




# Valentin Kruchinin and the *Queen of Mars*: Early Musical Traces of Soviet Sci-Fi

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## Abstract

Valentin Kruchinin was the first major ‘Soviet sci-fi’ composer, writing the music for Yakov Protazanov’s silent film *Aelita: Queen of Mars* in 1924. While his score is regrettably lost, evidence of Kruchinin’s musical vision for *Aelita* remains, including a two-page piano piece, ‘Aelita’, seemingly designed to promote the film. Lacking any ‘space-age’ musical tropes, this brief work instead showcases Kruchinin’s affection for ‘eccentric dance’. Resembling a slow foxtrot, Kruchinin’s piece brings *Aelita*’s cinematic world into contact with ‘light-genre’ popular fare, much of it borrowed from American jazz and maligned by critics for its ‘bourgeois’, ‘Western’ connotations. Within the context of Protazanov’s anti-New Economic Policy film, Valentin Kruchinin’s ‘Aelita’ comments on both the imperial past and the decadent allure of the Western present.

## Introduction

In *Classics for the Masses*, Pauline Fairclough describes the years following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution as a ‘social engineering project’.<sup>1</sup> To those with political power and cultural influence, the Soviet Union’s future lay not only in liberating the masses from the bonds of economic class, but also in creating a new mass-oriented culture – one in which the proletariat would be more than merely represented in art, but also moulded into a new kind of people *through* art. This was a true ‘art for the masses’: an ideologically founded aesthetic that would raise the cultural level of the proletariat as well as emphasize both political and ethical socialist values.

Music’s role within this great experiment had always been acknowledged by the revolutionaries. In the months following the October Revolution, the new Bolshevik government took swift action in forming a music division within *Narkompros*, nationalizing the imperial theatres, requisitioning instruments and manuscripts for state purposes, and sponsoring public concerts. However, what exactly ‘music for the masses’ should *sound* like was never made clear. With war raging and economic hardship increasing, the new regime was hardly in a place to closely govern musical affairs. Thus, at the dawn of the 1920s, creative expression

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Many thanks to the editors and reviewers at *Twentieth-Century Music* for providing insightful feedback for this article. Thanks also to Simon Morrison for providing guidance, translations, and archival assistance.

- 1 Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity under Lenin and Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 8.

was greatly liberated, and amidst this unique atmosphere of revolutionary fervour and artistic freedom, the musical world of Russia became a raucous ‘Wild East’. A thriving debate over Russia’s musical identity played out within press and printed policy during this early Soviet period. Here appeared a complex web of aesthetic arguments – all made with great seriousness and substance, but with no single individual or institution holding firm sway over the nation’s musical aesthetic. As Fairclough points out, the building of a new Soviet musical culture required a careful balance between continuity and innovation, as well as between individual creativity and collective need.<sup>2</sup> Everyone seemed to have their own opinion on these matters, and each was influenced not only by their own ideological beliefs, but also by politics and personal taste. Functionaries such as Cultural Enlightenment Commissar Anatoly Lunacharsky, old-guard intelligentsia such as Alexander Glazunov, futurists such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, and a bevy of conductors, composers, musicians, publishers, and critics participated in this discourse; each had their own belief that they (and they alone) knew the way forward into Russia’s musical future. In such an environment, proletarian audiences could sample from a remarkably wide menu of musical offerings.<sup>3</sup> A published list of programmes in the journal *Muzyka i teatr* (Music and Theatre), December 1922, evinces a thriving concert culture in which works from varying sources and genres from both West and East could coexist within neighbouring halls and theatres. Operas by Verdi and Gounod appear alongside orchestral performances of Stravinsky and Scriabin, while smaller recital venues tout ‘arias, romances, and Russian everyday songs’ for public entertainment.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, in the privacy of homes and clubs, Soviet listeners avidly consumed popular music imported from the West, first at the piano and later via gramophone recordings. To add even more noise to this new world’s cacophony, adventurous experiments into industrial music by avant-garde artists such as Arseny Avraamov were often staged in highly public spaces. Of course, increasing censorship would silence this vibrant chorus of ideas and sounds; the musical exploration of the 1920s ultimately gave way to Stalinist suppression in the 1930s. But for one remarkable decade, a stylistic hodgepodge of past and future, West and East, and bourgeois and proletariat sounded throughout Soviet Russia. Despite economic collapse under Lenin’s regime, culture expanded, and possibilities for Russia’s socialist soundtrack appeared truly endless.

One figure within this vast polyphony of ideas was the little-known Valentin Yakovlevich Kruchinin. Born in Rostov-on-Don in 1892, Kruchinin was among the many composers who remained on Russian soil after the Revolution to carve out distinctly ‘Soviet’ career paths. To this day, Kruchinin’s role within Soviet music lacks scholarly exploration, particularly his early career and his musical style during the post-revolutionary period. By studying Kruchinin’s prolific musical *oeuvre* of the liberal 1920s, we come not only to appreciate the composer’s oft-ignored notoriety and success as a songwriter, but also to better understand Russia’s musical landscape during its adolescent stage of Soviet nationhood. This article

2 Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 8.

3 Amy Nelson, *Music for the Revolution: Musicians and Power in Early Soviet Russia* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 28.

4 *Muzyka i teatr* 14 (26 December 1922), 2, 20.

discusses one of Kruchinin's more peculiar works from this neglected chapter of his life: his musical accompaniment for the silent film *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (*Aelita: Koroleva Marsa*, 1924), Russia's first full-length science fiction (*nauchnaya fantastika*) film. Kruchinin thus earns the distinguished designation of being the Soviet Union's first 'sci-fi' composer, creating the earliest sounds for a new cinematic genre that would become one of the nation's most intriguing and influential cultural touchstones. In this way, Kruchinin's *Aelita* is a valuable key to unlocking the nature of early Soviet science-fiction film music, as well as an integral piece to the broader, incredibly fascinating puzzle of science fiction's history.

Unfortunately, while the visual footage for *Aelita: Queen of Mars* can be viewed online, Kruchinin's score and cue sheets for the film do not appear to have survived in either written or recorded form. A 2004 re-release of the film by Ruscico replaces Kruchinin's music with a mixture of Alexander Scriabin, Igor Stravinsky, and Alexander Glazunov. To twenty-first-century ears, these three composers' edgy modernist sonorities provide an apt 'sci-fi' soundtrack for *Aelita*. However, they likely do not reflect Kruchinin's original musical conception for the film; not only did Kruchinin never write in a modernist idiom as Stravinsky and others defined it, but he also had no preconceived notions of what 'sci-fi' music was to sound like. The 'alien' sounds of the theremin, the 'otherworldly' meandering of atonal melodies, even the 'celestial' upper ranges of flutes and metallophones – these and other sonic sci-fi tropes were not standard in 1924.

What, then, were Kruchinin's models for writing the score for *Aelita*, and how might 1920s Russian musical culture have impacted his approach? Although Kruchinin's original score is unfortunately missing, extant bits of data help us unlock *Aelita*'s sonic world. For one, much can be gleaned from reviews and other primary documentation about the film, which reveal Kruchinin's interest in pre-revolutionary bourgeois aesthetics for this musical project. Beyond these, the most important clue to understanding Kruchinin's *Aelita* is his 24th opus: a two-page piano piece, also titled 'Aelita', likely designed to promote the eponymous film. At first glance, this piece does not promise many answers to the broader questions regarding early Soviet sci-fi music; it is minuscule in length, minimal in impact, and its musical style is far from 'cosmic'. There is also no sure evidence that its contents ever accompanied the film itself. However, when viewed in tandem with the constructivist imagery and pragmatic themes of its namesake film, we see in Kruchinin's 'Aelita' two seemingly disparate worlds converge: first, there is the grand ideological scope, out-of-this-world subject matter, and constructivist aesthetics of *Aelita*; and second, there is Soviet popular dance music, a realm unto its own. Indeed, Kruchinin's short piece evinces the precarious position of what was called 'eccentric' dance music in the early Soviet Union, bestowing this oft-maligned 'light' genre with a profound sense of alienness in war-torn and economically weathered Russia. Though a small piece, Kruchinin's contribution to Russian sci-fi film is a valuable example of how highbrow and lowbrow aesthetics could be brought together within the brand-new genre of science fiction. By so doing, it reveals the fluid, primordial state of both speculative fiction and Soviet politics in art during the era of Lenin's New Economic Policy. This little opus indeed offers a fascinating nexus between nostalgia for the imperial past and fascination with the present West – all within a work of both science and Socialist fiction.

