

VALENTIN SILVESTROV AND PUTIN'S WAR IN UKRAINE

Richard Louis Gillies

Abstract: This article draws on published interviews and personal correspondence with the Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov (b. 1937) to situate the development of his musical aesthetics and international reputation within the context of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022. In particular, the article focuses on Silvestrov's use of sacred musical genres as a means of engaging directly with his contemporary political environment; it also explores the ways in which Silvestrov and his music have recently become an unequivocal symbol of defiance in the face of Russian aggression, a position that stands in stark contrast to the avowed disinterestedness in and removal from politics that characterised his works of the 1970s and 1980s.

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Valentin Silvestrov (b. 1937) reflected on his early career in an interview with Gerard McBurney, commenting that although performances of his works were permitted during the 1960s and were, in his own estimation, very successful, there was a complete lack of coverage in the media. His 1965 work for chamber orchestra *Spectres*, for example, received no mention in the press, despite being, in the composer's own words, 'a sensational success' met with standing ovations.¹ In the same interview, Silvestrov revealingly complained that 'for me, well, it wasn't that it was easy; even now [1994] there are no publications. I was very rarely published, and still have a problem; I have only manuscript.'² This betrays a sense of frustration, not with any form of criticism or controversy surrounding his music, but with the general apathy and critical silence with which it was received both nationally and internationally, even during the early years of the post-Soviet era, when other members of his generation, above all Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998) and Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), already enjoyed firmly established international reputations.

Indeed, it was not until the early twenty-first century that Silvestrov's music began to be published with any consistency.

¹ Valentin Silvestrov, interview with Gerard McBurney (1994); no translator is acknowledged but is most likely McBurney. My thanks to David Fanning for lending me a transcript of the interview tapes.

² Ibid.

Schott Music's record of publications for Silvestrov³ begins in 2007 (the year the composer turned 70), and it seems remarkable that some of his best-known works, among them the Symphony No. 5 (1980–82) and the vocal cycles *Quiet Songs* (1974–77) and *Stupeni* (1980–82; revised 1997) are yet to appear as commercially available editions at the time of writing.⁴ Beyond the works recently published by Schott/Belaieff a vast quantity of Silvestrov's music exists, most unusually for a composer in the European art-music tradition, as bootlegs of concert performances and amateur recordings made by Silvestrov himself at his flat in Kyiv and self-published online on his Bandcamp page.⁵

It comes as little surprise that the renewed vigour with which Silvestrov's music is being published and performed coincides with the international spotlight on Ukraine during the events surrounding the Revolution of Dignity and Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and most recently, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched by Russia on 24 February 2022. The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has sparked international expressions of solidarity with Ukraine on a cultural as well as political level. For many performers and orchestras, both amateur and professional, this manifests most obviously in the inclusion of Ukrainian composers on concert programmes. As Ukraine's best-known living composer and one who has been very vocal about Putin's aggressive politics, Silvestrov is at the forefront of this surge of interest in Ukrainian music, but there has also been renewed attention paid to the music of his erstwhile teacher Borys Lyatoshinsky (1894 [O.S.]–1968), particularly his Symphony No. 3 in B minor (1951), which bears the nickname *Peace Shall Defeat War*.⁶ Along with its profile as an artistic response to the Nazi occupation of Ukraine during the Second World War, and the additional badge of honour of being labelled as 'anti-Soviet' by the authorities, this symphony and its nickname resonate strongly in the popular imagination with the narrative of censure, repression and defiance that accompanies the current conflict in Ukraine.

In spite of this revival of Lyatoshinsky's music, recent performances of Silvestrov's music outnumber those of any other Ukrainian composer, and since the Russian invasion, his works have been programmed by leading orchestras around the world, including the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Amsterdam Sinfonietta, the Oslo Filharmonien, the Münchner Philharmoniker, the Konzerthausorchester Berlin, the Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra, the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, the Kyiv Symphony Orchestra, the Bohemian Symphony Orchestra Prague, the New York Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the newly formed Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra, which includes war refugees among its members. Silvestrov's music and his international reputation have thus become matters of cultural politics because of what they signify against the backdrop of revolution and war.

This state of affairs is very different from Silvestrov's stance on political activity during the late Soviet era. He recently reflected that 'my

³ This includes publications by M. P. Belaieff Musikverlag.

⁴ The Symphony No. 5 is available on hire order from Schott Music, and *Quiet Songs* is listed as 'in preparation'. A previous edition of *Quiet Songs* was published by Sovetskiy kompozitor in 1985. *Stupeni* has never been published and is currently not listed by Schott, though there are extant versions of the score including a fair-copy manuscript of the original version and a Schott/Belaieff editorial proof from around 2015 of the revised version.

⁵ <https://silvestrov.bandcamp.com/> (accessed 11 June 2022).

⁶ Andrew Burn, liner notes, Kirill Karabits, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, *Boris Lyatoshinsky: Symphony No. 3; Grazhinya*, p. 7. 2019, Chandos, CHSA5233.

act of dissidence was that *I ignored politics* at a time when real dissidents fought with ideology'.⁷ Yet this self-imposed exile from political reality, possible during the 1970s and 80s, evidently became untenable for Silvestrov after the Revolution of Dignity and the annexation of Crimea and even more so after the Russian invasion. This signals a shift both in Silvestrov's personal involvement with politics and in his aesthetic thought since the collapse of the Soviet Union, away from a view of music as a purely apolitical mode of expression to one that sees its potential for social-political commentary. What follows is a consideration of Silvestrov's compositional and stylistic evolution, supplemented by the composer's own reflections on his musical aesthetics drawn from published interviews and personal correspondence, and a discussion of the impact of the 2014 Revolution and Putin's war in Ukraine on Silvestrov's international reputation and on his own creative and political thinking.

