of the People*, 1941) and Viktor Voloshinov's *Sil'neye smerti* (*Stronger than Death*, 1943). The trend of utilizing World War II imagery in the operatic production continued after the end of the war, with operas such as Prokofiev's *Povest' o nastoyashchem cheloveke*, but also Kabalevsky's *Sem'ya Tarasa*, both of which will be analyzed in-depth in separate chapters.

Indeed, by examining the representative operatic repertoire from the beginning of the Stalinist opera project in 1936 until Stalin's death in 1953,[127] certain tendencies immediately stand out. Firstly, it becomes evident that the new Soviet operatic protagonist was commonly a man. As explained by Clark, the new hero "is expected to be an emblem of Bolshevik virtue, someone the reading public might be inspired to emulate" and is ought to "show the forward movement of history."[128] Such great expectations were customarily placed on male agents, while women, though always somewhere in the orbit, were not commonly embellished with the "Bolshevik virtue," nor were they expected of great feats of historic importance as their male counterparts.

Another shared characteristic is that the operatic narratives in question are highly prototypical, sharing distinct plot mechanisms and inherent internal coherence that causes the plot to unfold in a substantially analogous manner. They can be best understood by evoking Joseph Campbell's term 'the hero's journey' from his seminal book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published in 1949,[129] standing for the distinct sequences of narrative

126 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 182.

127 According to Marina Frolova-Walker, the scope of the Soviet opera project began to decline from the 1940s onward, as the number of newly composed operas significantly decreased. Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project," p. 209. However, I am inclined to extend this timeframe up to the end of Stalin's reign. This is because the project's scope was not solely determined by the lack of success that operatic production faced in the early 1940s. Its influence remains evident throughout the 1940s and into the early 1950s, and to some extent, even beyond the Stalinist era.

128 Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 46.

129 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, commemorative ed., Princeton, NJ 2004. While the similarity between Campbell's theory and the conventional Stalinist operatic narrative is striking, it is important to note that the idea of connecting the rites of passage and the typical Soviet plotline during the Stalin era is not original by any means. Clark also acknowledges the existence of the

pillars or stages through which the protagonist passes throughout the plot. The tendency of typified narrative construction directly aligns with the emergence of Socialist Realism in 1932, which, as noted by Clark, marked the end of original text and story production. "After 1932 (at least) the Stalinist writer was no longer the creator of original texts; they became the teller of tales already prefigured in Party lore."[130]

As the primary three stages of the so-called "rites of passage," Campbell names separation, initiation, and return.[131] The 'hero's journey' is catalyzed by a crisis occurring in the initial world of the hero, which, in the context of Soviet opera, is characterized by the intrusion of an enemy to the Soviet regime. The instigated conflict creates a space for both literal and symbolic purging or, better yet, they represent a bridge connecting a world suffering from a "symbolic deficiency"[132] to a world of ideological fulfillment. "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."[133] Naturally, the Soviet protagonist does not journey into the realm of the supernatural *per se*; however, his separation consists of a brave departure to fight for "the Goal," to borrow from Andrey Sinyavsky,[134] or in other words, for the Communist ideal, while "the boons he bestows" on his fellow comrades are the Communist ideals themselves. Campbell explains the typical hero in the following manner:

> The individual, through prolonged psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great atonement. His personal ambitions being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity.[135]

Interestingly enough, the "anonymity" of the new Soviet operatic hero also translates to the music. As will be further explained and substantiated in

prototypical plot and explains it based on Campbell's methodology, although never directly referring to Campbell's name or terminology. See Clark, *The Soviet Novel*.

130 Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 159.

131 See Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

132 Ibid., p. 35.

133 Ibid., p. 28.

134 Abram Terts [= Andrey Sinyavsky], *Chto takoe sotsialisticheskiĭ realizm*, Paris 1988.

135 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 220.

the subsequent analyses of the chosen repertoire, there is a strong tendency in Stalinist opera to further anonymize and de-individualize the characters on the stage through rather typified musical portrayals, which oftentimes lack any specific qualities or connections to particular characters. This tendency will also be reflected in the way the music analyses are conducted and how music is incorporated to support certain points and theses.

Although within the typified Stalinist master plot, seemingly everybody lacked complexity, the strong focus that librettists and composers placed on the male leads and their perspective led to a particularly rigid and two-dimensional gallery of female operatic heroines. As it turned out, the female characters of the Stalinist operatic canon existed predominantly through their relation to the male protagonist, whether these relations were of a romantic or familial nature. This relation commonly served as the main basis for their character development. The role they played in relation to the male protagonist, whether it was as a fiancé, a sister, or a mother, also served as their main identity signifier through which they interacted with their surroundings and influenced their agency in the narrative to the highest extent. Female characters rooted in any of these three roles shared certain common characteristics: 'mothers' often occupied an ideologically ambiguous position, serving as a gentle guiding hand to their sons; the 'fiancées' were portrayed as pure and unblemished pawns, threatened by the enemies of the regime; while the 'sisters' were allowed the greatest agency of the three groups, sometimes also serving as ideological collaborators to the main protagonist and displaying the capability for brave ventures.

As already mentioned earlier, another shared key similarity between specifically operas on a Soviet subject is that they were predominantly set in the settings of either the 1905 Revolution, First World War, the 1917 Revolution, or the Russian Civil War. This leads us to conclude that the Soviet opera seemingly revolves exclusively around martial themes. Furthermore, when observing the selected repertoire, it becomes clear that the main heroes, those with full control over their circumstances and clear agency, are virtually exclusively male. Why is it that martial and masculine elements go hand in hand? According to Fraser, "militarism is not intrinsically linked to masculinity; that connection must be repeatedly forged by societies committed to building and maintaining it."[136] As she asserts further, martial themes and motifs, as well as idealizations of martial agency, permeated Soviet culture from its earliest days of existence.[137] Hence, if martial themes are predominant and martial agency is "forged" with the concept of masculinity, it leads us to conclude that strong female agency on the battlefield is

136 Fraser, *Military Masculinity and Postwar Recovery*, p. 10.
137 Ibid.

unnecessary, if not impossible. Indeed, I would argue that the primary reason for the prevalence of male-centric operatic narratives lies in the overarching concept of a martial and militant Soviet society, closely intertwined with the Soviet masculinity cult that entirely permeated Soviet culture. Furthermore, the iconography of forged masculinity, heroism, and militarism can be observed in array of arts as the time. As stated by Fraser,

> Nationalism relied on the propaganda of masculinized heroes, from Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky during the revolution and Civil War to the newly trained tractor drivers of the 1920s, the record-shattering coal miners of the 1930s, and the patriotic soldiers of the 1940s. Socialist iconography of the virile male worker thus combined with a pervasive patriarchy during the Stalin era to create a heavily masculinized—and militarized—political culture.[138]

Dumančić, whose work is centered on Soviet cinematography, describes the Stalinist film heroes as follows: "During the almost three decades of Joseph Stalin's reign, the Red screen depicted virile, square-jawed, and unambiguously upright male heroes. As products of Stalinist cultural politics, hypermasculine film heroes popularized hierarchy, obedience, and uniformity as core national ideals."[139] Additionally, in his analysis of Soviet cinema between 1928 and 1935, Haynes concludes that the era is characterized by "the re-emergence of overt patriarchal values as the dominant mode of Soviet culture accompanying Stalin's consolidation of power" and asserts that the cultural revolution of the era "can be seen to amount to a remasculinisation of culture after the relative liberalism of the first decade of Soviet power."[140] Furthermore, in her work, art historian Anita Pisch analyzes an array of Soviet posters depicting Stalin, asserting that a substantial part of his personality cult was based precisely on his identification with the "warrior archetype," or, more specifically, his portrayal as the great military leader.[141] On the other hand, when it comes to the female representation in the visual arts of the Stalinist era, cultural historian Susan Reid, who explores the female representation in Soviet art of the 1930s, concludes that "women modeled the ideal attitude of 'love, honor, and obedience'," [142] which suggests that women were simply considered unsuitable for the

138 Ibid., p. 11.

139 Dumančić, *Men Out of Focus*, p. 29.

140 Haynes, *New Soviet Man*, p. 31.

141 See Anita Pisch, *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications*, Canberra, ACT 2016.

142 Susan E. Reid, "All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s," in: *Slavic Review* 57/1 (1998), pp. 133–173, here p. 133.

highly militarized and industrialized spaces integral to the Soviet cultural imagination.

This strictly coded gender iconography in the visual arts of the Stalinist era is hardly surprising, considering the social and political context of the time, aspects of which will be more thoroughly explained in the following chapters. After actively addressing the 'woman question' during the first decade of the Soviet Union, the period between the late 1920s and mid-1950s was marked by the restoration of the family unit and family values.[143] This was predominantly achieved through the application of the 1936 and 1944 Family Codes, binding women back to their maternal and domestic roles. As explained by historian Ziva Galili, the art and artistic conventions of the time were actively utilized to mirror the ideal image of correct female participation in building Stalinist society: "These legal norms, and the literary conventions of Socialist Realism, propagated a new model for women's personal and sexual behavior, which some have described as a new 'bourgeois puritanism': a woman's first obligation was to her family; her paramount function-reproduction."[144] According to Russian studies scholar Lynne Attwood, who dedicated her studies to the representations of women in the Stalin-era magazines, "despite its rulers' protestations of women's equality, Stalinist society retained a conservative and traditional understanding of gender difference."[145] Even when women extensively entered the labor market and excelled among their male peers, they were often mistreated. This mistreatment, as discussed in a study by Mary Buckley, occurred "because men found female achievements threatening to male superiority, pride and the comfortable gender status quo in which women in the public sphere were inferior."[146]

While it is clear that whenever a Stalinist opera is set in Soviet time and space, it will most likely be tied to a martial setting, as can be seen from the examples above, it would nonetheless be rather prejudiced to hastily conclude that all Stalinist opera is exclusively navigated through a male protagonist. There are certain rare exceptions, marginalized in the Stalinist operatic landscape but still worthy of mention, which prove the contrary. For instance, Aleksandr Kas'yanov wrote *Partizanka* (*The Partisan Woman*),

143 Ziva Galili, "Women and the Russian Revolution," in: *Dialectical Anthropology* 15/2–3 (1990), pp. 119–127, here p. 123.

144 Ibid.

145 Lynne Attwood, "Rationality Versus Romanticism: Representations of Women in the Stalinist Press," in: Linda Edmondson (ed.), *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, New York 2001, pp. 158–176, here p. 172.

146 Mary Buckley, "Complex 'Realities' of 'New' Women of the l930s: Assertive, Superior, Belittled and Beaten," in: Linda Edmondson (ed.), *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, New York 2001, pp. 177–193, here p. 179.

which premiered in 1941; Dzerzhinsky wrote his opera *Nadezhda Svetlova*, set against the backdrop of the Siege of Leningrad, which premiered in 1943, the same year as Vasily Dekhteryov's (1910–1987) opera *Tanya*, based on the real-life figure Zoya Kosmodem'yanskaya (1923–1941). Although *Partizanka*, same as Dekhteryov's *Tanya*, are nearly completely forgotten and their record can be hardly found in music histories, the memory of *Nadezhda Svetlova* is better preserved. The destiny of Dzerzhinsky's opera is emblematic of the climate surrounding Soviet opera at the time, particularly in regard to the construction of an ideal Soviet protagonist and overall gender portrayal on the operatic stage. As can be read in *Sovetskaya muzïka*,

> "Nadezhda Svetlova" is a lyrical work in intent, with the theme of love being central, if not also fundamental: the heroine should be a bearer of pure and whole-hearted sentiment. However, the authors needed a conflict to sustain the narrative over the course of seven tableaux. Thus, a "conflict" is invented, which is monstrously indifferent to the ideological and aesthetic purpose of the work: in the first scene, Nadezhda becomes engaged to an older artist, and in the second, she runs off with a young student. In doing so, the heroine is disgraced, undermining her role in defining the moral content of the opera. In this way, the authors violate the lofty tradition of Russian classics, which upheld the virtuous purity of Russian girls' characters and their devotion to one great love.[147]

At this juncture, it is pertinent to shift the focus from examining the Soviet Russian operatic canon to exploring the operatic cultures of other nations within the Soviet Union, which also produced numerous operas embodying Soviet themes and featuring female leads. For example, Azerbaijani composer Müslüm Maqomayev (1885–1937) wrote his opera *Nərgiz* (1935), which historian Audrey Altstadt dubbed a "proto-feminist tragedy."[148] The

147 Aleksandr Shaverdi͡an, "Voprosy sovetskogo opernogo tvorchestva," in: *Sovetska͡ia muzyka* 1 (1947), pp. 15–28, here p. 23. Original Russian text: «Надежда Светлова» — произведение, лирическое по замыслу, тема любви в нем центральная и, казалось бы, основная; героиня должна быть носительницей чистого и цельного чувства. Но авторам нужен конфликт, чтобы как-то продержатьсая на протяжении семи картин. И вот, изобретается «конфликт», чудовищно равнодушный к идейно-этическому назначению произведения: в первой картине Надежда обручается со старым художником, а во второй уходит к молодому студенту. Так посрамляется героиня, которая должна была определить нравственное содержание оперы. Так нарушается авторами высокая традиция русской классики, оберегавшей целомудренную чистоту образов русских девушек, их преданность одному великому чувству.

148 Audrey T. Altstadt, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan, 1920–40*, Oxford 2016, p. 25.

Belarusian composer Yawhen Tsikotsky (1893–1970) composed *Alesya* (1944; later revised and renamed to *Devushka iz Poles'ya* [*The Girl from Poles'ye*]), which centers on the partisan struggle during World War II. Similarly, the Armenian composer Haro Step'anian (1897–1966) wrote *Herosuhi* (*The Heroine*, 1950), depicting life in a Soviet kolkhoz and the complex relationship between the protagonists Vaan and Nazeli.[149] Particularly noteworthy are the Uzbek musical play *Ichkarida* (*Inside the Women's Quarters*, 1932), originally written by Komil Yashin (1909–1997) and later adapted into the opera *Gulsara*,[150] and *Sevil* (1953) by Azerbaijani composer Fikrət Əmirov (1922–1984), highly propagated as a psychological opera, although this notion is debatable at least.[151] Əmirov's heroine's path is highly stereotypical and severely ideologically colored, and is based on the already pre-written Soviet narratives of the 'national' backwardness and success of Soviet modernization and colonialization. Rather than having an individual nature and a unique path, Sevil stands as a symbol of both female and Azerbaijani emancipation under the Soviet regime. Əmirov's opera (but here we can also count *Gulsara*) is particularly interesting, as it reinforces the trope of female emancipation from the 'old,' 'national,' and 'Muslim' worlds, transforming into true Soviet women. Furthermore, it exemplifies the firmly ingrained Soviet dichotomy between the 'advanced' and the 'culturally backward' Soviet peoples, with the Soviet East being perceived as belonging to the latter category and thus in need of reeducation.[152] Decolonial scholar Madina Tlostanova asserts that "the very encoding of Caucasus as part of the prototypal Orient—biologically inferior, culturally backward and forever fixed and fallen out of history signalizes a deep interiorization of the borrowed European Orientalist

149 See Marian Koval', "Za vysokoe opernoe masterstvo (K diskussiı͡am o novykh operakh v Armenii i Gruzii)," in: *Sovetskaı͡a muzyka* 6 (1951), pp. 40–48.

150 For more on the complex genesis of *Gulsara*, see Boram Shin, "National Form and Socialist Content: Soviet Modernization and Making of Uzbek National Opera Between the 1920s and 1930s," in: *Interventions* 19/3 (2017), pp. 416–433. Also, for better understanding of the Stalinist quest for national operas, see Marina Frolova-Walker, "'National in Form, Socialist in Content': Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics," in: *JAMS* 51/2 (1998), pp. 331–371.

151 For more information on the genre classification of Əmirov's opera see Lı͡udmila Karagicheva and G. Ismailova, "'Sevil" (Opera Fikreta Amirova)," in: *Sovetskaı͡a muzyka* 4 (1954), pp. 39–46, here p. 39; Nelli Shakhnazarova, "Zametki ob azerbaĭdzanskoĭ dekade," in: *Sovetskaı͡a muzyka* 8 (1959), pp. 99–106, here p. 100; Viktor Belyĭ and Vasiliĭ Kukharskiĭ, "Molodezh — vperedi: zametki o azerbaĭdzanskoĭ muzyke," in: *Sovetskaı͡a muzyka* 2 (1955), pp. 51–57, here p. 55.

152 See Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Ithaca, NY 2001, pp. 125–126.

clichés."[153] Generally, the act of emancipation following a decisive break with old norms and purported 'backwardness' is a trope particularly associated with female operatic protagonists. In contrast, such radical transformation arcs are rarely attributed to male protagonists, who, even at their transitional starting point, are typically portrayed as already competent Soviet citizens. In other words, the transformation of a 'backward' and 'national' woman of peasant origin may possess a distinctive allure that would be virtually unattainable in the portrayal of a Russian, urban male protagonist. As asserted by Reid: "Because the Bolsheviks considered women to have been the most backward and oppressed element of prerevolutionary society, especially in the Russian countryside and in the former tsarist colonies of Central Asia, female figures could most vividly demonstrate the contrast between the 'old and the new.'"[154] Additionally, Tlostanova's argument about "the Orient as a manifestation of feminine penetrability and supine malleability" and "the stereotype of the female nature of the colonized space"[155] further adds our understanding of the transformation narratives tied to non-Russian operatic women:

> The new Soviet element in the old formula which survived from Czarist times, and linked filth, backwardness, and Oriental women, was the pronounced national dimension. The backward woman now stood for the nation. The colonial national project already at its birth included self-denigrating elements. If filth, disease, and moral degradation were associated with the (colonial) nation then it was the liberation from this nation and the assimilation to the Russian/Soviet norm that became the final goal of the Soviet modernity.[156]

While one might question opera's affiliation with the genre of psychological opera, a deeper examination of the score reveals that Əmirov's work, despite being composed during the Stalinist era, exhibits elements that align it with the emerging phenomenon of operatic feminization.[157] Not only does the opera feature a female lead, but its entire microcosm is predominantly female-driven. The intertwined symbolic realms of the 'national,' the 'Soviet,' and the antagonistic 'bourgeoisie' are all represented by female characters. Notably, the Soviet 'virtue' is instilled into the 'national' world

153 Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, New York 2010, p. 69.

154 Reid, "All Stalin's Women," p. 137.

155 Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies*, p. 70.

156 Ibid., p. 106.

157 See Fikrət Əmirov = Fikret Amirov, *Sevil. Prolog və epilogu 4 pərdəli opera = Sevil'. Opera v 4 deĭstviiākh s prologom i ėpilogom*, Baku 1957.

through a female character, Sevil's sister-in-law, a dynamic absent from the Soviet Russian operatic canon of the Stalinist period. Furthermore, the opera lacks certain characteristics found in the works analyzed in subsequent chapters, such as a pronounced sense of historicity and a martial or militant environment. This opera thus supports the thesis that not all Soviet operas adhered to a singular established path, instead introducing unique symbolic imagery while addressing Soviet themes on stage.

While female-centric operas were peripheral, it did not mean that female operatic roles, even when placed within predominantly masculine operatic narratives, ceased to exist. The fundamental question posed in this brief introduction, as well as in the entire first section of this study, is: What happened to the female characters in these highly masculine and martial Soviet Russian operas of the Stalinist era? How are they constructed, and what is their function? Although these questions won't be answered just yet, it is appropriate to provide a brief introduction to the following analyses.

The first work presented in the section dedicated to the Stalinist operas is Tikhon Khrennikov's *V buryu*, centered around a young couple, Lyon'ka and Natasha, and set during the Tambov rebellion (1920–1922). By positioning Natasha in juxtaposition not only to her literary origin but also to her operatic counterpart, Lyon'ka, this chapter aims to illuminate the roots of Natasha's revolutionary agency. Furthermore, it seeks to explain why her acts of bravery do not resonate within Khrennikov's operatic landscape to the degree one would expect. The second opera, also set amid the internal political turmoil and depicting the bloody fight between revolutionaries and the supporters of the old order, is Sergey Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko*. It follows titular protagonist and his fiancée, Sof'ya, as they navigate the unrest their village finds itself in. This chapter aims to contribute to the existing analysis of the opera through the lens of (Stalinist) melodrama. The focus is on Sof'ya and Semyon's younger sister, Frosya, whose revolutionary agency is downgraded to the role of comical relief. The following two operas are both written on a World War II topic. Prokofiev's *Povest' o nastoyashchem cheloveke* traces the path of a real-life Soviet aviation hero, Aleksey Mares'yev (1916–2001), toward becoming the real Soviet man. This chapter aims to illuminate the function of female characters on Aleksey's journey toward reaching the ultimate form of Stalinist masculinity, but also aims to reconstruct the hazy path of Aleksey's fiancée Ol'ga, who exists predominantly as a monolithic phantom on the stage. Dmitry Kabalevsky's *Sem'ya Tarasa* depicts a regular Soviet family and its members navigating the immediate danger experienced by their family and their whole community. Within the analysis presented in this study, Nastya, Taras's daughter, is regarded as the focal character within the opera's narrative. Furthermore, Kabalevsky's approach to his main heroine already hints at the subsequent

feminization of Soviet opera that unfolds during the long sixties, making this opera a crucial link between the two sections of this study.

2.2 Tikhon Khrennikov's *Into the Storm* (1939)

In the mid-1930s, the quest for a genuine Soviet opera was of such magnitude that even the Vozhd himself held opinions on its requisite features, conveying his perspective during a meeting of opera experts on January 17, 1936. Schwarz reports that the preferable features voiced by Stalin included "a libretto with a Socialist topic, a realistic musical language with stress on a national idiom, and a positive hero typifying the new Socialist era."[158] As luck would have it, the response to the pressing need for an ideologically and aesthetically fitting opera surfaced sooner than anticipated. On that very evening of January 17, Stalin attended a performance of Dzerzhinsky's song opera *Tikhiy Don* and found himself greatly pleased with the young composer's work. Consequently, *Tikhiy Don* became the archetype of a nascent Soviet genre, the song opera, serving as a model of artistic excellence for a cohort of emerging Soviet composers, among them Tikhon Khrennikov. However, almost simultaneously, another contemporary opera elicited a diametrically opposing reaction yet yielded a comparable impact on a larger scale, and that was Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*.

It was the same tumultuous year of 1936 when the young Khrennikov, then only twenty-three years old, embarked on the creation of *V buryu* (*Into the Storm*), written to a libretto by the dramaturge Aleksey Fayko (1893–1978) and writer Nikolay Virta (1906–1976) based on Virta's 1935 novel *Odinochestvo* (*Solitude*). The piece premiered on October 10, 1939, and garnered significant acclaim as a quintessential Stalinist song opera.[159] The narrative unfolds in a rural corner of Soviet Russia during the years 1920–1921, drawing substantial inspiration from an actual historical event: the 1920 uprising by kulaks against the nascent Soviet regime in the Tambov province. The village inhabitants are gripped by fear, fueled by rumors of the imminent approach of a counter-revolutionary faction led by Antonov (tenor). Landowner Storozhev (bass) aligns himself with Antonov's forces, accompanied by his employee Lyon'ka (baritone), whose his brother Listrat (tenor) aligns with the communists. Their mother, Aksin'ya (mezzo-soprano), mourns the animosity between her sons. Natasha (soprano) nurtures

158 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 123.

159 See Laurel Fay, "V buryu," in: *Grove Music Online*, print publication 1992, published online 2002, ‹https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O005916›.

affection for Lyon'ka, yet their love is forbidden. Eventually, Listrat persuades Lyon'ka to reconsider his loyalties, leading him to join the partisans alongside his brother. Storozhev intimidates the villagers, attempting to shift blame onto the communists in a bid to sway the support of disillusioned villagers. He also misleads Natasha, suggesting that Lyon'ka has forsaken her for another, though the lovers eventually reconcile. Natasha's father, Frol Bayev, implores Antonov to shield the villagers from Storozhev's pillaging and even ventures to Moscow to seek advice from Lenin himself.[160] Despite seemingly insurmountable odds, the villagers rally to turn the tide, eventually vanquishing Antonov's gang and liberating their village.[161]

Khrennikov is arguably one of the most perplexing and controversial figures in the history of Soviet music. This assessment is not derived from his contentious nature or his unconventional, and perhaps even progressive, musical style. Quite the opposite, as musicologist Levon Hakobian notes, Khrennikov "is known in cultural history as one of the most sinister musical figures of our century, the oppressor of everything non-standard within his reach and a faithful lackey of the Kremlin rulers from Stalin to Gorbachëv."[162] Few composers in Soviet music history have enjoyed such adoration, immense power, and overwhelming popularity during their tenure with, according to many musicologists, seemingly no apparent justification, especially upon an examination of his body of work. Stanley Krebs, in his pioneering 1963 thesis—one of the earliest systematic and comprehensive Western attempts to approach Soviet music—rather cynically concludes: "Tikhon Khrennikov is a composer of insignificant talent […] Khrennikov,

160 Notably, Lenin's first appearance as a character in an opera. Here I would also like to draw readers attention to the Lenin cult and the *leniniana*. Although historian Nina Tumarkin in her extensive monograph on Lenin cult claims that it started declining in the early 1930s, leaving space for the rise of the Stalinist cult, some contemporary scholars, such as Dmirty Moskvin and Aleksandr Pak assert that in visual arts and film the *leniniana* reached its peak in the late 1930s, which coincides with the premiere of this opera as well. Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, Cambridge, MA and London 1983, p. 250; Dmirtiĭ Moskvin, "'Dolgaĭa leniniana': ėvoli͡ut͡siĭa obraza Lenina v otechestvennoĭ vizual'noĭ kul'ture," in: *Simvolicheskaĭa politika* 2 (2014), pp. 128–145; Aleksandr Pak, "Obraz V. I. Lenina v rossiĭskoĭ massovoĭ kul'ture XX–XXI vv. i v soznanii sovremennykh Rossiĭan," in: *Istoricheskaĭa psikhologiĭa i sot͡siologiĭa istorii* 16/1 (2022), pp. 49–72.

161 See Tikhon Khrennikov, *V buri͡u. Opera v 4 deĭstviĭakh, 6 kartinakh. Libretto A. Faĭko i N. Virty po motivam romana N. Virty "Odinochestvo." Perelozhenie dlĭa peniĭa s fortepiano A. Efremenkova*, Moscow 1971, ‹https://khrennikov.ru/noty/item/v-buryu-opera› 16 July 2026. The version in question is the revised version from 1952.

162 Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era*, p. 116.

however, holds a unique position, that of first secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers, a post to be gained and held only by a master politician, in the Soviet sense."[163] Indeed, in 1948, the "master politician" Khrennikov was appointed secretary of the Union of Composers, tasked with implementing the Party's ideological agenda within the realm of Soviet music. His newfound role epitomized the state of Soviet music during the late 1940s. Notably, this was the same year the Central Committee published the infamous resolution "On the Opera *Velikaya druzhba* by V. Muradeli," condemning a group of composers for their alleged formalism.[164] He retained this position until the dissolution of the Union of Composers in 1991, concurrent with the fall of the USSR.[165]

While the music attributed to this composer whom musicologist Richard Taruskin once dubbed the "*khozyayin*, the boss of Soviet music"[166] enjoyed considerable popularity within the USSR, Western critics, as evidenced by the case of Krebs, remained impervious to the political and ideological nuances underpinning his compositions. Furthermore, Krebs bluntly asserts that "Khrennikov has remained a particularly apt cook of a broth which blends a borrowed idiom with a keen awareness of the current Party taste."[167] Indeed, in contemporary scholarship, his style is frequently characterized as deeply traditional, displaying a penchant for popular musical language and melodies.[168] According to Schwarz, however, it was exactly Khrennikov's *Into the Storm* that managed to transcend the "general mediocrity" prevalent in Soviet song operas of that era.[169]

Within the Soviet musical sphere, the perceived absence of innovation and originality in his musical style, coupled with a potent ideological underpinning, manifested as a 'clear' and 'sincere' artistic expression. This sentiment is encapsulated in the words of the Soviet musicologist Yuly Kremlyov in his assessment of *Into the Storm*, as published in *Sovetskaya muzïka*:

163 Stanley Dale Krebs, "Soviet Composers and Development of Soviet Music," PhD diss., University of Washington 1963, p. 310.

164 See Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 206.

165 For more information on Khrennikov's biography see Valentina Rubcova, "Khrennikov, Tikhon Nikolayevich," in: *Grove Music Online*, print publication 2001, published online 2001, ‹https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.14980›.

166 Richard Taruskin, "Two Serendipities: Keynoting a Conference, 'Music and Power'," in: *The Journal of Musicology* 33/3 (2016), pp. 401–431, here p. 414.

167 Krebs, "Soviet Composers," p. 311.

168 Rubcova, "Khrennikov, Tikhon Nikolayevich."

169 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 146.

> T. Khrennikov's music captivates us through its lucid ideas, meticulousness and plasticity of the texture, harmonious voice-leading, and intentional designation of means of expression, as well as their adept mastery. […] The simplicity and sincerity of T. Khrennikov's song style often evokes thoughts of Schubert.[170]

Kremlyov's writing functions not only as a thought-provoking manifesto regarding the 'rightness' of Khrennikov's artistic persona but also reaffirms the boundaries of 'correct' Soviet music at large. Despite the text being composed three years subsequent to Stalin's passing, Kremlyov nonetheless perpetuates outdated and regressive viewpoints on Soviet music.

> In the early, relatively immature compositions of T. Khrennikov, there are instances where a strong allure toward musical modernism becomes evident. I recall that this fascination led certain musicians in the 1930s to invest expectations in T. Khrennikov. Thankfully, he didn't adhere to such expectations. […] The healthy creative inclination of T. Khrennikov dismissed "experimentation" in favor of authenticity, warmth, and clarity as his genuine guiding principles.[171]

Undoubtedly, it was precisely the "authenticity" and "clarity" of his music, coupled with a pronounced lyrical quality and "the passion of ethical ideal,"[172] that constituted the most esteemed attributes of Khrennikov's inaugural opera. However, despite the overwhelmingly positive official stance on the opera, this does not imply its complete immunity from certain negative critiques. Soviet musicologist Ivan Martïnov, while referring to opera's criticism, makes the following observation:

170 Ío͡Uliĭ Kremlev, "'V buri͡u': Opera T. Khrennikova," in: *Sovetskai͡a muzyka* 11 (1956), pp. 16–26, here p. 17. Original Russian text: В музыке Т. Хренникова радует ясность замыслов, продуманность и рельефность фактуры, стройность голосоведения, умение целенаправленно отбирать выразительные средства и свободно владеть ими. [...] Простота и задушевность песенных интонаций Т. Хренникова нередко заставляют вспомнить о Шуберте.

171 Ibid., p. 18. Original Russian text: В ранних, еще незрелых сочинениях Т. Хренникова временами довольно сильно дает себя знать увлечение музыкальным модернизмом. Помнится, что именно это увлечение заставляло некоторых музыкантов в тридцатые годы возлагать на Т. Хренникова особые надежды. Но он, к счастью, не оправдал таких надежд. [...] Здоровая творческая натура Т. Хренникова отвергла «экспериментаторство», избрала своим истинным девизом правдивость, сердечность и доходчивость музыки.