### ***Aelita: Queen of Mars and Lenin's New Economic Policy***

To understand Kruchinin's musical vision for *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, one must first understand the 1924 film: its contents, how it was made, and the sociopolitical context in which it was first screened. Silent films such as *Aelita* held an important yet complex position within Soviet culture. Owing to its propagandistic potential, film was considered by many (including Lenin himself) to be the most important art form of the Revolution. The film industry thus bore a massive burden in the eyes of the state, and stakes were high for producers and directors who took on major cinematic projects – in both the political and the economic sense (budgets, after all, were exceedingly tight).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, while music was spared intense scrutiny by the censors in the early 1920s, films were carefully vetted by proletarian and modernist factions within the cultural establishment. They were also heavily scrutinized by the Soviet press. All aspects of a film, including the very process of its production, were expected to promote a socialist message clearly and effectively to audiences. Meanwhile, at this early stage of cinema, many aspects of 'film language' – camera shots, lighting, costumes, as well as musical soundtracks – were not stably codified into recognizable genres or tropes. Sci-fi film aesthetics, in particular, were only just beginning to come into their own in the 1920s. Though space travel, advanced telescoping, and other such fantasies had taken firm root in nineteenth-century genre fiction and literary utopias, visual representations of such were still limited and widely diverse in 1924, both within and outside Russia.<sup>6</sup> Sonic representations of sci-fi themes, meanwhile, were practically non-existent.

Loosely inspired by a 1923 novel written by Alexei Tolstoy and directed by Yakov Protazanov (both recent repatriates), *Aelita: Queen of Mars* welcomed Russia's golden age of science fiction, being among the first films in the world to earnestly address themes of interplanetary travel and extra-terrestrial life.<sup>7</sup> Though Soviet critics hardly celebrated it, modern scholars such as Ian Christie assert the film's importance to sci-fi film history.<sup>8</sup> Particularly

5 For more on early Soviet film culture, see David Gillespie, *Early Soviet Cinema: Innovation, Ideology and Propaganda* (London: Wallflower, 2000) and Denise J. Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918–1935* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991). See also Mira Liehm and Antonin J. Liehm, *The Most Important Art: Soviet and Eastern European Film after 1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 34–5.

6 Though the term *nauchnaya fantastika* (literally 'science fantasy') appeared as early as the 1890s, science fiction was not formally theorized or studied as a historical phenomenon until the 1970s. The first Russian study of *nauchnaya fantastika* was A. N. Britikov's *Russkiy-sovetskiy nauchno-fantasticheskiy roman* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1970). A year later, Croatian-born literary theorist Darko Suvin published his *Russian Science Fiction, 1956–1970* (Toronto: Secondary Universe, 1971), the first English-language bibliography on the subject. For more, see Anindita Banerjee, *Russian Science Fiction Literature and Cinema* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2018), xii. See also Matthias Schwartz, 'How *Nauchnaia Fantastika* Was Made: The Debates about the Genre of Science Fiction from NEP to High Stalinism', *Slavic Review* 72/2 (2013), 226.

7 Having opposed the Bolshevik Revolution, Alexei Tolstoy (only distantly related to Lev Nikolayevich) spent seven years in France and Germany before returning to Russia in 1923. He wrote his novel *Aelita, or The Decline of Mars* in Berlin between 1921 and 1923.

8 English explorations of *Aelita's* themes include Ian Christie, 'Down to Earth: *Aelita* Relocated', in *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*, ed. R. Taylor and I. Christie (London: Routledge, 1991); Andrew J. Horton, 'Science Fiction of the Domestic: Iakov Protazanov's *Aelita*', in *Russian Science Fiction Literature and Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Anindita Banerjee (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018); and

notable are the film's Constructivist aesthetics, in both the Martian sets (designed by Viktor Simov) and the costumes (designed by Moscow Art Theatre designers Isaak Rabinovich and Alexandra Ekster). Constructivism, which had its roots in the avant-garde with the artists Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko, had by this point been repackaged for mass audiences by the Leftist intelligentsia. Its presence in *Aelita* demonstrates a fascinating instance (one of many) in which modernist aesthetics were presented to mass audiences in a deliberate attempt to promote cultural reinvention.<sup>9</sup>

Protazanov indeed intended his film to be more than a mere flashy showcase of futuristic sets and costumes; the plot of *Aelita* imparts a strong socialist message. The film begins with a telegraphed communiqué of three mysterious words: ANTA ODELI UTA, which appear across the world from an unknown source, perhaps outer space. The protagonist, a young Soviet engineer named Los, reads the strange message, and he fantasizes about the beautiful Martian Queen Aelita. Oppressed by the wicked ruler Tuskub, the Queen longingly peers through her telescope at Los and his fellow Earthlings. Los enlists the help of a fellow despondent colleague, Spiridonov, to secretly construct a spaceship to reach Mars. Meanwhile, Los's wife, Natasha, is seduced by the nefarious Erlikh, who lures her into his world of secret parties and black-market sugar. Believing his wife to be unfaithful, Los shoots her, then escapes to Mars in his rocket. Though Tuskub orders Los's execution, Aelita intervenes, taking command of the dormant masses to stage a revolution, mirroring the uprisings of 1917. But in a sudden twist, Aelita co-opts the insurgency and proclaims her supremacy over the proletariat rebels; as one character iterates: 'It's not for the masters to create revolutions.' As Los kills the traitorous queen, he awakens to find that it was all a dream – the bullet did not hit his wife, the spaceship was never constructed, and he never left Earth. The mysterious message, ANTA ODELI UTA, turns out to be nothing more than an advertising stunt for a tyre company. Feeling a new sense of dedication to the revolutionary cause, Los burns his spaceship plans, vowing to quit his daydreaming. Though much of the film takes place on Mars, its ultimate message is firmly down-to-earth: abandon fantasy and commit yourself to building the socialist nation here and now.<sup>10</sup>

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Jillian Porter, 'Alien Commodities in Soviet Science Fiction Cinema: *Aelita*, *Solaris*, and *Kin-dza-dza!*' in *Simultaneous Worlds: Global Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Jennifer L. Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Today, *Aelita* is often referenced alongside Fritz Lang's later genre-defining *Metropolis* of 1927, and many have noted the stark similarities between both films in both subject matter and imagery. This said, I have found no evidence indicating a direct reference to *Aelita* on Lang's part.

9 For more on Constructivism in the 1920s, see Christina Lodder, 'Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s', in *The Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Dennis G. Ioffe and Frederick H. White (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012). See also Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalнизм: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (London: Verso, 2011), 21–32.

10 Protazanov's departures from Tolstoy's novel help further bring the film to this 'terrestrial' plane. While almost all of the book's events occur on Mars, the majority of the film takes place on Earth, focusing heavily on Erlikh, Spiridonov, and Natasha. All three of these characters were created for the film, and none of them journey off the planet. Furthermore, Tolstoy does not fictionalize Los's journey to Mars as Protazanov does; the novel ends with the protagonist failing to bring about a successful revolution, returning to Earth, and subsequently receiving new radio messages from space (presumably from his beloved Aelita, who does not betray the revolution and ends up captured by Tuskub).

Protazanov's film looks sceptically at Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). Set in Moscow of 1922, two years before the film's release, *Aelita's* Russia is in grave economic and humanitarian crisis. In 1921, Lenin had responded by abandoning the 'pure' socialist model and allowing limited and tightly controlled capitalist ventures to aid in repairing Russia's shattered economy. Though Lenin and other Bolshevik pundits insisted that this dalliance with the free market would only be temporary, the policy would remain in effect well after Lenin's death, only ending with Stalin's collectivization efforts in 1928. Meanwhile, Lenin's softened form of socialism would profoundly impact both the consumption habits and the ideological content of mid-1920s Soviet culture. Hard-line communists disapproved of the NEP, arguing that it undermined revolutionary progress. Protazanov seemed to share this negative view, as his film explicitly attacks the enterprising petit-bourgeois 'businessmen' who took advantage of Lenin's relaxed economic strictures. These figures, known collectively as NEP-men (*Nepmany*) were often portrayed as underhanded villains in Soviet propaganda. In *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, the NEP-man caricature is embodied in Erlikh, who acts as both antagonist and foil to Los and his loyal socialist colleagues.

As an anti-NEP film, *Aelita: Queen of Mars* explicitly warns Soviet audiences against the dangers of nostalgia for the bygone imperial era. Early in the film, Erlikh and his friends wax sentimental about the order and luxury of earlier times. This scene, complete with flashbacks, establishes Erlikh and his cronies as not only enterprising and exploitative NEP-men, but also the pernicious embodiment of 'outdated' imperial ideologies. Their desire to re-live the glory days eventually rubs off on Los's friend and confidante Spiridonov, who decides to leave Russia and chase the glories of the past in the West. In a letter to Los, Spiridonov laments, 'The ways and habits of the past proved stronger than me.' But tempting as such a nostalgic escape may seem, the film asserts that living in the past comes at great cost to the proletariat of the present. This message pointedly appears in a scene where Natasha follows Erlikh to a secret ball. There, she considers the lavish dancing shoes worn by the party-goers and recalls her previous service to the cold and homeless refugees who had to sit on dirty ground and wrap their feet with thin cloth. Natasha realizes that she has allowed herself to be lulled into a sentimental dream-world of hedonism, complacency, and greed. Scenes such as this provide deeper meaning for Los's final commitment at the end of the film: to be a good Soviet citizen, one must abandon *all* dreams – not just the dreams of outer space, but also the nostalgic reminiscences of the unjust imperial past.