From naïveté to the naïve

Silvestrov's compositional development has usually been seen as following a trajectory from avant-gardism to neo-romanticism – a broad-brush account that inevitably obscures the complexities of his stylistic evolution. The temptation to periodise Silvestrov's musical development has been compounded by his willingness to categorise his work under various labels, from 'avant-garde', 'dodecaphonic' and 'modernist' to 'kitsch', 'metaphorical', 'post-', 'postlude', 'weak' and 'naïve'. But rather than viewing Silvestrov's stylistic evolution as a series of absolute shifts from one thing to the next, it is more productive to acknowledge a variety of overlapping, sometimes contradictory aesthetic influences that coexist.⁸

Silvestrov's compositional evolution is tightly bound up with his conceptualisation of the ontology of European art music, which he has described as being 'based on the sounding word', stemming from 'an ancient tradition of music and poetry, where there existed metres [*razmeri*] (iamb, trochee, tripartite [*trekhdol'niy*]) that were connected to declamation and to music'.⁹ The word 'razmer' has both poetic and musical applications and can refer to either poetic metre or musical time signature depending on context; similarly, the word 'trekhdol'niy' has a broad application but as an adjective to describe 'razmer' typically refers to time signatures divided into threes ($3/2$, $3/4$, $3/8$ and so on). Here the dual application of these words emphasises Silvestrov's belief that poetry and music are organically intertwined,¹⁰ as he has affirmed in numerous interviews; to McBurney, for example, he boldly stated that 'poetry is everything', since:

⁷ Valentin Silvestrov, interview with the author (20 March 2019); transcribed by Inga Nikolenko and translated by the author; my emphasis.

⁸ This view shares similarities with Peter J. Schmelz's interpretation of Silvestrov's music as 'polystylistic', although I refrain from using this term here because of its potential ambiguity. For an exploration of polystylism as cultural practice in the late Soviet period, see Schmelz, *Sonic Overload: Alfred Schnittke, Valentin Silvestrov, and Polystylism in the Late USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁹ Silvestrov, interview with the author.

¹⁰ Silvestrov also emphasises organic imagery in his description of poetic verse as 'a shrub' and music as 'ivy that curls around the branches of the shrub'; see Richard Louis Gillies, *Singing Soviet Stagnation: Vocal Cycles from the USSR, 1964–1985* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 186–87.

poetry and music were at some time together. They separated, and each one followed its own direction, but poetry preserves music itself. In music, it seems to me that there is very little music, and that which is in music itself is related to poetry.¹¹

For Silvestrov 'the sung word is preserved as the foundation of the European musical tradition',¹² although he has somewhat obscured this relationship by suggesting elsewhere that 'poetry is essentially music that has been transformed into words meant for eternity'.¹³ Silvestrov's understanding of European art music is that 'even in instrumental music [of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries], the word is felt, [and] it would be possible to impose words on certain motifs... when the words disappeared, melodies remained, and these are heard as self-sufficient'.¹⁴ This implies a system of musical semantics, or rather the echo of the semantic system of spoken language, the traces of which are fossilised in the melodic and rhythmic gestures of what Silvestrov describes as the 'musical word'.

These ideas form the basis of Silvestrov's interpretation of avant-gardism, which he has described as a moment of rupture in which the traditional foundations of music were challenged and the 'musical word' began to disappear: a shift away from the foundations of European art music in the sung word towards an approach in which 'music turned into sound processes, textures and so on' and 'the composer's concept became more interesting than its realisation'.¹⁵ This is probably a reference to the Darmstadt School variety of high modernism, since Silvestrov believes that although the 'avant-garde reaction' was initiated by the Second Viennese School, Schoenberg, Webern and Berg still relied on the 'musical word' in their compositional practice.

Silvestrov has described his exposure to this breach in music history as a kind of transfigurative experience. Although he passed through this phase relatively quickly, he describes the stylistic 'relics' of this phase as 'radiating' through his subsequent work, stating that 'it is impossible to simply return – you return with a different experience'.¹⁶ The phrase 'relic radiation' [*reliktovoye izlucheniye*] stands in contrast to the organic imagery he uses elsewhere, emphasising a sense of synthetic artificiality and the idea that these 'relics' of avant-gardism have a transformative influence that cannot be undone after initial exposure: for Silvestrov, these 'relic-transformations' [*reliktoviye vidozmeneniya*] remained; there remained an interest in the alteration of sound, and an interest in deformation, discontinuity, pauses – all that which is in avant-garde music'.¹⁷

Thus, according to his own narrative, around 1970 Silvestrov arrived at a moment of 'transition' [*perekhod*], a word carefully chosen instead of 'breaking away' [*perelom*].¹⁸ The reason for the distinction is clear: to establish a strong continuity running (or radiating) through

¹¹ Silvestrov, interview with McBurney.

¹² Silvestrov, interview with the author.