172 Ibid., p. 19. Original Russian text: Эта горячность этического идеала [наряду с его ясностью и прямотой составляет основу творческой индивидуальности Т. Хренникова, и, в данном плане он, по-моему, не имеет себе равных среди советских композиторов.]

> Certain critics, however, contend that the opera's exceptional triumph is attributed to… the low level of musical discernment in our audience. There is hardly a need to expound on the inherent fallacies and absurdities of such a perspective. If the diverse audience of our opera houses (comprising Soviet intelligentsia, workers, students, officers, and soldiers of the Red Army) is deemed uncultured, then who might even qualify as cultured?[173]

2.2.1 Virta's Novel Versus the Libretto

Nikolay Virta[174] published his first novel *Odinochestvo*, which provided the foundation for the opera's libretto, at a particularly significant juncture in Soviet literary history, just two years after the official codification of the Socialist Realist doctrine. Soviet critics acclaimed Virta's 1936 novel as a major triumph, retroactively earning him a Stalin Prize in 1941.[175] Similarly, the libretto for Khrennikov's opera received a relatively favorable appraisal.[176] Intriguingly, *Odinochestvo* was intended to inaugurate a trilogy centered around significant events from Soviet history. The trilogy's second installment is Virta's 1937 novel *Zakonomernost'* (*Lawfulness*), while the third part was never published.[177]

Despite the libretto's faithful adherence to Virta's novel and the relatively minor interventions in the plot, there are still noteworthy divergences. Foremost, the operatic format's constraints inherently preclude the inclusion of certain narrative intricacies present in a novel. Thus, it is unsurprising that Khrennikov's opera omits certain contextual components and events leading to the zenith of the kulak uprising in 1920. Similarly,

173 Ivan Martynov, "'V burı͡u' — T. Khrennikova," in: *Sovetskai͡a muzyka* 11 (1956), pp. 55–65, here p. 63. Original Russian text: Некоторые критики, впрочем, полагают, что причиной большого успеха оперы является… низкий уровень музыкальных вкусов нашей публики. Вряд ли нужно доказывать всю порочность и вздорность такой точки зрения. Если широкая аудитория нашего оперного театра (советская интеллигенция, рабочие, студенты, командиры и бойцы Красной армии) недостаточно культурна, то кто же тогда по-настоящему культурен?

174 Incidentally, it was Virta who became one of the most famous advocates for the *beskonfliktnost'* (Russ. "without conflict") theory in literature. The theory of *beskonfliktnost'*, which was developed during the 1930s, proposes that Soviet art should no longer depict grand conflicts, as Soviet society was now "free of class and social antagonism." Jesse Gardiner, "No Conflict on the Stage: The Theory of Beskonfliktnost' in Postwar Soviet Drama," in: *The Russian Review* 77/3 (2018), pp. 427–445, here p. 428.

175 Terras, "The Twentieth Century: The Era of Socialist Realism," p. 496.

176 See, for instance, Martynov, "'V burı͡u' — T. Khrennikova."

177 Gleb Struve, *Soviet Russian Literature, 1917–50*, Norman, OK 1951, pp. 283–284.

Virta's comprehensive examination of the conflict between opposing forces, unafraid to delve into intricate political complexities and explore arguments from both sides, was naturally excised from the operatic rendition. Furthermore, in the novel, the characters Storozhev and Antonov are considerably more abstruse compared to their operatic doubles. Virta's emphasis on Storozhev's multifaceted persona leaves the impression that the novel orbits around him and his fate during the era of revolutionary upheaval, overshadowing Listrat's or Lyon'ka's storylines. While the opera portrays Storozhev's capture and eventual demise, the novel presents him as surrendering voluntarily and ultimately escaping, concluding without the anticipated triumphant resolution.[178]

Nonetheless, one of the most significant changes in the plotline is, curiously enough, tied to Natasha. Specifically, two pivotal instances in the opera that unveil Natasha as a fervent 'revolutionary' before the audience's eyes never transpired in the novel. The first instance showcases her impulsive bravery, as she selflessly interjects with a rifle to shield her father. The second pivotal moment transpires when she chases after Storozhev, who attempts to flee captivity, ultimately leading to his demise. Interestingly, however, one particular episode involving Natasha in the novel is altogether absent from the operatic rendition. Librettists entirely omit the scene in which Natasha strangles a Red soldier to death, her actions fueled by her belief that Lyon'ka has forsaken her for another woman and that the Bolsheviks are indeed the true adversaries of the people.

While the majority of modifications can be swiftly rationalized by the inherent nature of the operatic medium, the situation with Natasha defies such oversimplified explanation. Consequently, one must delve into the inquiry of why the operatic rendition of Natasha necessitated the revolutionary zeal and acts of courage absent in the novel. Is she intended to represent a new female Soviet revolutionary, a facet evidently lacking in the Soviet operatic canon? Alternatively, could her portrayal merely serve as a rudimentary narrative device? As readers of Virta's novel gauge Lyon'ka's character progression in relation to Listrat, who forges his brother's revolutionary path and journey of self-discovery, the opera engenders a different set of comparisons—between Lyon'ka and Natasha. It is Natasha's resolute bravery and apparent selflessness that inadvertently expose Lyon'ka's inherent fragility and timidity. In reconstructing Natasha as an impassioned combatant, whether intentional or otherwise, the librettists cast a novel

178 For the translated version of the novel, see Nikolai Virta, *Alone: A Novel*, Moscow [n.d.], ‹https://archive.org/details/nikolai-virta-alone-a-novel-flph-1950/page/n1/mode/2up› 16 July 2026, original edition: *Odinochestvo. Roman*, Moscow 1936.

light upon Lyon'ka's character development as well—one that is particularly unflattering within the confines of the Stalinist narratives.

2.2.2 The Inadequate Soviet Man?

As explained by literary scholar Gleb Struve, the emergence of Socialist Realism brought about two pivotal shifts in character development within Soviet literature. The first objective aimed to craft literary archetypes, encapsulating the quintessential characters of the revolutionary era. Concurrently, another faction of Socialist Realism's vanguards sought to identify heroes, striving to epitomize the heroic attributes of the revolutionary age.[179] The convergence of these two endeavors culminated in the emergence of a new breed of protagonist, the literary Soviet New Man. Precisely this form of affirmative protagonist undeniably assumed a central role within Stalinist art. Describing its primary role, Clark asserts that the hero is meant to embody Bolshevik virtues, serving as an inspirational figure for readers to mirror.[180] However, this new convention found its way into Soviet literature with "great literalism, extremism, and rigidity,"[181] ushering in a plethora of standardized "remarkable" Soviet protagonists that came to dominate the landscape of Stalinist literature: "In mid-thirties rhetoric, an entire series of 'remarkable people' was singled out as official harbingers of a revolution in human anthropology soon to affect every Soviet man. These new men were not merely 'bigger' than that earlier paradigm, the 'little man'; they were the 'biggest' [...] The fantastic age had begun."[182]

Three primary male protagonists can be discerned in Khrennikov's opera, each embodying distinct narrative roles and varying levels of significance within the opera's plot. Listrat, an impassioned communist and revolutionary, arguably assumes a pivotal function in the opera's progression. He stands as the individual who shapes Lyon'ka and, to a certain degree, even influences Frol, contributing directly to their transformation and revolutionary self-discovery. Despite his resolute—albeit linear—demeanor serving as a moral and ethical anchor for other characters, his ideological convictions and pedagogic impact find scant musical representation. This is evidenced in Listrat's song (Act I, No. 3) which employs a straightforward strophic structure and sequential pattern accompanied by a dance-like rhythm. In the

179 Struve, *Soviet Russian Literature*, p. 270.
180 Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 46.
181 Ibid., pp. 46–47.
182 Ibid., p. 119.
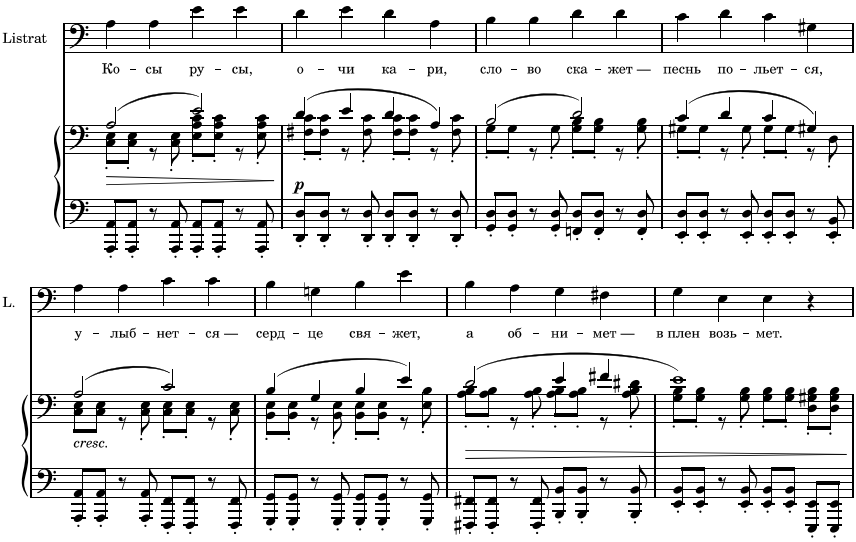
Figure 1. *Into the Storm*, Act I, Tableau 1, No. 3, "Listrat's Song," bars 172–179, p. 22.
Translation: Listrat: Blond braids, hazel eyes, when she speaks it's like a song flows, when she smiles she captures your heart, and when she embraces she takes you captive.

following segment, he speaks of his beloved and also addresses Antonov's pillaging in their native village (Fig. 1).

Similarly, his aria (Act I, No. 4) intended to convey the resolute and fervent nature of a committed communist while serving as a condemnation of the adversary's malicious actions, once more predominantly embodies lyrical qualities. Although it possesses an element of dramatic pathos, particularly in its closing section where he bids farewell to his village, the melody remains remarkably uncomplicated, maintaining its lyrical essence. However, in Listrat's song about Kronstadt (Act III, No. 26) where he recounts his experiences during the Civil War and more specifically, Khrennikov echoes the revolutionary zeal through the utilization of conventional march-like rhythmic motifs and orchestra accents (Fig. 2).

The musical language employed to shape Lyon'ka's character bears a striking resemblance to Listrat's, consequently leading to a notable reduction in the narrative autonomy, distinction, and individuality of these two figures. Interestingly enough, Frolova-Walker recounts an episode from the State Committee for Artistic Affairs meeting in 1939, soon after the debut of the opera. During this assembly, a particular musicologist endeavored to place Khrennikov in an uneasy position by presenting a sequence of piano excerpts. The intention behind this presentation was to illustrate how rather similar passages in the opera were ineptly associated with distinctly

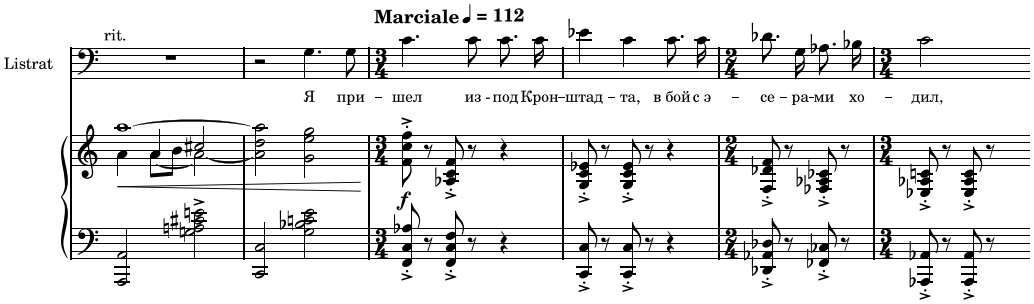

Figure 2. *Into the Storm*, Act III, Tableau 5, No. 26, "Scene and Song of Listrat (About Kronstadt)," bars 153–157, p. 201.

Translation: Listrat: I arrived from Kronstadt, I went into battle against the members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, [...]

different characters and situations, thereby elucidating perceived unfortunate resemblances.[183]

Lyon'ka, a youthful and compassionate villager, toils under the employ of the kulak Storozhev, who aligns himself with Antonov's counter-revolutionary faction. Lyon'ka emerges as genuine, light-hearted, and rather impressionable, as he readily accepts Storozhev's every utterance and carries out orders with unwavering consent. Although Lyon'ka, guided by Listrat's influence, does undergo certain personal development, this transformation remains largely absent in the musical rendering, marked by striking monotony. His straightforward musical portrayal leans towards the 'lyrical,' evident in instances such as his arioso (Act I, No. 7) (Fig. 3).

It is safe to assume that if there was ever meant to be a central male protagonist in Khrennikov's opera, it was likely intended to be Lyon'ka. His love story with Natasha was intended to serve as a narrative cornerstone in the libretto, making the absence of convincing character development all the more intriguing. Lyon'ka does not fit the mold of a typical Soviet man or a conventional hero. In fact, he is notably indecisive and easily influenced. More significantly, he lacks the resolute determination often found in literary revolutionaries of that era. Despite his unwavering support for Storozhev, he was easily swayed by Listrat to switch sides. This transition in the opera appears remarkably abrupt and artificial, lacking strong musical reflection as well. The unfortunate portrayal of his realization of the true nature of the conflict between the kulaks and the Bolsheviks renders Lyon'ka's revolutionary awakening insincere and superficial. This is particularly evident when Storozhev visits Aksin'ya's house suspecting Listrat's presence (Act I, No. 13). Lyon'ka entered his mother's house with a deep antipathy

183 Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project," p. 207.
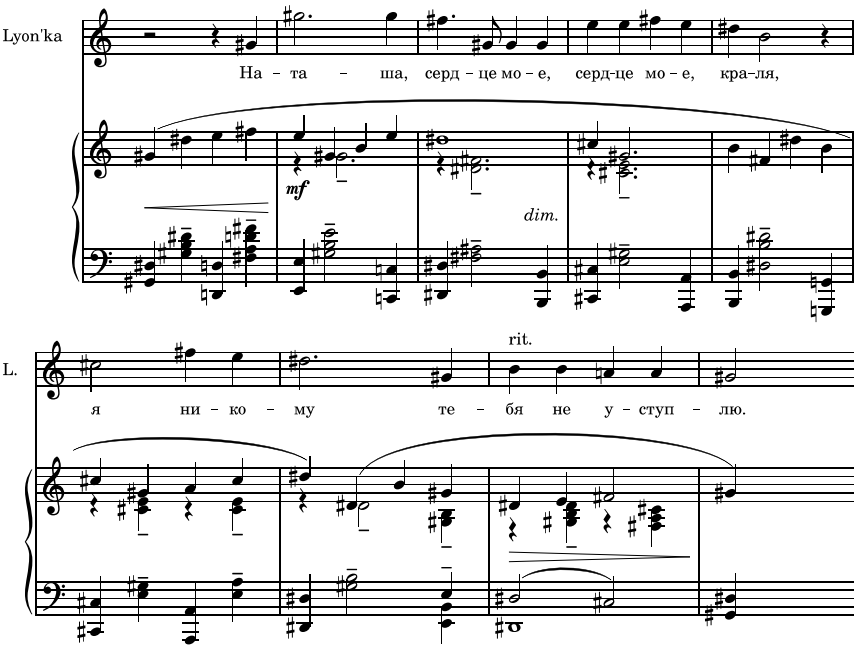
Figure 3. *Into the Storm*, Act I, Tableau 1, No. 7, "Lyon'ka's Arioso," bars 779–787, pp. 51–52.

Translation: Lyon'ka: Natasha, my sweetheart, my sweetheart, my beauty, I won't give you to anyone!

towards Listrat and the Bolsheviks, fervently supporting Storozhev. However, a single conversation with Listrat was all it took to completely shift his loyalty from one side to the other. Furthermore, Lyon'ka lacks the expected attributes of strength and sharpness of mind. Instead, he embodies naivety, gullibility, and susceptibility. Repeatedly seeking guidance and heavily dependent on authority figures, he lacks the fervent drive to wholeheartedly pursue the grand communist Goal.

This rather cynical interpretation of Khrennikov's protagonist can be substantiated by Lyon'ka's song from the opera's final act (Act IV, No. 34) (Fig. 4). While he was tasked with guarding the captive Storozhev, Lyon'ka sings a carefree folk song (in diegesis!) relying on the melodic and harmonic contours of his arioso (Fig. 3), appearing entirely unaware of the danger lurking on the other side of the door. In doing so, Khrennikov solidifies the portrayal of Lyon'ka as an innocent and cheerful young man who fails to grasp the gravity of the threat before him, and who does not approach his duty with significant seriousness.

Completing Khrennikov's triad of male protagonists is Frol Bayev, Natasha's father, who also receives a relatively maladroit characterization.
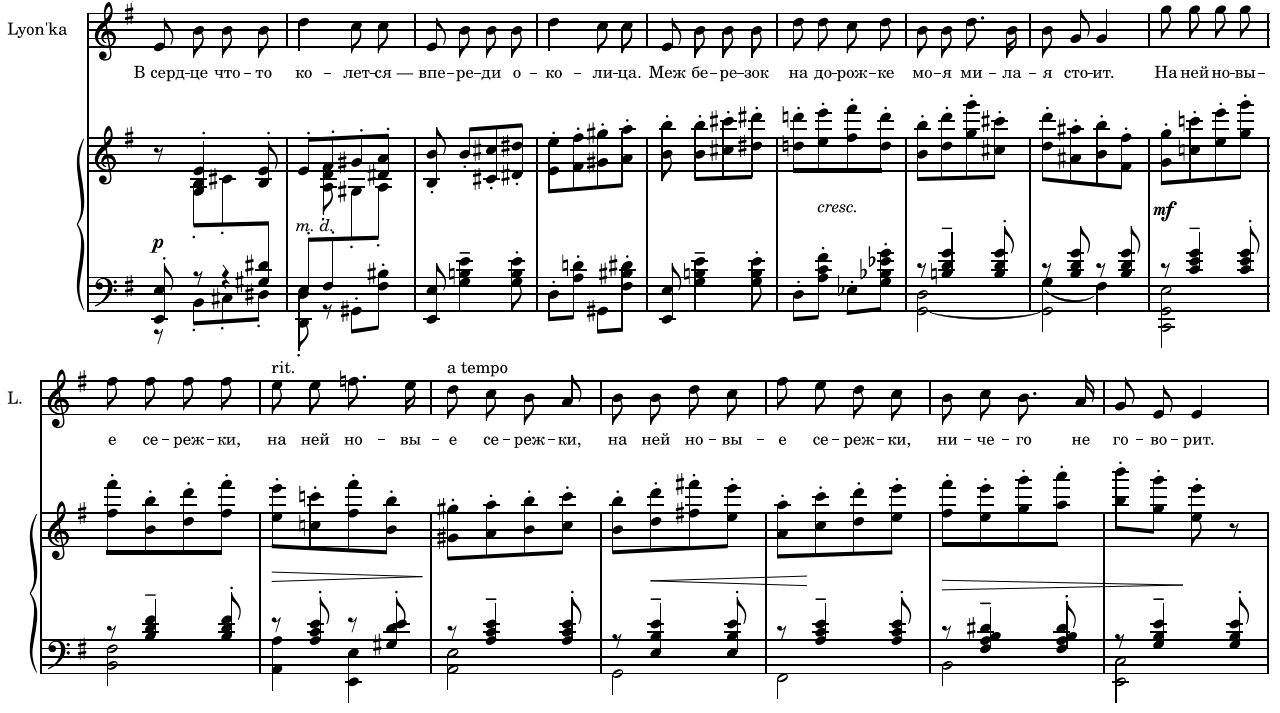
Figure 4. *Into the Storm*, Act IV, Tableau 6, No. 34, "Lyon'ka's Song," bars 614–629, pp. 239–240.

Translation: Lyon'ka: Something pricks the heart. In front of me is the village fence. Between the birches on the path, my dear is standing. She has new earrings on and says nothing.

His trajectory throughout the opera mirrors Lyon'ka's in the sense that he also undergoes a certain transformation that aligns him with the 'right' side of the conflict between Antonov and the Bolsheviks. However, the key distinction between the two lies in the manner in which they experience this enlightenment. As mentioned previously, while Lyon'ka's revolutionary journey can be somewhat unconvincing, Frol contemplates both sides, actively seeking the ultimate truth. This quest leads him to Moscow, where he even confronts Lenin himself. Nonetheless, Frol's repeated emphasis on his search for the truth occasionally verges on the comical, particularly because his companion Andrey also repetitively echoes the same sentiment throughout the opera ("Oh, life is so hard"). Despite this almost caricature-like quality, Frol emerges as the character with the most significant dramatic depth among the three. While Lyon'ka embodies the lyrical principle and Listrat embodies the revolutionary aspect, Frol stands out as the character characterized by the highest degree of dramatic tension. His aria (Act II, No. 19) encapsulates a range of complex emotions, musically surpassing the monotonous and repetitive lyrical cantilena. Equally compelling is his final confrontation with Storozhev, where he demonstrates his readiness to die for the truth he has finally discovered, proclaiming: "You can kill me, but you cannot kill the truth!"[184]

If we begin with the assumption that Soviet opera celebrates flawless Soviet individuals, endowed with the most admirable virtues, comprehending Khrennikov's didactic and pedagogical intentions becomes challenging, particularly if we agree on viewing Lyon'ka as the central figure in the opera's narrative. Khrennikov's depiction of the three male protagonists is unfortunate, primarily due to the plain and uniform musical delineation, though the issues arguably originate from the libretto itself. However, there exists a subset of characters that evade the trap of monotonous and uniform portrayal, intriguingly enough, these are the antagonists.

2.2.3 The Antagonists of the Soviet Operatic Canon

Khrennikov's portrayal of antagonists, Storozhev and Antonov, proves to be significantly more intricate compared to opera's protagonists. However, this phenomenon is hardly surprising, at least within the context of Soviet literature. In fact, as pointed out by Clark, in Stalinist novels villains typically receive a more detailed psychological depiction than heroes.[185] When Antonov finally takes the stage, long-awaited and shrouded in anticipation, and the

184 Khrennikov, *V burю*, p. 228. Original Russian text: Меня убьешь, а правды не убить!

185 Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 187.

audience meets the main villain who was mentioned in terror and kept secretive for almost the whole first half of the opera, the enigmatic figure revealed is not quite as expected. Aleksandr Antonov (1889–1922), a historical figure and a leader of the Tambov rebellion, is portrayed as self-absorbed, unstable, and heavily reliant on kulak Storozhev's guidance. Instead of a looming and menacing presence, he is presented as excessively conceited, bordering on caricature, and his initial appearance does not exude genuine threat or danger. Further supporting this interpretation is Khrennikov's choice of assigned singing voices. Namely, while Listrat is a baritone, and Frol and Storozhev are basses, Antonov, akin to Lyon'ka and Andrey, is a tenor. Notably, musicologist Juliet Forshaw, when talking about the "tenor-dominated operatic traditions of Western Europe," asserts that "western male protagonists are often sympathetic young rebels, typecast as tenors in order to contrast sonically with their older, more politically powerful bass or baritone opponents."[186] Examining Russian operas predating the twentieth century, Forshaw identifies a recurring emphasis on bass characters, further explaining:

> When tenors do appear in central roles, they are rarely heroes […] Instead, they are often seducers, usurpers, megalomaniacs and ineffectual dreamers. In short, they are antiheroes. Yet they also invite our critical attention, because their very marginality hints at the existence of alternative masculinities that militated against the dominant one of the sober family man idealized in the form of bass protagonists.[187]

By following Forshaw's elaboration, which can effectively be applied to Khrennikov's opera as well, and her notion that Russian opera in general maintains "a patronizing view of young men,"[188] a new clarity emerges not only regarding Antonov but also concerning Lyon'ka.

Antonov's introductory monologue (Act II, No. 15) ("I, I alone command the army of the people, I, I alone lead the rebellion")[189] walks a fine line between gravitas and farce due to his persistent emphasis on his own importance, yet it lays a firm foundation for understanding his character. Moreover, his subsequent song in the following scene, notable for its simplicity and devoid of the romantic lyricism seen in Lyon'ka's and Listrat's portrayals,

186 Juliet Forshaw, "Russian Opera Rebels: Fyodor Komissarzhevsky, Nikolai Figner and the Rise of the Tenor Antihero," in: Philip Purvis (ed.), *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and New Musicology*, New York and Oxford 2013, pp. 67–83, here p. 67.

187 Ibid., pp. 67–68.

188 Ibid., p. 68.

189 Khrennikov, *V buri͡u*, p. 119. Original Russian text: Я, я один командую армией народа, я, я один веду вперед восстанье.

becomes one of the most captivating moments from a musical perspective. Appearing on stage with a merry entourage, visibly intoxicated and in high spirits, he delivers a cheerful *chanson pour boire*, or better yet, Khrennikov's take on a popular nineteenth century brindisi (Fig. 5). The song takes on a simple, strophic structure with a choral response. The stark contrast between the clarity and restraint of Khrennikov's music and Antonov's reputation as a greedy, bloodthirsty tyrant generates an almost grotesque effect.

In the second strophe of his song, Antonov continues: "Repentance doesn't suit us, so communist, don't trust the tears. We're immortal, farewell, moonshine is our salve."[190] The same musical theme is employed to introduce Antonov's lover, Kosova—arguably one of the most fortunately constructed characters in the whole opera, both from the musical and the general narrative point of view. The moment she initiates dialogue with Antonov, the theme abruptly shifts from F major to d minor, thus swiftly altering the scene's entire ambiance (Fig. 6). This transition hints at the power of her presence, but also the influence she wields over Antonov, possibly suggesting her malevolence and depravity surpassing even his own.

Antonov and Kosova share a distinctly intricate relationship, best characterized as tumultuous and profoundly abusive at its core. Despite this, Kosova, navigating a perilous war-torn environment as a woman, defies the conventional role of an oppressed victim. She demonstrates a lack of fear seen in others when dealing with Antonov. Their exchange in the same scene arguably stands as the opera's most dramatically intense moment.

> Kosova: No, don't hide your face, look me in the eyes, Stepanych, pour a glass, let's drink together for our agony, for love.
> Antonov: Go away! Leave! I will kill you! (raises his hand against Kosova)
> Kosova: Hit me, Sasha, hit me, you love me, nonetheless. You have no one else left, forever we'll be tied with one string, together we wander, together we will die. Hit me, Sashka, hit me, I am not afraid! I gave everything to you; nobody can separate us now.[191]

The shift in atmosphere that accompanies Kosova's entrance onto the stage serves as Khrennikov's signal for the audience to discern her histrionic and

190 Ibid., p. 123. Original Russian text: Не к лицу нам покаянье, коммунист, не верь слезам. Мы бессмертны, до свиданья, самогонка — наш бальзам.

191 Ibid., pp. 124–126. Original Russian text: Косова: Нет, ты лицо свое не прячь, ты мне в глаза смотри, Степаныч, налейка чашку, вместе выпем за муку нашу, за любовь. Антонов: Прочь! Отойди! Убью! (замахивается на Косову) Косова: Бей, Сашка, бей, все равно полюбишь. Нет у тебя ведь больше никого, навек веревочкой мы связаны одной, гуляем вместе, вместе и умрем. Бей, Сашка, бей, не боюсь! Все отдала тебе, нас разлучить теперь никто не сможет.
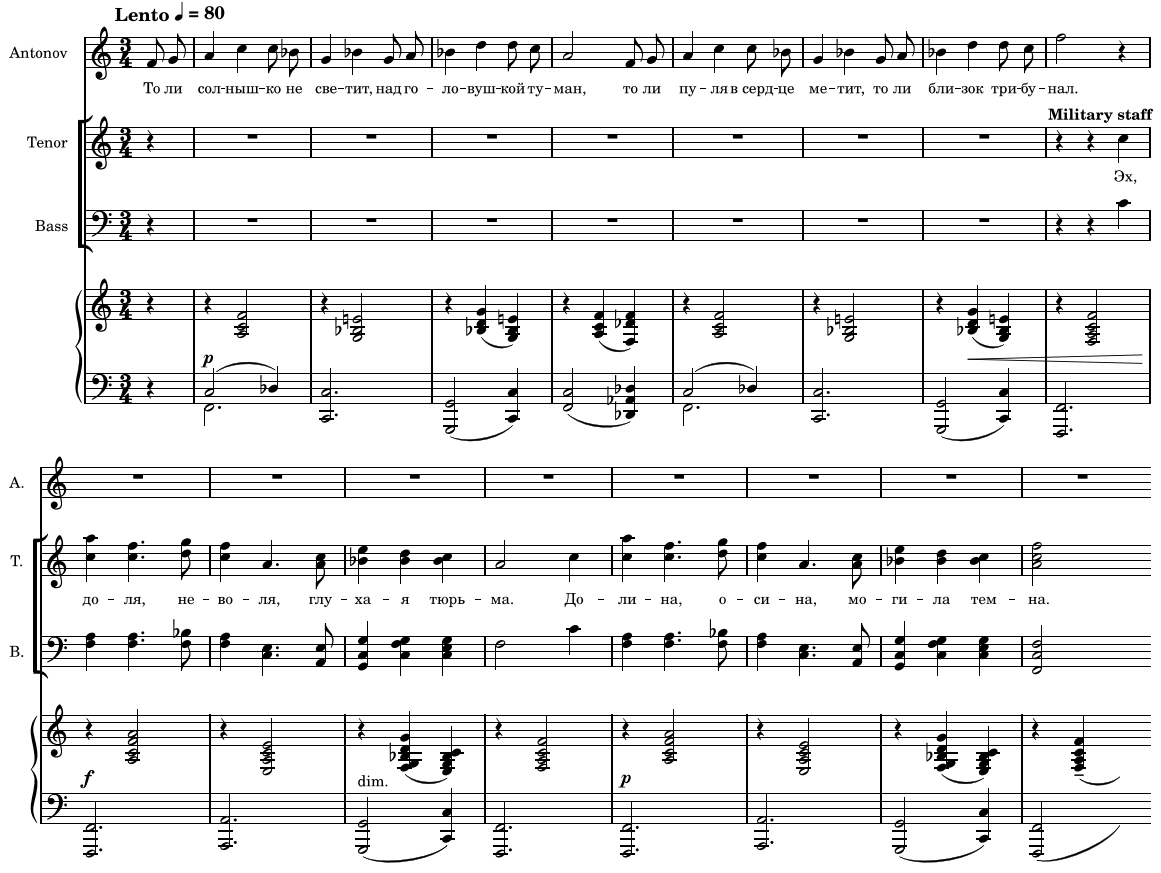
Figure 5. *Into the Storm*, Act II, Tableau 3, No. 16, "Antonov's Song with the Military Staff and Antonov's Scene with Kosova," bars 139–155, pp. 122–123.