To modern viewers, Protazanov's anti-NEP and anti-imperial messages are glaringly apparent, at times quite didactic (a literal hammer-and-sickle appears during the Martian uprising). However, contemporary socialist newspaper critics nonetheless questioned *Aelita's* status as a 'Soviet' film. Even before its premiere, the film was deemed dubious, due in part to its exorbitant budget, and also to its production company Mezhrabpom-Rus',<sup>11</sup> a studio founded in 1922 and funded by the Berlin-based Workers' International Relief. In its early years, the company hoped to comply with the fairly

11 *Mezhrabpom* is an abbreviation of *Mezhdunarodnoy Rabochey Pomoshchi* (International Workers' Aid). They partnered with the artistic collective Rus' in the summer of 1923.

free-wheeling government brief to produce 'utopian films, such as a look into a happier future'.<sup>12</sup> However, the company would quickly acquire a negative reputation for its NEP associations; as a direct product of Lenin's new policy, it was suspected that Mezhrabpom would genuflect to Hollywood and ignore its Soviet audiences.<sup>13</sup> Protazanov's involvement raised further eyebrows, as he had only recently returned from a long stint in Europe and was thus seen as a potentially corrupted 'Westernized' filmmaker.

When the film finally premiered in December, Soviet newspapers, including Mezhrabpom's own publication *Kino-nedelya* (Film-week), were quick to praise *Aelita* for its technical feats and impressive acting, but in the same breath dubbed the film a concession to the Western capitalist market. *Aelita* appeared a feeble attempt to merge proletarian subject matter with opulent 'bourgeois' production, sacrificing revolutionary integrity in the pursuit of commercial success abroad. In the words of Vladimir Erofeev for *Kino-gazeta* (Film-newspaper), the film was riddled with 'philistine dreams about bourgeois Mars', inappropriate for audiences living on 'Soviet Earth'.<sup>14</sup> Critic Albert Syrkin accused the film's creators of 'empty, naked technique', resulting in borderline 'ideologically harmful content'. His conclusion: 'If you have mastered the mechanics, it would be embarrassing not to master the ideology!'<sup>15</sup> A final notable sentiment comes from critic Nikolai Lebedev, who likewise called the film 'pretentious' and ideologically corrupt due to its interest in catering to both Russia and Europe. In his words: '*Aelita* will be very coldly received by the proletarian spectator, because in spirit it is alien [*chuzhda*, or 'foreign'] to him'.<sup>16</sup> In sum, the emphatic pro-socialist message of the film seemed an egregiously pale afterthought to Soviet critics when juxtaposed with the grand and obviously very expensive spectacle of the Martian world.<sup>17</sup>

### Kruchinin in the 1920s

Lebedev's conjecture about proletariat audiences proved less than true, for the film was, in fact, considerably popular among the public. Rumour had it that Protazanov himself could not attend the film's premiere due to lack of available tickets. Scholars have attributed the film's success not only to the grand Martian scenes, but also to the previous success of Tolstoy's novel (though some, including Lunacharsky, would complain about the changes made from the book in its film adaptation).<sup>18</sup> *Aelita*'s fame may also have been the result of a clever advertising campaign in *Kino-nedelya* and elsewhere, in which the three strange words that haunt the film, ANTA ODELI UTA, were published in large letters without further

12 Quoted in Christie, 'Down to Earth', 86.

13 Negative criticism of *Aelita* was indeed a bad omen for Mezhrabpom-Rus', as it would later face even more backlash and censorship during the reign of Stalin. See, for example, the story behind the censored film *The Glass Eye* (*Steklyannyy Glaz*) in Natalie Ryabchikova, 'Mezhrabpomfil'm mezhdru eksperimentom i tsenzuroy: delo Steklyannogo glaza', *Teatr, zhivopis', Kino muzyka* 3 (2019).

14 Vladimir Erofeev, 'O proizvodstve 'na zagranitsu', *Kino-gazeta* 41 (1924), 2.

15 Albert Syrkin, 'Mezhdru tekhnikoy i ideologiyey', *Kino-nedelya* 37 (14 October 1924), 3.

16 N.L. (assumed Nikolai Lebedev), '*Aelita*', *Kino-gazeta* 41 (1924), 2.

17 For more about *Aelita*'s reception, see Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema*, 30–2.

18 A short blurb from Lunacharsky appears in *Kino-nedelya* 37 (14 October 1924), 6.

explanation to pique audience curiosity. In any case, one can assert that *Aelita: Queen of Mars* had a rather ‘cosmic’ impact on Russian film culture in the 1920s. We now move our focus to a much smaller figure, Valentin Kruchinin, and his vague – yet very important – contribution to this film and its thematic messages.

After his family relocated from Rostov-on-Don to Moscow, Kruchinin enrolled in the private School of Music and Drama (present-day GITIS) in Alexander Shor’s piano class, graduating in 1912. He subsequently entered the Moscow Conservatory, continuing his piano studies with Evgeny Gvozdkov and Karl Kipp, and then, from 1916 to 1917, studying composition with Vasily Zolotaryov, also a Rostov native. When the Civil War began, he left school to serve in the First Cavalry Corps of the Red Army, writing songs for his regiment (an experience which he remembered fondly decades later) and ultimately receiving the Order of the Patriotic War.<sup>19</sup> He would continue to bolster his proletarian (worker-peasant) musical credentials into the Stalinist era. His presence at seminars for the Union of Soviet Composers from 1932 to 1936 put him in close contact with Stalin Prize recipients such as Reinhold Gliere. In 1964, he was made an Honoured Artist (*Zasluzhennyi deyatel’ iskusstv*) of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) based on his irreproachable service to the Soviet cause. Indeed, much of his best-known works, especially those composed in the 1930s and 1940s, effectively showcase the state-approved genres of ‘mass music’: vibrant military suites, choral works, propagandistic film scores, and operettas on gritty contemporary themes. Upon Kruchinin’s death in 1970, obituaries were released by both the All-Union and Moscow chapters of the Composers’ Union. Both laud his contribution to the proletarian repertoire, praising his lifelong devotion to genres ‘addressed to the broadest audience’ and highlighting his brass band compositions. ‘A composer-patriot, a charming and simple man, [and] a good faithful comrade’, his obituarist wrote, ‘such will remain in our memory of Valentin Yakovlevich Kruchinin’.<sup>20</sup>

As glowing as these remarks appear, much about Kruchinin’s life and career was left unsaid in Soviet retrospectives of his work. Perhaps in an act of Stalinist bias, Kruchinin’s activity from before Stalin’s first five-year plan received very little comment in Soviet historiography. For instance, though the composer’s obituary mentions his activity as a military songwriter and march-composer during the war years, his activity during the post-war 1920s is not mentioned at all, with his popularity being attributed only to the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, coverage of his career in *Sovetskaya muzyka* (Soviet Music) from that journal’s founding focuses almost exclusively on his Red Army output. Even today, the current Russian Wikipedia page on Kruchinin lists the composer’s musical activity only after 1930.<sup>22</sup> The

19 For more on Kruchinin and the military, see his article ‘Frontovaya Druzhba’, *Sovetskaya Muzyka* (1 January 1946). Kruchinin would continue to write for the Russian military into the 1940s. See Suzanne Ament, ‘The Soldiers of the Song Front: Composers and Poets during the War’, in *Sing to Victory!: Song in Soviet Society during World War II* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2018).

20 ‘Pamyati V. Ya. Kruchinina’, *Sovetskaya kul’tura* 18 (12 February 1970).

21 ‘Nash Vestnik: Pamyati ushedshikh’, *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 6 (June 1970), 160.

