

(174) that explores trauma (Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung* is a point of comparison) before breaking into Estrada.

Context matters too, of course, and here Prokofiev suffered from bad timing: *Kotko* was premiered just after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact; suddenly an opera that depicted Germans as enemies was taboo. *Betrothal*, too, was out of sync with the times. Operation Barbarossa, Adolf Hitler's three-pronged attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, put an end to light-hearted entertainment.

Seinen's musical discussions are accessible, and he provides more cultural context for some operas than others. The Gogolian, "Evenings in Little Russia" village banter in *Semyon Kotko* is fascinating to consider in the Stalinist context, so too the Mozartian and Rossinian imprint on *Betrothal*. (The obvious connections to Maurice Ravel and Richard Strauss are puzzlingly ignored.)

That Prokofiev had difficulties placing his "*tekhnika* in the service of *politika*" (5) is beyond dispute. His haughtiness caused resentment. Seinen believes Prokofiev "failed as a Soviet subject" (19), which I suppose means that his chief rival, Dmitri Shostakovich, succeeded. Then again, Shostakovich gave up on opera, while Prokofiev stubbornly, even heroically, stuck with it.

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Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism. By Eliot Borenstein.

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Eliot Borenstein has certainly made a big leap into academic discourses about national identity, nation-building, and self-definition with this book *Plots against Russia*. He has set for himself an impossible task, as he declares in the introduction: to try to establish a discourse on plots and conspiracies generated from within Russia as the country—formed by what he calls a "geopolitical accident" (6)—positions itself against an imaginary enemy; and he does so from the perspective of a foreigner, therefore running the risk of being accused of a "demonization of Putin" (ix), which he has carefully and elegantly avoided in this balanced and engagingly-narrated history of conspiracies. The book covers three stages of post-Soviet Russia's political developments, from the 1990s over the Putin/Medvedev years to Vladimir Putin's autocratic rule, when conspiracy theories move from the margins to mainstream culture (27).

Borenstein builds a narrative of the paranoia that has informed Russian national identity formation since the fall of the USSR, where "the destruction of the Soviet Union serves as proof of the ongoing threat to Russian statehood" (54). Russia relied on conspiracy theories to explain the Soviet Union's downfall, and continues to be motivated by paranoia and a desire for an augmented reality in which to play out its nightmares: "Conspiracy. . . is more than mere simulation. It takes all the various mythemes available to it and turns them into a persuasive narrative" (31), and this coherent story is at the same time "the antithesis of chaos" (67–68)—the chaos of the 1990s that the country never told itself and therefore attributed to others: "the culture had not developed a unifying story to tell itself about the ruins of the USSR" (106). Borenstein juggles cultural, historical, and political "conspiracies" into a coherent narrative, drawing on media sources and fiction, and thus giving a perfect explanation for the interest in the 1990s visible in contemporary culture.

The Introduction defines the field of conspiracy theory and the terminology, drawing on a theoretical framework through Jacques Lacan's order of the Real, Imaginary, Symbolical (17–19). Borenstein analyzes fictions in popular culture (historical, sci-fi, and fantasy) that concern the contemporary world but pretend to be set in the past or the future. After establishing the concept of conspiracy (Chapter 1), Borenstein associates the conspiratorial mode with the melodramatic genre (Chapter 2), where history is informed by repetition and replay, building an argument for a (medialized) game with reality. The chapter focuses on alleged conspiracies that brought down the USSR, such as the Harvard and Houston Projects, which are considered alongside the novels of such writers as Grigori Klimov and Sergei Norka. Pop culture is a further evil (western) influence in this discourse of conspiratorial theories, which is held off by the “Golden Billion,” suggesting Russia's spiritual superiority and its global influence through natural resources.

The term “Russophobia” is another paranoia about western agency and influence in Russia (Chapter 3) where Borenstein demonstrates lucidly how the media representation of the 1990s became a reality: “in the Putin/Medvedev years, it is as though the vast array of horrifying products of the media/culture industry have, in a deliberately naïve reading, *become* the reality of the 1990s. . . . What was discursive is now true” (109). He highlights the popular action novels of Viktor Dotsenko and the writings of mathematician Igor Shafarevich, emphasizing the shifts from reality into representation. Chapter 4 deals with the meaning of liberalism and tolerance in Russia, as well as the concept of political correctness. Borenstein here looks into discourses about gay rights and family values, particularly the concern with child protection and the increasing reliance on orthodox values.

Chapter 5 suggests the interest in the living dead (“zombirovanie”) as an echo of brainwashing, while the final chapter focuses on the conflict with Ukraine and its media representation, arguing convincingly how this war plays out in the media and through fictional representation (“bad writers’ war,” 209). Indeed, Sergei Loznitsa's film *Donbass* about how fake news is made in this war would have been a perfect example here. This, he argues, is a proxy war not between Russia and the US but Russia and a (marginal) part of itself. Overall, Borenstein never loses sight of the American and international dimension of conspiracy theories and thus ensures this is not understood as a uniquely Russian phenomenon, which enables him to present here a pertinent and lucid analysis of recent Russian political history.

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Chronicles in Stone: Preservation, Patriotism, and Identity in Northwest Russia.

By Victoria Donovan. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2019. xvi, 231 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Figures. Maps. \$49.95, hard bound.

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The cover of Victoria Donovan's excellent book features an architectural complex with the distinctive feel of old Russian architecture. According to the credits, it is the Pskov Kremlin Complex and Trinity Cathedral. The image is not exactly postcard quality, as the buildings are partly obscured by trees and, moreover, on the bottom, there are figures one does not usually find on postcards: two middle-aged women in bathing suits, with their backs to the viewer, looking across the river at the monumental emblems of the Russian past. This cover provides an apt metaphor for the book, which