Translation: Antonov: Maybe the sun doesn't shine, there is fog over the head, maybe a bullet is aiming at the heart, maybe a tribunal is close. Military staff: Ah, fate, captivity, a deaf prison. The valley, the aspen, the grave is dark.
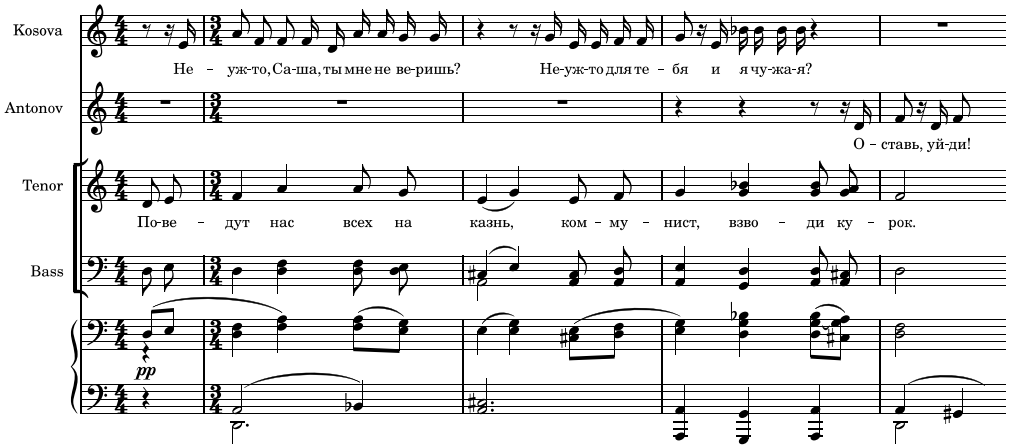
Figure 6. *Into the Storm*, Act II, Tableau 3, No. 16, "Antonov's Song with the Military Staff and Antonov's Scene with Kosova," bars 171–175, p. 124.

Translation: Kosova: Really, Sasha, you don't believe me? Am I also a stranger to you? Antonov: Leave me alone, go away! Choir: They will lead us all to execution, communist, cock the trigger.

exaggerated outpourings of affection. Indeed, while her affectionate communication with Antonov might superficially appear as caring, the music unequivocally reveals it as an intricately constructed manipulation. Although Antonov collapses into Kosova's embrace, trembling and weeping, her musical portrayal distinctly conveys that she is not his weak spot which will eventually serve as a loving healer and a supporter of his journey toward enlightenment and final transformation, a narrative template often visible in story-telling, but quite the opposite. She is the one wielding full control, immediately clear in her intent to employ her power for nefarious purposes. Kosova stands as the pinnacle Soviet antagonist—she embodies the most egregious flaws to an even greater extent than Antonov. Antonov is not the supreme authority everyone perceives him to be—the puppeteer behind him is Storozhev, working in tandem with Kosova, his equal in malicious scheming. In her conversations with Storozhev later in the second act, for instance, she exhibits distinct assertiveness and arrogance, unabashedly turning Antonov against his loyal advisor.

> Kosova: Here he is, a clever fellow, a gray-haired devil; if the power would be mine, I would give you an indefinite leave. (grabs a gun)

> Storozhev: You, Masha, put that toy away. Knocking the soul out of you—that'd be nothing for me.[192]

Within the confines of the rigid dichotomy between good and evil prevalent in art during Stalin's era, Kosova emerges not only as an antagonist, but also as a prime exemplar of a *female* antagonist, an exceedingly uncommon occurrence. In addition to embodying typical antagonist traits seen in both genders, such as a bloodthirsty inclination and manipulative prowess, Kosova also exhibits an array of behaviors that, when demonstrated by a woman, adopt an even more pronounced negative connotation—examples include drinking and coarse language. Furthermore, she serves as a mechanism to unveil the dishonorable and corrupt nature of Antonov and Storozhev. While Khrennikov's virtuous protagonists treat women with the utmost respect and gentleness, as befitting true Soviet heroes, Kosova consistently endures mistreatment from her counterparts.

Needless to say, the antithesis to the corrupted Kosova is the exemplary and pure Natasha. Yet, Natasha defies the conventional role of the damsel in distress passively awaiting her beloved's return from a heroic battle against malevolent forces. Parallel to Kosova, Natasha presents a distinct anomaly in the Stalinist operatic canon—a seemingly fervent and courageous combatant who undoubtedly outshines her sweetheart's revolutionary endeavors. However, is her case truly so unequivocal?

2.2.4 Natasha as the Ultimate Soviet Heroine?

In accordance with the conventions of a Socialist Realist novel, the anticipated hero of *Into the Storm* should logically be Lyon'ka, given that the plot revolves around his transformation into an ardent Bolshevik supporter. A triumphant act of heroism performed by Lyon'ka would neatly compensate for his less-than-convincing revolutionary journey, serving as a conclusive testament to his metamorphosis. However, this is not the case here. Surprisingly, the unexpected heroine of Khrennikov's opera, who shines in both courage and selflessness, at least on the first glance, is none other than Lyon'ka's sweetheart, Natasha. At the outset of the opera, Natasha is presented as the archetypal ingénue—innocent, sweet, and sincere—patiently awaiting her loved one's visit. Initially, neither the libretto nor

192 Ibid., p. 134. Original Russian text: Косова: Вот умник, черт седой, моя бы власть, дала б тебе бессрочный отпуск. (хватается за маузер) Сторожев: Ты, Маша, спрячь игрушку. Мне из тебя душонку выбить — плюнуть.

Khrennikov's music offers any indication that her role will extend beyond that of a devoted maiden.

However, the pivotal shift occurred after Natasha approaches Storozhev, seeking information about the whereabouts of the missing Lyon'ka (Act II, No. 18). At this juncture, Lyon'ka has already aligned himself with the communists, a fact he has kept hidden from Natasha. Here, Storozhev spots an opportunity to sow discord in their relationship and callously deceives her, fabricating a tale that Lyon'ka had departed with another woman. Witnessing Natasha's distress, Storozhev remarks: "Oh, I feel sorry for you, Natal'ya, so sorry, my girl. You are so quiet, gentle, and meek; another girl might not withstand such an affront."[193] Curiously, those words appear to stir her latent strength and concealed courage, igniting the fervor she had contained thus far. She replies: "Am I quiet, gentle, and meek? You do not know me well, Pyotr Ivanïch; you do not know me well!"[194]

As fate would have it, evidence of Natasha's transformation emerges sooner than anticipated. In that same scene, Frol confronts Storozhev and Antonov, openly condemning their mistreatment of the villagers. This sparks their anger, prompting them to order an attack on him. Amidst the lack of intervention for the helpless Frol, a pregnant Natasha seizes a carbine from one of Antonov's supporters and takes aim at Antonov himself, threatening to shoot if they do not release her father. They relent, and Antonov comments wryly: "Well, young girl, well done! She wants to fight, and not milk the cows."[195]

Even though her musical portrayal may be relatively scarce, Natasha's significance within the libretto remains undeniable. In fact, it is Natasha who delivers the decisive blow at the opera's conclusion, vanquishing the primary antagonist and resolving the conflict. Specifically, Storozhev employs a cunning maneuver, deceiving the naive Lyon'ka who had been overseeing his confinement to open the shed's door, thus inadvertently triggering a fight between the two men that allows Storozhev to escape. Undeterred, Natasha seizes a rifle and, despite Lyon'ka's warnings and fervent pleas to desist from her perilous undertaking, embarks on a pursuit of Storozhev. In a remarkable turn of events, she eventually triumphs over him, delivering the fatal blow that rescues the entire village from imminent danger.

193 Ibid., pp. 143–144. Original Russian text: Эх, жалько мне тебя, Наталья, жалько, девка, тиха ты, безответна и кротка, другая бы такой обиды не стерпела.

194 Ibid., p. 144. Original Russian text: Тиха я, безответна и кротка? Ты плохо меня знаешь, Петр Иваныч, плохо знаешь!

195 Ibid., pp. 153–154. Original Russian text: Ну, девка, молодец! Ей воевать, а не коров доить.

Khrennikov's portrayal of Natasha becomes even more intriguing when we consider the already mentioned differences between the operatic version of her character and the one found in Virta's novel. In Virta's work, Natasha is relegated to the role of a stereotypical innocent romantic interest for the protagonist, her character stripped of complexity (not to mention the deviation where, in a state of hysteria, she kills a Red Army soldier). Naturally, we are prompted to question the purpose and significance of operatic Natasha's agency within the broader context of Soviet 1930s history and arts.

A potential insight into Natasha's courageous transformation might be found when examining the urgency to reeducate the female Soviet audience and guide them away from perceived 'backwardness.' Namely, the struggle against perceived female 'backwardness' was a continuous theme in Soviet literature. In an analysis of female characters of the Stalinist era, historian Tarik Cyril Amar pieces together the Stalinist female heroine archetype. He remarks:

> Women had a special place in the Soviet imagination of backwardness and a socialist modernity [...]: overcoming their ascribed backwardness—construed as gender-specific and socially constructed and thus transformable—was seen as proof of modernization success. [...] Women were also regarded as constituting a special problem and danger: their particular backwardness had to be addressed so that it would not contaminate Soviet modernity through their influence on men and children and in work processes and controlled forms of social activism that they were supposed to join.[196]

As explained by sociologist Victoria Bonnell, within early Soviet political poster art, the female peasants were frequently depicted in an almost caricatured manner, often referred to as *baba*, a derogatory Russian term meaning woman, old woman, or a peasant woman,[197] in the given context. However, the approach artists took toward the pressing issue of specifically peasant women underwent a dramatic transformation in the 1930s:

> A radical break with this imagery and pattern of association does not come until 1930, when the drive for crash collectivization got fully under way. Only then did Soviet artists generate an entirely new and unambiguously heroic representation of women in the countryside: the picture of the

196 Tarik Cyril Amar, "Reframing Sovietization: Sovietization with a Woman's Face: Gender and the Social Imaginary of Sovietness in Western Ukraine," in: *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 64/3 (2016), pp. 363–390, here p. 368.

197 For more on the *baba* archetype in Soviet narratives, see Valentina Zaitseva, "National, Cultural, and Gender Identity in the Russian Language," in: Helena Goscilo and Andrea Lanoux (eds.), *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture*, DeKalb, IL 2006, pp. 30–54, here p. 34.

> young, aggressive, energetic and hardworking collective farm woman, with understated breasts and slender appearance, leading fellow peasants on the road to collectivization. In short, the very opposite of the *baba*.[198]

According to historian Orlando Figes, the widespread notion that the Russian peasantry was inherently deeply monarchist, thus posing an obstacle to achieving the revolutionary goals, is one of the most durable myths permeating the Soviet narratives, if not Russian history in general.[199] This likely heightened the allure of the artistic depiction of peasants' metamorphosis. As explained by historian of gender in Soviet Union Barbara Evans Clements, while the villagers can generally be characterized as skeptical towards the Bolsheviks, women in particular were acutely concerned about the rapidly changing society. Only a small minority embraced the Revolution from the outset. Women comprehended that meddling with the status quo entailed certain risks, and their rejection of communist ideas wasn't solely a result of their political illiteracy—they were also considering their best interests.[200]

While the libretto unfolds against the backdrop of rural Soviet Russia during 1920–1921, it is crucial to note once again that Virta's novel was published in 1935, and Khrennikov embarked on composing his opera in 1936. This timeframe perhaps holds significant relevance when attempting to decipher Natasha's character and her broader significance. Rather than being disregarded, the opera's placement in the mid-1930s and an examination of the historical events of that era could potentially unlock a deeper comprehension of Natasha's agency. As explained by gender historian Liubov Denisova, amid the collectivization and dekulakization processes peasant women openly voiced their disagreements and protested against the Soviet authorities. In the first half of the 1930s, more than a third of anti-Soviet demonstrations exclusively featured female participants, while in others, women constituted a significant or even majority portion of the protesters.[201] As the 1930s progressed, female resistance in rural areas gained even more momentum:

198 Victoria E. Bonnell, "The Representation of Women in Early Soviet Political Art," in: *The Russian Review* 50/3 (1991), pp. 267–288, here pp. 286–287.

199 Orlando Figes, "The Russian Revolution of 1917 and Its Language in the Village," in: *The Russian Review* 56/3 (1997), pp. 323–345, here p. 331.

200 Barbara Evans Clements, "Working-Class and Peasant Women in the Russian Revolution, 1917–1923," in: *Signs* 8/2 (1982), pp. 215–235.

201 Liubov Denisova, "The Daily Life of Russian Peasant Women," in: Melanie Ilic (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, London 2018, pp. 149–166, here p. 150.

> Women's riots' were the most effective form of resistance in the countryside. Peasant women defended their interests, demonstrating a significant level of organisation and conscious political opposition. […] Crowds of women deflected brigades of grain collectors, held up the carts carrying grain confiscated from the village, freed those who had been arrested, watched over houses where property was subject to confiscation, smashed up the offices of the village soviet, burnt documents and even beat up local activists.[202]

Denisova notes that the Soviet authorities swiftly recognized their inability to execute collectivization in the face of resistance from rural women. Upon realizing that poverty was the chief catalyst for this defiance, they resorted to a straightforward strategy of pitting the women against the affluent villagers. This tactic led to the establishment of Committees of Poor Peasants. Consequently, the economically motivated activism of peasant women took a turn as they were directed against the well-off villagers who opposed collectivization. Another government response to quell the unrest was the elevation of women's status and their inclusion in kolkhoz administration, effectively placing them on par with men.[203]

Nonetheless, the concerns of peasant women extended beyond mere poverty. An additional apprehension carried a more ethereal essence, intertwined with religion and morality. As explained by Evans Clements, villagers were apprehensive that female emancipation could jeopardize the very fabric of village existence. Importantly, this anxiety was not restricted to the male populace alone. Peasant women comprehended that securing a union with a diligent man was vital for their survival, representing the sole avenue towards attaining a respected standing within the community.[204]

> The Bolshevik party was committed, at least on paper, to the root-and-branch destruction of the patriarchal structure of the peasant family, Orthodox Christianity, and private land ownership—in short, to the abolition of the traditional village. The peasant women who criticized the revolutionaries may have understood few of the specifics of the Bolshevik program, but their hostility indicates that they grasped, or at least suspected, the ultimate purpose.[205]

Placing Natasha's agency within this historical paradigm and painting it as "didactic" proves somewhat challenging, primarily due to the inherent

202 Ibid.
203 Ibid., p. 151.
204 Evans Clements, "Working-Class and Peasant Women," p. 217.
205 Ibid., p. 220.

conjectural nature of such an endeavor. As appealing as this line of reasoning might appear, it is important to note the absence of any definitive account provided by Khrennikov, Fayko, or Virta. Such an account could have shed light on reshaping her character to construct an enlightening narrative for the contemporary female audience engaging with the opera during a period marked by significant female uprisings. Another potential explanation for Khrennikov's choice to convert literary Natasha, beyond 'correcting' Natasha's backwardness, or using her as a didactic tool to reeducate the rebelling female audience, goes hand in hand with trends observed on the operatic scene at the time. Namely, we should also take into account the trend of transposition, as explained by Bullock, and turning existing novels into simplified Stalinist libretti, removing any layers of ambiguity from the original novel. As noted by Bullock, "the reduction of meaning and form inherent in any transposition may in fact have been an advantage, as the resulting clarity and accessibility of imagery was exactly what guaranteed the successful elimination of ambiguity, a key goal of socialist realism in the 1930s."[206] Because indeed, how could Lyon'ka, a Soviet 'hero,' be associated with an 'ambiguous' woman who, blinded by rage, strangled a Red Army Soldier? Perhaps her acts of bravery, combined with the erasure of her 'sin,' served merely to liberate Natasha from any form of 'Soviet' ambivalence, cementing her on the correct side of the conflict.

Moreover, it becomes challenging to overlook the underlying motivation behind Natasha's acts of courage. Is her zeal genuinely revolutionary in its core? A crucial nuance exists that sets Natasha apart from the ranks of real-life female activists and protestors of the 1930s, and that distinction lies in her intent and the nature of her agency. Ultimately, Natasha's battle is not for the communist Goal or against kulaks; rather, it is against those who jeopardize her family's well-being. She seizes a rifle and pursues Storozhev to avenge Frol and safeguard her newborn, not due to his threat to the new regime. Natasha's agency does not stem from political or ideological convictions, as is the case with figures like Listrat and her father Frol in his pursuit of Truth. Instead, it emanates from a deeply personal and instinctual realm. While Frol's and Listrat's agency is marked by rational pragmatism, Natasha's is driven by irrationality and emotions. This might explain why her heroism goes largely unnoticed and remains far from celebrated. As asserted by Redepenning, "Natasha kills the kulak Storozhev, not because of his class affiliation or because he is an exploiter, but because he has severely deceived her. Her actions stem from personal motives of revenge […]

206 Bullock, "Staging Stalinism," p. 101.

Natasha is not a heroine; instead, she's a naive egoist who, due to misunderstanding, ends up taking on a heroic stature."[207]

The insertion of a female character into a traditionally male role was extensively avoided due to perceptions of it being both ridiculous and unnatural. However, in this specific instance, this approach succeeded precisely because of the intent woven into Natasha's character. At this juncture, envisioning Natasha claiming victory over the enemy, thereby exposing the inefficacy and inadequacy of her male counterpart, is indeed challenging. Her impulsive act of bravery turned out to be a fortunate circumstance that ultimately led to the male's triumph over the enemy. It is important to note that Natasha's support was not swayed by her grasp of the intricate web of political connotations; rather, it resulted from her emulation of the conclusions and transformations she primarily observed in Lyon'ka. In the context of analyzing Soviet literary discourse and its portrayal of female characters, Amar asserts that

> there is no way for a woman to learn and grow except guided, challenged, and inspired by men, not women. […] Even women depicted as overcoming former limitations, deceptions, and self-deceptions in an exemplary manner remained tethered not only to assistance but leadership and inspiration from males.[208]

It can be reasonably assumed that the transition of women from a state of backwardness to socialist modernity was commendable on its own, without necessitating the inclusion of stereotypical heroic acts, which were typically reserved for male protagonists. During the Stalin era, female individuals were not expected to embody the aggressive revolutionary archetype, as their central role, as argued by Galili, primarily revolved around motherhood and their chief responsibility lay with their families.[209] Ultimately, it was the men who received commendations for their bravery in warfare, while women were celebrated for their contribution through childbearing.[210] While Natasha unquestionably went to great lengths to fulfill her familial obligations, attributing her agency solely to political motivation would be a stretch, to say the least. The apparent intensity of her revolutionary spirit is likely a consequence of the glaring absence of such fervor in Lyon'ka. This apparent imbalance is possibly not an outcome of any

207 Redepenning, *Geschichte der russischen und der sowjetischen Musik*, vol. 2, p. 389.
208 Amar, "Reframing Sovietization: Sovietization with a Woman's Face," p. 386.
209 Galili, "Women and the Russian Revolution," p. 123.
210 See, for instance, K. B. Usha, "Political Empowerment of Women in Soviet Union and Russia: Ideology and Implementation," in: *International Studies* 42/2 (2005), pp. 141–165, here p. 149.

deliberate artistic or political intent but rather a result of an inadequate libretto and less than convincing musical portrayals.

2.3 Sergey Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko* (1940)

Russian composers of the beginning of the twentieth century maintained strong connections with the West, embracing the swiftly evolving array of new musical idioms and means of expression. Among the most remarkable artistic figures to emerge from this milieu was undoubtedly Sergey Prokofiev, whose body of work secured him a place in the pantheon of the greatest composers in the history of music. The revolutionary upheaval influenced his decision to depart from the Soviet Union in 1918 and settle abroad. Nevertheless, he never cut off ties with his homeland, quite the opposite. He made relatively frequent trips to the USSR, and in 1932, he was even appointed as a consulting professor at the Moscow Conservatoire. It was in 1936 that Prokofiev opted to return to the USSR after nearly two decades of residing and working successively in the United States, Germany, and France.

The rationale behind Prokofiev's return is complex, to say the least. His decision was not prompted by a noble sense of patriotism but rather seemed to stem from purely economic point of view. As explained by Hakobian, the late 1920s and early 1930s witnessed a waning interest from audiences in his art, which ultimately led him to move with his family to Moscow. Furthermore, Prokofiev believed that within the USSR, he could further his artistic endeavors more successfully. He held onto the connections he had maintained with his native land while living abroad, hoping they would ensure him artistic autonomy.[211] According to Morrison, "the regime needed celebrities" and lured Prokofiev back to the USSR by guaranteeing his international career would continue, with Moscow merely replacing Paris as his base.[212] Naturally, this relocation came at a certain cost, and like many other composers of his time, Prokofiev experienced continual artistic surveillance and censorship. "He sought to influence Soviet cultural policy, but instead it influenced him."[213]

The extent to which Prokofiev comprehended the artistic and, more significantly, the political climate upon his return remains a subject of inquiry. His physical absence and the partial information vacuum spanned nearly 20 years. Not just any 20 years—he departed the country in 1918,

211 Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era*, pp. 119–121.
212 Morrison, *The People's Artist*, p. 3.
213 Ibid., p. 2.

immediately following the preceding year's Revolution, and he returned at the outset of Stalin's Great Terror. Certain scholarly accounts even propose that Prokofiev may have been, in fact, deceived, with contacts from his homeland downplaying the political reality facing the nation.[214] His purported nonchalance towards the tumultuous Soviet political environment often serves as a motif to depict him as politically naive. Whether accurate or not, this does not negate the fact that Prokofiev eventually became acutely aware that adhering to the prevailing artistic doctrine was a necessary condition, inevitably resulting in his artistic expression being curtailed under Soviet censorship.[215]

His first opera on a Soviet topic, *Semyon Kotko*, first premiered on June 23, 1940, aimed to serve as the ultimate response to the challenging circumstances the composer found himself in. Simultaneously, as explained by Morrison, it was meant to substantiate his allegiance to both the regime and the method of Socialist Realism.[216] For the basis of his 'rehabilitation opera,' Prokofiev used writer Valentin Katayev's (1897–1986) 1937 short novel *Ya — sïn trudovogo naroda* (*I, Son of Working People*), with the libretto being a product of their mutual collaboration.[217]

The plot of the libretto takes place in a Ukrainian village in 1918 and starts with young Semyon Kotko's (tenor) return home after four years of fighting in the war. He is welcomed as a hero by the whole village, including his sister Frosya (mezzo-soprano) and his mother (mezzo-soprano), who are especially excited by Semyon's homecoming. He is looking forward to resuming a regular village life and marrying his sweetheart Sof'ya (soprano). However, the village faces a threat from the lingering German troops and

214 Ibid.

215 According to Morrison, "while he attempted to write along official lines, seeking patriotic subjects and abandoning the compositional practices that had earned him notoriety abroad, his music nonetheless angered government officials. And despite a conscious simplification of harmony and melody, Soviet scholars objected to Prokofiev's (so-called) 'expressionist' musical language. This stylistic 'defect' was in some cases equated with a lack of commitment to the evolution of socialism." Simon Morrison, "Sergei Prokofiev's Semyon Kotko as a representative example of Socialist Realism," PhD diss., McGill University 1992, p. 7.

216 Morrison, *The People's Artist*, p. 90.

217 Katayev has indelibly imprinted Soviet literature, especially through his early post-Revolutionary body of work. Within this period, he delved into the everyday lives of Soviet people, often accompanied by a satirical undertone. See Struve, *Soviet Russian Literature*, pp. 147–148. However, his 1937 novelette, which drew from his own experiences during the Civil War, garnered limited attention from literary scholars and failed to overcome the success he experienced with his earlier work, with literary historian Gleb Struve calling it "of little interest." Ibid., p. 277.

their allies. Sof'ya's reactionary father, Tkachenko (bass), covertly supports the aggressors and seizes the opportunity to elevate his standing in the new order. Despite Sof'ya's mother, Khivrya (mezzo-soprano), supporting her daughter's marriage plans, Tkachenko opposes her union with Semyon. As the foreigners, aided by local haydamaks and Tkachenko himself, encroach upon the village, Semyon and Mikola (tenor), Frosya's love interest, flee to avoid murder. Tragedy unfolds as old man Ivasenko (bass) and sailor Tsaryov (baritone) are killed, and the haydamaks ignite a fire in the village. Tsaryov's fiancée, Lyubka (soprano), is consumed by grief, and mass hysteria engulfs the village. Sof'ya is forced into engagement with her father's laborer, who is revealed to be Klembovsky (tenor), the cavalry staff captain of the former imperial Russian army. His family's estate was redistributed during the process of collectivization, much to Tkachenko's displeasure. After several months pass, Frosya locates her brother and notifies him of the dire circumstances in the village, including Sof'ya's coerced engagement. The ostracized villagers form a partisan unit and successfully counterattack, liberating their village and resulting in the defeat of the enemy.[218]

The prototypical and highly predictable plotline encompasses all the traditional narrative elements one would anticipate from a classic opera—a strong and brave young man, embodying the most commendable virtues; his exquisite and delicate love interest in distress, requiring salvation; and the adversary obstructing their path to happiness. Infusing this ostensibly universal plot with a discernible 'Soviet coloring' in a relatively straightforward manner renders Katayev's and Prokofiev's libretto a quintessential example of the crudest and most elementary approach to embedding dense ideology within an already familiar and well-established narrative framework. To bestow didactic significance and a Socialist Realist essence upon the plot, minor adjustments were made. For instance, Semyon was not merely a simple and kind-hearted village dweller; he also aligned himself with the Bolshevik revolution and its values. The conventional confrontation of good versus evil unfolds through the rivalry between Semyon, a representative of the young generation symbolizing revolutionary ideals, and Tkachenko, a kulak who opposes the Revolution and collaborates with foreign nemesis, a literal embodiment of multiple forms of enmity toward the new regime.

However, despite the ideologically fitting libretto, grounded in a novel by a respected Soviet writer, the opera encountered early rejection and vanished from operatic stages for nearly two decades.[219] What transpired to

218 See Sergeĭ Prokof'ev, *Semën Kotko. Opera v pi͡ati deĭstvii͡akh. Libretto V. Kataeva i S. Prokof'eva. Po povesti V. Kataeva "I͡A syn trudovogo naroda,"* Moscow 1960.

219 See Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 146.

prevent Prokofiev's inaugural Soviet opera from anticipated success, and why did its protagonist evolve into a significant impediment in Prokofiev's pursuit of Socialist Realism and the opera's fate in general?

2.3.1 The Unfulfilled Craving for a New Operatic Revolutionary

Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko* premiered almost simultaneously as Khrennikov's *Into the Storm*, which was elaborated upon in the previous chapter. The coincidental timing caused the two operas to be opposed to each other, oftentimes at the expense of Prokofiev's work, that got critiqued for its complex musical conception.[220] Despite receiving highly polarized reviews and welcomings to the operatic scene, the two operas share certain common characteristics. Thus, the relentless comparison cannot be deemed entirely baseless. Specifically, not only did they debut around the same time, but their libretti are anchored in a similar temporal and spatial setting. Furthermore, both plotlines revolve around young romantic couples facing numerous obstacles and hardships on their journey towards achieving ultimate happiness. In Prokofiev's opera those are Semyon Kotko and Sof'ya and in Khrennikov's Lyon'ka and Natasha. In both cases, the main male protagonists are associated with pro-revolutionary and partisan forces, while the antagonists represent the old order that must be dismantled.

However, Prokofiev took a different path in creating the musical setting for his Soviet opera and thus offered an alternative solution to the 'operatic crisis' that emerged in the second half of the 1930s. While Katayev envisioned an opera with songs and dances, Prokofiev sought his own particular dramatic solution. Not only did he adopt a distinct approach to developing the elements of the operatic dramaturgy, as noted by Tarakanov,[221] but the overall flavor of the opera is substantially different, with, as explained by Morrison, Prokofiev's declamatory style standing in stark contrast to Krennikov's cantilena style.[222] Furthermore, Taruskin asserts that Prokofiev maintained the belief that operatic action should be dynamic and uninterrupted, and traditional numbered formats and static musical interludes on stage hindered achieving this objective.[223] As written by Hakobian, Prokofiev continuously demonstrated a distinct affinity for prose text, resulting in melodious recitativo assuming a principal role in vocal expression in his

220 See ibid.
221 Tarakanov, "Opera 20-kh i 30-kh godov," p. 355.
222 Morrison, "Sergei Prokofiev's Semyon Kotko," p. 23.
223 Taruskin, *On Russian Music*, p. 252.

operas.[224] On the contrary, Tarakanov highlights the song's continued significance as a foundation for *Semyon Kotko*, though admits that it lacks the strong strophic orientation evident in the song operas of the time.[225] Although Hakobian's general conclusion likely aligns more accurately with Prokofiev's musical idiom, Semyon's simple introductory melody in the first scene of the first act substantiates Tarakanov's assertion (Fig. 7).

Semyon's musical portrayal revolves around conveying his cheerful and kindhearted nature, reflecting a character whose primary concern isn't the grand clash between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces, but rather his own personal happiness. The plot makes it evident that the revolutionary turmoil is merely an unfortunate obstacle in his path towards achieving marital bliss with Sof'ya, and it is precisely her that stands as the catalyst for all of his revolutionary activity. Furthermore, Prokofiev's music equally underscores his lack of revolutionary agency. His most poignant musical moments undoubtedly occur during his romantic duets with Sof'ya. Another noteworthy example is his emotionally charged farewell song as he departs the village under the threat of death from the eleventh scene of the third act. These instances further solidify the concept of him as a lyrical protagonist, rather than a revolutionary hero. This perspective was not lost on contemporary critics either, as they perceived his portrayal as deeply problematic. The opera's narrative structure, despite depicting revolutionary events, also garnered a rather negative evaluation. In his comprehensive analysis written for *Sovetskaya muzïka*, Soviet musicologist Izrail' Nest'yev concludes:

> And yet… Prokofiev's new opera remains a contentious work on multiple fronts. Numerous unfortunate missteps hinder its recognition as a definitive Soviet operatic masterpiece, a status it undeniably had the potential to attain. […] Even more disconcerting is the opera's primary ideological focus, which turns out to be notably restricted and confined. Despite selecting a narrative set in the epoch of the world's most monumental socialist revolution, a narrative that portrays the archetypal biography of a heroic combatant from the civil war, the creators chose to present it in the form of a *lyrical melodrama*. The opera neither showcases a grand *hero*, a bearer of lofty revolutionary ideals and emotions, nor does it present a convincingly generalized representation of the revolutionary *people*. The aspiration of a Soviet audience for a genuinely heroic operatic portrayal, one aligned with the lofty ambitions of Soviet operatic art, once again remains unrealized.[226]

224 Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era*, p. 125.