22 Wikipedia, ‘Kruchinin, Valentin Yakovlevich’, [ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Кручинин,Валентин\\_Яковлевич](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Кручинин,Валентин_Яковлевич) (accessed 13 February 2023).



reality of Kruchinin's career contains far more than these accounts suggest. In 1981, a reviewer noted this erasure of the composer's past within the *Muzykal'naya entsiklopediya* (Musical Encyclopaedia),<sup>23</sup> which 'indicates that [Kruchinin] composed operettas and music for brass bands. But the name of Kruchinin, after all, is primarily associated with popular songs of the 20s . . . Why this reticence in the selection of facts pertaining to his aesthetics?'<sup>24</sup> This writer implies that Kruchinin found great success as a composer before Stalin's rise. Primary documentation supports this argument; for example, an unpublished letter from the Leningrad *Estradbyuro* (Variety Show Bureau) dated 1926 deems him 'a talented worker and one of the most prolific contemporary composers' of the RSFSR.<sup>25</sup> What seemed to rattle music critics in later years was Kruchinin's affection in the 1920s for popular ditties contra grand works for the masses. Like Shostakovich, Kruchinin earned his keep in his youth as an accompanist and popular theatre composer, but unlike Shostakovich, he did not make the leap to symphonies and oratorios and become a Soviet institution. But outside of that matrix, he was nevertheless prolific and respected, writing music for the Peacock's Tail variety theatre and other such venues. Dozens of Kruchinin's 'forgotten' tunes from the 1920s survive in printed score; several of which, like his beloved 'The Song Flows' (*L'yotsya pesnya*) appear in multiple reprints.

Regardless of what Soviet historians have said (or not said) about these works, many of them strongly reflect the socialist politics of their time. Indeed, though composers did enjoy more artistic freedom during the Bolshevik period than what would later be offered by Stalin, Kruchinin nevertheless felt a strong need to set texts that unmistakably promoted revolutionary rhetoric. Researchers such as Robert A. Rothstein have tied the composer to the romantic revolutionary aesthetic of the Proletkult movement, as seen in songs such as his 1923 'Little Bricks' (*Kirpichiki*, with lyrics by Pavel German).<sup>26</sup> Telling of a love affair between two loyal revolutionaries at a brick factory, 'Little Bricks' effectively displays at least a surface-level pro-Soviet sentiment on the part of the composer. One can only speculate if such songs came from a sincere place of political loyalty; surrounding social pressures may have compelled him more than personal conviction. But in any case, Kruchinin would maintain a steady output of similar pro-Soviet songs into the 1930s and beyond.<sup>27</sup>

However, despite the brimming revolutionary zeal in the lyrics, reception to 'Little Bricks' and songs like it was mixed among socialist critics. On the one hand, 'Little Bricks' was accessible, politically didactic, and incredibly popular, marketed as a 'song of the new way of life'.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, institutions such as the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians

23 Literally *Musical Encyclopedia*, a premiere reference source comparable to the Grove Dictionary, published jointly by the scientific publisher Sovetskaya entsiklopediya and the All-Union Musical Publishing House Sovetskiy kompozitor.

24 H. Schaffer, 'S Tochki Zreniya Antona Ivanovicha. . .', *Literaturnaya gazeta* 35 (1981), 8.

25 Leningradskoe Estradbyuro, letter to Valentin Kruchinin, 20 November 1926, RGALI f. 675 op. 2, khr. 340, l. 18.

26 Robert A. Rothstein, 'The Quiet Rehabilitation of the Brick Factory: Early Soviet Popular Music and Its Critics', *Slavic Review* 39/3 (1980).

27 Such songs include his double-choir setting of 'My Country' (*Moya Strana*) and his song 'Our Moscow' (*Nasha Moskva*), both published in 1938 and including texts by Vasily Lebedev-Kumanch.

28 Nelson, *Music for the Revolution*, 97–8.

(RAPM) labelled such songs as insipid ‘light-genre’ music – politically agitative in lyrical content, but possessing music too stylistically tied to the ‘trite’ and ‘hackneyed’ popular music infiltrating Russia from the West.<sup>29</sup> ‘Little Bricks’, in particular, was deemed guilty by association with its ‘petit-bourgeois’ musical affect. As the critic I. Ledogorov would complain in 1930, ‘The success of “Little Bricks” is a throwback [*otryzhka*] to that bourgeois “culture” that still holds the artistic tastes of millions in captivity.’<sup>30</sup> Note here Ledogorov’s use of the word *otryzhka*, which implied not a mere throwback, but a far more visceral ‘belching up’ of past aesthetics. As in Protazanov’s film, we see in Ledogorov’s statement a strong distaste for the lingering vestige of the decadent past; ‘Little Bricks’ was an indicator not only of the West’s pernicious influence, but also of the masses’ refusal to completely abandon pre-revolutionary habits.

Ledogorov’s fears about the persistence of bourgeois style in Kruchinin’s music were not entirely unfounded; while Kruchinin certainly produced music designed to morally edify the proletariat, the composer also sought to entertain them. Though songs such as ‘Little Bricks’ were numerous and popular, much of Kruchinin’s output in the 1920s was not revolutionary in subject matter at all, but rather the very ‘light-genre’ music that the RAPM so despised. Frequently collaborating with the Association of Moscow Authors (a primary vehicle for publishing light-genre fare in the early 1920s), he published all sorts of romances, children’s songs, and other pop-adjacent tunes for private use. A specialty for Kruchinin was dance music – in particular, a style of dance music heavily inspired by the alluring ‘foreign’ sounds of American jazz and blues.<sup>31</sup> These works, marketed under the umbrella term ‘eccentric dances’ (*ekstsentricheskiy tanets*), were the hot new alternative to the stuffy and heavily choreographed dances of the classical salon such as the waltz.<sup>32</sup> Popular eccentric dances included shimmies, apaches, tangos, and foxtrots. Other light-genre works employed topical caricatures of ‘the Orient’ and Eastern European culture. These songs were called *tsy-ganshchiny* – literally, ‘gypsy songs’ – likewise outrageously popular since the late nineteenth

29 Nelson, *Music for the Revolution*, 123–4. See also Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 64.

30 I. Ledogorov, ‘Protiv opportunizma i detskoy bolezni levizny v muzyke’, *Sovetskiy teatr* 11–12 (1930), 28; see also Rothstein, ‘Quiet Rehabilitation’, 382.

31 Nelson, *Music for the Revolution*, 98. See also Marina A. Alyakrinskaya, ‘Tanets i ideologiya: fokstrot v sovetskoy kul’ture 1920–1930-kh gg’, *Vestnik CPbGUKI* 3/12 (September 2013), 24.

32 In the early 1920s, the Petrograd-based Factory of the Eccentric Actor (*Fabrika Ekstsentricheskogo Aktora*, or FEKS) coined the word ‘eccentric’ to describe (among other things) the dynamic and absurd art of ‘chance’ seen in circuses, cabarets, and racetracks. Directors and bandleaders such as Nikolai Foregger and Valentin Parnakh further solidified the term’s association with jazz and the dance hall by including foxtrots, shimmies, and other American-inspired dance music in their parodic cabarets. By the later 1920s, the term ‘eccentric dance’ was used as a mainstream label for songs written in the ‘American’ style. For example, Kruchinin’s 25th opus, ‘Jackie’ (*Djekki*, Leningrad: Valyashchik, 1925), is labelled as an ‘eccentric dance’. See Alyakrinskaya, ‘Tanets i ideologiya’, 24; Grigori Kozintsev, Georgii Kryzhitskii, Leonid Trauberg, and Sergei Youtkevich, *Eccentrism: The First Translation of the Russian Eccentric Manifesto, 1922*, trans. and ed. Marek Pytel (London: Eccentric Press, 1992); Éric Schmulévich, *La fabrique de l’acteur excentrique (FEKS) ou L’enfant terrible du cinéma soviétique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006); Bernadette Poliwoda, *FEKS: Fabrik des exzentrischen Schauspielers: vom Exzentrismus zur Poetik des Films in der frühen Sowjetkultur* (Munich: O. Sagner, 1994), 65–8; and Mel Gordon, ‘Valentin Parnakh, Apostle of Eccentric Dance’, *Experiment* 2 (1996), 424–7.

century and published prodigiously as sheet music in the 1920s. Kruchinin's published corpus from this decade provides archetypal examples of these exoticizing trends in eccentric dance. Often pairing his music with evocative titles, he exploited 'foreign' musical colours in his popular fare. Examples include his use of frequent chromatic passing tones in *tsyganshchiny* such as 'The Gypsy Song Flows' (*L'yetsya pesnya tsygane*, with lyrics by M. N. Lakhtin, published 1926) and strong syncopated melodies in dances such as 'Evening-time' (*Vecherom*, op. 80, published in Kiev, 1927). Among the crudest of Kruchinin's exoticist works is his self-published 1927 'Chocolate Kiddies' (*Shokoladnyye rebyata*), with its minstrel-inspired cover art and title likely referencing the Harlem-inspired variety revue act of the same name, founded in 1924 for European touring (Figure 1). The revue, marketed as a 'Negro operetta', had visited Moscow in 1926.<sup>33</sup>