¹³ Tatjana Frumkis, liner notes, Iana Ivanilova and Alexei Lubimov, *Valentin Silvestrov: Stufen*. 2000, Megadisc Classics, MDC7832.

¹⁴ Silvestrov, interview with the author.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.* The connotations of nuclear radiation in the language Silvestrov uses spark associations with the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1985 and resonate in the present context of concerns over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, a focal point of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

¹⁸ Tatjana Frumkis and Valentin Silvestrov, 'Sokhranyat' dostoinstvo...', *Sovetskaya muzika*, 4 (1990), p. 12.

his aesthetic philosophy despite what audiences might hear as a U-turn in his style from the pointillistic, crystalline Webernian serialism of the 1960s to the expansively soporific melodiousness and intellectualised kitsch of the 1970s and 80s.¹⁹

Complicating the idea of a transformative exposure to the avant-garde are a number of piano miniatures from the mid-1950s that pre-date his detour into the avant-garde, namely *Naïve Music* (1954–55; revised 1993) and *Distant Music* (1956; revised 1993). On first glance these works bear a remarkable similarity to the 'kitsch' style that he developed during the 1970s, suggesting a continuity running from his early pre-avant-garde works through his avant-garde period and into his later post-avant-garde works. Similarities between *Naïve Music* and Silvestrov's better-known suite for piano, *Kitsch Music* (1977), are not hard to detect, given their tonal (if not always functional) melodic and harmonic language and their commentary on memory and the history of European musical forms. The titles of the individual movements of *Naïve Music* – among them 'Waltz', 'Nocturne', 'Fairy Tale' and 'Prelude' – all evoke nineteenth-century forms favoured by composers close to Silvestrov's heart, including Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann and, above all, Frédéric Chopin. The three movements of *Distant Music* – 'Nocturne', 'Waltz' and 'Prelude' – also trigger immediate associations with Chopin. While the individual movements of *Kitsch Music* are not titled, they continue a similar line of commentary through their textural, formal, melodic and harmonic properties, most notably in the second movement (see [Example 1](#)), which presents the listener with a distorted echo of the left-hand chords of Chopin's Prelude op. 28 no. 4 in E minor recast in 3/8 (see [Example 2](#)), transposed down a tone into D minor and accompanying an alternative melodic line (reportedly derived from the fourth movement of Myroslav Skoryk's Partita No. 5; see [Example 3](#)),²⁰ which further helps to obfuscate the memory.

It is difficult to assess the extent of the revisions to *Kitsch Music* and *Naïve Music*, however, given the lack of surviving sketches for most of Silvestrov's works.²¹ In her introduction to the Schott/Belaieff edition containing *Naïve Music* and *Distant Music* Tatjana Frumkis suggests that the young Silvestrov 'wrote a veritable flood of miniatures in an outburst of dilettantish love of music... in the style of Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Lyadov, Grieg and Chopin'.²² According to Frumkis, these artefacts of juvenilia, sequestered in old exercise books and apparently forgotten, were "'accidentally" rediscovered' by Silvestrov during the 1990s at a time when, 'after he had completed a succession of major orchestral works... he turned to his own past'.²³ This sheds some light on the continuities, both

¹⁹ Consider in this regard the Swiss composer and music critic Andreas Zurbriggen's recent article in which he writes: 'In a *radical break* [*radikalen Bruch*] Silvestrov turned away from the western avant-garde during the 1970s'; emphasis added. Zurbriggen, "'Ich bin längst in die Musik emigriert" – der ukrainische Komponist Valentin Silvestrov', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 16 May 2022, www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/der-ukrainische-komponist-valentin-silvestrov-ich-bin-laengst-in-die-musik-emigriert-ld.1683245 (accessed 3 September 2022).

²⁰ Schmelz, *Sonic Overload*, p. 94.

²¹ A few extant sketches and drafts are held at the Paul Sacher Stiftung (www.paul-sacher-stiftung.ch/en/collections/p-t/valentin-silvestrov.html, accessed 5 April 2022), though it is often difficult to tell how these relate to the published works (my thanks to Peter J. Schmelz for this observation).

²² Tatjana Frumkis, 'Preface', Valentin Silvestrov, *Klavierwerke Band II (Werke von 1954 bis 1973)* (Mainz: M. P. Belaieff, 2010).

²³ *Ibid.*

Example 1:
Valentin Silvestrov, *Kitsch Music*, No. 2, bars 1–8.

Example 2:
Frédéric Chopin, Prelude in E minor, op. 28 no. 4, bars 1–5.

Example 3:
Myroslav Skoryk, Partita No. 5 for solo piano, 'Ariya', bars 1–6.

stylistic and aesthetic, that can be traced from these early pieces through to his post-avant-garde style, evident in the performance note that accompanies both *Naïve Music* and *Distant Music*: 'All the pieces in the cycle should sound as if they are heard from afar, like a distant reminiscence.' A comparative glance at the performance note for *Kitsch Music* (which instructs the performer to 'play very softly (*pp*) or extremely softly (*ppp*), as if from afar [...] allowing the music to cautiously touch the listener's memory and resound in his mind's ear, as if his memory were itself singing the music') suggests that these early works underwent a retrospective aesthetic makeover to bring them into line with Silvestrov's later style or, as Frumkis formulates it in her preface, were "awakened" by the features of Silvestrov's so-called "metaphorical" style'.²⁴ The implied narrative fits Silvestrov's own:

I see my development as a circular process: 'in my end is my beginning, in my beginning is my end'. I began with naïve music and imitated Chopin a little, then I stormed through the avant-garde; I resolutely rejected this too in favour of the 'metaphorical style' and returned to naïve music.²⁵

Thus a clear cyclical narrative emerges, one that justifies the composer's later aesthetic decisions and stylistic evolution within the context of a return to his origins, and one which bears the structural hallmarks of a familiar heroic narrative arc in which a return to one's origins after a transformative experience enables the familiar to be seen with renewed clarity, wisdom and understanding. Indeed, though it is unclear whether Silvestrov is consciously paraphrasing T. S. Eliot in the quotation above, the narrative that he constructs surely concedes that 'the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know that place for the first time'.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 43.