225 Tarakanov, "Opera 20-kh i 30-kh godov," pp. 357–358.

226 Izrail' Nest'ev, "'Semën Kotko' S. Prokof'eva," in: *Sovetskaīā muzyka* 9 (1940), pp. 7–26, here pp. 24–25. Original Russian text: И тем не менее… новая опера Прокофьева — произведение во многом спорное. Целый ряд досадных
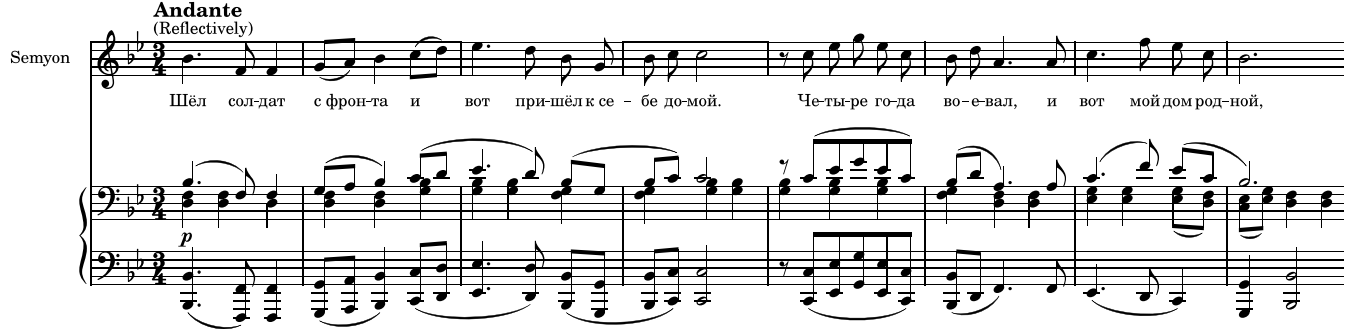
Figure 7. *Semyon Kotko*, Act I, Tableau 1, Scene 1 (Semyon approaches his native hut), rehearsal mark 7, p. 7.

Translation: Semyon: (reflectively) A soldier returned from the front and now he returned to his home. I was fighting for four years and now here's my native home.

Notably, in a footnote to his text, Nest'yev points out that Khrennikov's *Into the Storm* encounters a similar "heroic" deficit akin to that of *Semyon Kotko*.[227] While Nest'yev's critique offers a valuable resource for elucidating the ideology underpinning the creation of an authentic Socialist Realist Soviet opera, it also substantiates a collective paradigm shift concerning the portrayal of the Soviet operatic protagonist going beyond his heroic portrayal. Following a brief era marked by the prevalence of the song-driven opera and a formulaic embodiment of a faultless hero, the Soviet audience and music scholars seemingly began to yearn for a multifaceted operatic revolutionary. However, *Semyon Kotko* fell short in fulfilling this emergent aspiration. Later in his text, Nest'yev raises his concern regarding the portrayal of the titular protagonist in following way: "Similarly to the masses of people within the opera, who lacked sufficiently comprehensive and profound characterizations, the main character, Semyon Kotko, also emerged as overly one-dimensional, lacking vibrancy and a requisite level of universality."[228] When delving into additional contemporary accounts, it becomes apparent that Prokofiev's representation of Semyon was in fact the cardinal misstep he made while crafting his opera.

For example, Nest'yev's contemporary, Iosif Rïzhkin, concedes that no opera from that era comes close to the musical quality exhibited in *Semyon Kotko*.[229] However, he highlights the unfortunate portrayal of the main hero and identifies this tendency in other Soviet operas as well, notably referencing Khrennikov's operatic debut.[230] Another contemporary voice, Nikolay Panchekhin, similarly critiques the relatively lackluster lineage of

промахов не позволяет признать ее классическим советским оперным произведением, каким она несомненно могла бы быть. […] Еще более досадно то, что основная идейная направленность оперы оказалась суженной, ограниченной. Избрав сюжет из эпохи величайшей в мире социалистической революции, сюжет, рисующий типическую биографию бойца-героя гражданской войны, — авторы разрешили его в основном плане лирической мелодрамы. Ни большого героя, носителя высоких революционных идей и чувств, ни убедительного обобщенного образа революционного народа опера не показывает. Мечтсоветского слушателя о настоящем героическом оперном образе, соответствующем большим стремлениям советского оперного искусства, — и на этот раз остается нереализованной.

227 Ibid., p. 24.

228 Ibid., p. 25. Original Russian text: Точно так же как народные массы в опере не получили достаточно полной и глубокой характеристики, так и главный герой — Семен Котко — оказался слишком одноцветным, бледным, недостаточно обобщенным.

229 Iosif Ryzhkin, "O razvitii sovetskoĭ opery," in: *Sovetskaīā muzyka* 11 (1940), pp. 49–57, here p. 56.

230 Ibid., p. 51.

contemporary Soviet operatic heroes, asserting that "these are not heroes of the revolution, but rather rudimentary artisans mimicking revolutionaries. There is nothing more challenging for an actor than embodying such a 'positive hero,' familiar to the audience even before the curtain rises."[231] He goes on to elaborate:

> I recall the words of K. S. Stanislavsky: "When you want to play a good character, by all means, search for where he is evil." Remenyuk and Semyon Kotko are overly straightforward; from the very beginning to the end, they are affixed with the label: "see, I am a virtuous hero." I fail to discern their human complexities—instances of vulnerability, bewilderment, and genuine joy in living. They come across as one-dimensional, akin to most of the virtuous figures in Soviet opera. Individuals with fervent passions inherently carry contradictions. […] The heroic figures of Soviet opera lack the breadth of emotional subtleties. They exhibit a monotonous quality; there is an absence of the interplay between darkness and light, the seamless shifts from brightness to obscurity. In other words, they lack the enigmatic essence that underscores the genuine theatricality of Shakespearean characters.[232]

Furthermore, within his text, Nest'yev introduces another intriguing perspective—that of aligning Prokofiev's opera with the genre of melodrama. While musicologist Nathan Seinen already offered a valuable exploration of the distinctive link between Prokofiev's composition and the melodrama genre,[233] I contend that by broadening his analytical framework, we can unearth more insights concerning the linearity and predictability of the

231 Nikolaĭ Panchekhin, "Nit' pravdy," in: *Sovetskaīa muzyka* 10 (1940), pp. 27–29, here p. 28. Original Russian text: Это не герои революции, а довольно примитивные ремесленники, изображающие революционеров. Нет ничего труднее для актера, чем играть такого «положительного героя», хорошо знакомого зрителю еще до поднятия занавеса.

232 Ibid. Original Russian text: Вспоминаются слова К. С. Станиславского: «Когда хочешь играть доброго, ищи непременно, где он злой». Ременюк и Семен Котко слишком прямолинейны; к ним с самого начала и до конца приклеен ярлык: «смотрите, я положительный герой». Я не вижу у них человеческих переживаний — моментов слабости, растерянности, живой радости. Они резонерствуют, как и почти все положительные герои советской оперы. Люди больших страстей противоречивы. […] Этого богатства душевных нюансов лишены положительные герои советской оперы. Они — одноцветны; в них нет сопоставления черного и белого, нет незаметных переходов от света к тени, т. е. нет того, что составляет секрет правдивой театральности шекспировских героев.

233 Nathan Seinen, "Prokofiev's 'Semyon Kotko' and the Melodrama of High Stalinism," in *COJ* 21/3 (2009), pp. 203–236.

titular protagonist. Moreover, this approach could shed greater light on the overarching question of this study—the inquiry into gender portrayal.

2.3.2 *Semyon Kotko* as a Melodrama

Seinen proposes that it is precisely the classical melodrama of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as codified by French playwright René-Charles Guilbert de Pixerécourt (1773–1844), that serves as the foundation for Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko*.[234] As he elucidates, "rapid action, flexibility of declamation and sharply etched caricature—all characteristics of Prokofiev's operas—tally with a plot featuring stock characters within an abstract moral conflict, and a dramatic structure combining catastrophe with comic relief."[235] This alignment linked his work not only with the central tradition of Russian opera but also with the modernist theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940),[236] a figure instrumental in staging *Semyon Kotko* who ultimately became a victim of the Great Purge.

However, even though this genre affiliation might seem regressive at first glance, at least from the perspective of the contemporary opera project, Seinen highlights the remarkable suitability of melodrama within the framework of High Stalinist narratives. Specifically, the arts administration sought a form that could "project ideology with the greatest expressive force," and melodrama proved to be a potent mechanism for eliciting the desired compelling emotional resonance and an "essential ingredient in the promotion of the moral absolutes of the Stalinist state."[237] The ideological potential of melodrama resides precisely in its simplicity and predictability. The amalgamation of established and well-recognized narrative mechanisms, anchored in an array of steadfast conventions, along with an unambiguous ideological charge, form an exceptionally effective ideological and didactic strategy.

When addressing Soviet melodrama specifically, historian Lars Lih asserts that "melodrama is not just a way of popularizing a political outlook: it *is* a political outlook." Lih argues that Soviet playwrights' dramas are not merely representations of political doctrine, but artistic articulations of the same myths that provided impetus to the political doctrine itself.[238]

234 Ibid., p. 204.
235 Ibid., p. 206.
236 Ibid., p. 204.
237 Ibid.
238 Lars T. Lih, "Melodrama and the Myth of the Soviet Union," in: Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger (eds.), *Imitations of Life. Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia*, Durham and London 2002, pp. 178–207, here pp. 202–203.

Historians Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger affirm that melodrama in Russia stood as an "alternative to the old intelligentsia's valorization of reason, propriety, and public and political commitment" and "offered its audiences a world of feeling, sensation, and private moral dilemmas."[239] However, this does not imply that melodrama existed in isolation from the tangible world characterized by genuine societal shifts and upheavals. In fact, melodrama's interaction with contemporary social matters stands as one of its fundamental attributes.[240] This is elaborated further:

> In every age, setting, and medium, melodrama explored the social issues that preoccupied its audiences and offered models of behavior for changing times. Both before and after 1917, as shifting lines between private and public were being drawn and the public invasion of the private was being justified on new ideological, economic, and political grounds, melodrama helped people negotiate new boundaries in social life.[241]

Delving deeper into the essence of melodrama is of imperative importance, given that the term oftentimes evokes different connotations and interpretations. The hallmarks of conventional melodrama are undeniably abundant. According to Seinen, they encompass the confrontation between righteousness and malevolence, instances of astonishment, interludes of humor, coincidences, eleventh-hour turnarounds, unveilings, daring escapes, heroic rescues, and, as anticipated, a happy ending, just to enumerate a few.[242] These attributes find substantial presence within nineteenth century opera too, which has assimilated numerous melodramatic conventions. However, Seinen posits that *Semyon Kotko* bears an even closer resemblance to the original melodramatic form than the average classic opera, not just due to its "rapid pace and immediacy of its action," but also for the music which "defines character, supports dialogue, doubles gesture, and underlines shocks and emotional cruces, reinforcing stock roles and straightforward conflicts rather than representing unconscious experience or moral ambivalence."[243]

As per the perspectives of literary theorist Peter Brooks, the adjective 'melodramatic' refers to the extravagance of representation, intensity of

239 Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger, "Introduction," in: Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger (eds.), *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia*, Durham, NC and London 2002, pp. 1–24, here p. 3.

240 Ibid., p. 9.

241 Ibid., p. 3.

242 Seinen, "Prokofiev's 'Semyon Kotko'," p. 220.

243 Ibid.

moral claim, heightened and hyperbolic drama, referencing "pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation."[244] The essence of melodrama resides in its manichaeistic struggle of good and evil, and the very existence of their conflict "suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order."[245] As Brooks explains further, "melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue."[246] With its purpose of "proving the existence of a moral universe," melodrama actually derives from a world "where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern."[247] The melodramatic plot adheres to specific conventions, a stable formula: typically, the narrative is introduced through the lens of virtue. However, this status quo is disrupted by the unforeseen intrusion of the antagonist, who may be temporarily expelled but inevitably returns to triumph because the hero's virtue has not yet been fully proven. Nevertheless, following the villain's resurgence and apparent triumph over the forces of good, the plot's trajectory once again takes a twist, culminating in the ultimate victory of virtue.[248]

The 'melodramatic good' of Prokofiev's opera, the revolutionary Semyon Kotko, although poised to stand as a link in the chain of illustrious operatic heroes, might not have had the opportunity to meet the lofty expectations laid out by contemporary Soviet critics. Melodrama often ascribes notions of goodness and wickedness to characters who lack intricate psychological dimensions and are markedly typified.[249] By firmly adhering to the stringent confines and conventions of the classic melodramatic genre, Prokofiev relinquished the potential for complexity and profound exploration of his titular protagonist. This decision arguably served as one of the factors contributing to the opera's eventual dismissal. As noted by Brooks: "There is no 'psychology' in melodrama in this sense; the characters have no interior depth, there is no psychological conflict. It is delusive to seek an interior conflict, the 'psychology of melodrama.'"[250]

244 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven and London 1995, p. xiii.
245 Ibid., p. 13.
246 Ibid., p. 20.
247 Ibid., p. 15.
248 Ibid., p. 28–32.
249 Ibid., p. 16.
250 Ibid., p. 35.

Moreover, it is imperative to inquire into the role of female characters within Prokofiev's resolutely male-centric melodramatic realm. Do they serve merely as ornamental figures, existing solely as satellites orbiting the two primary poles—Semyon representing the virtuous and Tkachenko epitomizing the malevolent? What insights can be gleaned by examining them through the melodramatic lens? As posited by literary historian Katherine Newey, melodrama is intrinsically "*about* gender, and the contradictions of gender ideology."[251] Expanding on this, while melodrama allows female characters a dominant stage presence and an independent voice, it does not automatically warrant categorization as a feminist genre: "Political expression in melodrama was uneven, oscillating between protest and conformity. Melodrama offered a critique of gender roles, but any subversive effect was ultimately contained."[252]

As explained by Gabrielle Hyslop, in the realm of classic Pixerécourt melodrama, a woman's societal role is predominantly presented as domestic, and her primary identity forever chained to her familial role.[253] The emphasis on female domesticity stems from the notion that women are pivotal in uniting the family, thereby assuming the role of primary bearers of domestic virtue on the stage.[254] She often assumes the role of a victim, seemingly powerless to surmount challenges arising from her dire circumstances. She is characterized by physical fragility and excessive emotional expression. Nonetheless, this physical vulnerability is offset by her moral fortitude and bravery.[255] Consequently, we must explore how Prokofiev's most prominent heroines—Sof'ya and Frosya—align with these elemental contours of a melodramatic heroine, and what role they fulfill within the broader narrative of Soviet culture.

2.3.3 Sof'ya as the Melodramatic Ingénue

According to certain Soviet critics, including Nest'yev, it is the female characters, with Sof'ya in the forefront, who, through their intricately developed profiles, manage to cast a shadow over the central figure of Semyon. "The depiction of Sof'ya, Semyon's betrothed, is remarkably multifaceted; she is at

251 Katherine Newey, "Melodrama and Gender," in: Carolyn Williams (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 149–162, here p. 149.

252 Ibid., p. 150.

253 Gabrielle Hyslop, "Deviant and Dangerous Behavior: Women in Melodrama," in: *Journal of Popular Culture* 19/1 (1985), pp. 65–78, here p. 67.

254 Ibid., p. 68.

255 Ibid., p. 67.

times passionately selfless, at times childishly restless and apprehensive, and at times fiery and proud in her confrontations with her father."[256] Prokofiev introduces Sof'ya to the audience shortly after Semyon's return from the front-lines. She has steadfastly awaited her beloved's homecoming, and the passage of time has done nothing to waver their determination to wed. Concerned that Sof'ya's father, Tkachenko, will once again reject their proposal, Semyon contemplates involving sailor Tsaryov and chief of selsoviet Remenyuk as intermediaries, recognizing them as individuals Tkachenko would be hard-pressed to deny. Though initially hesitant, Tkachenko concedes to their involvement. In the course of their initial exchange, Tkachenko's affluence and his critical stance on collectivization are revealed. While he pledges that the final decision on the marriage rests with Sof'ya, his reaction upon entering her room, where she is hurriedly preparing with the aid of her mother Khivrya, reveals his heated opposition to his daughter's choice.

At first glance, Sof'ya appears to embody the stereotypical, if not archetypal, portrayal of the damsel in distress—youthful, naive, ensnared, and awaiting rescue. Yet, she is far from a passive character. Not only does she aspire to break free from her predicament and alter her fate, but she also possesses the capacity to assert herself and defy her father. Her inability to escape her father's clutches is not due to a lack of agency, but rather due to the constraints imposed by her role within the rural patriarchy.

> Sof'ya: I don't need any man from you. Stop pestering me, father.
> Tkachenko: Sonya!
> Sof'ya: Either way I'm not marrying anyone but Semyon, and that's that.
> Tkachenko: You're insane!
> Sof'ya: You're insane yourself!
> Tkachenko: Harlot!
> Sof'ya: One has lost all their sense of conscience.[257]

The friction between a daughter and her father concerning her choice of a husband constitutes a stereotypical narrative within classical Pixerécourt melodramas. As explained by Hyslop, this conflict originates from the father's

256 Nest'ev, "Semën Kotko," p. 12. Original Russian text: Очень многогранен образ Софьи, невесты Семена, то страстной до самозабвения, то по-детски суматошливой и пугливой, то вспыльчивой и гордой в схватках с отцом.

257 Prokof'ev, *Semën Kotko*, pp. 100–101. Original Russian text: Софья: Не треба мне от вас никакого человека. Отчипитесь от меня, папа. Ткаченко: Сонька! Софья: Бо я все равно ни за кого другого, кроме Семёна, не пойду, и кончено. Ткаченко: Скаженная! Софья: Сами вы скаженный! Ткаченко: Халява! Софья: Последней совести решился человек.

inability to "recognize the virtue" of his daughter's chosen partner.[258] However, it is not exclusively daughters who can discern the hero's merit; mothers, too, often extend their approval for the relationship. The fact that women are attributed with the capacity to recognize the hero's virtue only amplifies the melodramatic notion of the "moral superiority of women over men."[259]

Despite Sof'ya's acts of defiance potentially seeming minor when juxtaposed with Semyon's grand heroic feats, they nonetheless convey a possibly crucial facet of the opera that cannot be overlooked when examining it on a higher narrative plane. According to historian Martín Baña, through Sof'ya's character, Prokofiev introduces the "question of generations," depicting young individuals eager to escape not only familial oppression but also political constraints to a certain degree. Traditionally, revolutions are linked with generational defiance, and Sof'ya embodies both the spirit of youth and the burgeoning youth revolution. "Sonya is not challenging her kulak father's status, but rather his authoritarian patriarchy and his determination to dictate her future."[260] According to Baña, the notion of a generational rift and the revolutionary historical shift that is expected to find its resolution as Sof'ya journeys from her father's tyranny to her independence is further underscored by the appearance of girl and boy choirs in the sixth scene of the second act, [261] exclaiming: "Elders, elders, why linger there? Why not return home? But Sonechka isn't yours, she's ours."[262]

Nonetheless, Prokofiev injects a comedic twist into the theme of generations and patriarchy. The dialogue between Tkachenko, Sof'ya, and Semyon in the second scene of the third act, where Tkachenko stumbles upon the two alone, is directly mirrored in the fourth scene of the same act, where Semyon finds his younger sister Frosya with her beau Mikola and reacts in the same way as Tkachenko did a bit earlier to his own presence.

Semyon: (entering) Frosya, is that you?
Mikola: It's us, uncle Semyon.
Semyon: I am not asking you.

258 Hyslop, "Deviant and Dangerous Behavior," p. 69.

259 Ibid.

260 Martín Baña, "Kompozitor kak intelligent i opera kak al'ternativnoe povestvovanie o pervykh godakh russkoĭ revolı͡ut͡sii v ėpokhu stalinizma (ob opere 'Semën Kotko' S. Prokof'eva)," in: *Noveĭshaı͡a istoriı͡a Rossii* 3 (2013), pp. 187–200, here p. 194. Original Russian text: Соня обсуждает не статус отца-кулака, а его авторитарный патриархат и решимость управлять ее будущим.

261 Ibid.

262 Prokof'ev, *Semën Kotko*, pp. 107–108. Original Russian text: Что вы, старосты, старосты, сидите, что по дому, что по дому не идёте? Ще же Сонечка не ваша, наша, ще же Сонечка не ваша, наша.

Mikola: Uncle Semyon...
Semyon: I'm talking to her. Go home! [...] You're not her fiancé yet.[263]

Another lens through which we can approach Sof'ya is as a representation of the occupied motherland, symbolizing Ukraine and the need for its rescue from intruders. While Prokofiev refrains from using direct musical quotations in *Semyon Kotko*, he nevertheless manages to evoke the essence and melos of Ukrainian folklore.[264] In terms of textual references, he incorporates the poem "Zapovid" ("Testament") by Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) during Tsaryov's funeral scene. Additionally, he employs the traditional Ukrainian song "Rano-ranen'ko" ("Early, Early"),[265] which had already been quoted in Katayev's novel (Fig. 8). The initial occurrence of "Rano-ranen'ko" takes place in the seventh scene of the second act, as Semyon and his family join the matchmakers at Tkachenko's residence. In tandem with the choir's rendition of "Rano-ranen'ko," Semyon and Sof'ya openly confess their emotions to each other and celebrate their reunion after enduring prolonged years on the frontlines.

The theme resurfaces again in the orchestral interlude at the beginning of the third act, as well as in Semyon's vocal part in his duet from the beginning of the third act. While it might appear that the theme is exclusively employed to depict the affection between Semyon and Sof'ya, it is also used in alternate contexts. Enamored Mikola also sings the same theme in the fourth scene of the third act. Additionally, Remenyuk performs it in the fourth scene of the fourth act when Semyon embarks back to the village to carry out his mission of bombing the enemy headquarters and, consequently, rescuing Sof'ya. The latter occurrence of the theme distinctly implies that its use extends beyond the realm of romance and into the realm of patriotic endeavor to safeguard the homeland. Namely, following the news of Sof'ya's engagement to Klembovsky, fervent Semyon, ready to abandon his detachment and comrades to rescue her, swiftly comprehends that he cannot forsake his companions, reluctantly prioritizing the collective over the personal agenda. In a twist of fate, Remenyuk receives an order to launch an attack on the enemy's headquarters—conveniently positioned in Semyon's village—and assigns the task to Semyon and Mikola. Suddenly, and quite auspiciously, Semyon's mission takes on a dual purpose—through

263 Ibid., pp. 173–174. Original Russian text: Семён: (входит) Фрося, це ты? Микола: Це мы, дядя Семён. Семён: Я тебя не спрашиваю. Микола: Дядя Демён... Семён: Я с нею разговариваю. До дому! [...] Ты ещё ей не жених.

264 See Nest'ev, "Semën Kotko," pp. 19–20.

265 *Rano-ranen'ko* (рано-раненько) means very early, at dawn, before dawn. In: *Slovnyk ukraïns'koï movy. Akademichnyĭ tlumachnyĭ slovnyk (1970—1980)*, ‹http://sum.in.ua/s/rano-ranenjko› 23 August 2023.

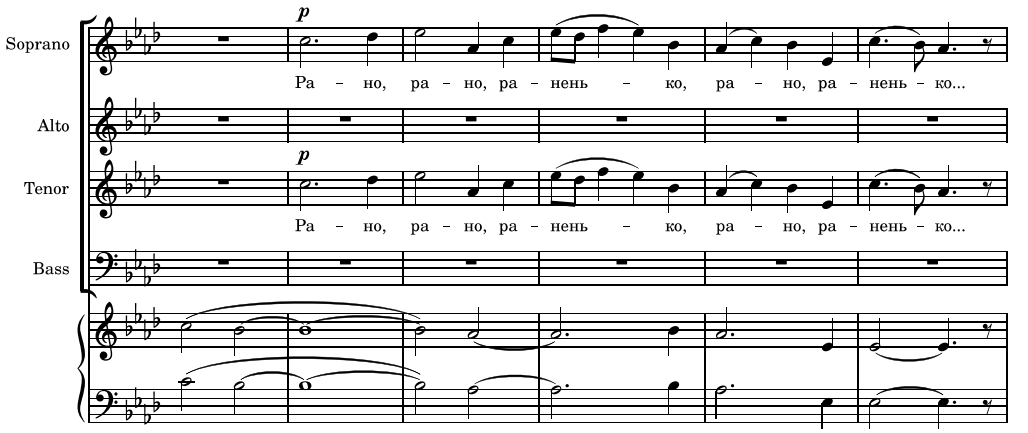

Figure 8. *Semyon Kotko*, Act II, Scene 7, rehearsal mark 162, p. 116.
Translation: Choir: Early, early ...

saving the village, he concurrently rescues Sof'ya, compelling him to immediately accept the order. Lastly, the theme resurfaces in the opera's final chorus, bearing unequivocally patriotic lyrics that exalt the ultimate triumph over the adversary: "Across free Ukraine, across the azure steppe, partisan squads stretch in formation. Onward!"[266] Semyon's rescue of Sof'ya from a forced marriage towards the opera's end is directly linked to the triumph over the enemy, symbolizing the salvation of the entire Ukraine. In fact, the salvation of Sof'ya automatically implies the salvation of Ukraine, but also vice versa—the two are, in this regard, completely interwoven, further solidifying the theory that Sof'ya might, in fact, symbolize the motherland within opera's narrative.

The "Rano-ranen'ko" theme emerges as a crucial motif within the opera's narrative structure. While initially introduced in the context of romantic love, it later transcends the confines of individual interests and personal relationships, eventually resurfacing in the opera's grand finale, serving as the ultimate expression of collective devotion to the Ukrainian motherland. The treatment of this theme in Prokofiev's opera reinforces two key ideas. Firstly, Prokofiev draws a parallel between the romantic relationships of the main protagonists and their patriotic love for the motherland. The theme is employed to convey not only the affection shared between characters but also the fervor to liberate the country from occupation. The second concept that Prokofiev underscores, tightly connected with the previous, is

266 Prokof'ev, *Semën Kotko*, pp. 367–372. Original Russian text: По свободной Украине, по над синей степью партизанские дружины растянулись цепью. Вперёд!

the act of prioritizing collective interests over personal ones as a means to attain ultimate happiness. Throughout the opera, the theme is associated with the 'righteous' characters, and Semyon's final dilemma, along with the use of the theme once he makes the right choice, suggests that the opera may not be about the quest for personal, romantic happiness, but rather about realizing that personal and collective agendas are necessarily intertwined. Namely, the sole male protagonist not given the opportunity to evoke the theme is the sailor Tsaryov. His brutal demise can be attributed to his choice to depart for Odessa with his fiancée Lyubka once he realizes the escalation of the conflict is inevitable, placing his personal desires and happiness above the welfare of the community.

In addition to viewing Sof'ya as a representation of the generational clash and a symbol of the motherland, another dimension of her character worthy of examination is her prophetic nature. Curiously, Sof'ya anticipates the impending danger in a clairvoyant dream, or more aptly, a nightmare, at the outset of the third act. However, it is not uncommon for the melodrama genre to delve into the realm of dreams or nightmares; on the contrary, and as explained by Brooks, it frequently does so.[267] In the world of melodrama, characters' nightmares, as seen in Pixerécourt's oeuvre, often explore themes of loss of mobility and identity.[268] Sof'ya intuits that her father's workman is not as benign as he might appear and will play a pivotal role in the forthcoming unfortunate events. Additionally, through the symbolism of the burning candle, she foretells that the strike of malevolence will occur quite soon.

> Sof'ya: I had the same dream again: […] the hut is empty, and the walls are bare, and I am alone, and before me, on that bare floor, stands a wax candle by itself, burning so quietly, so quietly. You can see it was just lit, the wick hasn't even blackened yet. I got scared, ran into the yard, and there again—not a single living soul, not a single living soul. […] And in the middle of the yard, there stands that very same candle, all by itself, burned halfway down. And suddenly, I see, Semyon, Semyon—our new worker is walking straight, straight towards me across the empty yard.[269]

267 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, pp. 19–20.

268 Ibid., p. 50.

269 Prokof'ev, *Semën Kotko*, pp. 151–154. Original Russian text: И снится мне опять: […] хата голая, и голенькие стеночки, и я одна, и предо мной на голом том полу сама собой стоит восковая свеча и тихо, тихо так горит. Видать, что только-только запалили, ще фитиль не почернел. Испужалась я, бежу во двор, а там обратно — ни одной живой души, та ни одной живой души. […] А посередине двора эта самая свеча сама собой стоит, сама собой стоит, до половины догорела. И вдруг смотрю, Семён, Семён, через пустой двор прямо, прямо на меня идёт наш новый работник.

Her recounting of the dream takes on the form of an exceptionally frenzied, repetitive, and swiftly paced recitativo, mirroring Sof'ya's state of turmoil and mimicking a distressed manner of speech (Fig. 9).

Her prophecy comes to fruition in the seventh scene of the same act, as the haydamaks apprehend sailor Tsaryov. This is further exemplified in the eighth scene, where the workman unveils his true identity as the cavalry staff captain of the former imperial Russian army, and the son of General Klembovsky, whose property underwent division during the collectivization process. The ninth scene sees Tkachenko presenting a list of peasants, earmarked for elimination, to the German Lieutenant von Virchow.[270] At the top of this list is Semyon, compelling his and Mikola's flight from the village.

The climax of the third act serves as the dramatic pinnacle of the entire opera. As the Germans and haydamaks ignite Semyon's house, the fire spreads, and villagers rally to extinguish it. The scene's tension is amplified by the hysterical state of Lyubka, who has been driven to despair and grief by Tsaryov's murder. Musically depicted through what we can name the 'madness theme,' her portrayal stands out as one of the most striking musical characterizations not only of the third act but the entire opera (Fig. 10). Later in the act, the female choir takes up her theme, symbolizing the widespread hysteria enveloping the village in response to the immediate threat.[271]

Though Sof'ya resides within the confines of the classic melodramatic genre and is significantly influenced by its norms and conventions, same as her male counterpart Semyon, she is not an entirely flat character. While Sof'ya fundamentally embodies the traditional role of the melodramatic ingénue, this does not imply that she was entirely devoid of revolutionary zeal or entirely passive in character. In the third act, as Semyon readies himself for battle, Sof'ya implores him to let her join, to which Semyon responds: "It's not women's business—it's for us soldiers."[272] Although she does not actively engage in combat, she still plays a role in reshaping the social order by challenging the authority of her father and confronting the enemy to a certain degree. Sof'ya is not solely defined by her traditionally feminine lyricism, but also encompasses moments of confrontation, resistance, and bravery. Furthermore, there exists another female lead, Semyon's younger

270 In English-language literature, one often finds his name spelled as "Von Wierhof."

271 Taruskin highlights the connection between *Semyon Kotko* and *The Fiery Angel* and claims that the scene of Lyubka's raving is in fact derived from Renata's. See Taruskin, *On Russian Music*, p. 255.