Among Kruchinin's most prolific light-genre works of the 1920s were foxtrots, a genre which possesses a particularly colourful history within Soviet culture. This simple duple-metre dance, originating in the American jazz scene, made its way to Russia as early as 1920, first appearing as a choreographic novelty for avant-garde theatrical productions.<sup>34</sup> It exploded in Soviet popularity soon after, both on the variety show stage and in the dance hall. By the time of *Aelita*'s production, the foxtrot had reached its height, the term itself becoming synecdochic in the Russian press for any two-step dance (slow or fast), as well as for the entire eccentric dance genre and for youth culture as a whole. Theatres in every major city played foxtrots for eager young Soviets, with repertoire including both foreign imports and home-grown compositions.<sup>35</sup> Scholars such as Christopher Gilman have explained the dance's appeal to young Russians during this period, particularly its association with cosmopolitan existence and its use as a diversion during tough economic times – trends which would continue into the 1930s, though now through a narrower 'nationalistic' lens.<sup>36</sup>

During its first years in Russian consciousness, the foxtrot and all its cousins were relatively ignored by Leftist critics. Some, including famed film director Sergei Eisenstein, would strongly contend that such art of the music hall was innately revolutionary, arguing that these seemingly lowbrow 'attractions' may indeed be key to the great art of the future. Eisenstein thus wished to see Soviet art revolutionized from below, exalting light dance

33 For more on the 'Chocolate Kiddies', see S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union 1917–1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 54–7.

34 There is dispute as to who exactly 'invented' the foxtrot; suffice it to say that it reached mainstream American culture in the late 1910s and was primarily danced to ragtime tunes. For more on the foxtrot in Russia, see Alyakrinskaya, 'Tanets i ideologiya', 24; J. A. E. Curtis, 'Down with the Foxtrot! Concepts of Satire in the Soviet Theatre of the 1920s', in *Russian Theatre in the Age of Modernism*, ed. R. Russell and Andrew Barratt (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1990), 226; and Christopher Gilman, 'The Fox-Trot and the New Economic Policy: A Case Study in "Thingification" and Cultural Imports', *Experiment/Eksperiment* 2 (1996), 449–55.

35 See N. Foregger, 'Koye-chno po povodu mody', *Zrelishcha* 55 (1923), 4, quoted in Alyakrinskaya, 'Tanets i ideologiya', 24.

36 Gilman, 'The Fox-Trot and the New Economic Policy', 455, 459–61; Katerina Clark discusses Stalinist Russia's unique appropriation of Western art in her book *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).



**Figure 1** Front cover of Valentin Kruchinin's 'Shokoladnyye rebyata' ('Chocolate Kiddies'). Moscow: Izdanie avtora, 1927. Courtesy of Princeton University Library.

music to the status of high art.<sup>37</sup> But in autumn 1923, eccentric dances, foxtrots in particular, began to face a severe backlash, particularly by the Proletkult press and by cautious political

37 See Sergei Eisenstein, 'Montage of Attractions: For "Enough Stupidity in Every Wiseman"' [1922], trans. Daniel Gerould, *The Drama Review* 18/1 (1974), 79; Gerard McBurney, 'Declared Dead, but Only Provisionally: Shostakovich, Soviet Music-Hall and *Uslavno Ubityi*', in *Soviet Music and Society under Lenin and Stalin: The Baton and Sickle*, ed. Neil Edmunds (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 34–6. Another noteworthy example of Soviet apologetics for American dance is found in the 'Eccentric Manifesto' ('*Ekstsentrizm*', also published in 1922) written by members of the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS, see note 32). This manifesto, consisting primarily of short aphorisms, includes the following statement by Grigorii Kozintsev: 'We prefer the tap shoes of an American dancer to the 500 instruments of the Marinsky Theatre'. Meanwhile, in 1923, a critic for the journal *Zrelishcha* (*Spectacles*) attests to the 'need for rhythmic movement' among the masses, which the foxtrot and other such eccentric dances provide. See Kozintsev et al., *Eccentric Manifesto*, 4; Federov V. Frank, 'Djaz-band', *Zrelishcha* 7 (1923), 24–5, quoted in Alyakrinskaya, 'Tanets i ideologiya', 24.

authorities. Though the ‘foreign’ nature of foxtrots was undoubtedly appealing for many Russians, critics asserted that such dances were heavily associated with Western decay and petit-bourgeois individualism. American dances such as the foxtrot had become strongly associated with capitalist excess through their wide mass appeal, racial associations, eroticism, and elitist connotations. In 1923, the critic Gaik Adonts called the foxtrot ‘a new kind of pornography . . . [a] yellow contagion of the European bourgeoisie’ into which the Russian public had willingly backslid.<sup>38</sup> Adonts and other critics also closely associated the dance with the much-maligned NEP; indeed, much of the foxtrot’s success during this decade was due to conditions set by Lenin’s new policy.<sup>39</sup> Things would culminate in the early 1930s with official censure of foxtrots by the political youth organization *Komsomol*, alongside scathing criticism of the foxtrot by prominent RAPM members such as Lev Lebedinsky, who argued that dances from the ‘land of slaves’ would only lead to worship of capital.<sup>40</sup> But by then, the eccentric dance had become endemic in Russian mass culture; thus, in Stalin’s time, priorities turned towards the dance’s rehabilitation rather than its expulsion.<sup>41</sup>

Kruchinin doubtless followed this debate over foxtrots. But like many artists and publishers of the period, he took advantage of the political loopholes, ideological contradictions, and the general respect for artistic licence that predominated the 1920s to publish many eccentric dance compositions inspired by ragtime. There was undeniably great monetary potential in peddling these pop tunes, first as sheet music and later as recordings.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Lenin’s new economic climate provided a perfect environment in which one might market not just the allure of the exotic West, but perhaps also the potent nostalgia for dance culture of a bygone imperial era. Kruchinin’s ‘Aelita’, to which we now turn, manifests this public yearning for both the foreign present and the imperial past.

### Kruchinin’s ‘Aelita’

The 1920s also witnessed Kruchinin’s first forays into film scoring. *Aelita* appears to be his first ‘soundtrack’ – though, admittedly, little is known of Kruchinin’s thinking when he composed his score, and even less of his investment in the film’s production. He was surely aware of the goals of his commissioners, both Mezhrabpom-Rus’ and the director Protazanov; he was also likely familiar with Tolstoy’s novel. But there is no evidence of Kruchinin’s interest in the film’s constructivist imagery, which he might not even have known about before its release.

38 Gaik Adonts, ‘Novyy vid pornografii’, *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 37 (18 September 1923), 1–2.

39 Alyakrinskaya, ‘Tanets i ideologiya’, 24.

40 Lev Lebedinsky, *Amerikanskiy tanets* (Moscow, 1931), 4, quoted in Alyakrinskaya, ‘Tanets i ideologiya’, 26. See also Lyubov Ginzburg, ‘The Rhythms of the NEP: The Fox Trot Calls the Time’, *Journal of Russian American Studies* 3/1 (2019), 37–8.

41 See Peter Kupfer, ‘Bread and Champagne: Stalinist Musical Comedies of the 1930s and the Soviet Middlebrow’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Middlebrow*, ed. Kate Guthrie and Christopher Chowrimootoo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197523933.013.7>.

42 Nelson, *Music for the Revolution*, 47.

Without a score, one must look elsewhere for clues regarding *Aelita*'s music and how it was received. Public commentary on the film's original musical content appears nearly non-existent. Unfortunately, press reviews of silent film during this period, whether for scholarly or public readership, rarely mentioned the music connected with it. While the visual aspects such as cinematography could be reproduced and maintained from theatre to theatre, accompaniment for early silent films was, by its nature, a fluid and ephemeral practice. Many composers did not write full scores for these silent films at all, relying instead on cue sheets or arrangements of previously written material. When scores were written, they frequently shifted in content as their films were screened in disparate theatres across the country, for much depended on what resources were available and who was behind the baton (or, more likely, the piano) at each venue.<sup>43</sup> Thus, while the *Aelita* film strip travelled throughout the provinces, Kruchinin's music, written for full orchestra, likely was not heard in full outside of the film's first showings in Moscow and Leningrad.<sup>44</sup>

What *can* be gleaned from critical reviews of *Aelita*? One review published in both *Pravda* (Truth) and *Kino-nedelya* describes the Martian scenes in musical terms: 'The scenes on Mars are made in an opera-sweet way (namely *Aida* at the Bolshoi Theatre), and the meeting of Martian slaves is staged according to the stamp of "monumental" foreign films.'<sup>45</sup> Here, the film's purported 'operatic' quality is viewed with distaste, aligned with the elitist cosmopolitan art of the previous generation. How much the music contributed to this 'opera-sweet' sensibility, however, is unknown. More revealing is what is read between the lines in a *Kino-nedelya* review by Grigory Boltvansky. In his discussion of the film's 'major shortcomings', Boltvansky senses in the work's music (particularly its overture) a certain 'theatrical' quality:

In terms of the form of the film, the organization of the individual *mise en scene*, and the details of production, one senses Ya. A. Protazanov's experienced hand and mastery. But oddly so. Throughout the screening, I had the feeling that I was not in the cinema, but . . . in the theatre. The general atmosphere of the performance, the bias towards the '*aki-esque*' in the music, the inclusion of an overture before the start and the subtle ancient Roman stylization of the beautifully theatrical episode on Mars, [and the] static, anti-cinematic nature of this section – all of this taken together

43 For more on this, see the introduction to Martin Miller Marks, *Music and the Silent Film: Contexts and Case Studies, 1895–1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Yuri Tsivian, 'The Acoustics of Cinema Performance', in *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception*, trans. Alan Bodger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

44 Kruchinin's involvement in Leningrad can be traced to a note from the composer to the Union of Dramatic and Musical Writers, 28 October 1924, RGALI f. 675 op. 2, khr. 340, l. 7. Here, he entrusts his score to the conductor D. S. Blok. Advertisements in *Izvestiya* (News) also mention full orchestral accompaniment for the premiere of the film at the Ars Theater in Moscow under the hand of Blok. Orchestral work for the film's screening at Cinema Forum, meanwhile, was under the direction of A. G. Berezovsky. See *Izvestiya* 258 (12 November 1924), 7 and 259 (13 November 1924), 7 for these names. Some sources also contend that Dmitri Shostakovich played the piano for *Aelita* screenings in Leningrad, though I cannot find any primary source material confirming this fact.

45 'Chto govoryat i chto pishut ob *Aelite*', *Kino-nedelya* 38 (21 October 1924), 12, quoting a *Pravda* article dated 1 October 1924.

made you squirm in your seat, experiencing an awkward sensation of sitting in one of the ‘*aki*’.<sup>46</sup>

Boltyansky’s mention of music in the film is brief, but there is enough here to perceive his negative attitude towards it. Notable is his use of the terms *aki* and *aki-esque*.<sup>47</sup> These words, which resist English translation, were slang references to the old-school academic (*akademicheskii*) theatres and all the pre-revolutionary, high-society values implied therein.<sup>48</sup> Boltyansky thus heard in Kruchinin’s music the awkward, stuffy atmosphere of rule-bound, stifling bourgeois aesthetics, ostensibly associated with an antiquated, imperial tradition. The music worked in tandem with the ‘non-dynamic’ pacing of the Martian scenes and the stylized beauty of classical architecture that inspired the costumes and staging. Such an effect, says Boltyansky, does not belong in Soviet cinema. Rather, more emphasis should be paid to ‘red everyday life, with its red core, pathos and zest, and the composition of everyday life in nature’.<sup>49</sup>

These small clues in the Soviet press educate our guess as to what Kruchinin’s music for the film may have sounded like: reminiscent of pre-Soviet ‘bourgeois’ styles and tastes. We now arrive at a more concrete bit of musical evidence: Kruchinin’s 24th opus, ‘Aelita’ (Figure 2), published in Leningrad by Leon Valyashchik, this small opus exists as a separate work from the *Aelita* score, but it nevertheless provides important insight into how Kruchinin conceived of his work with the film.

This piece lacks a printed date, but its title page describes the work as a ‘composition for the worldwide picture *AELITA*’. One might thus assume that the little opus was published around the time of *Aelita*’s release – that is, late 1924 into 1925. Indeed, the title description implies that the work was designed explicitly ‘for the worldwide picture’ (*k mirovoy kartine*) and was thus perhaps an excerpt from the score itself. These are conjectures, however; with lack of further evidence, the true date and provenance of the music cannot be fully assumed.

The two pages of musical material from ‘Aelita’ can be briefly analysed thus: after a two-bar introduction, Kruchinin presents an A section riddled with dotted rhythms, followed by a new B melody that includes a vocal addition, the word ‘Aelita’ sung at the beginning of each phrase. The binary form is complicated by *coda* and *segno* symbols with ambiguous destinations, perhaps to provide two possible options for the B section, one played with higher octaves. The piece’s fluid binary form is conducive for easy adaptation in dance situations. It would also come in handy, perhaps, when accompanying the film itself. *Allegro moderato* and *con dolore* imply a stateliness perhaps taken to the point of dramatic exaggeration.

Quite unlike the ‘aki-esque’ overture heard by Boltyansky, Kruchinin’s ‘Aelita’ bears the attributes of a slow foxtrot: a duple-metre dance with syncopated rhythms and distinct

46 G. Boltyansky, ‘Aelita’, *Kino-nedelya* 36 (7 October 1924), 8.

47 These appear in Boltyansky’s original Russian in their declensions (*akov/akovskim*).

48 We see the term *aki* used similarly in an editorial by critic K. Egorov, where he speaks of the ‘open war’ between the traditional ‘aki’ of the Moscow Art Theater and the avant-garde ‘Lefs’ such as Meyerhold and Mayakovsky. See K. Egorov, ‘Tsikl Zavershen’, *Rabochiy i teatr* 50 (1925), 10.

49 Boltyansky, ‘Aelita’, 8.



**Figure 2** Front cover and score for Valentin Kruchinin's 'Aelita' (3 pages). Leningrad: Muzykal'noye izdatel'stvo Leon Valyashchik, undated. Courtesy of Princeton University Library.

'striding' left-hand figures, all allusions to American ragtime piano technique. This said, the piece's formal generic identity is vague. Valyashchik's official label for the work was 'choreographic sketch' (*khoreograficheskiy eskiz*), as can be seen on back-page advertisements from this period that promoted other Kruchinin scores (Figure 3). The term 'choreographic sketch' seems a rather broad one, used to merely distinguish sung works (romances and songs) from instrumental works meant for dance. One common element among Valyashchik's list of choreographic sketches is the use of evocative titles; Kruchinin's 'Jungle' (*Dzhungli*), 'Baby' (*Babi*), and his tango 'Vampire' (*Vampir*) are useful examples. In practice, a choreographic sketch could thus be any programmatic piano work, either for use in public entertainment (e.g., dance studios, clubs, restaurants) or home enjoyment. Several of Kruchinin's eccentric dances fall under this umbrella categorization, including his foxtrots 'Jackie' (*Dzhekki*) and 'Indian Summer' (*Bab'ye Leto*).



53

2

С чувством глубокого уважения ГРИГОРИЮ РОЗЕНБЕРГ Повестью

„Аэли́та“

Allegro vivo. Валентин КРУЧИНИН, Оп. 24.  
Allegro moderato.

PIANO.

*f*

*mf*

1.

2.

Con dolore.  
Аэ - ли - та

*rit.*

*p*

Аэ - ли - та

Аэ -

© L. 349 W.

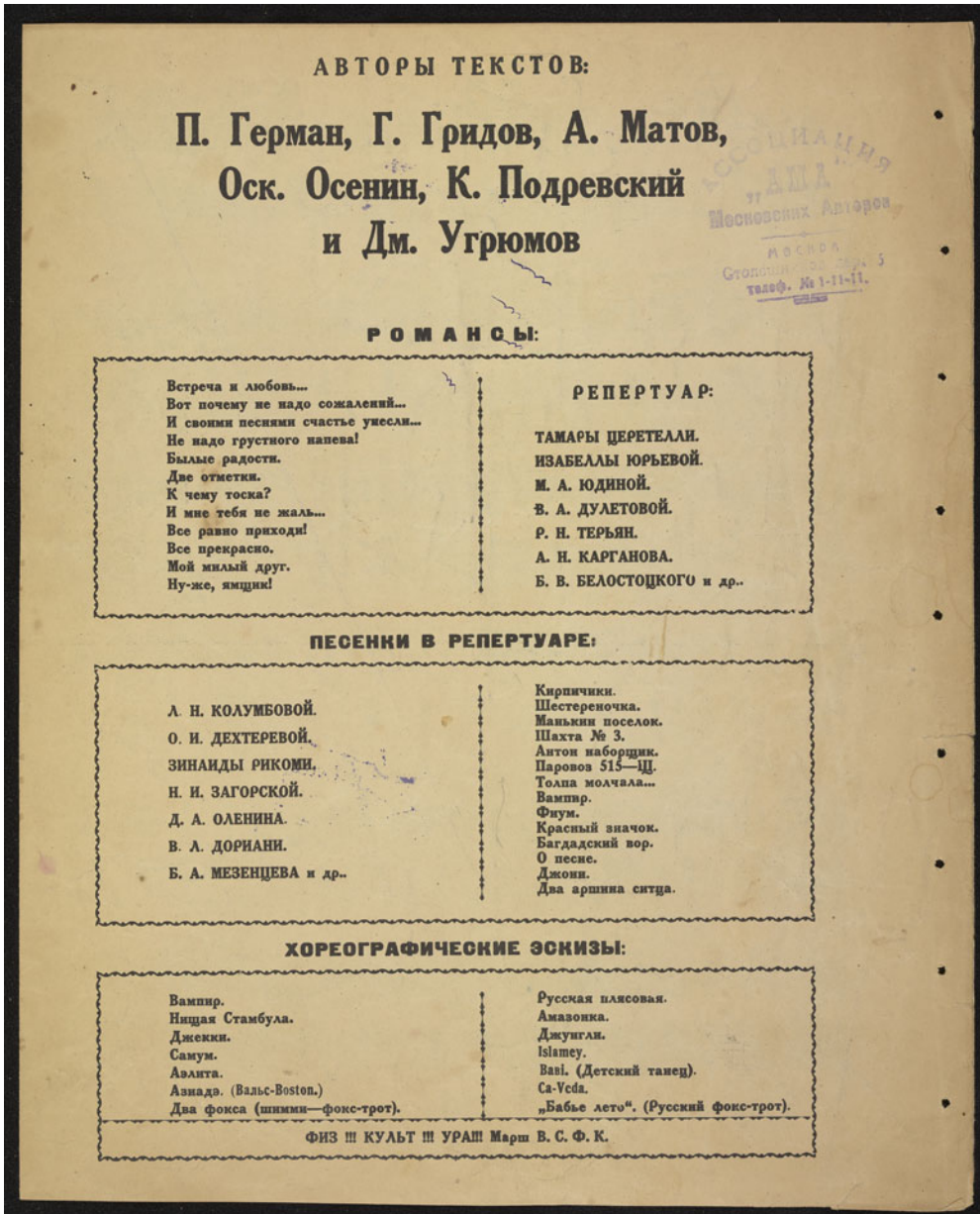
Figure 2 Continued.

