

# CONTEXT

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## A Delicate Balancing Act

**For years, the Moscow Conservatory has been in dire need of renovation. But can it be saved without ruining its acclaimed acoustics and historic character?**

By Edmund Harris

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The Moscow Conservatory is a living monument to a golden age of Russian music. It was built between 1894 and 1901, a time when many of its most illustrious alumni, such as Alexander Scriabin and Sergei Rachmaninov, were making a name for themselves. Even today, the acoustics of its Great Hall -- Russia's unofficial national concert hall -- are unparalleled. But the beloved institution is in serious trouble. Not only does it have serious shortcomings for performers and students alike, it is visibly falling to bits.



Vladimir Filonov / MT

Faced with a crumbling facade, parts of the building on the verge of collapse and an antiquated ticket system that has barely entered the computer era, music lovers have long clamored for improvements. In response, an ambitious plan was unveiled earlier this year to renovate the building and upgrade its facilities, and this has now got the go-ahead from the city's planning council, chaired by Mayor Yury Luzhkov.

The merest mention of reconstruction work, however, is enough to set alarm bells ringing in the heads of architecture buffs. In recent years, reconstruction work on historic Moscow buildings has often done more harm than good, and some preservationists fear that the Conservatory is next, as the building is set to undergo its biggest changes since the 1890s.

Caught in the middle of the controversy is Tigran Alikhanov, the affable 63-year-old pianist who was elected rector of the Conservatory last year after the previous rector, Alexander Sokolov, left to become culture and press minister. Earlier this month, Alikhanov discussed the challenges of the renovation project during an interview in his office, furnished with a pair of pianos and large quantities of musical literature.

According to the rector, the biggest hurdle so far has been winning the approval of his own colleagues. "I'm afraid that pleasing our professors is very difficult," he said. "Whatever you do is wrong."

The dapper, diminutive Alikhanov gives the impression of someone whose first love is music, not administration. He continues to give performances even with his current duties as rector -- in May, he played Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 27 for a concert in the Great Hall.

Having taught at the Conservatory since 1971, Alikhanov understands the need to bring it up to modern standards. "Ridiculous though it sounds, in one place in the Great Hall there are still 180-volt sockets!" he griped. None of the halls has disabled access, Alikhanov noted, and the backstage space in the Great Hall can barely accommodate a modern symphony orchestra. Nor does it allow full stagings of operas. Then there is the unique organ by celebrated 19th-century French organ builder Aristide Cavallé-Coll, which badly needs a complete overhaul.

Many of these concerns (though not the organ) are addressed in the city's renovation plan. Among other things, the plan calls for two new concert halls, seating 250 and 500 people; new rehearsal space, to be added in the attic above the Rachmaninov Hall; a brand-new opera school, to be housed in buildings at the back of the site along Bolshoi Kislovsky Pereulok; and a major revamping of the library, currently split between several inadequately sized rooms. The designs are now being reviewed by the city government's numerous planning committees and have largely been approved, although there are still details to be worked out, Alikhanov said.

The rector was anxious to assuage fears that the Conservatory would be demolished and rebuilt from scratch, a fate that has befallen a number of historic Moscow buildings in recent years. First of all, Alikhanov insisted, the building-preservation authorities simply wouldn't let it happen. "Even if you want to change the curtain, they won't allow it," he said, referring to a recent case when permission to put up curtains in the Rachmaninov Hall was refused.



Vladimir Filonov / MT

A former piano professor, Tigran Alikhanov was elected rector of the Conservatory last year.

Then there's the worry of harming the acoustics for which the building's three halls are so famed. Alikhanov emphasized that only warranted, carefully thought-out improvements would be made to the halls, since even minor changes could affect their acoustics. "Before knocking in a single nail, you have to think hard about whether you really need to do it," he said. "Nothing is to be changed there, and they're not to be modernized."

One aspect of the renovation plan that might have raised the hackles of preservationists is an underground parking garage. Alikhanov stressed, however, that the garage is to be built in the area behind the Conservatory's main building, not beneath it, a prospect that would spell doom for its acoustics and historic character. The rector pointed out that underground garages are a ubiquitous feature of all new construction projects in Moscow. "Without a parking garage, the city government won't let you build anything, because you can see the problem," Alikhanov said,

gesturing toward the permanently traffic-clogged Bolshaya Nikitskaya Ulitsa outside his window.

Some work has already been done to strengthen the building's foundations. So far, Alikhanov said, the block nearest the Kremlin has been treated. When work starts on the Great Hall, this will entail first moving out the archive of sheet music stored in the basement underneath. Some of the collection will be moved out to space being loaned from a city government archive, but the rest, including the most valuable music, will stay on-site. "We can't be left without a library, it would be impossible to work," Alikhanov said.

Alikhanov refused to be drawn on the total bill for the reconstruction. "I don't think anyone can say exactly how much it will be at the moment, because while work is underway, the amount will probably increase. The thing is that these really big cash injections -- I won't say how much, as they could inflame the public -- they're promised to us later on, around 2009 or 2010. But musical and cultural circles in Moscow have shown a great deal of interest in the fate of the Conservatory, and a whole host of organizations has petitioned the government for the financing to start earlier."

Many have wondered how long the Conservatory will be closed. Alikhanov promised that there was no risk of the Great Hall being out of action for as long as the Bolshoi main stage, which will be undergoing renovation for at least the next 2 1/2 years. "In the case of the Bolshoi, it was entirely obvious that it couldn't be done quickly, so they built another theater and then shut the main stage," he said. "But as you can appreciate, no one is going to build anything for us."

Earlier this year, reports appeared saying that the Great Hall would need to be shut for part of 2006. But Alikhanov said that this would not be necessary anymore, thanks to an inspection by independent experts who found that the gallery was in a far less perilous state than the first team of specialists had made out. "The hall will be in use from September to June, and in June 2007 the 13th Tchaikovsky Competition is supposed to take place, and then after that, we'll close the hall. For how long? That's difficult to say, but we would like to close it for a relatively short period."

Alikhanov admitted that he felt sorely tried by the task of overseeing the renovation project. "I was elected director for five years, but ... if it's any shorter, I shall be only pleased," he said. Still, he is confident that the Conservatory has a bright future -- the venue always sells itself. As one example, he cited reactions to the much-publicized Festival of the World's Symphony Orchestras, held earlier this month. The prospect that the Great Hall might close for restoration meant that all of the festival's concerts took place in the Hall of Columns at Dom Soyuzov instead.

"The nicest thing for me is that the public said how splendid it was, but that it was a pity the concerts weren't taking place in the Great Hall," Alikhanov said. "That's the main thing -- when people come here not because of any special effort or organization, but just because they realize that nothing can compare with this hall."

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