272 Prokof'ev, *Semön Kotko*, pp. 218–219. Original Russian text: [Ни, Соня,] то не ваше женское дело, а наше солдатское.
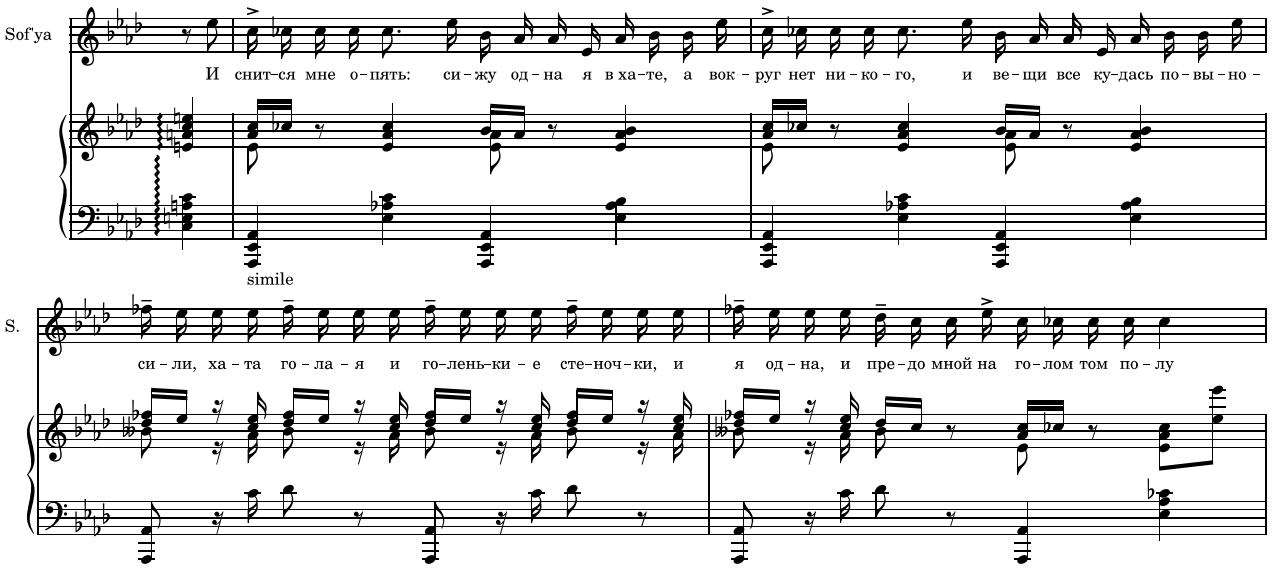
Figure 9. *Semyon Kotko*, Act III, Scene 1, rehearsal mark 226, p. 151.

Translation: Sof'ya: I had the same dream again: I am sitting alone in the hut, with nobody around me, all the things have been carried away somewhere, the hut is empty, and the walls are bare, and I am alone, and before me, on that bare floor, [...]
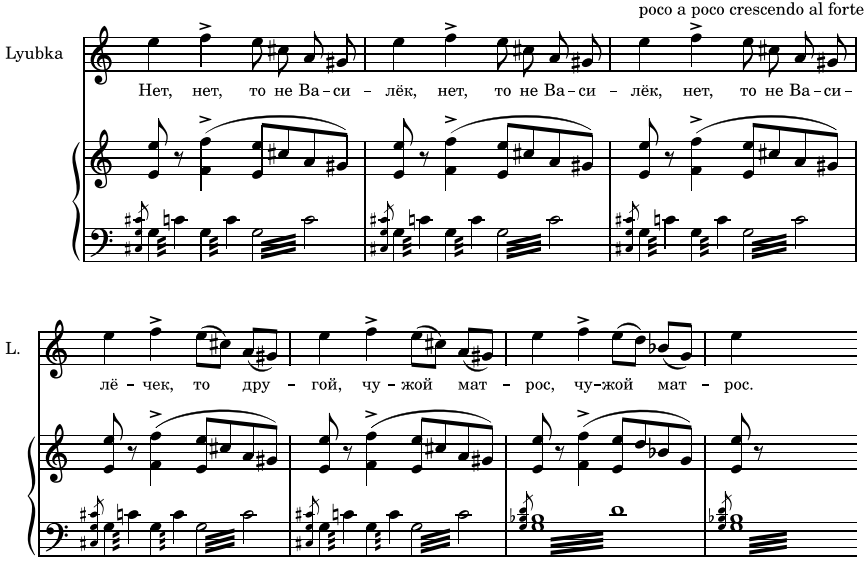
Figure 10. *Semyon Kotko*, Act III, Scene 10 (Lyubka passes by), rehearsal mark 308–309, p. 210.

Translation: Lyubka: No, no, it is not Vasilyok, no, it is not Vasilyok, no, it is not Vasilyochek, it is someone else, another one's sailor, another one's sailor.

sister Frosya, whose remarkable revolutionary fervor outshines Sof'ya's, seemingly positioning her on par with the male revolutionaries within Prokofiev's opera.

2.3.4 Female Revolutionary Fervor as Comic Relief

Semyon's younger sister, Frosya, emerges as a stark contrast to Sof'ya in multiple regards, a dichotomy that Prokofiev intentionally underscores throughout the opera. While Sof'ya is primarily depicted as gentle and innocent, Frosya is curious, assertive, quick-witted, and clever. In the sixth scene of the first act, when the topic of her brother's impending wedding arises, Frosya promptly devises a specific plan, and Sof'ya readily falls in line, eagerly echoing her suggestions.

> Frosya: First of all, bow to the sailor Tsaryov—old Tkachenko won't refuse a sailor.
> Sof'ya: He won't refuse a sailor.
> Frosya: Greybeard Tkachenko serves the sailor more than the devil.
> Sof'ya: More than the devil.
> Frosya: Second, bow to the chief of the Soviet...
> Sof'ya: Comrade Remenyuk.
> Frosya: Comrade Remenyuk.
> Sof'ya: Greybeard Tkachenko won't refuse the chief...
> Frosya: Because he fears the chief more than the devil.
> Sof'ya: More than the devil.[273]

Frosya's ability to swiftly react and take initiative—especially when others falter due to apprehension—manifests on various other occasions. For instance, in the seventh scene of the first act, Semyon aims to seek out Remenyuk and Tsaryov as potential matchmakers for Sof'ya, yet he finds himself too embarrassed to directly approach them. Frosya steps in, seizing the initiative and approaching them herself. Notably, she extends her courage and solace to those around her, as demonstrated in the thirteenth scene of the third act, where she interacts with Sof'ya and Khivrya following Semyon's departure from the village. Amidst a crowd of hysterical women,

273 Ibid., pp. 49–51. Original Russian text: Фрося: Первым делом кланяйся матросу Царёву: старый Ткаченко матросу не откажет. Софья: Матросу не откажет. Фрося: Старый хрен Ткаченко матроса служается больше чёрта. Софья: Больше чёрта. Фрося: Вторым делом — кланяйся голове Совета... Софья: Товарищу Ременюку. Фрося: Товарищу Ременюку. Софья: Старый хрен Ткаченко голове не откажет... Фрося: Потому что голову он боится хуже чёрта. Софья: Хуже чёрта.

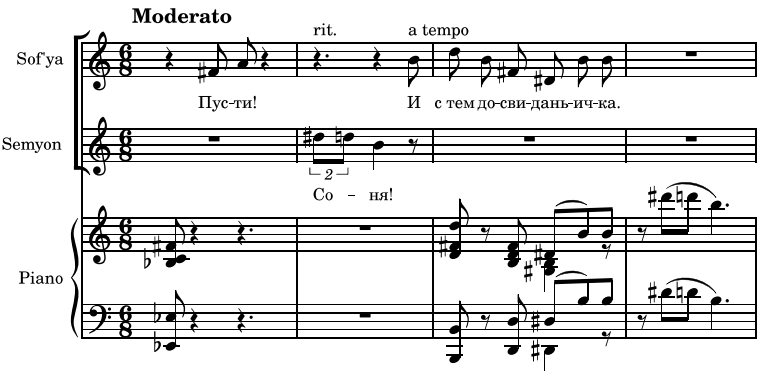

Figure 11. *Semyon Kotko*, Act I, Tableau 2, Scene 5, rehearsal mark 64, p. 43.
Translation: Sof'ya: Let me go! Semyon: Sonya! Sof'ya: And with that, goodbye.

Frosya stands out as a composed voice of reason, resilient even when panic pervades.

Her bravery surfaces consistently across various situations. It shines when she fearlessly confronts the haydamaks and Germans, who are intent on igniting their house, or in the third scene of the fourth act when she ventures into the steppe alone in search of Seymon. The latter instance holds profound significance in illustrating Frosya's emancipatory agency. By physically and metaphorically departing from the domestic sphere that encumbers other female characters, particularly Sof'ya, she embarks on a perilous quest to disseminate information about the horrors unfolding in the village.

Her self-assuredness is particularly evident during her initial interactions with Mikola. Frosya does not merely serve as a passive object of admiration; she exerts complete control over herself and those around her. For instance, in the fifth scene of the first act, Sof'ya realizes that she needs to leave Semyon and go home, reluctantly repeating her farewells. Her goodbye motif, which is also her leitmotiv throughout the whole opera, is based on a simple but striking combination of minor and major triads (Fig. 11). Taruskin describes her spirited and bouncy farewell as "coquettish" and "teasing," highlighting the fact that it got repeated seven times, unlike in Katayev's novel where it emerged only two times.[274]

On the other hand, when Frosya chooses to abruptly conclude her conversation with Mikola in the ninth scene of the same act, her farewell is portrayed substantially differently, contrasting the playful agility of Sof'ya's adieu with the firm and stable musical movement (Fig. 12). Despite Mikola's attempts to prolong the conversation, Frosya remains resolute in her choice.

274 Taruskin, *On Russian Music*, p. 255.

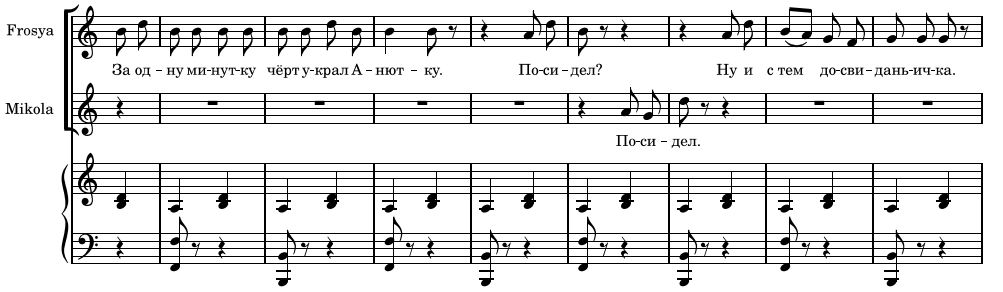

Figure 12. *Semyon Kotko*, Act I, Tableau 2, Scene 9, rehearsal mark 101, pp. 67–68. Translation: Frosya: It only took a minute for the devil to steal Anyutka. Did you stay long enough? Mikola: Long enough. Frosya: Fine, and with that—goodbye.

Nevertheless, the dichotomous thread upon which these two characters are woven goes even further. While Sof'ya is crafted as an ethereal ingénue, possessing an intuition verging on clairvoyance, Frosya is firmly anchored in realism, her demeanor also carrying a touch of comedy. Intriguingly, another notable parallel emerges between the two female protagonists—Frosya, akin to Sof'ya, also has a dream. However, this dream, occurring in the fourth scene of the third act, serves as a lighthearted meta-joke, cleverly employed to alleviate the dramatic tension introduced by Sof'ya's dream three scenes prior, as well as the subsequent scene that unveils Tkachenko's conspiracy.

> Frosya: I had a dream, Mikola, that I'm making porridge from chestnuts.
> Mikola (trying to embrace her): What are you talking about, Frosya?
> Frosya: Just without hands. I'm cooking porridge from chestnuts and stirring it with a huge spoon, throwing pieces of lard into the pot. Why do I keep having such dreams, Mikola?[275]

Even though her role in the plot might serve as a catalyst for change on a small scale (albeit never that of the ultimate executor of change, a role still reserved for the male protagonists), her dominant narrative function within the opera is that of comic relief. Frosya's boldness and tenacity are cloaked in a comedic facade, likely because the notion of a woman as a deeply serious hero might be challenging to perceive. Her character

275 Prokof'ev, *Semën Kotko*, pp. 170–172. Original Russian text: Фрося: И снится мне, Микола, сон: будто я варю из каштанов кулеш. Микола: (Хочет обнять её) Ну что ты, Фросечка, говоришь? Фрося: Только без рук. Варю я кулеш из каштанов и громадной ложкой размешиваю, шматочки сала в кастрюлю бросаю. К чему такие сны, Микола, мне всё время снятся?

development even bears semblance to the comical folkloric archetype of the *babushka* or *baba*.[276] While this comparison might seem somewhat far-fetched, given that Frosya is still a young, unmarried girl, the resemblance remains uncanny. As explained by historian Jonathan Waterlow, in Soviet *anekdoti*, Russian for anecdotes and jokes, the *baba* is frequently "portrayed as a mouthpiece for the people's frustrations, but was also a truth-teller, stripping back ideological claims to reveal the often contradictory reality beneath."[277] Indeed, Frosya never exhibited a trace of hesitation in expressing her perspective on the unfolding reality. Despite her youth, her words and deeds consistently resonate wisdom, a quality not only appreciated by her peers but also by the elderly.

Nonetheless, Frosya, notwithstanding the role of a comical sidekick she assumes, signifies a stride towards emancipation in contrast to Sof'ya. While Sof'ya exhibits hints of rebellion against her father and the established status quo, she remains anchored within the archetype of the melodramatic ingénue—the rather conventional romantic interest of a valiant male hero. While Baña, as discussed earlier, argues that it is Sof'ya who represents the revolution of the youth and highlights her emancipatory agency, Sof'ya's acts of revolutionary defiance nevertheless primarily revolves around her conflict with her father, Tkachenko, stemming from her desire to transition from his domain to Semyon's. On the contrary, Frosya does not require a transfer from one man to another to assert her agency. Despite carrying the mantle of a comical sidekick, she exerts complete dominion over her life and well-being. Her essence, as well as that of the opera, is encapsulated in the fourth scene of the final act. In a fervent proclamation, she declares, "We have to fight for our future"—a manifesto echoed by those around her.[278] This assertion solidifies her as a representation of youthful revolution, which culminates in the ultimate triumph over the intruders and aggressors.

276 The characters Prokofiev appoints to fill us in with the details of the surprising and unexpected return of Semyon from the war are three village ladies, in libretto stated as *babï* (Russ. plural of *baba*), a term often used pejoratively to describe married lower-class women. The function they carry throughout the plot is one of humorous commentators, and they are used to recreate the comfort of the familiar home environment, pulling the audience into the cheerful and spirited world of the village.

277 Jonathan Waterlow, "*Babushka*, Harlot, Helper, Joker: Women and Gender in 1930s Political Humour," in: Melanie Ilic (ed)., *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, London 2018, pp. 133–148, here p. 135.

278 Prokof'ev, *Semën Kotko*, pp. 364–365. Original Russian text: За нашу долю нада биться.

2.4 Sergey Prokofiev's *The Story of a Real Man* (1948)

The outbreak of World War II substantially affected cultural production in the USSR; however, it did not manage to bring it to a halt. Soviet artists continued to create new works even after being evacuated from their primary places of residence. The war years, although undoubtedly emotionally and spiritually overwhelming, turned out to be particularly fruitful for some composers, including Prokofiev. Like many others, he offered his creative response to the immediate social turmoil by composing a series of topical works dealing with contemporary political events,[279] as, for example, his orchestral suite *1941-i god* (*The Year 1941*) and *Oda na okonchaniye voynï* (*Ode to the End of the War*) from 1945. Additionally, it was during the war he undertook the monumental task of creating the opera *Voyna i mir* (*War and Peace*), based on Lev Tolstoy's renowned magnum opus. According to Schwarz, this is the only opera standing out among Soviet war operas composed in the early 1940s.[280] Furthermore, there was a whole series of Soviet operas based on contemporary war narratives. Some of the operas which were based on a World War II topic include, for instance, Ivan Dzerzhinsky's *Krov' naroda* (*The Blood of the People*, 1942) and *Nadezhda Svetlova* (1943), Dmitry Kabalevsky's *V ogne* (*In the Fire*, 1943), Viktor Voloshinov's *Sil'neye smerti* (*Stronger than Death*, 1943), as well as Marian Koval"s *Sevastopol'tsï* (*Inhabitants of Sevastopol*, 1946).

However, the post-war years brought about a radical change in Soviet society and culture, leading to an increasingly tumultuous artistic atmosphere and devastating effects on a number of Soviet composers. Specifically, the period between 1946 and 1953 was characterized by the dominance of the Zhdanov cultural doctrine.[281] While the doctrine's influence was pervasive and impacted Soviet artistic production on a broad scale, its influence on music's trajectory can be traced back to 1947. According to Hakobian, during this year, Dmitry Shepilov (1905–1995), the deputy director of the department of agitation and propaganda of the Party's Central Committee, along with Polikarp Lebedev (1904–1981), the head of the art section within the same department, sent a confidential letter titled "About the Drawbacks in the Development of Soviet Music" to the secretariat of the Central Committee.[282] Another pivotal juncture in this process was the already mentioned infamous 1948 publication "On the Opera *Velikaya*

279 See Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era*, pp. 150–151.

280 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 182.

281 For more on Zhdanov's views on music, see Andrei Zhdanov, *Essays on Literature, Philosophy, and Music*, New York 1950.

282 Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era*, p. 175.

druzhba by V. Muradeli." However, the critical campaign was not restricted solely to Muradeli's opera and his perceived artistic shortcomings. The list of composers deemed guilty of formalism included figures such as Dmitry Shostakovich, Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978), Dmytro Klebanov (1907–1987), and Prokofiev himself.

Prokofiev's second opera centered around a Soviet theme, and simultaneously, his final opera overall, *Povest' o nastoyashchem cheloveke* (*The Story of a Real Man*), performed for the first time for the closed audience on December 3, 1948. Right from the outset, it appeared that the opera was destined for a troubled path. The libretto, co-authored by Prokofiev and his wife Mira Mendelson (1915–1968), draws from the eponymous 1946 novel penned by Soviet writer Boris Polevoy (1908–1981). Notably, Polevoy served as a war correspondent for *Pravda* during World War II and for the novel he received the Stalin Prize Second Class. Despite being built upon a compelling literary foundation—rooted in the real-life saga of Aleksey Mares'yev (1916–2001), an exceptional Soviet World War II fighter pilot who persevered his duty despite losing both legs—the opera encountered an unenthusiastic reception, failing to captivate the critics.

The libretto traces the journey of Aleksey (baritone), a Soviet fighter pilot, who, following his aircraft being downed in combat against the forces of Hitler, sustains grave injuries. Despite the severity of his leg wounds, he miraculously endures 18 days in the woods before being discovered by children from a neighboring village. The villagers rescue and nurture him until his transfer to a Moscow hospital, where his legs are ultimately amputated. Aleksey's recovery is catalyzed by thoughts of his beloved Ol'ga (soprano) and bolstered by the camaraderie of fellow patients, notably the Commissar (bass), who presents him with an article recounting the tale of a First World War ace who continued flying despite losing a leg. The opera culminates with Aleksey taking flight once more, now piloting a new plane.[283] While the central dramatic conflict unfolds within Aleksey himself, the clash between opposing forces—Stalin's and Hitler's armies—is indirectly conveyed through characters recounting events and sharing their personal wartime experiences.

Prokofiev found himself in a challenging position even before embarking on his new rehabilitation opera. As written by Seinen, continuously accused of formalism by the Composers Union, he was further driven to clear his reputation and ensure the success of the opera.[284] However, *The*

283 See Sergei Prokofiev, *The Story of a Real Man: An Opera in Four Acts. Piano Vocal Score. Op. 117. With Russian Text*, Melville, NY [1979]. The partiture in question is the revised version from 1960.

284 Seinen, *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*, p. 162.

Story of a Real Man faced swift rejection following its closed performance. Given that the Composers Union had predicted the opera's failure from the outset, Prokofiev diligently attempted to conform to Socialist Realist norms by making significant modifications. As reported by Schwarz, eager to achieve his goal, he consistently kept the Union informed about the alterations.[285] Nevertheless, even Prokofiev's close friend, the composer Nikolay Myaskovsky (1881–1950), foresaw the unfortunate reception of the opera. He observed certain flaws in the libretto and Prokofiev's artistic decisions. As explained by Morrison: "Myaskovsky articulates a hopeless double-bind: the more Prokofiev tried to make his music accessible, the more it lent itself to interpretation as sarcasm. Such was the power of the simple, rather than the complex, to convert and to subvert."[286]

As recounted by Hakobian, during the plenary session of the Composers' Union in December of 1948 the opera *The Story of a Real Man* was sharply ostracized for both Prokofiev's musical idiom and his inadequate representation of Soviet people. Despite Prokofiev's evident conciliatory disposition and readiness to comply, both artistically and politically, he was nevertheless unjustly condemned: "It is clear that this unsophisticated work, based chiefly on song-like and dance-like tunes, does not deserve such an evaluation. The fact that Khrennikov, despite Prokofiev's obvious readiness to comply, chose him as a scapegoat, casts doubt on his latter assertion that 'Prokofiev was my musical God'."[287]

According to Taruskin, from a musical perspective, *The Story of a Real Man* closely adheres to the principles of Socialist Realism.[288] The opera's song-like quality, partially achieved through the inclusion of mass songs, is notably more prominent than in *Semyon Kotko*.[289] This, combined with Prokofiev's embrace of the number opera format and traditional structural operatic elements, which he had previously abandoned, leads us to conclude that, among all of Prokofiev's operas, this one may be considered his most artistically 'agreeable,' even more so than his 'Soviet' operatic debut, *Semyon Kotko*.

The opera's unfavorable reception resulted in it being largely overlooked in the ensuing decades. While dissecting the reasons for this reception can be approached from various angles, the opera's unfortunate fate—partly attributed to the pervasive political machinery and intricate web of political machinations—does not render it undeserving of more

285 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 234.
286 Morrison, *The People's Artist*, p. 321.
287 Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era*, p. 181.
288 Taruskin, *On Russian Music*, p. 261.
289 Ibid., p. 262.

thorough examination. Despite its lack of critical acclaim, the opera stands as Prokofiev's renewed operatic endeavor within the realm of Socialist Realism and Soviet subject matter, nearly a decade after the setback of *Semyon Kotko*. It not only serves as a testament to Prokofiev's new and conciliatory artistic stance but also provides a direct glimpse into an alternative portrayal of Soviet masculinity and a fresh insight into the intricate evolution of the New Soviet Man. Moreover, *The Story of a Real Man* can be interpreted as a didactic post-war experiment, serving as a contemporary testament to Soviet post-war morals and ethics. It also stands as a tangible illustration of the enduring prevalence of martial masculinity in the post-war Soviet arts and culture.

2.4.1 The Remarkable Heroes of the 1940s

To gain a deeper understanding of Soviet operas, it is crucial to delve into the concept of the New Man, or more precisely, the virtuous hero of Stalinist era who has undeniably played a pivotal role in shaping Socialist Realist artistic narratives. Yet, providing an exhaustive and comprehensive explanation of this concept is challenging, given its multifaceted nature and the evolving contexts it encompasses. When surveying the array of artistic depictions of the New Soviet Man and tracing its evolution over time, distinct attributes take prominence based on the prevailing political, societal, and cultural demands and trends. Nevertheless, certain qualities remain consistent and universal, transcending the fluid nature of societal and cultural dynamics. For instance, philosopher Maja Soboleva accentuates that the ideal of a Soviet citizen encompasses profound dedication to Marxist ideology, collectivism, proactive social engagement, personal development, harmony, and a selfless commitment to the well-being of both present and future society.[290] Moreover, the literary embodiment of the Stalinist "remarkable people," to reach again for Clark's appellation,[291] is based on certain universal narrative patterns. Clark highlights the resemblance between the High Stalinism hero and the medieval *bogatïr*, a prominent figure in folk tradition, often depicted as audacious and resolute, accomplishing extraordinary feats.[292] She expounds on the 1930s *bogatïr* "as a figure who 'dares,' who 'breaks' established norms of science or conventional bureaucratic practice, seems strangely at odds with the authoritarian, dogma-bound society in which he

290 Maja Soboleva, "The Concept of the 'New Soviet Man' and Its Short History," in: *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 51/1 (2017), pp. 64–85, here p. 74.

291 Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 119.

292 Ibid., p. 138.

works. There is an incipient paradox between his 'daring,' 'freedom-loving' nature and his ritual role as a model son."[293]

However, the hero of the 1940s, though very similar, had his own peculiarities. "In the thirties the hero often had to sacrifice or transcend his personal attachments, but in the forties he was expected to regularize his relationships as a way of proving himself worthy of a position of responsibility in the 'organization.'"[294] The change probably influenced the fact that the hero of the 1940s, unlike the one from the previous decade, was not a youth, but typically in his thirties or forties. The point here was not his age *per se*, but his status—he was already expected to be a member of the Soviet hierarchy and not only a potential member.[295] The same conclusion resonates in Seinen's analysis of the opera, who concludes that "Aleksey's quest deals with his self-fulfilment, the realization of his personal goals, more than it does his re-entry into Soviet structures."[296] Indeed, Polevoy's and Prokofiev's Aleksey serve as solid proof of the changed paradigm, as he himself represents a type of the already established Soviet hero, unlike, for instance, Khrennikov's Lyon'ka or Prokofiev's Semyon Kotko, who are still standing on the threshold of their communist and socialist metamorphosis. Aleksey does not question his status within the Soviet hierarchy, nor does he get tangled in the introspective deconstruction of various social and political concepts but goes to astonishing lengths to prove his loyalty and kinship to the system.

It is hard to talk about the ideal Stalinist hero without directly acknowledging its gender and the fact that its political agency is necessarily martial. The recurring theme of war and the seemingly unbreakable bond between masculinity and militarism was not novel in the post-war years, nor was it unique to the art of the Stalin era in general. This connection had been consistently forged in Soviet society and culture since its earliest days. As explained by Fraser, it was the Civil War that "set the tone for the battle motifs and idealization of soldiering that followed in Soviet culture, and it influenced the valorization of healthy male bodies as national symbols in literature, art, and political posters."[297] The persistent mythologization of war and Soviet martiality is a tendency that endured throughout the entire existence of the Soviet Union. The tumultuous events of the 1940s and the Great Patriotic War only introduced a new set of motifs to the cultural and

293 Ibid., p. 140.
294 Ibid., p. 204.
295 Ibid., p. 201.
296 Seinen, *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*, p. 213.
297 Fraser, *Military Masculinity and Postwar Recovery*, p. 10.

artistic imagination of the Soviet people, while the underlying mechanism of the core narrative remained seemingly untouched.

Anna Krylova, a historian specializing in modern Russian history, explains that the inclination to fashion a flawless hero who is simultaneously complex and multidimensional ultimately yielded meager results, as intricate psychological processes and traumas triggered by the ravages of war were frequently obscured by schematic plots.[298] Furthermore, in her research, Krylova challenges the notion of the perfectly dynamic post-war hero depicted in Soviet literature and raises a pivotal question: "How did a man without an 'inner speck of accumulated energy' metamorphose into a familiar positive Socialist Realist hero-organizer-educator-motivator?"[299] She elaborates:

> Such repeated failures demonstrate the complexity of the task writers set for themselves. Injuries of the soul, instead of being articulated and healed, tended to disappear. They hid behind descriptions, facts, plots, and cliché's, and with them a whole stratum of Soviet postwar reality was insinuated but not confronted. Those who pursued the healing project had, in the first place, to solve the mystery of the injured soul—its trauma.[300]

Although these glimpses into the writings of Soboleva, Clark, Fraser, and Krylova guide us toward a better understanding of Aleksey's position within Stalinist cultural and artistic narratives—where he serves as a quintessential example of various prominent cultural currents intertwined—Aleksey also embodies certain other subcategories and minor trends in a need of further dissection. While the pervasive presence of the Soviet masculinity cult was apparent throughout the political and cultural spheres, McCallum explains it "was not monolithic or consistent, either in its idealized state-sanctioned form or in the range of masculine types and behaviors that populated literature, visual culture, and reality itself."[301] Furthermore, a deeper exploration is required to uncover the true meaning of the 'real man' category proposed by Polevoy and Prokofiev, which is crucial for a comprehensive understanding not only of this opera, but Stalinist masculinity cult as a whole.

298 Anna Krylova, "'Healers of Wounded Souls': The Crisis of Private Life in Soviet Literature, 1944–1946," in: *The Journal of Modern History* 73/2 (2001), pp. 307–331, here p. 320.

299 Ibid.

300 Ibid., pp. 320–321.

301 Claire E. McCallum, "The Return: Postwar Masculinity and the Domestic Space in Stalinist Visual Culture, 1945–53," in: *The Russian Review* 74/1 (2015), pp. 117–143, here p. 119.

2.4.2 Aleksey as the Real Man

While Prokofiev's Aleksey aligns with the broad description of an ideal Soviet protagonist, he also embodies other distinctive offshoots of the primary archetype. As per historian Jay Bergman's delineation of the New Soviet Man during the Stalinist era, two primary archetypes come into view. The first pertains to the older individual who, "with the benefit of maturity and hindsight, was able to learn from his mistakes, harness his energies in tasks that were socially useful, and participate fully in the life of his society." The second, a category that Aleksey can also be attributed to, is marked by "youthful exuberance and spontaneity," and furthermore, by taking "unnecessary risks that were potentially harmful to himself and to everyone around him."[302] Moreover, another archetype Aleksey embodies is that of the Soviet pilot. Notably, during the Stalin era, aviation held significant favor with the Soviet government, and pilots received special recognition, enjoying considerable respect, and the nation even fervently celebrating Aviation Day.[303]

> To perpetuate in the popular imagination the impression of Soviet pilots as heroes possessed of extra-human, and even superhuman, characteristics and abilities, the Soviet press repeatedly referred to them as "falcons" or as "Stalin's falcons," and to the aeroplanes they flew as "steel birds." The choice of phraseology was deliberate. Kievan and Muscovite princes were often described in Russian folklore as falcons, and some of the heroes in these tales miraculously transformed themselves into birds.[304]

Clark also observes the same archetype: "The iconic attributes of the aviation hero represent a positive but childish brand of 'spontaneity.' He was presented in both fiction and nonfiction as a man of impatience, high spirits, reckless daring, and indefatigability."[305] The Stalinist New Man retained a certain degree of individual initiative, and aviation, being a mostly solitary endeavor, aligned well with the new paradigm.

> Unlike Bolsheviks such as Kollontai, Bogdanov and Gorkii, who stressed the nobility of collective endeavour and believed that the New Soviet Man would devote himself to furthering the collective interests of communist society, Stalin saw the New Soviet Man as an individual hero who, instead of submerging

302 Jay Bergman, "Valerii Chkalov: Soviet Pilot as New Soviet Man," in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 33/1 (1998), pp. 135–152, here p. 145.
303 Ibid., p. 136.
304 Ibid., pp. 138–139.
305 Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 126.