In the absence of surviving draft materials and the reliance on statements made by the composer or his close associates, these ideas – some verging on the arcane – must be considered highly subjective. Yet they are useful in shedding some light on Silvestrov's retrospective interpretation of the development of his musical language during the 1960s and 70s and on his self-consciousness regarding his position within the musical establishment, which parallels his frustration over the lack of critical reception and publication his music was receiving in the 1990s.

From the metaphorical to the liturgical

Just as Silvestrov has characterised the years around 1970 variously as a moment of 'transition' and a moment of 'crisis', so it seems that the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 were another moment of transition and crisis that precipitated a reflection and commentary on his own artistic practice. His complaint to McBurney in 1994 masks an anxiety about his precarious position in the new post-Soviet international market, when many of his fellow *shestidesyatniki* were enjoying greater success in the West.²⁷ This period was punctuated by personal tragedy – the death of his wife, Larissa Bondarenko, in 1996 – which precipitated one of his most substantial new works, *Requiem for Larissa* (1997–99). Work on the *Requiem* also stimulated the 'return to his past', inspiring revisions to the vocal cycle *Stupeni*, originally composed between 1980 and 1982 and intimately connected to Bondarenko.²⁸

Although a few isolated works predate it, *Requiem for Larissa* is Silvestrov's first large-scale work in a religious genre; it signals a point at which the use of explicitly religious texts and themes in his music began to play a significant role in his creative practice. This is not to downplay the engagement with spiritual and mythical themes in Silvestrov's music before 1997 but rather to make a distinction between the kind of metaphysical and philosophical spiritual ruminations that characterise his musical thinking from the late 1960s onwards (linked to transcendentalism, meditation, eastern spirituality, Zen Buddhism and antiquity, and often expressed through secular forms and settings of lyric poetry) and the direct engagement with explicitly Orthodox Christian liturgical forms and texts that began with *Requiem for Larissa*.

This engagement with religious music is indicative perhaps of his own spiritual soul-searching in the wake of his wife's death and more broadly of the growth of interest in Orthodox Christianity that began with the revival of Russian nationalist movements in the late 1950s.²⁹ The millennium of the Christianisation of Rus' in June 1988 also saw a great increase in the amount of explicitly religious music being composed in the terminal Soviet Union, and this has continued in the post-Soviet era, becoming a defining feature of Putin's Russia. Whereas composers of a more nationalist bent, like Georgy Sviridov (1915–1998), remained more aligned to a concept of

²⁷ *Shestidesyatniki* is a Russian term used to refer to the generation who came of age during the 1960s, to which Silvestrov belongs (sometimes translated as 'men of the 60s' or 'the sixtiers').

²⁸ For a discussion and analysis of this vocal cycle, see Gillies, *Singing Soviet Stagnation*, pp. 140–97.

²⁹ For an in-depth study of the resurgence of Russian Orthodox Christianity and its links to Russian nationalism, see Yitzhak M. Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1991* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Table 1:
Schott Music's list of Silvestrov's works composed after 2014

Title	Date of composition	Description
<i>Prayer for Ukraine</i>	2014	For mixed choir; arranged for chamber orchestra by Eduard Resatsch (2022); arranged for orchestra by Andreas Gies (2022).
<i>Hymn – Kyiv, Maidan 13.02.2014</i>	2014	For acapella choir; based on the text of the Ukrainian National Anthem (Pavlo Chubynsky).
Cantata No. 4	2014	For soprano, piano and string orchestra; on texts by Taras Shevchenko and Saint Silouan the Athonite.
Three Serenades	2015	For piano and string orchestra.
Violin Concerto	2016	–
Symphony No. 9	2017–2019	–
<i>Psalm</i>	2019	For large mixed acapella choir; eight variations on the Ukrainian folksong 'Oï z-za hory kam'yanoyi holuby litayut', a song whose text Silvestrov has set many times. A traditional performance can be heard at www.polyphonyproject.com/en/song/BMI_UK17100145 (accessed 25 August 2022)

Christian Orthodoxy nationalist ideology that privileged ethnic Russians, a combination of cosmopolitanism, spirituality and intellectualism, embodied by figures like Alexander Vladimirovich Men (1935–1990) and Dmitri Likhachev (1906–1999),³⁰ seems to have attracted many liberal-minded members of the Soviet intelligentsia, including members of Silvestrov's artistic milieu. For Silvestrov, the new impulse towards liturgical forms arising in the 1990s is highly significant, since it is through such liturgical, religious or otherwise spiritual musical forms that he later chose to engage most directly with contemporary politics, as is evident from a number of works composed from 2014 onwards (Table 1).

