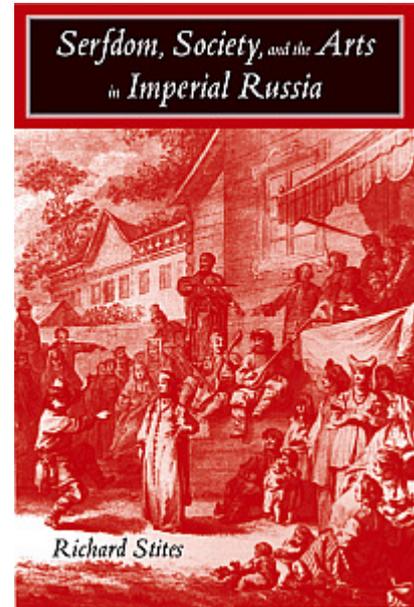


Behind the Scenes

By Rosamund Bartlett

Even by the standards of Moscow's turbulent musical life, the concert held on the anniversary of Svyatoslav Richter's birth in 2002 was scandalous. Between Martha Argerich's solo performance in piano concertos by Robert Schumann and Franz Liszt, Alexander Rabinovich-Barakovsky conducted one of his own pieces, but the heckling which accompanied "Beautiful Music No. 3" eventually drove him to throw down his baton and walk off the stage. Critics agreed there had never been anything like it -- but, of course, there had, as we learn in one of the many vivid anecdotes that illuminate "Serfdom, Society and the Arts in Imperial Russia," Richard Stites' account of cultural life in Russia prior to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, which spearheaded the era of the Great Reforms under Alexander II. The reception given to a St. Petersburg concert in the mid-1850s at which the self-styled "ami de Rossini" Alexandre Lazareff conducted his own music was in fact much more hostile, with the resulting pandemonium forcing the police to intervene and make a series of arrests. As Stites points out, of far greater concern than the offence caused by this rare instance of hubristic self-delusion was the fact that the country's capital still lacked both a professional orchestra and a proper concert hall at this time.

Astonishingly, within a decade the situation was already quite different, as it was also in the sphere of decorative arts and in the theater, but little attention has been focused until now on examining how the ground was prepared for that transformation. Like Leo Tolstoy, who found that he had to go back to the events of 1812 in order to understand the revolutionary generation of 1825 (which resulted in his writing of "War and Peace"), Stites is intrigued by the build-up rather than the better-known results of the cultural explosion in the 1860s, since, also like Tolstoy, he is interested not so much in the end-result of processes as in the nature of the processes themselves. The comparison with Tolstoy is not an idle one: At least 10 years in the making, this impressive book is the fruit of long hours spent in libraries and archives, and it maps a huge area of previously uncharted terrain that will be of inestimable value to anyone with more than a passing interest in the Russian arts. A historian with a distinguished record, Stites comes to his study of pre-1861 Russian culture having previously published monographs on the Russian women's liberation movement, and on the utopianism of early Bolshevik culture.



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Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power By Richard Stites
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Audiences flocked to the Bolshoi Theater in 1856, three years after a fire gutted the building.

painters, actors and musicians of caliber.

When one casts an eye over the achievements of early 20th-century Russian culture, which include the Moscow Art Theater's championing of Anton Chekhov's innovative plays, Sergei Diaghilev's creation of the Ballets Russes, and the groundbreaking work of artists such as Igor Stravinsky, Kasimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky and Alexander Scriabin, it is hard to believe that the philosopher Pyotr Chaadayev could have been serious when claiming in 1836 that Russia had no civilization which it could be proud of, having merely borrowed from others. His criticisms were, of course, exaggerated, but the story of Russia's secular artistic life is indeed a comparatively short one where "high culture" is concerned, for it began very late, in the early 18th century, when Peter the Great decided to change the course of his nation's destiny by replacing old-world Muscovy with a modern European state. And it was really only toward the latter part of the century, where Stites begins his survey, that Russia started producing indigenous portrait

These individuals had a lot to contend with in forging successful and fulfilling careers, not least because a large number of them were serfs, hence liable at any point to be sent back to the cabbage fields. There were serfs who had to paint portraits as well as serve at table, while others were forced to pose as living statues or perform for hours on end. Only rarely were their promising careers allowed to flourish unfettered, and few were given their freedom, let alone permitted to receive a decent education. The painter Vasily Tropinin initially given away as part of a dowry, was one of the lucky ones, but he was only freed in his late 40s having had to work as a pastry chef in St. Petersburg and as a decorator on his owner's remote provincial estate before finally being able to settle in Moscow and concentrate on the portraits at which he excelled.

Stites devotes a good deal of attention to the role played by serfs in Russian cultural life before the 1861 emancipation, and rightly so, for it was not until the middle of the 19th century that, with the chief exception being for writers, the gentry began to think of themselves as more than consumers, for whom artists were little better than servants. Indeed, little distinction was made between artistic and domestic performance. Until their fortunes began to go into decline, some of the wealthier members of the gentry revelled, for example, in being able to maintain large horn orchestras on their estates, in which each player often played only one note. Serfs dominate the picture at every level, yet are at the same time also strangely absent from it, as the landscape paintings of the time show. Country estates were invariably portrayed as Arcadian idylls in which peasants were either not shown at all, or depicted in a highly idealized manner, with little or no reference to their working lives, which were usually defined by unremitting drudgery.

It is to Stites' great credit that he takes pains to show how Russian cultural life in the provinces connected with that in the two capitals, St. Petersburg and Moscow, and his large cast of characters includes several interesting obscure figures as well as the more familiar names. He shows what it was like for actors and dramatists to work for the Imperial Theaters, and how the high quality of domestic music-making in the early 19th century laid a solid foundation on which the composer Anton Rubinstein could later build, leading to the achievement of his long-held dream of establishing regular concerts of Russian music, a conservatory and professional status for performers (essential in a class-obsessed society). We are given insight into the workings of the Imperial Academy of Arts and the day-to-day lives of its students and faculty, and along the way we learn intriguing details about the habits and tastes of Tsar Nicholas I, whose long reign inevitably takes center stage in this book. We might know about his reputation for running his country like an army barracks, and for privileging Italian over Russian opera, but perhaps not that he played the cornet, drew proficiently, took a personal interest in the administration of the Academy of Arts, and disposed of the parts of the Hermitage collection he did not like, before opening it up to a public who had to don black frock coats and white gloves.

Stites does not cover every aspect of the arts before the era of the Great Reforms, but such is the clarity and detail of his exposition, and his wide sweep, that it is as if we have before us for the first time a compelling and comprehensive painting in full color, rather than a mere pen-and-ink drawing of this hitherto understudied period of Russian culture.

Rosamund Bartlett contributed the chapter on "Russian Culture 1801-1917" to the recently published Cambridge History of Russia. Her most recent article, "The Post-Soviet Musical Landscape," appears in the current issue of Slavonica.

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