> his individuality in collective endeavour, would pursue activities in which he could distinguish himself, as an individual, from others.[306]

Another intriguing perspective through which we can analyze Aleksey's character is his physicality. Notably, as pointed out by philologist and filmologist Lilya Kaganovsky, "in its attempts to articulate the 'coming-into-being' of the new Soviet man, socialist realism [...] produces a mangled or mutilated (male) body as frequently as it produces the hyperbolically strong and healthy Stalinist man."[307] Kaganovsky suggests that under Stalinism, two contradictory models of masculinity emerge—the "overly healthy, virile, and productive male body" on one hand, and "the wounded, mutilated, long-suffering mummy" on the other, exemplified by characters like the blind and paralyzed Pavka Korchagin from *How the Steel Was Tempered*, one-legged Aleksey Voropaev from *Shchast'ye*, and finally, the pilot Mares'yev who loses both legs. This implies that "Stalinist art seems to offer the blinded, limping, paralyzed, and hystericized male body as a new kind of masculinity."[308]

While these two lenses, that of Soviet aviation and that of mutilated physicality, partially shed light on the genesis of the New Soviet Man during the Stalin era and aid in placing the literary and real-life Aleksey Mares'yev within the evolutionary continuum of this core Soviet cultural archetype, the essence of the titular 'real man' still remains somewhat enigmatic. Namely, the narrative of *The Story of a Real Man* traces Mares'yev's journey, yet for much of it, he is not the embodiment of the real man, an ontological concept molded by the novel's author. In essence, the audience does not follow the tale of a real man, but rather Aleksey's transformation toward it, as he strives to attain this perceived zenith of Soviet heroism. While the string of adversities the protagonist encounters on his path is surmounted through his unwavering determination and extraordinary individual efforts, this does not imply that he was alone on his quest. Both in the village and the Moscow hospital, he encounters numerous supportive characters who uplift him and contribute to his journey. Among them is a preeminent real man, the Commissar, who holds the key to comprehending Polevoy's vision, and in extent Prokofiev's, of the ultimate Stalinist masculinity.

Aleksey's story in the libretto begins in medias res, just as he realizes he has survived the enemy attack and the subsequent plane crash. He immediately decides to head through the forest in hopes of finding other Russians

306 Bergman, "Valerii Chkalov," p. 142.

307 Lilya Kaganovsky, "How the Soviet Man Was (Un)Made," in: *Slavic Review* 63/3 (2004), pp. 577–596, here p. 578.

308 Ibid., pp. 578–579.

and seeking help. The first theme that Prokofiev introduces to the audience is a simple yet expressive string musical theme that represents moments of physical and mental hardship (Fig. 13). This theme recurs throughout the opera during crucial dramatic moments, such as when the exhausted and barely alive Aleksey is discovered in the snow by boys from a nearby kolkhoz.

The same theme is employed in the "Ballade of the Commissar" (Act II, No. 18), where the Commissar narrates a heroic episode from the Russian Civil War to nurse Klavdiya and describes the torment he endured. This theme also resurfaces in the scene "Commissar's Death" (Act II, No. 28), where Kukushkin, another pilot convalescing at the hospital, laments the tragic loss in the following manner: "He passed away… No longer will he break the silence in the ward with kind words. No longer will he offer advice in times of need. Alyosha, he will no longer playfully and gently chide complaining Kukushkin. He passed away… Who? A real man. A Bolshevik."[309]

The two characters undoubtedly share an intriguing bond—the Commissar, a war hero with a well-established career and reputation, who is also older than Aleksey, serves as a quintessential mentor and a paragon of heroism for the young pilot. The use of the same musical theme in the construction of both of their musical portraits signals, first and foremost, their shared military, martial, and heroic experiences, all filled with suffering and hardships. Here we can also include Seinen's interpretation, who sees it as a way of conveying Commissar's "omniscient understanding of other people and life in general as portrayed in the novel."[310] Secondly, it imparts a certain sense of exclusivity and uniqueness, as it appears solely within the contexts of these two men. Could it be an indicator of the two of them having endured greater hardships than the other patients? Furthermore, is it perhaps Prokofiev's way of conveying through music that Aleksey has embarked on the journey to becoming what the Commissar already is—a real man? In the case of the latter, what defines him as "real," in contrast to Aleksey?

The Commissar performed impressively heroic deeds on par with his comrades in the hospital room. However, the essence of his real man status equally resides in his uplifting personality and his capacity to offer support to others in need, as Kukushkin described after his passing. Despite his challenging physical state and rapidly deteriorating health, he remains cheerful

309 Prokofiev, *The Story of a Real Man*, pp. 150–152. Original Russian text: Умер… Больше он не нарушит сердечным словом тишину палаты. Тебя не поддержит советом в беде твоей. Алеша, и не осадит ловко, необидно брюзжащего Кукушкина. Умер… Кто? Настоящий человек. Большевик.

310 Seinen, *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*, p. 195.

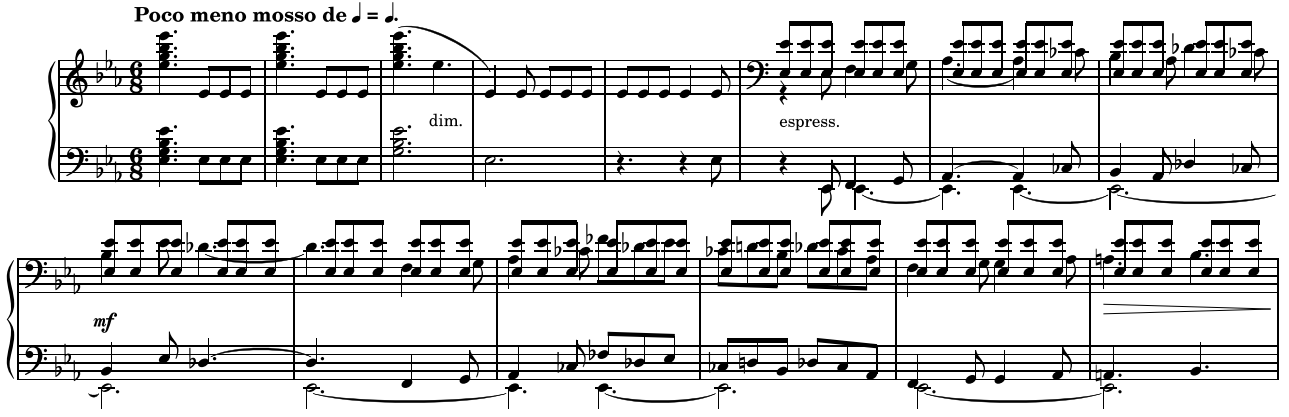

Figure 13. *The Story of a Real Man*, Act I, Tableau 1, First entr'acte, rehearsal mark 24, p. 17.

and lighthearted, concealing his weaknesses and pain, often expressing his readiness to continue living. As nurse Klavdiya told him: "What an individual you are—you draw everyone to yourself. It's as if you've brought spring to the hospital. Everyone is rejuvenated, almost unrecognizable. Even their wounds are healing more swiftly. You possess a wealth of heartfelt words! You have unlocked the key to every heart."[311]

Moreover, there is additional musical evidence substantiating the notion that the entire odyssey Aleksey undergoes serves as an educational experience, benefiting both the protagonist and the audience, and that the Commissar assumes a crucial role in leading and guiding this instructional process. After the kolkhoz members opt to care for Aleksey, Prokofiev introduces yet another musical theme in the "Song of the Kolkhozniki" (Act I, No. 8) (Fig. 14). This theme is notably straightforward in terms of melody construction and harmonic progression, even more so than the previous one.

The oak struck by lightning, a relatively unambiguous metaphor for Aleksey, eventually recovers and stands strong once again. It also acts as an optimistic prophecy, foretelling the bright future of the tormented Aleksey. This theme resurfaces a second time in the hospital room when the Commissar introduces an article to motivate Aleksey and lift him from his state of utter despair. The article narrates the story of a pilot from the First World War who, despite losing a leg, managed to fly again. In the ensuing conversation, the Commissar's attempt to convince Aleksey of the possibility of flying even as a double amputee is accompanied by the oak theme. In this dialogue, the desperate Aleksey challenges the Commissar, consistently rejecting his efforts at encouragement. However, Aleksey eventually starts believing in the prospect of recovery, and his assertion "But I am a Soviet man!"[312] coincides with the same theme. It is as if the Commissar 'passes down' the theme to Aleksey; this musical handover represents an infusion of courage, strength, and motivation into the disheartened Aleksey, who suddenly becomes infused with confidence and aspiration. Seinen sees this exchange as a "moment of indoctrination," where Aleksey "recognizes the identity to which he should aspire, then adopts it as his own."[313]

The theme reemerges at the opera's finale when a Moscow correspondent arrives to interview Aleksey, referring to him as the greatest pilot of

311 Prokofiev, *The Story of a Real Man*, pp. 102–104. Original Russian text: Ну, что вы за человек: всех к себе притягиваете. С вами в госпиталь точно сама весна вошла. Ожили все, не узнать людей. Кажется, даже раны стали быстрей заживать. Как много сердечных вы знаете слов! К каждому вы подобрали свой ключик.

312 Ibid., p. 124. Original Russian text: Но ведь я же советский человек!

313 Seinen, *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*, pp. 197–198.

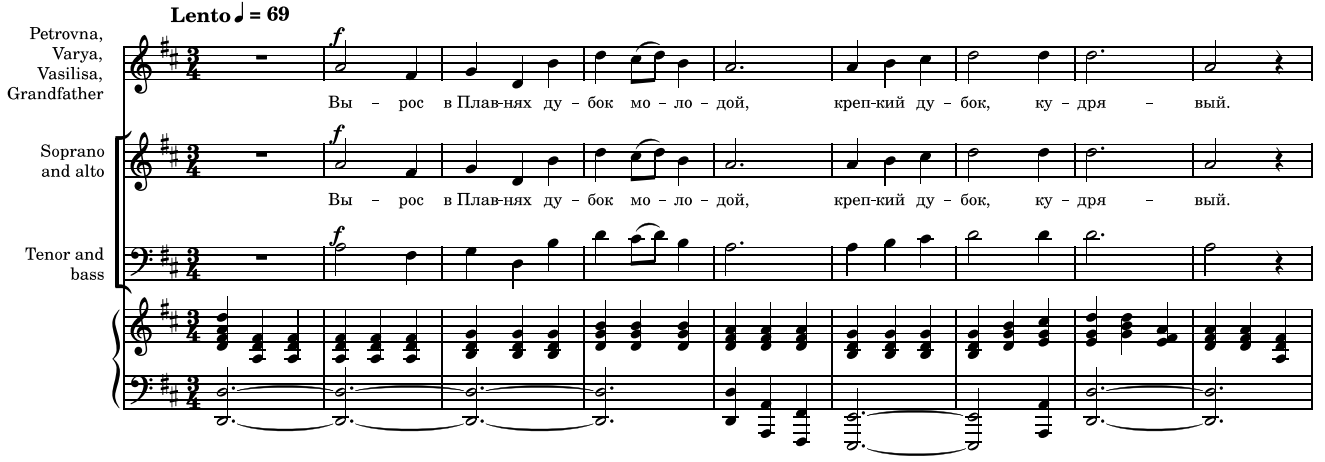

Figure 14. *The Story of a Real Man*, Act I, Tableau 3, No. 8, "Song of the Kolkhozniki," rehearsal mark 66, p. 43.

Translation: Petrovna, Varya, Vasilisa, Grandfather, Choir: A young, strong, and bushy oak tree grew in Plavni. But once during the storm, it was burnt by lightning.

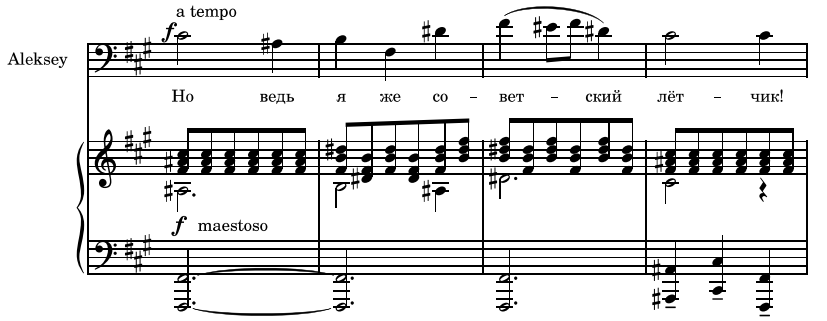

Figure 15. *The Story of a Real Man*, Act III, Tableau 10, No. 44, "A Real Man," rehearsal mark 333, p. 243.

Translation: Aleksey: But I am a Soviet pilot!

the regiment, later concluding, together with Ol'ga, that he indeed is a real man (Fig. 15).

While Aleksey's life is disrupted by a real-life enemy, the primary conflict does not lie externally; instead, it unfolds within him. The principal tension followed by the audience is the struggle between the initially well-established, to say the least, Aleksey and the extraordinary persona, the real man, he evolves into over the course of the opera, arguably making it a rudimentary psychological opera of the Stalinist times.

2.4.3 Soviet Femininity as a Healing Power

One of the most striking features of *The Story of a Real Man* is undoubtedly its scarcity of prominent, strong leading female roles. All the female characters in Polevoy's and Prokofiev's microcosm, despite serving essential functions in the plot, tend to be reduced to mere two-dimensional supporting roles. Specifically, each of them serves a single unified purpose within the narrative. For example, Ol'ga, Aleksey's fiancée, appears as a memory for the majority of the opera, set in Aleksey's subconscious, surfacing only during his most arduous moments. While still injured in the forest, gathering the courage and strength to embark on his search for help, he takes out Ol'ga's photograph to rekindle his flagging vigor, as if she were his sole source of solace and motivation to persevere, consequently summoning her on the stage (Fig. 16).

Indeed, almost serving as an emblem of fidelity, hope, and divine inspiration that sustains one's will to live and strive for survival, this lyrical musical theme emerges in the most poignant moments of the opera. It stands as a reminder to Aleksey that there is purpose in fulfilling his duty. The
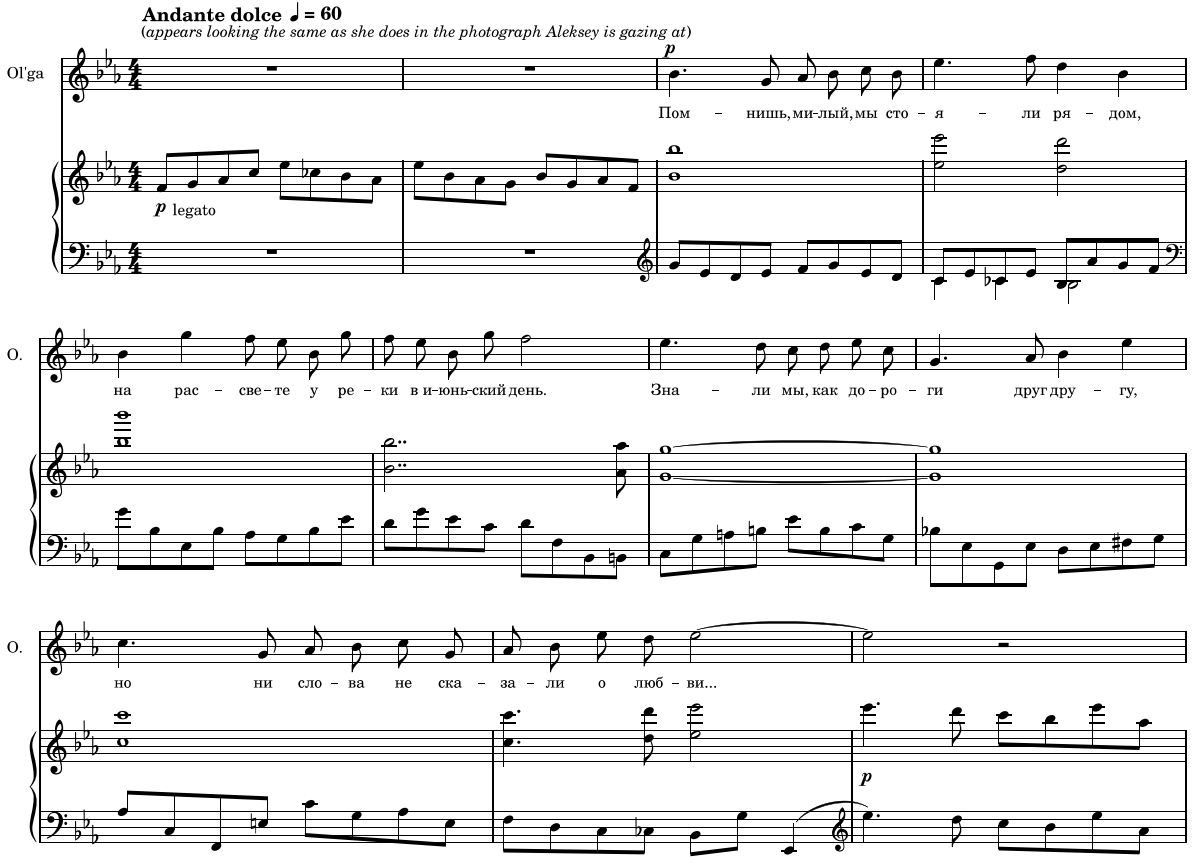
Figure 16. *The Story of a Real Man*, Act I, Tableau 2, No. 3, "Ol'ga's Song," rehearsal mark 38, p. 25.

Translation: Ol'ga: (appears looking the same as she does in the photograph Aleksey is gazing at) Do you remember, darling, when we stood side by side at dawn by the river on that June day? We knew how dearly we held each other, yet we didn't utter a word about love.

musical theme also finds its place in the scene "Aleksey's Delirium" (Act II, No. 15), where Prokofiev juxtaposes two contrasting musical idioms. The first captures Aleksey's feverishness, dread, and agony stemming from the amputation of his legs. The second presents a calming and mellow musical vision of Ol'ga, reassuring him that nothing is as fearsome as long as they share their love. This theme appears again in the vocal segment of the scene "Aleksey's Arioso" (Act II, No. 27), precisely when he, fueled by the thought of Ol'ga and his home, embarks on the painful journey of learning to walk anew, earning the admiration of everyone around. As Gvozdev shared with his sweetheart Anyuta: "He is a hero, Anyuta. […] Such power of will: he bites his lips until they bleed, but he keeps going."[314] Presented as a simple cantilena, the theme balances out Aleksey's tormented psyche, as well as contrasting with the 'real man theme' and the surrounding musical environment.

Prokofiev's use of the same musical theme in these contexts suggests two significant points. Firstly, the theme, though predominantly linked to Ol'ga, does not solely possess romantic undertones, but reinforces the symbolic unity between the images of Ol'ga and home. More specifically, the theme evokes Aleksey's recollections of the pre-war happiness, hence making Ol'ga stand as a symbol of home and a joyful life removed from the front lines. On the other hand, the theme's pronounced association with Ol'ga leads her to appear somewhat monotonous and almost caricatured. The repetition of the same musical idea in developing Ol'ga's musical profile only reinforces the notion that her role in Aleksey's life, as well as in general, is one-dimensional, and her path of growth linear.

Similar to Ol'ga, other women in *The Story of a Real Man* play a supporting role, both in the sense of being 'secondary' characters and in their primary function of offering support to male characters. It almost appears that the graphic description Aleksey provides at the beginning of the opera in the scene "Death Field" (Act I, No. 2)—depicting a nurse attempting to shield an injured soldier from an attack with her own body—is a symbol of female virtue and the women's role within the opera. Upon Aleksey's discovery by the boys in the forest and his return to the kolkhoz, everyone is eager to assist him, despite their own limited resources. However, when Grandfather Mikhaylo, the kolkhoz chairman, asks Vasilisa to sacrifice her only chicken and prepare soup for the starving Aleksey, she initially declines the request with frustration. Yet, she later changes her mind and indeed prepares the soup for him. Upon Aleksey's gratitude, she explains: "My children are also

314 Prokofiev, *The Story of a Real Man*, p. 136. Original Russian text: Вот он герой, Анюта. [...] Этакая силища воли: до крови губы кусает, а идёт.

fighting in the war. Maybe someone is also offering them some soup."[315] As Mikhaylo comments in his aria: "This bird was her only joy. Oh, women! You're beyond measure! Our women will share their last penny. But the tongue, oh, the women's tongue!"[316]

Additionally, while nurse Klavdiya, often referred to as the "Soviet angel," plays a substantial role in the life of her patients, the audience learns very little about her. The opera provides limited insight into her relationship with the Commissar, in contrast to the novel where their romantic connection is explicit. Another prominent female character is Anyuta, a young student who falls in love with the tank driver Gvozdev. Despite Gvozdev's injuries in battle resulting in severe facial scars, Anyuta continues to accept him lovingly. Her love, as noted by nurse Klavdiya, revitalizes the wounded soldier: "One can hardly recognize him since Anyuta appeared. He was brought to us terribly burnt, saved from a burning tank. Our Grisha was at death's door."[317]

The women in *The Story of a Real Man* serve as embodiments of the most fundamental virtues, with their primary role being to aid in the healing process, but also to facilitate the metamorphosis of their male counterparts, particularly Aleksey, into real men. Members of the kolkhoz, especially Vasilisa with her evident maternal selflessness, contribute to his initial recovery before he is transported to Moscow. Similarly, Klavdiya is present to heal and uplift the injured soldiers. Anyuta plays a role in supporting Gvozdev as he strives to regain his confidence despite his injuries. Even though Ol'ga is predominantly portrayed as a memory residing in Aleksey's subconscious, she fulfils a similar function. Ol'ga is transcendent and omnipresent, potentially symbolizing the overarching concept of a waiting woman, not just for Aleksey, but for every Soviet soldier engaged in the same battle.

As explained by Krylova, although Soviet writers responded to the new wartime reality by redefining their mission and the overarching purpose of literature, articulating their new role in the postwar society as that of "healers and doctors,"[318] the healing narratives within their artistic output were frequently ascribed to female characters. This is also evident in Prokofiev's opera, where every female character assumes such a role in various ways. As further noted by Krylova, the incorporation of Soviet women into healing

315 Ibid., pp. 59–60. Original Russian text: Мои-то тоже воюют. Может, им тоже кто-нибудь супчику даст.

316 Ibid., p. 63. Original Russian text: Одна утеха была ей — эта птица. Эх, бабы, бабы! Цены вам, бабы, нету! Она последнее отдаст, баба-то наша.Только язык этот бабий, ох, язык!

317 Ibid., pp. 108–109. Original Russian text: Не узнать его с той поры, как появилась Анюта. Привезли к нам его, обожженного, из танка горящего вынули. На грани жизни и смерти Гриша наш был.

318 Krylova, "Healers of Wounded Souls," p. 314.

narratives was crucial for resolving the war-induced identity crisis faced by traumatized and incapacitated soldiers.[319] In fear of burdening Ol'ga with the truth about his condition and jeopardizing her memory of him, Aleksey refrains from disclosing his present state to her, although she eventually learns about it through other means. She accepts Aleksey's condition without hesitation and loves him unconditionally. As Krylova elucidates further:

> Images of wives welcoming mutilated and traumatized husbands and fiancé's home functioned as a promise and hope for men and as a suggestion and instruction to women. Women were to recognize in deformed, mutilated men their former masculine selves, to see in them their former strength and beauty, and to provide of their own healthy body parts substitutes for those missing or dysfunctional.[320]

Another notable characteristic of Soviet healing narratives is the absence of direct exploration of female war trauma. As explained by Krylova, literature of that era sought to counterbalance troubled male characters with women who were physically sound and psychologically cohesive, ready to nurture and contribute their life forces.[321] Evidently, the experience of trauma and its artistic portrayal were primarily reserved for men. Acknowledging female suffering could potentially jeopardize their role as healers, leaving a void in that narrative function. Krylova asserts that the post-war emphasis on "the private sphere as the healing place" and the portrayal of women as "social therapists of traumatized male souls" essentially led to the minimization of women's actual contributions on the front. In reality, Soviet women joined the Red Army in active combat roles such as pilots and snipers, but also assumed traditionally "male" occupations, transgressing gender norms "in ways that were exceptional among the belligerent nations."[322]

Contrary to the implications of Ol'ga's stage presence, her life undergoes changes over time, as revealed through her correspondence with Aleksey. Even though she remains distant from the audience's view, the young girl who once stood on the banks of the Volga, a mere fleeting memory in Aleksey's mind, transforms into a Soviet soldier. While unfolding behind the curtains, her metamorphosis is indeed significant. Ol'ga's military involvement is not, however, presented as astonishing or uncommon, given that female participation in war and war-related activities was no longer regarded as an unusual occurrence. In a discussion about female

319 Ibid., p. 324.
320 Ibid.
321 Ibid., p. 310.
322 Ibid., p. 325.

characters in Russian literature depicting World War II, literary scholar Xenia Gasiorowska asserts that female military activities became somewhat normalized. Specifically, while they might still get "extra credit for heroism," in general terms, and assuming gender equality, "Soviet women's active participation in the war, however heroic, is no more than what is expected of them."[323]

We learn about Ol'ga's enlistment in the army through a letter Aleksey writes to her (Act III, No. 30): "You've transformed as well: no longer in that cheerful, vibrant attire, amidst a sea of white daisies, but in a military shirt amidst your native Volga steppe. You're now alongside Kamïshin girls, constructing fortifications."[324] Interestingly, as the audience, we do not get to hear about this development from her perspective. On the other hand, in their final duet at the opera's conclusion, we do learn that Aleksey finds her even more endearing now, wearing her military uniform and bearing the Order of the Red Star.

2.4.4 Romantic Relationships Lacking Romance

A romantic relationship, whether it serves as an axis of the operatic plot or not, can reveal a lot about the perception of gender and gender norms. Therefore, the central relationship in *The Story of a Real Man*, despite appearing stereotypical and straightforward at first glance, should not be ignored. However, even though Aleksey's and Ol'ga's relationship is of a romantic nature, the audience never gains insight into the more intimate aspects of their romance, nor do they witness emotional outpourings to the extent commonly seen in a classic Western opera. One reason for this could be purely circumstantial, as Aleksey and Ol'ga are not reunited until the end of the opera. However, there are certainly more factors influencing the nature of their relationship than mere physical distance. The key to understanding its nature lies in the literary conventions of the time, as well as in the puritanism of Stalinist society.

Clark identifies three primary variants of love plots in Soviet literary narratives. The first variant involves a relationship where the object of affection is more mature than the protagonist. In this scenario, the mature character

323 Xenia Gasiorowska, *Women in Soviet Fiction, 1917–1964*, Madison, WI 1968, pp. 158–159.

324 Prokofiev, *The Story of a Real Man*, pp. 155–157. Original Russian text: Оля, ты поймешь меня, все поймешь, родная. Ты сама теперь иная: не в том веселом, пестром платье, не в россыпи белых звездочек-ромашек, а в военной гимнастерке в степи родной приволжской, вместе с камышинскими девушками ты строиш теперь укрепления.

becomes a source of guidance and serves as a role model for the hero. Another variation centers around the woman assuming the role of a vixen or temptress, thereby challenging the hero with his own sexual desires, which he must overcome to achieve his ultimate goal. The final variant, upon which this particular plotline is built, explores a narrative where the hero faces trials in a world devoid of female attachments. "He may have a loved one, but, because of specific circumstances—the war, their being posted to different stations, illness, etc.—she is not present in his world for the period of the trials. The author may well see fit to reunite the couple for the happy finale."[325] It is precisely the moment of homecoming and reunion with the family that served as a motivating force for those fighting on the front. As explained by McCallum, the family was also called upon to contribute to the war effort: "In the indistinct boundaries between the home and the front, familial relations were cast as a motivation for fighting for those in the forces, and as part of a rhetoric of both support and of waiting for those who were left behind the lines."[326] According to Krylova, the "dream of postwar normality" and the "nostalgia for prewar private happiness" occupied a central position in public discourse, Soviet literature, and private correspondence right from the outset of World War II.[327] However, the idealized image of homecoming only loosely mirrored the harsh reality, as practically every Soviet citizen was affected by war losses and tragedies in some manner. For the majority of the Soviet population, the aspiration for "postwar normality" remained nothing more than an unattainable dream. As early as 1943, professionals in the literary field began to argue that the idealized image of family reunion was, in fact, an expression of the nation's profound anxiety over the post-war period.[328]

When considering the theme of romance through the perspective of Soviet homecoming narratives, the once puzzling question of maintaining pure and desexualized romantic ties no longer appears particularly enigmatic. The returning soldier is not reuniting with a romantic interest, but rather with his *family*. The woman symbolizes the normalcy of pre-war life and familial harmony. Another dimension of this assertion pertains to the previously mentioned fact that Aleksey is already an established Soviet citizen, likely older than the protagonists in early Soviet literature. Perhaps the tumultuous, adolescent-style romance is reserved for youthful heroes like Semyon Kotko or Lyon'ka, while the mature and composed Aleksey is unburdened by romantic intrigues, focusing resolutely on his Soviet military

325 Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 184.
326 McCallum, "The Return: Postwar Masculinity," p. 123.
327 Krylova, "Healers of Wounded Souls," p. 308.
328 Ibid., p. 310.

duty. This echoes Clark's explanation for why love serves as an "auxiliary ingredient" in Stalinist literary plotlines.

> The hero's love life is not valuable in itself; it serves only to aid him in fulfilling his tasks and in attaining "consciousness." This is so much the case that in the West the standard Stalinist plot has been somewhat snidely dismissed as "Boy gets tractor." This quip could be expanded slightly by the addition of "plus or minus girl." Whether he "gets girl" or not is of little importance as long as he gets "tractor," i.e., successfully completes his public task, which is inextricably tied to his quest for "consciousness." If he gets "girl" as well, this enhances the general glow of well being at the novel's end. If he does not, this loss becomes another of his sacrifices, and it serves to heighten the sense of his achievement in reaching the goal of his quest.[329]

Additionally, we can approach this issue from another perspective: considering the broader Stalinist cultural atmosphere that shaped concepts of love and sexuality, both in real life and literature, extending to the operatic realm as well. One of the factors contributing to downplaying the romantic aspects and relegating the romantic plotline to a subordinate position could be attributed to the puritanical nature of Stalinist era and Socialist Realism. As further explained by Clark: "When the hero does 'get the girl,' he cannot get her as an erotic object; she must be his spiritual companion and a means of adding to the new generation of the 'family.'"[330] In alignment with this puritanical cultural stance, imbuing Ol'ga with sexual connotations would almost tarnish her image. Drawing on the archetype of the waiting woman and eventual wife of Aleksey, not to mention her role as a Soviet soldier, she cannot be depicted in such a manner. Furthermore, if we adhere to already mentioned Clark's assertion that the narrative journey of the Soviet hero is rooted in the medieval genre of hagiography,[331] and view Aleksey's trajectory as akin to entering the ultimate Soviet sanctorale, the notion of Ol'ga as an erotic and sexualized object of desire becomes even more implausible.