Table 1 reproduces Schott Music's catalogue of Silvestrov's works and is incomplete: it includes Eduard Resatsch's and Andreas Gies' arrangements of *Prayer for Ukraine* (both made in 2022) but does not include a series of works composed and recorded by Silvestrov since the Russian invasion, among them a selection of piano miniatures bearing evocative titles such as 'Epigraph', 'Bagatelles of Distress' and 'Elegy', which appeared on the composer's Bandcamp page in April 2022.³¹ Nor does it include a number of spiritual and liturgical songs grouped under the titles *O Luce Eterna* and

³⁰ For more on these figures, see Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 252–53, 338.

³¹ A cycle of 11 pieces can be heard in a live recording of a concert given by Silvestrov in Berlin shortly after he left Kyiv (<https://silvestrov.bandcamp.com/album/live-in-berlin-march-17-2022>, accessed 25 August 2022). In his brief talk before the concert Silvestrov directly links the first five of these works to his experience of displacement, stating: 'The first four [sic] pieces arose [voznikli] in the period when we moved from Kyiv and went to Germany. Actually, not four but the first five pieces. But the first piece I'm going to play is the melody that arose when we crossed the border from Poland to Germany. It's called 'Elegy'. As we drove, we saw endless queues of refugees fleeing Ukraine. It was a very sad scene.'

Liturgicheskiye pesnopeniya ('Liturgical Chants'), composed in 2018 and 2019 respectively.³² These may be absent from Schott's list because they do not exist in any physical form. Indeed, part of the difficulty in compiling a comprehensive list of Silvestrov's output is that, as he complained to McBurney in 1994, much of it still exists privately in manuscript or in the form of home recordings and demos, many of which duplicate material or present different versions of the same work.

Nevertheless [Table 1](#) highlights Silvestrov's use of liturgical musical forms to signal his stance concerning the international political tensions between Russia and Ukraine, best illustrated by his choral cycle *Maidan 2014*, his most substantial choral work since *Requiem for Larissa*, which combines liturgical texts with verses by Pavlo Chubynsky (1839–1884), best known as the text for the State Anthem of Ukraine.³³ *Maidan 2014* is the first and, until very recently, only work in which Silvestrov has engaged with contemporary politics so explicitly, as he acknowledged in 2019:

The one moment I crossed paths with politics was in 2014, during the Revolution of Dignity [*revolyutsii dostoinstva*], when people gathered on the Maidan to protest against the politics of the government. I took part in the protest, and I had an idea for a choral work, *Maidan 2014*, where, in my music, the words of the Ukrainian anthem alternate with prayers and liturgical texts. It's a huge cycle, 70 minutes, which does not point fingers against the aggressive politics of Russia, but is simply a response to the events taking place.³⁴

Silvestrov's suggestion that *Maidan 2014* marks the only moment he directly 'crossed paths with politics' corresponds to the list of works in [Table 1](#) in the sense that none of the works composed after 2014 is clearly connected to the Revolution or the subsequent war in Donbas (though many of them preserve the connection between Christian spirituality and the Ukrainian nation). His comment also identifies the use of prayers and liturgical texts in combination with the politically loaded text of the State Anthem of Ukraine, emphasising the use of liturgical forms as a vehicle for political commentary, although the final sentence attempts to downplay the extent to which his music is directly 'pointing fingers' at Putin's politics.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, however, Silvestrov has become very vocal about the conflict. In a recent interview he claimed that, as a result of Russia's invasion, 'the whole of Ukraine, and the whole world will become the Maidan', connecting both the events commemorated in *Maidan 2014* and the work itself to the recent invasion.³⁵ Thus it is possible to consider 2014 and 2022 as punctuating a further period of 'transition' and 'crisis' in

³² Demo recordings by the composer can be found at <https://silvestrov.bandcamp.com/album/2019-4> (accessed 25 August 2022). 'Pesnopeniya' has been rendered variously in English as 'chants', 'hymns', 'canticles', 'psalms', etc.

³³ Two complete recordings of *Maidan 2014* can be found on Silvestrov's Bandcamp page: the first is a home recording made in 2014 of the composer singing the work and accompanying himself at the piano (<https://silvestrov.bandcamp.com/album/maidan-2014-2014-acapella>, accessed 25 August 2022); the second is a live recording of the work performed in 2016 at Saint Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery in Kyiv (<https://silvestrov.bandcamp.com/album/2014-live-at-st-michaels-monastery-2016>, accessed 25 August 2022). A third home recording containing movements from *Maidan 2014* can be found at <https://silvestrov.bandcamp.com/album/2014> (accessed 25 August 2022). A studio recording of the work by Mykola Hobdych and the Kyiv Chamber Choir for ECM was released on 30 September 2022, marking Silvestrov's 85th birthday.

³⁴ Silvestrov, interview with the author.

³⁵ Zurbriggen, "'Ich bin längst in die Musik emigriert'".

