

WHEN VALENTIN SILVESTROV TURNED 80

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Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov burst onto the European and American scenes in the 1960s as an avant-garde rabble rouser who produced dissonant, large-scale orchestral pieces, chief among them his Symphony no. 3, “Eschatophony” (1966), which won the prestigious Koussevitzky Prize. Since then he has passed through a variety of compositional styles, including his highly melodic “kitsch” phase, as in his *Quiet Songs* for voice and piano (1973-77) and *Kitsch Music for Piano* (1977). More recently Silvestrov has engaged politically with the 2013-14 Euromaidan protests. Silvestrov turned eighty in late September 2017, and it seemed that all of musical Kyiv showed up to celebrate.



I flew to Kyiv in late September 2017 from Berlin, where I was a fellow at the American Academy. The festivities had already begun, but I was able to catch several highlights over the weekend from Friday, September 29 to Sunday, October 1. My first experience was the Friday concert “Valentin Silvestrov-80!” at the Kyiv Philharmonic, which featured two of Silvestrov’s key interpreters and collaborators. First, Roman Kofman conducted the National Philharmonic Orchestra of Ukraine in Silvestrov’s Symphony no. 5 (1981-82), one of his most impressive achievements in his “postlude” style, meant to evoke the belatedness of the era and its seemingly unending endings. (For more on Silvestrov’s Symphony no. 5 see [this article](#) in *The Journal of Musicology*.) This was followed by *Postludium* for piano and orchestra (1984), anchored by pianist Aleksey Lyubimov, his typical precision and sensitivity evident throughout. The concert represented a redressing of past wrongs: during his Soviet career, Silvestrov was long denied performances in this venue. The printed program was a simple, single-sheet Xerox, but the audience was enthusiastic and attentive, including several small children in rows close to the front.

The next evening, Saturday, one person remarked that the concert in the Kyiv Conservatory (or to give it its official name, the Large Hall of the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine) also recalled the old Soviet days: everything was free and no-one got paid. The lobby of the hall was already mobbed half an hour before the program was due to begin. When the doors opened at about 15 minutes before the announced starting time, the crowd surged forward. People jockeyed for seats; tempers

flared. Although I had read about moments like this surrounding performances of Alfred Schnittke's music in the early 1980s in Moscow's large halls, I had never personally experienced anything similar.

This concert, the official start of Kyiv Music Fest-2017, was preceded by introductions from the Rector of the Kyiv Conservatory, Volodimir Rozhok; the chair of the National Composers' Union of Ukraine, Ihor Shcherbakov; and the Ukrainian Minister of Culture, Yevhen Nyshchuk. Nyshchuk first read an official proclamation from Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, to Silvestrov, who was called to the stage. Nyshchuk, a trained actor, then spoke for himself, at length (in Ukrainian), about what Silvestrov's music meant for him personally, and for Ukraine, singling out the *Maidan-2014* cycle as particularly moving. Whether avant-garde or postmodern, Nyshchuk said, Silvestrov's music is emotional and deep.



The concert began with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, conducted by Volodimir Sirenko, performing Silvestrov's Symphony no. 6 (1995). Like his Symphony no. 5, this composition foregrounds moments of staccato—of emotional, resonant space. The second half of the concert featured two premieres of more recent music derived from his bagatelle style: his Concertino for piano and orchestra (2015), with soloist Oleg Bezborodko, and the Violin Concerto (2016), with soloist Bogdana Pivnenko.

Given Silvestrov's recent political activity and his cultural prominence, the presence of state representatives, and the salience given to his more monumental orchestral music, is understandable. I found more to appreciate in the performances on Sunday, October 1. First, the very active musical organization Ukho (or "ear") hosted a "Silvestrov Marathon" at the Center Alexander Dobzhenko. Formerly a factory, and now an industrially-flavored performance art space, the venue was a perfect fit for the composer's earlier, smaller-scale music, and it drew a younger, much hipper audience than the concerts on Friday and Saturday. The space was raw, the listeners devoted—they treated Silvestrov like a beloved grandfather. The program included *Projections* for harpsichord, vibraphone, and bells (1965), *Five Pieces* for piano (1961), *Triad* for piano (1961-62/1966), *Kitsch Music* for piano (1977), and Piano Sonata no. 3 (1979). These works reflect a more relaxed, more edgy, more interior Silvestrov. If Friday's and Saturday's concerts enacted a kind of memorialization, this was a more vital celebration.

The performances were all strong. Yevgeny Gromov played *Five Pieces* and *Triad* with great stylistic sensitivity, and Vyacheslav Poprugin's realization of *Kitsch music* was spell-binding. The audience at the Marathon was the most attentive I've been a part of in many years—giving even Berliners a run for their money. Listening carefully, they were rapt and absorbed. Afterward, one of the young women helping to run the event told Silvestrov that she had tears in her eyes during *Kitsch Music*. In these circumstances, in this performance, with the curtains drawn, the hall almost completely dark, and only a single orange light showing on the performer, private poignancy prevailed.

The final concert of the weekend took place at the Saint Catherine Lutheran Church, on one of Kyiv's many hills, just a short walk from the Maidan and Kyiv's central Khreshchatyk Street. It featured recent choral works by Silvestrov performed by the Kyiv Chamber Choir conducted masterfully by Nikolai Hobdych (also part of Kyiv Music Fest-2017). The *Maidan-2014* cycle comprises individual songs that Silvestrov wrote chronologically in response to the late 2013 and early 2014 events on and off the Maidan in Kyiv. He built over time a composition bearing witness to his sense of outrage and grief. Five of the movements are recompositions of the Ukrainian national anthem—the same words with new music written by Silvestrov.[1]

Maidan-2014 is powerful in performance, and in such a small hall the excellent choir, with its robust, ground-trembling basses, caused the ears to ring. Hobdych is a craftsman—his touch refined, his control over the choir near total. Working closely with Silvestrov, he—and they—have honed this work to a fine sheen.

After the performance, composer Lesya Dychko (b. 1939) paid fierce tribute to Silvestrov from the stage, expressing the contemporary resolve of many in Kyiv. Ukraine, they emphasize, is never going back. Silvestrov is helping lead the way to a new sense of Ukrainian national identity. "*Maidan-2014* should be taken to Moscow," many said, provocatively.

Silvestrov himself remains genial and self-deprecating. He cast a decidedly skeptical eye on the goings on, preferring to avoid the fuss. When I asked him on Monday afternoon about his impressions from this busy, varied weekend of concerts, he said that he awoke that morning, noticed only the silence, and was very glad of it. He said that over the past three days everyone had called him the greatest and most famous composer in Ukraine, but that in two days no one would remember him. Only time will tell the path of Ukrainian patriotism; but from what I saw of the reverence Silvestrov's music commands among a new generation of listeners in Kyiv, his artistic legacy seems secure.

[1] For more on *Maidan-2014*, see <http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/2014/03/valentin-silvestrov-and-what-times.html>; as well as my forthcoming essay: "Valentin Silvestrov on the Maidan," *The Oxford Handbook of Protest Music*, ed. Eric Drott and Noriko Manabe (Oxford).