Among all the Soviet heroines discussed in previous and upcoming chapters, Ol'ga stands out as a figure of utter flawlessness and serenity. She not only exists as an embodiment of a quintessential agent of healing, capable of mending even the most traumatized and ravaged human destinies, but also the glimpses of her background story suggest she embodies the ideal model of a Soviet citizen, willingly embracing the role of a soldier in the fight. Furthermore, while Prokofiev's Sof'ya from his opera *Semyon Kotko*, though possessing agency, fits the mold of a typical operatic ingenue, the

329 Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 182–183.
330 Ibid., p. 183.
331 Ibid., p. 47.

same cannot be said for Ol'ga. She lacks the childlike demeanor, impulsiveness, and borderline irrationality attributed to characters like Sof'ya or Khrennikov's Natasha from *Into the Storm*, as well as the comedic touch seen in Semyon Kotko's younger sister, Frosya. It is Ol'ga's linear and two-dimensional portrayal, combined with the absence of depth or character complexity, that allows her to embody the ideal Soviet heroine. Her two-dimensionality translates into a certain universality, making her not only Aleksey's Ol'ga but also a symbol of the ultimate perfect Soviet woman in general.

By representing a talisman of hope and fidelity, waiting not only for Aleksey but for every Soviet soldier, she, to some extent, reflects an even more regressive perspective on female representation than her predecessors. Although her background story arc challenges the notion of the inherent vulnerability of women, who are perceived as constantly dependent on male protection,[332] we cannot definitively categorize her martial agency as inherently feminist or empowering. Her martial agency, into which we received only a fleeting insight, serves only as another convenient means of supporting her character building as the quintessential Soviet woman and exemplary Soviet citizen, a worthy companion to the true embodiment of a real man, Aleksey.

2.5 Dmitry Kabalevsky's *The Taras Family* (1950)

Dmitry Kabalevsky stands as one of the most prominent Soviet and Russian composers of the twentieth century, marked by a distinct loyalty to the Socialist Realist doctrine and the ruling political establishment. This amalgamation of factors led him to secure the position of chief editor of *Sovetskaya muzïka* from 1940 to 1946. Additionally, from 1952 until his passing, he held a place on the governing board of the Union of Composers of the USSR. Alongside his music for children and youth, which garnered immense popularity within both the USSR and abroad, he dedicated a significant portion of his oeuvre to various genres of theater music. Of his five operas, three were imbued with the theme of Soviet patriotism, rooted in contemporary political events of epic magnitude. Kabalevsky's operas *V ogne* (*In the Fire*, 1943) and *Sem'ya Tarasa* (*The Taras Family*, 1947; rev. ed. 1950) delve into the events of World War II, while in *Nikita Vershinin* (1955) he used the Civil War as the foundation for the storyline.

Kabalevsky's opera in four acts, *The Taras Family*, was written to a libretto by Sergey Tsenin (1903–1978), adapting Boris Gorbatov's (1908–1954)

332 See McCallum, "The Return: Postwar Masculinity," p. 123.

1943 novella *Nepokoryonnïe* (*The Unvanquished*).[333] Tsenin, a reputable Soviet operatic singer, also gained recognition as a prolific author of numerous libretti,[334] including the one to Kabalevsky's aforementioned *Nikita Vershinin*. The initial version of Kabalevsky's opera was completed as early as 1947; however, the influence of Zhdanovshchina and the burdening revision of artistic expectations prompted Kabalevsky to significantly modify his work. Consequently, given the extent of Kabalevsky's revisions, Soviet critics contend that the new version should be treated as a distinct and independent opera.[335] It is precisely the 1950 rendition that will be the focus of this analysis. Indeed, as Schwarz notes, after 1948, making revisions to already written operas became a standard procedure. Apart from Kabalevsky, Yuly Meytus similarly presented a second version of his opera *The Young Guard* (1947; rev. ed. 1950) around the same time, as did Kostyantin Dan'kevich with his opera *Bogdan Khmel'nits'ky* (1951; rev. ed. 1953).[336]

According to Tarakanov, the beginning of the 1950s was marked by a certain sense of novelty in the evolutionary trajectory of Soviet opera. As an example of the composers' "non-standard artistic solutions," he points to the previously mentioned *The Young Guard* by Meytus, as well as Kabalevsky's *The Taras Family*. Further elaborating, he states that "the stamp of normative aesthetics was, of course, imprinted on these works as well. However, they notably attempt to distance themselves from the schematic plot and the straightforward poster-quality depiction of the lively nature of people."[337] It is important to note that Tarakanov's statement should be taken with a grain of salt. This caution is not due to substantial inaccuracies in his interpretation of Kabalevsky's opera, which can indeed undoubtedly be approached as an updated Stalinist patriotic opera from the late 1930s and 1940s. Instead, it stems from the fact that the endeavor to move away

333 Parallels can be drawn between Gorbatov's novella and Nikolay Gogol"s "Taras Bul'ba."

334 Moreover, he collaborated with various other Soviet composers such as Kirill Molchanov, Sergey Slonimsky, and Tikhon Khrennikov.

335 I͡Urii Keldysh, "Na puti opernogo realizma ('Sem'i͡a Tarasa' D. Kabalevskogo)," in: *Sovetskai͡a muzyka* 3 (1951), pp. 13–24, here p. 13.

336 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 260. Both Meytus and Dan'kevich are Soviet Ukrainian composer.

337 Tarakanov, "Opera 40-kh i 50-kh godov," p. 333. Original Russian text: [Лишль ближе к началу 50-х годов появились примечательные для своего времени сочинения, заключавшие в себе] нестандартные решения, [которые оживляли сйужетные схемы, выдержанные в духе сложившейся конъюнктуры.] [...] Печать нормативной эстетики, конечно, была оттиснута и на этих сочинениях. Но в них очевидны попытки отойти от сйужетной схемы, от прямолинейной плакатности в обрисовке живых характеров людей.

from the song opera genre and schematic plot is quite subtle, as evidenced by the opera's plot summary.

Kabalevsky's opera unfolds in Soviet Russia during World War II. Taras (bass), a retired factory foreman, bids farewell to his sons Stepan (baritone) and Andrey (tenor) as they depart for battle. Nastya (soprano), his young daughter, mourns the loss of her childhood and her separation from her sweetheart Pavlik (tenor). Taras' wife, Yevfrosin'ya (mezzo-soprano), and Antonina (soprano), the wife of Andrey, both pray for the safety of their loved ones as the factory workers decide to destroy the building rather than let it fall into the hands of Hitler's advancing army. Stepan leads the partisans operating behind enemy lines, while Pavlik is tasked with destroying the German headquarters located in their former school. In an ecstatic reunion, Taras joins his son. After Stepan describes the latest Red Army offensive, Taras returns to the village. Unexpectedly, Andrey escapes from a German prison camp and returns home. However, Taras is ashamed of his son's perceived cowardice, prompting Andrey to realize his mistake and rejoin the battle. A ball takes place in the German headquarters. Nastya keeps watch while Pavlik and the others set explosives. Following a successful attack, Pavlik and Nastya confess their love, and as he departs, she envisions their future happiness. Yet, Nastya is captured by the Germans who are aware of her involvement in the school explosion. They pressure her to reveal the names of her co-conspirators. Despite her mother's protests, they take her away for execution. The subsequent morning brings triumphant Russian troops, accompanied by Andrey, who has restored his honor.[338]

Although *The Taras Family* was among the rare operas of the decade following 1948 that were performed at multiple theaters[339] and the reviews generally carried an apologetic, if not somewhat positive, tone, the opera did not escape criticism. What is evident when examining the assessments of Kabalevsky's opera in *Sovetskaya muzïka* is that it found itself in the midst of a comprehensive discussion concerning the broader evolutionary trajectory of Soviet opera. Despite the somewhat warm reception of Kabalevsky's work, it was also often used as an illustration of what the new Soviet opera should avoid.

To illustrate, the titular character faced critique for not embodying the essence of authentic Soviet citizens, and moreover, for appearing excessively artificial and lacking psychological depth. For instance, musicologist Georgy Khubov asserted that Taras fails to unfold "with the complete

338 See Dmitriĭ Kabalevskiĭ, *Sem'i͡a Tarasa. Opera v 4-kh deĭstvii͡akh 8-i kartinakh. Libretto S. T͡Senina (Po povesti B. Gorbatova "Nepokorennye"). Perelozhenie dli͡a penii͡a s fortepiano*, Moscow 1955.

339 Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 301.

integrity and stark simplicity of a hero's resolute and robust nature," and that Kabalevsky placed him "in an unrealistic relationship with reality."[340] Taras, meant to embody the "flesh and blood of the working class," suffers from unconvincing ties and connections to real Soviet people, not to mention his fear restraining him from patriotic action, which seems devoid of genuine motivation.[341] As concluded by Khubov: "Is such psychological ambivalence characteristic of constructing the image of an elderly cadre Soviet worker? Certainly not."[342]

Evidently, the question of Soviet operatic psychology emerged as a pressing concern in the early 1950s, prompting numerous Soviet musicologists to contribute their sometimes contrasting insights to this newly arising conundrum. In her article, musicologist Tamara Livanova presents a critique of contemporary Soviet opera, cautioning readers that "the challenge of crafting vibrant individual characters, depicting the images of the new Soviet people in opera demand special attention."[343] She asserts that all the individual characters in Kabalevsky's opera, particularly in their musical portrayals, lack distinction and specificity.[344]

Lyudmila Polyakova offers a similar observation to Livanova's and identifies the development of individual Soviet characters as the "Achilles' heel of Soviet operatic production," further highlighting the unsuccessful attempts to delve into the depths and complexities of the inner worlds of operatic protagonists, and simultaneously admitting the futility of the song

340 Georgiĭ Khubov, "Muzyka i sovremennost' (O zadachakh razvitiĭa sovetskoĭ muzyki)," in: *Sovetskaĭa muzyka* 3 (1953), pp. 3–12, here p. 11. Original Russian text: [К сожалению, Тарас в опере Д. Кабалевского еще далек от этого жизненного идеала:] он не раскрывается во всей цельности и суровой простоте прямодушной и сильной натуры героя. [Композитор слишком выпятил и растянул изображение «душевного надлома» Тараса и тем самым поставил своего героя] в ложное отношение к действительности.

341 Ibid. Original Russian text: [Тарас —] кровь от крови, плоть от плоти рабочего класса, [а между тем в опере его жизненные связи с народом выявлены недостаточно глубоко и убедительно.]

342 Ibid. Original Russian text: Характерна ли, типична ли такая психологическая половинчатость в образе
старого кадрового советского рабочего? Конечно, нет.

343 Tamara Livanova, "Kharakter geroiĭa i opernaiĭa ariiĭa," in: *Sovetskaĭa muzyka* 8 (1951), pp. 10–18, here pp. 10–11. Original Russian text: [Опыт советских композиторов за последнее время ясно показал, что] проблема создания ярких индивидуальных характеров, сильных образов новых советских ских людей в опере требует к себе особенного внимания.

344 Ibid., p. 13.

being employed as the main mean of character building in opera.[345] In her text, Polyakova proclaims: "Authors and directors frequently overlook a fundamental aspect. Portraying characters in familiar attire and surrounding them with the everyday elements of a contemporary city or village on the operatic stage does not signify innovation or realism."[346] She proceeds by posing a question: "Why do our composers allocate so little attention to lyrical-psychological genres? Personal relationships, emotional experiences of Soviet individuals, intense internal conflicts, and the clash between new Soviet morality and vestiges of the past—aren't these all viable operatic themes? What immense potential for music!"[347] In contrast to the critical stance of Livanova, Polyakova envisions considerable potential in Kabalevsky's portrayal of the opera's protagonists and concludes that he *could* succeed in crafting a lyrical-psychological opera.[348]

While Kabalevsky's opera was not immune to the contemporary yearning for novelty, or at the very least, a perceived need for it, some Soviet musicologists nonetheless acknowledged the profound psychological depth of *The Taras Family*. Among the favorable critics, musicologist Lev Danilevich asserts that "the composer aimed to delve deeply into the inner world of his characters," resulting in "the tremendous psychological richness of the music."[349] Curiously, within the same context, he presents a thought-provoking stance by suggesting that the epic elements assume a subordinate role in Kabalevsky's opera.[350] Although one might swiftly disagree with Danilev-

345 Lı͡udmila Polı͡akova, "Sovremennaı͡a tema v opere," in: *Sovetskaı͡a muzyka* 10 (1954), pp. 45–52, here p. 51. Original Russian text: [Что касается индивидуальной характеристики образов советских людей, то это едва ли не] «ахиллесова пята» советского оперного творчества.

346 Ibid., p. 46. Original Russian text: Авторы и постановщики нередко забывают об одном существенном обстоятельстве. Изобразить на оперной сцене людей в привычном для нас платье, окруженных бытовыми атрибутами современного города или деревни, — это еще не новаторство и не реализм.

347 Ibid., p. 48. Original Russian text: Почему же наши композиторы так мало внимания уделяют лирико-психологическим жанрам? Личные взаимоотношения, душевные переживания советских людей, вплоть до острых внутренних конфликтов, столкновение новой, советской морали с пережитками прошлого — разве все это не темы для опер? И какой здесь огромный простор для музыки!

348 Ibid., p. 49.

349 Lev Danilevich, "Dmitriĭ Kabalevskiĭ (K 50-letiı͡u so dnı͡a rozhdeniı͡a)," in: *Sovetskaı͡a muzyka* 12 (1954), pp. 12–22, here p. 20. Original Russian text: [Показывая борьбу советских людей с гитлеровскими захватчиками,] композитор стремился глубоко раскрыть внутренний мир своих героев. Отсюда большая психологическая насыщенность музыки.

350 Ibid.

ich's observation, particularly given the significant presence of epics, heroics, and historicity in Kabalevsky's opera, his perspective should not be discarded as easily. Notably, the secondary positioning of epics and historicity is a trend that will become characteristic of the operas analyzed in the second section of this study. In this light, Kabalevsky's opera could genuinely signify a subtle progress in departing from the Stalinist norms and operatic conventions, and instead, moving toward the opera of the Thaw.

Upon reviewing the insights provided by contemporary Soviet critics, it proves challenging to arrive at a definitive conclusion regarding the exact position of Kabalevsky's opera concerning the psychological complexity of its characters. Indeed, is *The Taras Family* a rudimentary psychological opera, foretelling the forthcoming Thaw era, or does it merely serve as a modernized rendition of the patriotic opera prevalent during the Stalinist era, nevertheless featuring two-dimensional and simplistic characters? One certainty is evident: a clear-cut answer to this inquiry cannot be extracted solely from the writings of contemporary Soviet critics. For instance, while Danilevich acknowledges the considerable "psychological richness" within Kabalevsky's music and asserts that the role of the epics is secondary in the opera's dramaturgy, Yury Keldïsh recognizes the prominence of the folk style and the prevalence of choral scenes, culminating in the creation of a "generalized image of great national sorrow,"[351] and generalized depiction of the Soviet people in extent. Who are Kabalevsky's heroes—individual complex figures or generalized images playing out the epic occurrences of World War II always standing in the foreground? This question is standing on the threshold of another, and that is the issue of genre and melodic quality of Kabalevsky's opera.

2.5.1 The Limitations of the Song Opera

What immediately captures one's attention (or rather, the ear) upon studying the score of *The Taras Family* is the prevalence of song as the primary foundation and the propelling force of the entire opera. Kabalevsky draws evident inspiration from the folk musical heritage, with his characters communicating through the folk-infused musical idiom not only to the audience but also to each other, often expressing themselves via songs within the diegesis. Instances of such diegetic operatic music include the 'farewell song' initially introduced at the outset of the first act, Antonina's lullaby (Act I,

351 Keldysh, "Na puti opernogo realizma," p. 19. Original Russian text: [На основе интонаций, родственных протяжным народным песням, Кабалевский создает] обобщенный образ великого народного горя.
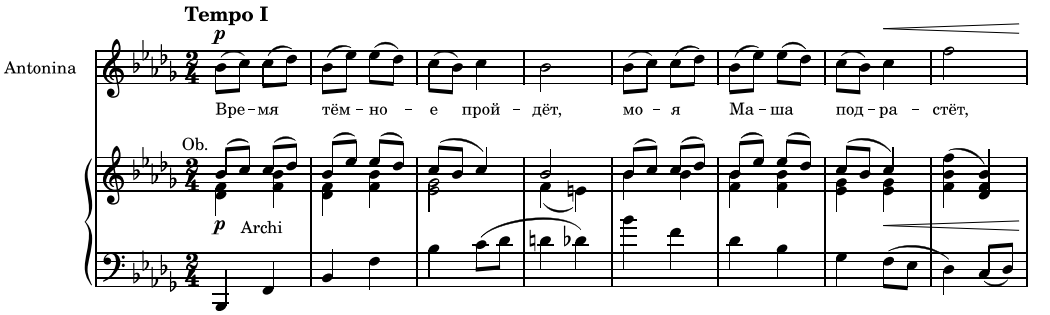
Figure 17. *The Taras Family*, Act I, Tableau 2, rehearsal mark 7, p. 68.
Translation: Antonina: The dark times will pass, and my Masha will grow up, [...]

Tableau 2), Stepan's partisan song (Act II, Tableau 3), and numerous choral interludes dispersed throughout the opera. Listing each instance of a song within the opera is perhaps superfluous, as it is not an anomaly warranting specific attention and dissection, but instead represents a consistent trend of significant structural importance.

To exemplify Kabalevsky's alignment with the accessible, song-like musical idiom, let us delve deeper into, for instance, the formerly mentioned Antonina's lullaby (Fig. 17). The straightforward diatonic melody based in B-flat minor (though as the melody unfolds, Kabalevsky introduces a major instead of a minor third, imbuing it with a hint of a Phrygian dominant scale) encompasses a relatively modest range and predominantly stepwise melodic motion. This aptly mirrors the intimate context and the tender bond between a mother and her young child. Additionally, by observing the accompaniment in the fourth measure, one observes that it is rooted in a major sixth progressing into a diminished seventh chord. Rather than sounding dominant, tense, or in need of resolution, it exudes a more modal quality, evoking the essence of the Ukrainian Dorian scale, highlighted by the distinctive tritone between the first and fourth grade.

Another instance of direct reference to the folk tradition that reinforces the opera's national affiliation is found in Nazar's fable (Fig. 18). Notably, it was Tsenin and Kabalevsky themselves who opted to immerse in the long-standing Russian tradition of this genre, given that the episode did not originally appear in Gorbatov's text.[352] Within his fable, Nazar ingeniously expresses his dissent towards Taras' hesitancy to join the fight by recounting a story of villagers confronting a bear, serving as a representation of the occupier. The melody essentially sketches the minor tonic chord, its vivacity

352 For the full text of the novella, see Boris Gorbatov, *Sobranie sochineniĭ v chetyrekh tomakh*, vol. 3, Alekseĭ Ternovskiĭ (ed.), Moscow 1988.
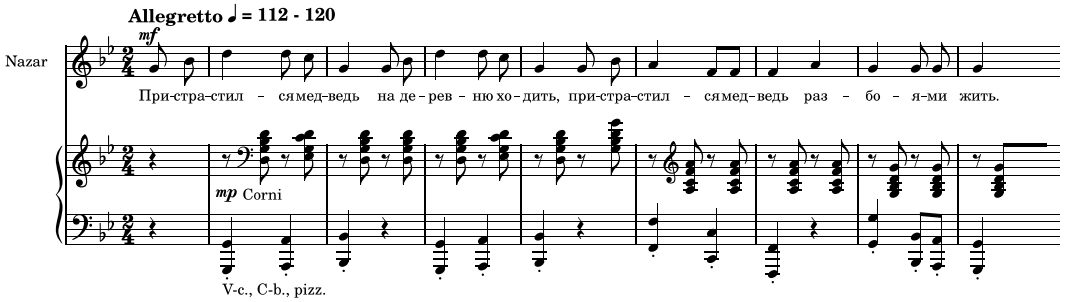
Figure 18. *The Taras Family*, Act I, Tableau 2, rehearsal mark 50, p. 87.
Translation: Nazar: A bear got used to visit a village, a bear got used to live by robbery.

and freshness accentuated by the pizzicato strings and a straightforward harmonic accompaniment based on a tonic and dominant interplay.

Nevertheless, the Kabalevsky's work found itself embroiled in another significant discourse regarding Soviet opera, albeit this time revolving not around psychology, but rather the concept of *pesennost'*, which surprisingly has a deeper connection to the former than one might initially anticipate. Specifically, as asserted by Keldïsh, the opera lacks a "fluid melodic progression," consequently resulting in a deficiency of direct and uninhibited emotional expression, as if the composer hesitated to be too candid.[353] To illustrate this point, he cites the final scene involving Nastya and Pavka, noting that while it exudes youthful purity and freshness, it retains a certain aloofness and excessive restraint in its expression.[354] Danilevich echoes a similar observation, suggesting that the composer does not consistently achieve "the seamless flow of the 'melodic current'," and that the "rigidity of melodic development" manifests in various segments of the opera.[355]

Within her assessment of Kabalevsky's opera, Livanova singles out a question, one she considers central, revolving around the opera's musical dramaturgy, or more precisely, "the question of the role of expansive aria forms in crafting vibrant character portrayals, in conveying their inner worlds."[356] Livanova demonstrates acute awareness of the seemingly par-

353 Keldysh, "Na puti opernogo realizma," p. 22. Original Russian text: [В опере недостает широкого,] свободно льющегося мелодического потока, [опирающегося на реалистическую песенность наших дней.]

354 Ibid.

355 Danilevich, "Dmitriĭ Kabalevskiĭ," p. 17. Original Russian text: К сожалению, композитор не везде достигает непрерывности «мелодического тока». [...] Примеры «недопетости», скованности мелодического развития встречаются и в других эпизодах оперы.

356 Livanova, "Kharakter geroi͡a," p. 12. Original Russian text: [Не вдаваясь в общую характеристику оперы Кабалевского, выделим лишь один вопрос

adoxical relationship between the opera's actual composition and its perception by contemporary Soviet critics. She notes that the opera faces criticism for its purported lack of melodic development and continuity, despite its abundance of songs. Similarly, the opera is criticized for its perceived lack of distinct national identity, even though it draws from songs inspired by the Russian folk melos.[357] What prompts this discord? As she concludes: "The crux of the matter does not lie in the generalized absence of melodic scope and national identity in 'The Taras Family'; such a claim would be erroneous. The essence of the issue lies in the central attributes and pivotal monologues of the opera's main characters—the indomitable Soviet people—often lacking the requisite vividness, melodic breadth, and national identity."[358] Further inquiry follows: "Where do the critical junctures of the main characters' musical segments emerge? At which junctures of the opera's unfolding are their personas unveiled?"[359] Despite her ability to identify several monologues throughout the opera, Livanova finds them to be devoid of distinctiveness. She contends that in terms of form, development, and melodic quality, they amount to "extended recitatives" rather than fully realized expansive aria forms.[360]

While engaging in a debate over Livanova's standpoint regarding the requirement of national identity in music and the objective necessity for extensive aria forms to reveal character psychology might be a fruitful possibility, it is hard to argue the overarching stand that intricate psychology is indeed lacking in Kabalevsky's opera. However, this issue already stems from the libretto. Although Stepan remains a linear and monotonous character, both Taras and Andrey do undergo a degree of growth and experience dramatic and emotional upheaval—especially evident in their shared scene upon Andrey's return from a German prisoner camp—yet they

ее музыкальной драматургии —] вопрос о значении крупных ариозных форм в создании ярких образов героев, в передаче их душевного мира.

357 Ibid.

358 Ibid., p. 13. Original Russian text: Суть дела здесь заключается совсем не в том, что в «Семье Тараса» вообще мало мелодической широты и национальной определенности: это утверждение было бы неверным. Суть дела состоит в том, что центральные характеристики героических образов, ответственнейшие монологи главных героев оперы — непокоренных советских людей — в большинстве своем недостаточно ярки, не обладают необходимой мелодической широтой и национальной определенностью.

359 Ibid. Original Russian text: Где же находятся центральные эпизоды партий главных героев? В каких моментах оперного действия раскрываются их характеры?

360 Ibid. Original Russian text: Это как бы расширенные речитативы — как по типу мелодии, так и по методу развития и структуре целого (незамкнутая форма без повторений и периодичностей).

remain insufficiently specific and developed. Although the motives behind Andrey's actions are rather clear, the same cannot be said for Taras. The reasons behind his initial reluctance to join the fight at the opera's outset remain ambiguous. Despite Kabalevsky's apparent aspiration to craft complex and multidimensional characters, this endeavor falls short. The characters read more like stereotypes than individuals with genuine depth, as echoed in the conclusions of contemporary critics.

While reviewing the contemporary Soviet critiques of the opera, a notable emphasis on Taras is evident. This focus is not entirely unexpected, considering he is the titular hero of the opera. However, perhaps our attention should shift from Taras to his family, specifically his three children. While delving into the opera, a lingering sentiment arises that it was originally meant to primarily address the youth. Nonetheless, due to the composer's vision being inadequately executed, this intention becomes obscure to the audience. Perhaps the key to deciphering Kabalevsky's opera resides in Stepan, Andrey, and Nastya—the representatives of the emerging young Soviet generation and their contribution to the battle against Hitler's forces.

2.5.2 Ode to the Brave Soviet Youth

The central issue with *The Taras Family* lies in the fact that, despite its potent subject matter, Kabalevsky and Tsenin did not manage to construct a convincing narrative. Various conclusions can be drawn, and ambitious interpretations of the opera's true essence can be offered, but it remains challenging to substantiate these claims based on the provided text or music. It would be easy to propose, for instance, that the opera revolves around a representative of an older generation attempting to grapple with the vast political upheavals. Alternatively, one might posit that the work deals with the generational divide, wherein a representative of the older generation recognizes the need to guide and educate the new generation along their path of safeguarding the Soviet motherland. Nevertheless, both of these potential interpretations lack solid evidence within the text or music; they are speculative at best.

While Taras is the titular protagonist of Kabalevsky's opera and plays an important role in the libretto as a connecting element, he is hardly the true hero of his own opera, nor is he its primary dramatic and musical focus. The chief distinction that sets him apart from the other Soviet operatic heroes explored in previous chapters is his age and status. Unlike some of the other men who stand at the threshold of their revolutionary metamorphosis and are about to embark on their adult lives, he is already at its dawn—being a father of three children and a grandfather as well. He

finds himself in the midst of World War II, implying that he has already settled into life under the regime. His struggles differ from those of characters like Khrennikov's Lyon'ka or Prokofiev's Semyon Kotko, who are torn between individual needs and collective ones. Right from the beginning of the opera, he is preoccupied with concerns for his homeland as much as for the well-being of his family. Furthermore, to continue the line of surface-level attributes that set him apart from the other heroes, and following the thread of the latter observation, his revolutionary involvement is not closely tied to romantic intrigue or romantic interests. Taras is already an established family man and is not preoccupied with 'getting the girl.' Naturally, it is not the absence of these mentioned characteristics that prevents Taras from being perceived as a hero. However, his age and status serve as significant narrative elements in Kabalevsky's opera, making him stand out in contrast to the youth-focused Stalinist operas where adults often play subordinate roles.

To refine the scope of these comparisons, we should position Taras in relation to Prokofiev's Aleksey from *The Story of a Real Man*. This is not only because the two operas were composed around the same time but also because the two characters share crucial similarities. Similar to Aleksey, Taras is already a seasoned Soviet individual, demonstrating a greater awareness of communal needs in contrast to the protagonists of the early Stalinist operatic repertoire. Unfortunately, his hesitations about joining the fight can only be speculated upon, as no substantial motivations are deeply explored. Eventually, he validates his worth and loyalty to the regime by refusing to aid in the construction of tanks for Hitler's army. He sustains severe injuries in doing so. Moreover, a significant part of his contribution to the regime lies in the fact that he has raised three exemplary Soviet children. He continues to guide and instruct them, even when they veer off course. However, the impending struggle faced by his community is not his to engage in—he yields that role to the younger generation, offering paternal guidance and support.

Perhaps it would be productive to step back and approach the opera as a memento, a tableau of an extended Soviet family grappling with political turmoil and urgent societal demands. Here, different generations and individuals strive to function amid perilous circumstances, with their characters and personalities put to the test by the collective anxiety stemming from imminent danger. Moreover, as mentioned previously, one could suggest that the focus of analysis should shift from Taras to his family, particularly his three children. Indeed, while Taras, a somewhat ambiguous figure to the audience, copes with the grand political changes in his own manner, the same can be said for his three children—Stepan, Andrey, and Nastya. Each of them responds differently within the hazardous environment, striving to

contribute in any way possible. The portrayal of the revolutionary youth is arguably the most striking aspect of *The Taras Family*, as it is precisely their agency that culminates in a minor victory by the opera's conclusion.

The use of the three-sibling trope, where each individual is markedly distinct from the others and the intricate web of their relationships serves as the foundation of the plot, is not a novelty in Russian literary tradition. Notable examples include Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* or Chekhov's play *The Three Sisters*. However, in this case, the complex interplay between the siblings is not the central focus, as Kabalevsky's protagonists maintain relatively harmonious and balanced relationships. The opera's conflict, in a true Stalinist manner, is more of external than internal nature, centered around the War and the clash of opposing forces.

Stepan, ostensibly the eldest of the trio, assumes the role of the composed, pragmatic, and rational sibling, wholly dedicated to the regime and the fight against Hitler's army. Among the three, he stands out as the steady and dependable one, also taking on the mantle of leadership and organization in the youths' martial activities. He vulnerably recounts his experiences from the front to his father in a monologue (Act II, Tableau 3): "At first it was difficult... How difficult it was... The earth seemed to be crawling out from under my feet... How can one hide one's anger when one's soul screams and cries? How to speak the truth in full voice when enemies are all around?"[361] While Soviet music critics sometimes refer to this specific monologue as an aria, and it certainly conveys the growing tension of the situation Stepan recalls and recounts, one could easily argue that it lacks any distinctive musical quality. His narration concludes with a description of the elation brought about by victory, culminating in his in-diegesis performance of a partisan song "Oh, the forests are so impenetrable" (Fig. 19). According to Livanova, the unexpected trajectory of Stepan's monologue, culminating in the rendition of a partisan song, results in the portrayal of a "generalized characteristic" rather than an individual one.[362] This contrasts with what might typically be anticipated from an operatic monologue. Interestingly, this is not the only instance where Kabalevsky assigns a "generalized" song as the pinnacle of a monologue or arioso for his characters—a

361 Kabalevskiĭ, *Sem'i͡a Tarasa*, pp. 134–135. Original Russian text: В начале было трудно... Ох, как трудно... Казалось, уползает из-под ног земля... Как злобу скрыть свою, когда душа кричит и плачет? Как полным голосом о правде говорить когда кругом враги?

362 Livanova, "Kharakter geroi͡a," p. 17. Original Russian text: [И когда, в конце монолога, глубокое и сильное чувство должно полностью овладеть Степаном, он запевает партизанскую песню, т. е., как и Настя, получает не] индивидуальную, а общую характеристику.