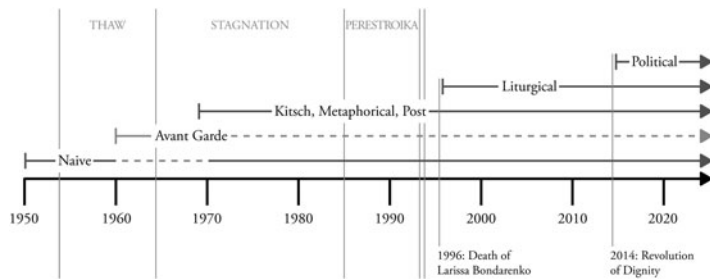


Figure 1:
The evolution of Valentin
Silvestrov's aesthetic and stylistic
thought, 1950–present.

Silvestrov's aesthetic thought and compositional development – a drastic shift away from the staunchly apolitical stance he adopted throughout the 1970s and 80s that uses the framework of liturgical musical forms he turned to during the 1990s as a means of direct and explicit interaction with the contemporary socio-political environment (Figure 1).

From the apolitical to the political

Both political and apolitical musics seek to form a communicative bridge of some form or other with an audience, but in different ways: in Silvestrov's earlier works the emphasis on memory and ancient, mythical or spiritual worlds abounds, whereas works such as *Maidan 2014* or the piano miniatures composed during Silvestrov's evacuation from Kyiv direct the listener to present and future concerns in the real world. This marks a clear transition of thought from the 1970s and 80s, when, as Alexei Yurchak has observed:

distant topics [such as] ancient history and foreign literature, pre-Soviet architecture, and Russian Silver Age (early twentieth-century) poetry, theoretical physics and botany, archaeology and Western rock music, Buddhist philosophy and religion... were interesting and meaningful not only *in themselves* but because they 'injected' various temporal, spatial, semantic, linguistic, biologic and other 'elsewheres' into the here-and-now of one's personal life, producing the intense relation of 'being *vnye*' ['outside' or 'beyond'] the Soviet universe.³⁶

Silvestrov's works of this period, such as the vocal cycles *Quiet Songs* and *Stupeni*, *Kitsch Music* and the Symphony No. 5, all 'inject' elsewheres from beyond the contemporary Soviet experience of their audiences, weaving a Tarkovskian dreamworld of Gold and Silver Age poetry, Symbolism, mysticism, mythology, antiquity, science fiction and nineteenth-century Romanticism that is 'spatially, temporally, thematically, and meaningfully *vnye* the regime of Soviet authoritative discourse'.³⁷ This mode of aesthetic thought is a product of Silvestrov's conscious effort to ignore the politics of the Soviet Union and engage in a creative act that completely removed him from the stagnant and uncomfortable world of day-to-day Brezhnevite politics. As he recalled in 2019:

³⁶ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 151; emphasis and transliteration in original. For a definition of *vnye*, see Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, pp. 126–34; for the application of the term to musical culture of the post-Stalinist era, see Peter J. Schmelz, *Such Freedom, If Only Musical: Unofficial Soviet Music during the Thaw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Gillies, *Singing Soviet Stagnation*.

³⁷ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 150.

In our circle any interest in politics simply disappeared. The communist ideology simply ceased being relevant for us. We occupied ourselves with our own business, and politics reminded one of every persecution and discomfort.³⁸

This reflects Sergei Dovlatov's (1940–1990) consideration of what the physicist Niels Bohr called 'clear truths' or 'facts' (as opposed to lies or falsehoods) and 'deep' or 'profound truths' (as opposed to another equally profound truth). Yurchak describes Dovlatov's encounter with 'deep truths' as beginning in the mid-1960s, when people stopped evaluating Soviet life within the moralistic, 'honest-vs-dishonest' framework of 'clear truths', because 'they considered the events and facts of Soviet life around them to be relatively irrelevant compared to "deep truths"'.³⁹ While Silvestrov's compositions of the 1970s and 80s can be understood as a musical analogue for this behavioural model (attributed by Dovlatov to his direct contemporary, the poet Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996)), much of his music from 2014 onwards runs directly counter to it. Rather than 'injecting' various 'temporal, spatial, semantic, linguistic, biologic and other "elsewheres" into the here-and-now', Silvestrov instead injects the here-and-now into his music. No longer does a melody from another world 'cautiously touch the listener's memory', as in *Kitsch Music*; instead, the music becomes 'a response to the events taking place'.

As Silvestrov's stance has become more politically engaged since 2014, so too is his music becoming 'politicised' as its international public profile during the ongoing Russian–Ukrainian conflict has been elevated into a signifier of resistance, and not only through works such as *Maidan 2014* or *Prayer for Ukraine*. Despite their apolitical origins many of his earlier works have been recontextualised and politicised within programmes and performances that enact cultural solidarity with Ukraine and defiance of Russian aggression. On 31 July 2022, for example, the newly formed Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra gave a performance at the BBC Proms of Silvestrov's Symphony No. 7. Although the work was composed in 2003 the rhetoric surrounding the performance unsurprisingly focused on Silvestrov's recent displacement from Kyiv, with the BBC's concert blurb reading: 'Under Canadian-Ukrainian conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson the orchestra is a symbol of the remarkable resolve and determination shown by the people of Ukraine. They celebrate Ukraine's leading living composer, Valentin Silvestrov, *who escaped Kyiv* with his daughter and granddaughter in March.'⁴⁰ Silvestrov's new status as a war refugee thus eclipsed the original circumstances of the work's composition. Conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson gave a brief pre-concert interview which both acknowledged the work's original context and yet simultaneously displaced it into the context of the war:

[Silvestrov] dedicated [the Symphony No. 7] to his wife, who died suddenly in 1996, and it's very special, because for the last two minutes of the work, there's a beautiful effect, which is the sound of blowing into a brass instrument, inhaling and exhaling. . . and this, obviously, is her dying breath. But, ultimately, we interpret this as the breath of life, and I told the musicians at our first rehearsal, that this we would like to dedicate to all of the soldiers and innocent victims who have died in this war.⁴¹

³⁸ Silvestrov, interview with the author.