‘Aelita’ can therefore be labelled in several ways: a foxtrot, an eccentric dance, and a choreographic sketch. Regardless, it sonically matches the popular ‘light-genre’ music of the period. In this way, ‘Aelita’ forms a peculiar link between two very different aesthetic worlds: the monumental and sophisticated cinematic world on the one hand, and lowbrow Russian ‘foxtrot’ culture on the other. What possibly could have inspired Kruchinin to link common dance music with such an opulent and high-profile film? To reiterate, Kruchinin had very few

The image shows a page of musical notation, likely a score for a piano piece. The page is numbered "3" in the top right corner. The notation consists of six systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line includes lyrics in Cyrillic: "ЛИ-ТА" and "А-Э-ЛИ-ТА". The piano accompaniment features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth-note runs. Performance markings include "f", "ff", "espressivo", and "Fine". The page is numbered "L. 349 W." at the bottom center.

Figure 2 Continued.

models to follow and thus had room to explore and follow his own rules. One hypothesis is that he wished to exalt the foxtrot in a manner like Eisenstein. Indeed, Kruchinin may have been sympathetic to radical movements promoting lowbrow music in support of modernist art. However, Boltyansky's reference to the highbrow *aki* in his review suggests that Kruchinin was not strongly committed to such a cause. Never one for avant-garde 'out-of-this-world' experimentation, Kruchinin does not appear to have been interested in promoting any sort



**Figure 3** Back matter of Valentin Kruchinin, ‘Dva Foksa: Shimmi Foks-Trot’. Moscow: Izdanie avtora, 1926. Note the presence of the title ‘Aelita’ under the bottommost list of ‘Choreographic Sketches’ (‘Khoreograficheskiye Eskizy’). Courtesy of Princeton University Library.

of grand ideology about lowbrow music. What little we have of his correspondence also suggests that he was not an aesthetic idealist. It is more likely that the ‘Aelita’ foxtrot was motivated by simple pragmatism; a man with a keen sense of economy (as his correspondence shows), Kruchinin likely hoped to play to his strengths as he wrote for *Aelita*, less interested

in any elaborate artistic merging of sight and sound, and more interested in a paycheque. Indeed, the piece may have been written completely independently from the film at first, with the title tacked on later to push sales.

All this said, when one considers this short piece in context with the earthbound metanarrative of the film's plot, Kruchinin's choice to invoke a genre familiar to Russian audiences of the 1920s seems more deliberate. After all, this piece was likely published right as critiques of foxtrots and other eccentric dances emerged in earnest; surely Kruchinin, aware of these polemics, was considering how he could creatively justify his musical contribution. Thus, a new hypothesis forms: rather than presenting anything otherworldly, the composer may have chosen music grounded in lived Soviet experience to convey a deeper message about political loyalty and the dangers of nostalgia in NEP-era Russia – themes mirrored in the film itself. Specifically, Kruchinin may have intended his piece to be associated with the villainous Erlikh: through this NEP-man character, the contemporary sounds of America intermingle with wistful longing for pre-revolutionary times. Erlikh indeed forms a nexus between what can be considered 'latitudinal' fascination with Western trends and 'longitudinal' pre-occupation with the bygone imperial era. Thus, pine as they might for the ways of the past, Erlikh and his ilk do not dance the antiquated waltz at their throwback parties, but rather the more modern foxtrot. Their corrupt-yet-seductive parties, held in defiance of the broken Soviet present, reflect well Ledogorov's notion of 'regurgitating' a musical past that had officially been deemed dead by the critical Left – while also embracing more current Western trends. Dance culture, like the NEP in general, was not just a courtship with the West, but also a backsliding, a departure from 'purer' forms of proletariat lifestyle found during War Communism.

Thus, despite its new 'American' style, Kruchinin's 'Aelita' does not merely sound the jazzy strains of the present. In its association with a film explicitly warning against nostalgia, 'Aelita' also reverberates echoes of the nation's pre-revolutionary past – echoes that, though pernicious, are nevertheless alluring, perhaps irresistible. It is indeed as Spiridonov attests in his letter: 'The ways and habits of the past proved stronger than me.' In short, Kruchinin's 'Aelita' reveals a point of convergence between past and present: reminiscence of imperial days of yore on the one hand, and a more present envy of the capitalist West on the other.

One can go further; when looked at another way, this eccentric dance is not just Erlikh's, but the Martian queen's herself. After all, it is she who appears on the work's front cover, bedecked in all her opulent Constructivist regalia. Kruchinin's foxtrot is thus also linked with a world far distant from the lived experience of 1920s Russians. Indeed, though on the surface mundane and familiar, the foxtrot may have constituted an 'otherworldly' force in its own right: when heard amidst the toils of everyday Soviet life, such hedonistic strains recall a life that, though only a few short years ago or a few thousand miles away, felt more distant than ever. In a society ravaged by war, political instability, and abject poverty, the foxtrots of Erlikh's parties surely seemed uncanny and alien, more so than any eerie theremin, atonal tune, or metallic blast. Any moment of uninhibited freedom – freedom to dance, to play, to dress up, to unleash the senses – might have felt to working Russians just as impossible as travelling to Mars. In short: within the context of NEP-era Moscow, 'Aelita' sounds a

bourgeois decadence neither fantastical nor cosmic, but something more haunting in post-revolutionary society, distracting Russians from higher socialist goals – Erlikh’s nostalgic decadence and *Aelita*’s highbrow *aki* eerily coexist with Kruchinin’s alluring ‘Western’ foxtrot.

The most ‘alien’ aspect of Kruchinin’s ‘*Aelita*’ can be found in the B section’s peculiar vocal line. When compared with other Kruchinin foxtrots from the period, this addition seems especially adventurous on the part of the composer. Not only is this vocal part a rare feature, but it also seems, for lack of a better word, underwritten: a single word, doubled verbatim in the upper hand of the piano and repeated merely four times in the back half of the piece. It begs more questions than answers: How optional was the vocal part? Was this a last-minute addition, or did Kruchinin intend for it to be there from the beginning? Perhaps the line emphasizes a leitmotif taken directly from Kruchinin’s film score; what might this motif have represented? The pining utterances of the character Los as he stares through his telescope, a disembodied host of celestial beings, perhaps something else entirely? Even more puzzling: Who was expected to sing? The pianist? A chorus, à la Holst’s *Neptune*? Or perhaps the busy crowd of dancers? All these ambiguities considered, it is important to acknowledge Kruchinin’s foxtrot as a ‘practical’ dance piece for use *outside* the context of the film. In this environment, the vocals might have hovered above the piano as a sort of echo. Programmatic interpretations of *Aelita*’s science-fiction narrative fall by the wayside here; in the festive public venues befitting an eccentric dance, the vocal line now embodies the drunken echoes of *real-world* hoi-polloi as they revel in decadent frivolity – a *non-fictional* moment of hedonist escape from socialist reality. The vocalizations in ‘*Aelita*’, with all their uncertainty of meaning, offer a foray into the uncanny, the otherworldly, *and* the bourgeois.