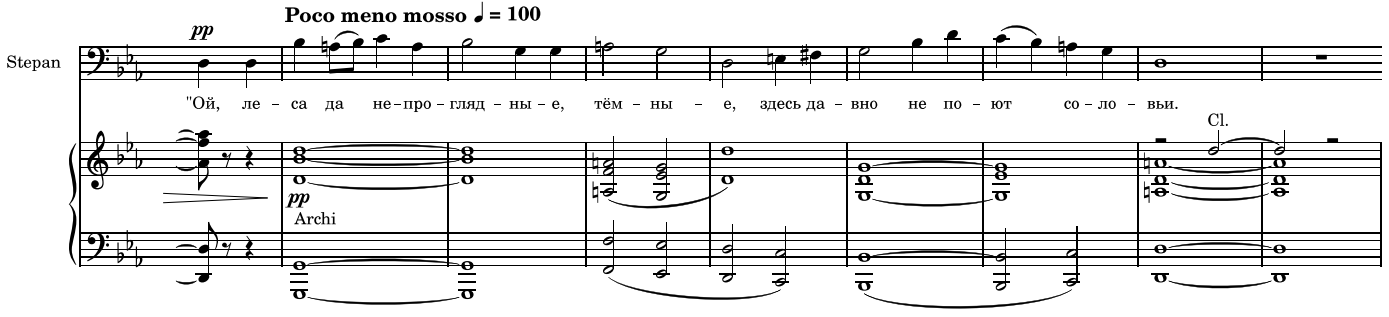

Figure 19. *The Taras Family*, Act II, Tableau 3, rehearsal mark 47, p. 141.

Translation: Stepan: Oh, the forests are so impenetrable, so dark, it's been a long time since the nightingales sang here.

similar approach was taken with Pavka and Nastya, as will be discussed further in the chapter.

Despite Stepan's inclusion within the younger generation, he is perceived as older than his peers, occupying the roles of both their partisan leader and moral pillar. In the seventh scene of the fourth act, which unfolds during a Komsomol meeting hosted at Taras' residence, Stepan addresses the central themes of the opera—those of lost youth and the significance of the fight. He remarks: "You may not have lived in this world for many years, yet you have encountered much. With your own hands, you've earned the privilege to live, and now this life shall become a hundredfold more splendid, a hundredfold more precious!"[363]

In contrast to Stepan, who is a steady and unchanging character, Andrey, married to Antonina and already a father, undergoes the most significant and dramatic transformation among all the characters. Overcoming his fear of losing his life, he flees from the German prisoners' camp and returns home. However, instead of receiving a warm welcome, he faces harsh ostracism from his angered father. This event marks the climactic pinnacle of the opera. Interestingly, amid the familial turmoil, it is Nastya who aligns with Taras and perceives Andrey's return in the same light as he does, rejecting her sister-in-law's pleas to take her brother's side. Andrey's candid explanation of his fear results in one of the sincerest moments in the libretto: "Do you think this captivity was easy for me? Maybe I cursed myself a hundred times for not dying. Dying would be easier..."[364] This particular segment offers one of the most intricate psychological depiction in the entire opera, arguably the only one of its kind. Andrey's emotional state transitions from joy and relief to utter despair due to his father's denouncement. While it is difficult to ignore the overarching impression of Taras' hypocrisy, his intervention ultimately prompts Andrey to regain his composure and recognize his error. This sets the stage for Andrey's triumphant return towards the conclusion of the opera, alongside the Red Army troops.

However, among the three siblings, Nastya is arguably the most perplexing and vivid, warranting a more in-depth analysis. First of all, she is a part of the sole (romantic) relationship explored in the opera—the one she cultivates with her comrade Pavka. This is not to suggest that romantic intrigue is a prerequisite for creating a fertile landscape to explore interpersonal

363 Kabalevskiĭ, *Sem'ia Tarasa*, p. 296–297. Original Russian text: Не много лет вы на свете прожили, а много вам пережить довелось. Своими руками отвоевали вы право на жизнь, и сейчас эта жизнь станет для вас в сто раз прекрасней, в сто раз дороже!

364 Ibid., p. 197. Original Russian text: Думаешь, мне этот плен легко дался? Я, может, сам себя сто раз проклял, что не помер. Помереть легче...

relationships on stage. Nevertheless, within Kabalevsky's opera, the majority of characters, although interlinked with their surroundings, lack truly intricate, complex, and deeply intimate relationships with one another. The only instance of interpersonal conflict that unfolds on stage is the already mentioned clash between Taras and Andrey. While she may appear as a highly predictable and stereotypical character, embodying traits of being 'perfect' and linear, akin to Stepan, Nastya also encapsulates the opera's principal themes more profoundly than anyone else. Beyond representing the partisan Soviet youth with her purity and daring acts of bravery, she also symbolizes the conclusion of childhood and the entry into the realm of adulthood.

2.5.3 Nastya—Reckless Revolutionary Teenager or a New Vision of Soviet Femininity?

Nastya resides at the tumultuous juncture of multiple contrasting narrative realms. She occupies the space between childhood and adulthood, the gore present and the wonderful future, between the lyrical and the epical, and finally, the individual and the collective. One of the most perplexing subjects explored in the opera is the theme of growing up, and subsequently, Nastya's placement on the tremulous divide between childhood and adulthood. The term 'tremulous' is used here to underscore that this generational transition was not a natural outcome of the organic process of growing up. Instead, it was catalyzed by World War II and the overarching anxiety that affected not only Nastya but the entire community. We are introduced to Nastya at the very beginning of the first act. She is at home alongside her girlfriends, contemplating the unnerving silence outside and surmising that the enemy must be in proximity. Through her monologue, she mourns the conclusion of her school years and bids farewell to both her school and her friends, stating: "Today I went to say goodbye to my school... With my desk, my school yard..."[365] Her monologue intensifies as she voices the sentiments of an anonymous mournful voice from within the school, declaring: "It has ended! Our childhood has ended, and so have our childhood dreams! That's right! What kind of children are we... We are all adults today, and today we live differently, and now our dreams are about something else."[366] The symbolism of the school as a reminder of shattered

365 Ibid., p. 21–22. Original Russian text: Я сегодня со школой прощаться бегала... Со своей партой, со школьным садом...

366 Ibid., p. 24–25. Original Russian text: «Кончилось! Кончилось наше детство, детские наши мечты!» Верно! Какие мы дети... Все мы сегодня взрослые, и

Soviet childhood becomes even more potent when we discover that their very school has been transformed into the Nazi headquarters. Moreover, the school's symbolism as a pivotal locus, a site of transformation, gains even greater resonance as it is Nastya who ultimately becomes involved in its fiery destruction, subsequently leading to her own demise.

In a manner analogous to Stepan, whose dramatic monologue evolved into a collective song, Nastya's similarly transcends the individual realm. As she bids farewell to her girlfriends, a metaphorical departure from their carefree youth, she commences singing what, for the purpose of this analysis, can be termed the 'farewell song'—a pivotal musical theme in her portrayal, as well as one of the most resounding themes throughout the entire opera (Fig. 20).

Nastya revisits the farewell song once more further in the act (Tableau 2),[367] and, on this occasion, her singing is overheard by Taras and Yevfrosin'ya. The latter affectionately comments on Nastya's beauty and maturation. However, Taras somberly expresses his apprehension about her potential demise, causing his wife to worry. This dialogue propels Yevfrosin'ya into an aria-like monologue, where she laments Nastya's lost childhood. Yet, she concludes with an optimistic and tender note: "She will live and blossom without worries, without grief, without tears, she will be solace and support, solace and support to us during our elderly years..."[368]

Yevrosin'ya's statement not only places Nastya at the threshold of adulthood but also envisions her potential future—a bright one devoid of the tragedy of war. However, Yevfrosin'ya is not the sole character who regards Nastya as a window into the future. The theme of the impending future permeates most of the dialogues between Nastya and her sweetheart, Pavka. In their brief exchange in the first act (Tableau 1), they firmly express their

другим мы сегодня живём, и о другом нынче наши мечты: [...].

367 The same farewell song resurfaces once again in the fourth act (Tableau 7), during a Komsomol gathering at the Taras residence. Following Stepan's proclamation concerning the loss of youth and the imperative to fight, and Pavka's optimistic assertions that a future lies ahead for them all, Pavka's monologue, in a manner typical of this opera, evolves into him commencing the farewell song from the opera's outset. This time, however, the song is presented in an extended format, serving as a more direct farewell to childhood compared to its previous iterations, and performed by both Pavka and Nastya, followed by a choir: "Farewell, childhood years, you will never return. We, Soviet schoolchildren, are embarking on a long journey." Ibid., p. 310. Original Russian text: Прощайте, годы детские, вас больше не вернуть. Мы, школьники советские, уходим в дальний путь.

368 Ibid., pp. 82–83. Original Russian text: Будет жить да цвести без заботы, без горя, без слёз, будет нам, старикам, утешеньем, опорой, утешеньем, опорой на старости лет...
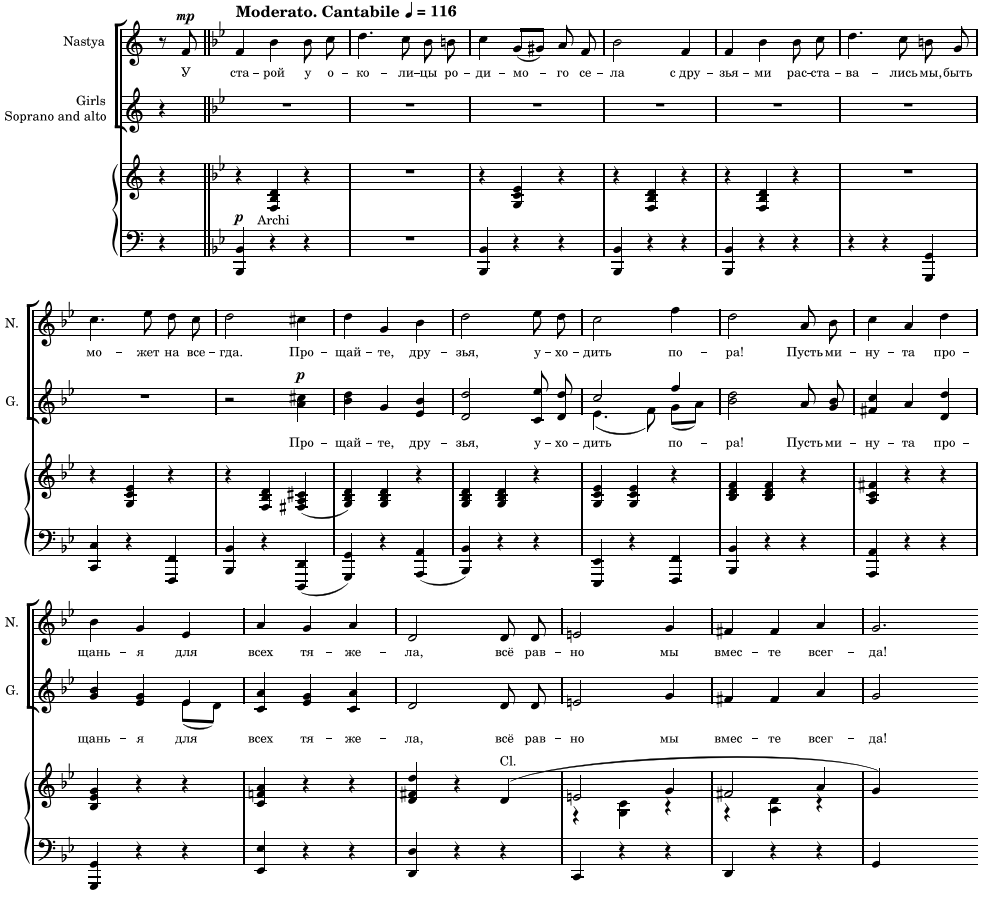
Figure 20. *The Taras Family*, Act I, Tableau 1, rehearsal mark 17–18, p. 26.

Translation: Nastya: At the old fence of our home village, we parted with friends, perhaps forever. Nastya and the girls: Farewell, friends, it's time to go!

desire to spend their lives together.[369] In the following act (Tableau 4), the young couple bids farewell as Pavka departs to join the fighting forces. Pavka reassures Nastya that happiness lies ahead, while emphasizing that, at present, this happiness takes a back seat to their primary goal: "So much happiness lies ahead for us, such a life awaits us! It is good to dream and believe, and to know that dreams will come true! But now we have only one dream, and we all live for one thing: to strike the enemy with all our might, every day, every hour, so that our truth may always shine on our native land!"[370]. In both Yevfrosin'ya's and Pavka's narratives of this splendid future, Nastya is an integral component. There is no doubt about her being a part of it, nor that this future will be abruptly curtailed.

Furthermore, we could also approach Nastya as a dual persona: the one of a lyrical heroine but also, simultaneously, an epic-dramatic one. However, this duality is not exclusive to Kabalevsky's Nastya; it can be encountered across a range of Soviet operas from that era. In his article, Rïzhkin discusses a specific genre of opera prevalent in the Soviet Union during that time, referring to it as the "lyrical-dramatic-epic opera," or simply, a "synthetic opera."[371] As explained by Rïzhkin, events of epic proportions cannot merely serve as a backdrop within an opera, just as the lyrical aspects cannot be merely incidental. Both the lyrical and the epic elements should be in the foreground and intricately interconnected.[372] As examples of lyrical heroes against the epic-dramatic canvas, Rïzhkin mentions Natasha and Lyon'ka from *Into the Storm*, Semyon Kotko from the opera of the same name, Aleksey from *The Story of a Real Man*, and also Nastya and Pavka from *The Taras Family*.[373] Indeed, despite existing and operating within the epic context with strong agency and proactivity, Nastya's core is inherently lyrical, and so is her musical portrayal.

369 Here Pavka also reminisces on words of no other than Pavel Korchagin, the hero of Nikolay Ostrovsky's (1904–1936) novel *Kak zakalyalas' stal'* (*How the Steel Was Tempered*). After quoting Korchagin on his stand on fighting for the freedom and one's own happiness, two adolescents enthusiastically repeat on the words.

370 Kabalevskiĭ, *Sem'ïa Tarasa*, pp. 177–178. Original Russian text: Впереди у нас столько счастья, впереди у нас такая жизнь! Хорошо мечтать и вертить, и знать, что сбудутся мечты! А у нас теперь лишь одна мечта и одним теперь мы все живём: чтобы каждый день, каждый час, сколько силы есть,— бить врага, чтоб на нашей родной земле наша правда сияла всегда!

371 Iosif Ryzhkin, "Sovremennost' v sovetskoĭ opere," in: *Sovetskaïa muzyka* 8 (1960), pp. 24–38, here p. 25. Original Russian text: [Можно даже говорить об утверждении в нашем искусстве особо характерного для него жанра] синтетической (лирической-драматической-эпической) оперы.

372 Ibid.

373 Ibid.

Nastya's lyrical essence shines most notably in the romantic duets with Pavka. Their poignant farewell in the fourth act (Tableau 7) brims with optimism about their eventual reunion and a future filled with happiness. However, the subsequent material, in stark contrast to the tender romance shared between the young couple, serves a dual purpose, and effectively supports Rïzhkin's thesis. This material simultaneously unveils Nastya as both a lyrical and an epic-heroic heroine. Pavka's departure and her bittersweet recollections of their shared schooldays and the heart with their initials carved into a willow tree in the schoolyard are abruptly interrupted by Yevrosin'ya's agitated warning that the Germans are approaching, and she must hide. Initially concealing herself, Nastya emerges from hiding upon hearing the soldiers mistreat her mother. Refusing to betray her fellow participants in the school's burning, she surrenders herself.[374] Eventually escorted away from her home, she departs for good, accompanied by the orchestra's performance of the farewell song marked by "maestoso" and "pathetico."[375]

Here, the farewell song, along with Nastya, reveals its true essence. Namely, it was never solely a means of conveying the significance of Nastya bidding farewell to her *own* school days, friends, and abruptly ended childhood due to the war. It stood as a symbol not just for Nastya, but for an entire generation. Simultaneously, it served as both a gentle farewell to school years and collective childhood, and a powerful, solemn theme depicting the resolve to confront the enemy and defend the motherland. This theme, much like Nastya's character throughout the opera, possesses a dual function; it is both lyrical and tragic, as well as heroic. This final rendition of the theme not only concludes the evolution of Nastya's portrayal, but also signifies the transformation of an entire generation. Progressing from innocent children, they have matured into fearless Soviet World War II heroes. Her tragic and courageous demise serves as a representation of Soviet childhood truly reaching its conclusion.

Rïzhkin elucidates that these 'lyrical-epical heroes' are both passionate and resolute in their determination to alter the circumstances they find themselves in. This very agency for change serves as the crucial means for achieving their personal well-being as well as the collective happiness.[376] As posited by Rïzhkin: "Nastya's thoughts and emotions meld with the

374 One might also draw a striking parallel between Nastya and the real-life Soviet partisan Zoya Kosmodem'yanskaya. Like Nastya, Zoya joined the partisan forces while still a student, participated in acts of arson, was arrested, and refused to divulge any information to her interrogators, leading to her death.

375 Kabalevskiĭ, *Sem'i͡a Tarasa*, p. 348.

376 Ryzhkin, "Sovremennost' v sovetskoĭ opere," p. 25.

sentiments of the entire nation; simultaneously, her spiritual restlessness, that poetic grandeur which finds more convincing expression in music than in words, is distinctive and unparalleled."[377] In this sense, Nastya embodies an individual that coexists with her role as a representative of the broader collective.

The multifaceted portrayal of Nastya becomes even more intriguing when one examines the scene of her death. What immediately catches attention is the fact that her tragedy remains somewhat unnoticed by the surrounding characters. While Taras and Yevfrosin'ya briefly discuss their daughter's death, their dialogue appears unconvincing, and even more striking is the absence of grief or contemplation on the matter from Pavka and her brothers. Keldïsh aptly referred to this indifference as "incomprehensible."[378] I would like to propose two potential explanations for Nastya's understated fate.

The first explanation is rooted in the earlier depiction of Taras' blunt characterization and his reaction to Andrey's escape from the prisoner's camp. While his response is rational and understandable, it sends a message that in the war, there's no room for 'selfish' considerations. If safeguarding the Motherland necessitates one's sacrifice, then so be it. This perspective might explain why Nastya, righteous as she is, never entertained the idea of revealing the identities of others who participated in the school fire. Instead, she calmly accepted her death sentence. As her demise was in a way inevitable and anticipated, it is possible that this is why nobody appeared shocked or mournful. In the end, Nastya's conscious decision indirectly contributed to the significant victory that followed in the subsequent scene.

The second explanation emerges from the chronological sequence of operatic events, where victory immediately follows Nastya's death. It is possible to interpret her demise as a symbol of childhood's culmination and the ultimate phase of the metamorphosis of Soviet children transitioning into adult, heroic Soviet citizens. Nastya's death, stemming from prioritizing the collective over personal needs, could signify the statement that childhood is drawing to a close, and that the death of childhood was imperative for the ultimate triumph. In this context, viewing Nastya as a transcendent agent who exists more as a symbol than a concrete being might elucidate why

377 Ibid., p. 37. Original Russian text: Мысли и чувства Насти сливаются с мыслями и чувствами всего народа; в то же время своеобразны, неповторимы ее душевная трепетность, та поэтическая возвышенность, которая раскрывается в звуках убедительнее, чем в словах.

378 Keldysh, "Na puti opernogo realizma," p. 15. Original Russian text: [Удивляет, что ннкто из собравшихся возле дома Тараса ни словом не выражает родителям Насти сочувствия в постигшем их горе. Как бы ни была велика радость освобождения и победы, такое безразличие] непонятно.

her death leaves such minimal impact on the surrounding characters. The last three narrative occurrences—Nastya's and Pavka's tender farewell, Nastya's arrest and death, and the final victory of the Red Army—are profoundly interconnected, lending credence to the second theory. Although it may appear 'overinterpreted' at first glance, it is not entirely implausible. Despite not being overtly apparent in a superficial reading of the score, Nastya holds a pivotal role in *The Taras Family*. The artistic focus on her remains uncertain and undefined throughout. Yet, much like Kabalevsky's approach to her characterization, Nastya herself embodies a sense of ambiguity and indefiniteness, existing at multiple crossroads and symbolizing crucial facets of the plot.

2.5.4 The Depiction of Female Agency Within the Context of Stalinist Martial Masculinity

While *The Story of a Real Man* portrayed female characters in a monotonous manner, projecting the role of women solely as supporters existing primarily to bolster male martial endeavors and guide them on their tumultuous paths toward achieving the pinnacle of Stalinist self-actualization, one could hardly get the same impression when examining the score of *The Taras Family*. Unlike the former, where the women were relegated to auxiliary roles, Nastya's portrayal in the latter lacks any trace of being an 'other' or mere helper. Her agency and martial involvement are equated with those of her male counterparts, and her contributions are accorded the same level of importance. Although Stepan leads the Komsomol activities, and Pavka along with Andrey serve in the Soviet military forces, Nastya's character consistently exudes a presence that transcends traditional gender roles. Her influence and participation are treated as equally significant and instrumental.

When reading the score of *The Taras Family*, what becomes apparent is that all four Stalinist operas presented in the first part of this thesis are significantly interconnected, and certain features pertaining to gender, gender dynamics, and female agency stand out. Each opera represents a progressive step in the evolutionary trajectory of female political and operatic emancipation. Khrennikov's *Into the Storm* and Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko* are both set in the highly masculine and martial setting of the Civil War, where the female characters seemingly just roam around with little to no political agency. Natasha, although killing the enemy and directly contributing to the liberation of the village, still is not recognized as a grand hero. This could be attributed to fact that all throughout the opera she served as an innocent pawn in the evil machinations against Lyon'ka, and that her

final clash with the enemy was personally motivated. This leaves us with the impression that even when Stalinist female protagonists showcase certain political agency and proactivity, it is usually tightly connected to their own needs or the needs of their close ones. The situation is rather similar with Sof'ya from *Semyon Kotko*. Sof'ya's defiance against an arranged marriage stems from her desire to marry Semyon. Conveniently, the undesirable groom is an enemy of the regime, making her fight dual-sided—she pursues her happiness while incidentally opposing the regime's intruder. Ol'ga's role in the martial and masculine landscape of *The Story of a Real Man* is nevertheless slightly different. Joining the Red Army suggests political agency, yet both she and her agency remain unexplained and vague. Metaphorically and literally, she recedes into the background without elaboration. Nastya represents the final stage of this spectrum of female political agency, as she resolutely participates in the fight against the enemy, ultimately sacrificing her life to protect her comrades.

Though all characters inhabit a landscape of martial masculinity and male characters take precedence, Nastya, despite not being the sole focal point of Kabalevsky's opera, still emerges as, as argued in the previous text, its most prominent and intricate character. Even if one were to contest this assertion, it remains undeniable that she possesses the most intense semiotic charge and embodies the opera's predominant themes. Moreover, she is not depicted merely as an adjunct to male martial activity, but as an equally essential component. Hence, I would posit that Nastya signifies a certain advancement in the development of complex Soviet operatic heroines, at least if we admit that the level of political involvement and care for the collective agency is the main criteria while determining the 'righteousness' of a certain character during Stalinist era. If we depend on the distinct division that this study seeks to argue, namely the contrast between the masculinization of Stalin-era opera and the feminization of post-Stalin opera, then *The Taras Family* conveniently embodies a transitional evolutionary phase between the two. In other words, Nastya's portrayal hints at the impending feminization of Soviet opera during the Thaw and the subsequent years. Specifically, while the first three operas placed the male protagonist(s) at the forefront of the main narrative function, firmly entrenched in the cult of masculinity that pervaded the core of the operas, with female characters existing primarily as satellites orbiting the male pole, this opera introduces a certain adjustment to this established equilibrium, or rather imbalance. Moreover, extending beyond the revitalized portrayal of the female heroine, the discussion surrounding Kabalevsky's opera reveals an emerging inclination toward a psychological operatic genre and more nuanced characters. Consequently, this work, along with its critiques, embodies a crucial

transitional quality in the evolution of Soviet opera concerning Soviet subjects, operatic heroes, and the development of Soviet operatic femininity.

2.6 Summary

The operatic landscape in the works of Khrennikov, Prokofiev, and Kabalevsky is inherently martial, intertwined with pivotal historical events such as the Russian Revolution and the Civil War (as seen in *Into the Storm* and *Semyon Kotko*) or the Great Patriotic War (as in *The Story of a Real Man* and *The Taras Family*). The martial backdrop, coupled with a pervasive sense of historical significance, or historicity, always at the forefront, significantly influences the unfolding of the plot and the choices made by the characters. It not only reinforces the construction of the Soviet mythology but also strengthens the unbreakable link between the conceptual Sovietness and the martial context. In fact, many of the events depicted in the selected operas are grounded in reality, with certain characters representing real-life historical figures. For instance, in Khrennikov's *Into the Storm*, the plot mirrors the actual Tambov Rebellion and includes historical figures such as Aleksandr Antonov and even Lenin himself. Similarly, Prokofiev's *The Story of a Real Man* features the legendary Soviet pilot Aleksey Mares'yev as its protagonist. Furthermore, within the context of the era, if the Soviet operatic landscape is essentially martial, it also, following the logic of Stalinist metaphysics, automatically assumes a heroic dimension. The Stalinist operatic landscape is not characterized by perpetual loss, devastation, and suffering, at least not in its ultimate form. When watching any of these operas, the audience consistently witnesses the transformation of a world initially intruded upon by the enemy, posing a threat to the Soviet regime, into a world successfully purged of such threats and attaining stability and contentment for the people. In a sense, and with an awareness of the generalizing undertone this conclusion might convey, the Stalinist operatic landscape represents a topos of its own—profoundly historical, monolithic, and unchanging, with the only variable being the characters on the stage, although they are also rather typified and uniform. They engage in the same eternal battle against the enemy, committed to the same heroic quest that perpetuates itself on the stage, always leading to the same outcome.

The stereotypicalization and deindividualization of the protagonists are not only driven by the Stalinist grand narrative but also, more specifically, by the conventions of the song opera. All the characters are confined within the song opera format, expressing themselves predominantly through *song*—its fundamental unit—with the notable exception of *Semyon Kotko*, where this tendency is less pronounced. In these operas, the use of song results in a

pronounced depersonalization and detachment from the inner self, instead reinforcing a sense of collective belonging. Furthermore, the operas analyzed in this section of the study rely heavily on musical clichés in shaping both genders, a tendency particularly evident in the portrayal of female characters. These women are often depicted through romantic or melancholic lyrical outpourings, heightened moments of agitation, and even hysteria, reinforcing conventional and two-dimensional understanding of female gender.

The Stalinist protagonist is always necessarily a hero too. Specifically, he is always ready and capable of undertaking great martial ventures, perfectly embodying the moral and ethical standards of the Soviet ideology, and always standing on the right side of the history by sympathizing with the Bolshevik or broadly Soviet cause. He confronts the ever-changing political turmoil with little to no fear or doubt, masterfully navigating the obstacles set in front of the Soviet regime. Furthermore, and building on this theme, what these characters share is a strong sense of political agency, as clearly portrayed in Prokofiev's *The Story of a Real Man*. They do not aimlessly wander around the stage; instead, they actively participate in shaping and molding their own destiny, as well as the destinies of their community and motherland. Of course, this painted portrait, or rather a sketch, is somewhat generalized, and all the heroes elaborated in respective analyses do not always fit the mold perfectly. A good example of this is Lyon'ka from *Into the Storm*, who lacks the strong will and determination seen in other Stalinist heroes. While the central operatic conflict invariably involves external forces representing the Soviet regime and their adversaries, whether kulaks or Nazis, there is always a trace of internal conflict present in this group of characters, however, so minor and uniform, that it seems more like a crude character-building filler. The internal conflict in question is namely the one between the individual and collective needs and aspirations.[379] At some point, all these heroes need to choose between their own personal happiness and that of the collective. In the case of Semyon Kotko, it is the choice between his sweetheart, Sof'ya, and the welfare of the collective, while in the case of Taras, it is the dilemma of protecting his family or allowing his children to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the occupied motherland. Yet in Taras's case, the choice between the two cannot even be called a conflict, as he is resolute in his understanding of what is the right thing to do (which could explain his anger with Andrey, who left the prisoner's camp, and perhaps embodies this conflict even clearer, but also his subdued reaction to his daughter Nastya's death). Semyon Kotko had a tougher time making his choice. However, once he made the right

379 See Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 167.

decision, the individual and the collective seamlessly merged into a common goal, inspiring him even further for the final attack.

The nature of the material presented thus far, despite the overarching theme of the study focusing on female characters, required for a focus to be equally put on their male counterparts as well. First of all, Stalinist martial and heroic landscapes were predominantly navigated through a male hero, which, taking into regard the overarching Stalinist masculinity cult and the hegemonic masculinity within martial and militant environments, comes as no surprise. Second of all, it would be impossible to discuss female characters without simultaneously addressing male ones, as these women's existence was entirely dependent on or influenced by them, whether in a literal sense, as seen in Khrennikov's opera, Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko*, but also, symbolically, in Prokofiev's *The Story of a Real Man*. Khrennikov's Natasha, despite being the unsung 'hero' of the opera, grounds all of her actions, at times rather impulsive, on her emotional instinct to protect her family and loved ones. Her agency is indirectly considered as of lower importance to the grad revolutionary schemes conducted by male characters in the opera, which could explain that her mindless act of heroism is not recognized at the end of the opera. Prokofiev's Sof'ya, although she could be interpreted as an active agent navigating her own destiny, is still rooted in the ingenue archetype, and used as a pawn in male political machinations. Her sister-in-law, Frosya, although exhibiting independence and stronger sense of personal agency, is nevertheless reduced to a comical figure. Ol'ga, although a soldier and on an invisible path of her own, is reduced to a healing memory to her beloved Aleksey, similarly to the other female characters in the opera, which are all in one way or another tied to the healer function in male characters' lives. However, Kabalevsky's Nastya represents a critical point in this small-scale evolutionary trajectory. Unlike Natasha, Sof'ya, and Ol'ga, who exist in the shadow of male lead and inhibit a rather reduced (in value at least) narrative function and personal agency, Nastya was given a clear voice and placed at the forefront of the opera's narrative. However, despite being granted political and personal agency, at least in a more unrestrained manner compared to her predecessors, she is still rather stereotypical and two-dimensional, same as other female characters elaborated in this section of the study, but also the male heroes they support.

However, there are two things that stand out when observing Nastya's function in the operatic narrative. The first thing that stands out is the mere fact that she, being a young woman, is not only the potential main protagonist of the opera, but also its hero—both exceptionally rare phenomena within the Stalinist operatic canon. The second thing, similarly rare if not impossible, is the fact that she, the hero, lost her life to the enemy. Despite the anxiety-inducing and dangerous worlds in which Stalinist operas were

set, and despite certain tragedies occurring (such as Frol's death in *Into the Storm* or the murders of Semyon's comrades in *Semyon Kotko*), the protagonists were never truly tragic, nor can the entire narrative of the operas be attributed to such a notion. Is the introduction of tragedy, the death of a hero, in this Stalinist opera a product of the slow decline of the grand victorious Stalinist narrative, or is tragedy introduced because the hero was, in fact, female? This core question will not be answered just yet, but is important to keep in mind while approaching the operas of the long sixties.