³⁹ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, pp. 126–27.

⁴⁰ www.bbc.com/mediacentre/proginfo/2022/31/bbc-proms-ukrainian-freedom-orchestra (accessed 30 August 2022); my emphasis.

⁴¹ Transcribed from BBC Proms 2022, Prom 19a: Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra (BBC Radio 3, 31 July 2022), www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0019l18 (accessed 30 August 2022). Wilson's comments appear at 01:29–01:56. Wilson interprets the 'inhaling and exhaling'

Similarly, at a recital given at the Rassvet Cultural Centre in Moscow in April 2022, Russian pianist and long-time friend of Silvestrov Alexei Lubimov continued to perform Schubert's Impromptu D899 (op. 90) No. 2 in E flat despite attempts by police to evacuate the auditorium after a bomb threat was allegedly reported to the authorities.⁴² Although the reporting of the event was slightly confused, the main points to emerge were that Lubimov's behaviour was received as an act of resistance and that it was significant that he and soprano Yana Ivanilova were performing works by Silvestrov, a Ukrainian composer. In Lubimov's own words:

it was immediately obvious to us that they wanted to stop the concert because Silvestrov had spoken clearly about the war and Putin's dictatorship in interviews. The authorities probably recognised the name: 'Silvestrov means you're against Putin and against the war.' They probably thought his name was a dangerous anti-war symbol. . . Of course we couldn't call our concert an anti-war concert. But it was obvious to the people in the hall: Since we're playing Ukrainian music, we're against the war. The audience was made up of the so-called Moscow intelligentsia, musicians, writers, poets, friends, and acquaintances.⁴³

Here, then, is confirmation, from a Russian-born performer who has worked closely with Silvestrov since the 1960s, that Silvestrov has become a publicly recognised symbol of opposition to Putin's regime through his outspoken position against the war. The interviews to which Lubimov refers have appeared since Silvestrov's departure from Kyiv. Shortly after his arrival in Berlin in March 2022 he told Deutsche Welle (DW) that the current conflict is a magnified version of what took place in 2014, characterising Euromaidan as 'the chamber version, a trio or a duet' and the Russian invasion of Ukraine as 'the full orchestral version'⁴⁴ (paralleling the evolution of Silvestrov's *Maidan 2014* from a demo recording for voice and piano made in 2014 to a professional studio recording by the Kyiv Chamber Choir in 2022). More provocatively he referred to the Russian government as 'Kremlin devils'⁴⁵ and described Putin as 'a terrorist like Bin Laden, only a thousand times stronger', who should be recognised as 'an international terrorist and put on the wanted list'. Even more provocatively he suggested that 'naturally, the West must react to threats with threats of their own – if you threaten us with nuclear weapons, we'll threaten you back'. These unequivocally bellicose words sat somewhat awkwardly alongside DW's characterisation of Silvestrov as a 'master of understated tones' who stands against violence, and the composer's own statement that 'it is clear how little we appreciate peacetime'.

In addition to the interview published on their website, DW also released a composer profile of Silvestrov on their YouTube

sound as representing Larissa Bondarenko's dying breath, but this is slightly problematic since Silvestrov used this same effect at the end of his Symphony No. 5, completed almost 15 years before Bondarenko's death.

⁴² A widely circulated video of the recital being disrupted by police can be found at <https://youtu.be/tntNSUb2v5w> (accessed 31 August 2022).

⁴³ Jeffery Arlo-Brown, 'Dangerous Symbols: Alexei Lubimov's Anti-War Concert, Interrupted', *Van Magazine*, 20 April 2022, <https://van-magazine.com/mag/alexei-lubimov-ukraine/> (accessed 30 August 2022).

⁴⁴ Anastassia Boutsko, 'Valentin Silvestrov: "Was macht ihr Kremlteufel?"', *Deutsche Welle*, 16 March 2022, www.dw.com/de/valentin-silvestrov-was-macht-ihr-kremlteufel/a-61149397 (accessed 30 August 2022). All quotations from the interview in the following discussion are taken from this source unless otherwise stated (translations from German and Russian are my own).

⁴⁵ 'Kremlteufel' is from the German transcript of the interview, though it is not clear what the exact Russian wording used was.

channel featuring excerpts from the interview, evocatively entitled: 'Valentin Silvestrov: Ukrainian Composer Takes a Stand against Totalitarianism and Violence'. Here the composer is characterised almost exclusively in terms of his Ukrainian identity and his stance vis-à-vis the ongoing conflict.⁴⁶ The video describes Silvestrov as having been 'a thorn in the side of the former Soviet Union [whose] music was often banned [but who] stayed true to himself', drawing a link for their primarily West European audience between the Cold War rhetoric of censorship, repression and dissidence and the current situation in Russia and Ukraine. DW's use of the word 'often' is judiciously vague. Lubimov recalls that 'as an avant-garde composer [Silvestrov] wasn't exactly welcome in the 1960s and '70s either, there was a campaign against avant-garde art in Russia at that time',⁴⁷ but Silvestrov's description of performances of his works as 'sensationally successful' during the 1960s contradicts these statements.⁴⁸ The emphasis on censorship and 'taking a stand against totalitarianism' inserts Silvestrov into a narrative paradigm that is strikingly familiar to European and American audiences acquainted with Solomon Volkov's account of Shostakovich as a dissident composer who stood up against the repressive social and cultural institutions of the Soviet Union yet maintained his artistic integrity. Silvestrov, however, has willingly contributed to the characterisation of his artistic persona with a loquaciousness that was alien to Shostakovich.⁴⁹