In sum, this vocally tinged foxtrot expresses a glimpse, even if small, into the experimental world where audience meets performer, bourgeois meets proletariat, East meets West, past meets present, Mars meets Earth, and decadent fantasy meets revolutionary reality. Kruchinin was far from the only composer attempting to reach such a compromise between these dichotomies in a world that was quickly turning against the fantastical, the decadent, and the spectacular. The association of popular music with bourgeois decay had recent precedent in Soviet theatre; popular music of the American West had become a common tool for parodic depictions of the capitalist bourgeoisie and NEP-men. One major example of this can be seen in Vsevolod Meyerhold’s 1924 adaptation of Ilya Ehrenburg’s novel *The D.E. Trust – The History of the Fall of Europe* (*Trest D. Ye. – Istoriya gibeli Yevropy*). Meyerhold’s play, simply titled *D.E.*, tells of the Soviet proletariat digging a tunnel to Manhattan to stop a cabal of American monopolists from destroying and re-colonizing the European continent.<sup>50</sup> In the hands of the radical Meyerhold, *D.E.* portrays a stark and contradictory musical divide between the Soviet protagonists and the American capitalist villains. While the Russians marched to what *Izvestiya* (News) called ‘pale and unconvincing’ harmonicas, the American monopolists danced to eight heady tunes performed by Valentin Parnakh’s infamous jazz band. As S. Frederick Starr explains:

<sup>50</sup> For more on this work, see Starr, *Red and Hot*, 50.

in contrast to the dull naturalism of the Soviet heroes, the despised capitalists were dressed in elegant tuxedos and stepped out in racy cabarets with beautiful women . . . sexy dancing girls in heavy makeup hoofed it up to ‘Dancing Honeymoon’, ‘Dardanella’, ‘Rose of the Rio Grande’, ‘Japanese Sandman’, and other pop-jazz hits. *The Red Army may have won the war on stage, but Parnakh’s jazz band clearly won the audience.*<sup>51</sup>

As they so often do to this day, it was the villains who got the ‘fun’ dance music in Meyerhold’s theatrical revue. This parodic strategy was an effective means for getting away with experimenting with Western styles in an otherwise hostile political environment. Should anyone question the legitimacy of Western music in Soviet theatre, it seemed safest to present eccentric dances as a parodic demonstration of what a good Comrade ought *not* to do.<sup>52</sup> Such is the case, though much smaller in scope, with Kruchinin’s ‘Aelita’ (itself likely appearing within a year of *D.E.*’s premiere).

It is important to note that Kruchinin’s humble *divertissement* lacks the bombast for which Meyerhold became infamous. We must also note that the ‘Aelita’ foxtrot lacks a verifiable plot-based foil with which to be compared; assuming this was indeed Erlikh’s music, we still know nothing of what accompanied the Martian palace scenes, nor the scenes depicting Soviet industry or revolt. It is also difficult to fully align Kruchinin’s aesthetic goals with the highly idiosyncratic ideology of the ambitious provocateur Meyerhold. Again, it seems more likely that Kruchinin published ‘Aelita’ (and his other ‘eccentric’ works) to give audiences what they wanted, pleasant-sounding music, while also earning a few roubles in the tough NEP market. Notwithstanding all these caveats, the ‘Aelita’ foxtrot nevertheless suggests a similar musical impulse as the jazz of Meyerhold’s theatre: to have one’s revolutionary cake and eat it too, all while dancing to the hip sounds of American music. Considering this, the film *Aelita* seems one of many attempts, great and small, to accommodate the individualist profane within the socialist sacred. Audiences were greeted with Mars’s constructivist architecture and costumes on the one hand – clean, sophisticated, and above all, *aristocratic* – while on the other witnessing the gritty and uniform realism of terrestrial proletarian life. The two styles are so harshly juxtaposed, they beg to be directly compared. And in the end, while the Red Army may win the war on the screen, it is the glittering Aelita – with her expansive halls, opulent gowns, and show-stopping headwear – who wins the heart of the audience.

51 Starr, *Red and Hot*, 51. Emphasis added.

52 In later years, Dmitry Shostakovich would harness this technique of linking Western dance music with ‘villainous’ dramatic characters. In his score for the film *New Babylon* (*Novyy Vavilon*, 1929, directed by Grigory Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg), Shostakovich juxtaposes French revolutionary songs such as the ‘Marseillaise’ with the bourgeois ‘dances of the epoch’ such as the waltz, the galop, and the cancan. More notably, in his 1930 ballet *The Golden Age* (*Zolotoy vek*), Shostakovich pairs a pernicious Diva with the tango and foxtrot, directly contrasting a noble Soviet sportswoman. As Marina Ilichova notes, the Diva was ‘sketched far more vividly’, and thus had a greater success with audiences upon the work’s initial performance. See Marina Ilichova, ‘Shostakovich’s Ballets’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich*, ed. Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 201–2. See also Joan Titus, *The Early Film Music of Dmitry Shostakovich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 28–30; McBurney, ‘Declared Dead, but Only Provisionally’, 35–6.

Just as the constructivist costumes and grandiose stage sets of *Aelita* were called into question by Soviet purists, so too did Meyerhold's jazz fall victim to the same top-down reactionary politics. Kruchinin's 'Aelita', though a tiny fish in the wide pond of Soviet music, was equally a stylistic product of NEP-era culture and thus subject to the same scrutiny. These attacks against Westernism in all its shades signalled the beginning of the end for the playful and diverse artistic climate that had existed since the Revolution. During the age of Stalinism, Russia's golden age of science fiction would indeed blossom; foxtrots, meanwhile, would never be fully dismissed out of hand. But when forced through the homogenizing filter of Socialist Realism, both art forms would face severe limitation and censorship in the ensuing decades.

## Conclusion

Over ten years after *Aelita*'s premiere, Kruchinin was set to work on yet another science-fiction project – also a silent film, this one called *Cosmic Voyage* (*Kosmicheskiy reys*, directed by Vasily Zhuravlyov and premiered in 1935). Unfortunately, even less is known about the music of this film than of *Aelita: Queen of Mars*. But with this second work, Kruchinin's 1924 foray into the world of science fiction no longer becomes a fluke project; history can now claim Kruchinin as *the* sci-fi composer of the early Soviet period. But Kruchinin almost certainly did not view himself as a sci-fi composer. Indeed, we must tread with care so as not to place any undue pressure on such early figures as conscious trendsetters. As one who dabbled in a multitude of genres, both commercial and academic, the demand for Kruchinin to create a 'new' genre was likely not strong. But with little precedent for the kind of music he had to create, Kruchinin, like many Russian artists during these first years after the Revolution, did appear to feel a sense of adventure and opportunity as he took on the challenge of writing for stories of space travel and interplanetary conflict. Perhaps unbeknownst to him, Kruchinin undoubtedly left behind a fascinating contribution to the history of science fiction.

But the story of Kruchinin's 'Aelita' extends beyond the niche realm of sci-fi. It also reveals how Soviet composers exploited the artistic freedom that was available during the era of the NEP, all the while crafting a distinct notion of what true 'music for the masses' should be – by revealing what it perhaps *shouldn't* be. Kruchinin's foxtrot may not easily be considered a sci-fi work in the aesthetic sense, but it nevertheless had the power, as in all speculative fiction, to simultaneously look backward *and* forward, keeping vestiges of bygone values alive while also anticipating socialism's future. Viewed alongside its companion film, the piece reflects a fascinating point of convergence between two 'other' worlds: Erlikh's decadent and nostalgic world of eccentric dance, and the cosmic high modernism of the Martians. Both worlds claimed political neutrality, yet in *Aelita* they threaten the dream of Soviet unity in communism. Essentially, both worlds are one and the same: *Aelita*'s Mars is, in fact, an allegorical mirror of the real world – a dream-world through which audiences understand the path forward from the Revolution. Kruchinin's dance becomes an important signal for revealing this allegory; a worldly and familiar foxtrot is bestowed the title of the cosmic Martian queen herself, linking her with the thing she truly represents: the virtues and the vices of the

bourgeoisie. Indeed, the film *Aelita: Queen of Mars* represents a paradoxical place. The Martian world is full of irresistible fantastical illusion, but this very illusion – the illusion of the past, of the West, of capitalism in all its forms – must be fully renounced for humankind to persist in real-world Socialist peace. Kruchinin's foxtrot echoes this true conflict of the film – a conflict not between Earth and Mars, but between bourgeois complacency and revolutionary change – a conflict each Soviet man or woman had to fight within themselves, and a conflict which would define socialism's future, whether on or off this planet.

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