This characterisation is at odds with Silvestrov's repeated assertion that his music was apolitical – an assertion further complicated by his claim that ignoring politics when 'real dissidents fought with ideology' was itself an 'act of dissidence', rendering his 'apolitical' music paradoxically 'political' by virtue of its 'apolitical' nature.⁵⁰ It is notable that the work performed by Ivanilova and Lubimov at the disrupted recital in Moscow was Silvestrov's vocal cycle *Stupeni*, perhaps one of his most 'apolitical' works of the 1980s. This deeply personal work originated as a musical setting of one of Larissa Bondarenko's own poems, written in imitation of Osip Mandelstam, and which later evolved into an 11-song cycle on texts by Mandelstam, Alexander Blok, Alexander Pushkin, Yevgeny Baratynsky, Fyodor Sologub, Fyodor Tyutchev and John Keats. Typical of Silvestrov's aesthetic at the time, *Stupeni* is soporific and otherworldly, both in its musical language and its thematic imagery; it makes no explicit statement about politics or society.

Nonetheless, its performance in Russia against the backdrop of the current international political situation invested this apolitical music with political agency, as a symbol of resistance and an act of defiance. The fact that *Stupeni* sets texts that are (with the exception of Keats' *To Sleep*) exclusively by revered canonical Russian poets adds further piquancy to its recontextualisation, co-opting the voices of Russia's cultural pantheon in an enactment of solidarity with Ukraine, arguing that Russian cultural heritage is universal in its outlook, and echoing Alexander Men's and Dmitri Likhachev's

⁴⁶ <https://youtu.be/HYoauPjil70> (accessed 30 August 2022).

⁴⁷ Arlo-Brown, 'Dangerous Symbols'.

⁴⁸ Silvestrov, interview with McBurney. It is likely that Lubimov is thinking of Silvestrov's expulsion from the Ukrainian Union of Composers in 1970 (he was permitted to rejoin in 1973).

⁴⁹ For numerous recollections and descriptions of Shostakovich's character, see Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

⁵⁰ Silvestrov, interview with the author. Even in the recent DW interview Silvestrov emphasises this point, stating 'I've never dealt with politics, that's true'.

cosmopolitan worldviews, carried over from the period in which *Stupeni* was written. Silvestrov has recently affirmed a strong Likhachevian stance, stating:

Ukrainian music, like Russian music, is primarily European music. They are part of European culture. . . Peter the Great opened the window to Europe. And through this window poetry, philosophy, music, and literature came flowing in. Now Putin has gone up to this window and stuck his backside through it – a backside with a red atomic button. But this backside is not the face of Russia. The face of Russia is Russian culture.⁵¹

Though wryly humorous with its comic-book image of Putin's atomic backside turned to Europe, Silvestrov's message is humanitarian: that a nation is not defined by its politics or its ethnic profile and that culture should be a unifying, edifying and enlightening spiritual force that is unconnected to the blunt tool of politics. Compare this to Lubimov's response when asked whether he would consider emigrating from Russia:

although I really do hate the current Russian government, this dictatorship, this censorship, and all it is doing against culture, freedom, and free thinking. . . I'm still Russian. I never want to lose Russia as a country. I will never be against Russia, but only against the people who have put Russia in this state.⁵²

Silvestrov and Lubimov emphasise that the destructive actions of those who wield and abuse political power in Russia should not be considered representative of Russia's rich cultural heritage, nor of what it means to 'be Russian' or, indeed, 'Ukrainian'. The sad irony is that it has taken the divisiveness of Putin's politics to bring Silvestrov's music and its message of cultural universality to a broader audience in Europe and America. The awkwardness of this position is palpable, and Silvestrov's comments in the accompanying notes to ECM's recent recording of *Maidan 2014* betray a sense of exhaustion and a desire for peace that appears more deep-rooted than the provocative statements he made in his DW interview:

It's no accident that the symbolic crown and ending of the *Maidan 2014* cycle is a quiet lullaby. For I'm neither able nor willing to duplicate the noise of this terrible war. Instead, I want to show how fragile our civilisation is. I try, with my music, to safeguard and preserve a day of peace.⁵³

Perhaps the great tragedy of Silvestrov's artistic career is that international acclaim, the lack of which he complained about to Gerard McBurney in 1994, has been achieved as a consequence of the brutal international conflict that has displaced him, his family and so many millions of Ukrainians from their homeland.

⁵¹ Boutsko, 'Valentin Silvestrov: "Was macht ihr Kremlteufel?"'.

⁵² Arlo-Brown, 'Dangerous Symbols'.

⁵³ Liner notes, Mykola Hobdych, Kyiv Chamber Choir, *Valentin Silvestrov: Maidan*. 2022, ECM 2359.