

Review of *The Struggle for Control of Soviet Music from 1932 to 1948: Socialist Realism vs. Western Formalism*, by Meri Herrala

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This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Review of *The Struggle for Control of Soviet Music from 1932 to 1948: Socialist Realism vs. Western Formalism*, by Meri Herrala. *Russian Review* 72, No.2 (April 2013): 317–318, which has been published in final form at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/russ.10693>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with [Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving](#).

Abstract:

In her descriptive and lengthy tome, Finnish historian Meri Herrala uses Soviet opera as a lens to examine the nuanced relationships between the Union of Soviet Composers, opera theaters, Muzfond, and other Soviet musical-cultural institutions between 1932 and 1948, focusing on the significant and oft-discussed scandals of 1936 and 1948.

Keywords: Meri Herrala | Soviet Music | Socialist Realism | Western Formalism | review

Article:

Herrala, Meri. *The Struggle for Control of Soviet Music from 1932 to 1948: Socialist Realism vs. Western Formalism*. Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2012. \$179.95. 680 pp. ISBN 978-0-7734-2611-5.

In her descriptive and lengthy tome, Finnish historian Meri Herrala uses Soviet opera as a lens to examine the nuanced relationships between the Union of Soviet Composers, opera theaters, Muzfond, and other Soviet musical-cultural institutions between 1932 and 1948, focusing on the significant and oft-discussed scandals of 1936 and 1948. By analyzing the roles of individuals within these institutions, who often operated according to their own predilections and personal politics, Herrala illuminates the ways in which they responded to the demand for clear definitions of socialist realism and formalism in Soviet music. Her analysis thus reveals how centralized control of Soviet music never came to fruition.

Herrala's sources reveal her extensive research in Russian archives and engagement with current historical scholarship. She builds upon the research of similar histories written by Leonid Maximenkov and Kiril Tomoff by examining several state agencies; yet her approach exposes interconnectedness between those multiple agencies instead of a topdown push, illuminating a

network of musical politics. Herrala shows this complexity by analyzing how leaders of major agencies mediated between each other, high-ranking party officials, composers, and musicologists. Such administrators, who were also composers and musicologists, constantly moved in and out these positions for various reasons, adding to the instability and inconsistency that marks the cultural politics of this time. Herrala's analysis effectively, though sometimes inefficiently, teases out these inconsistencies to reveal a complex network of interaction between entities and individuals to create the ideal Soviet opera; a goal that, as she argues, was never successfully achieved.

Herrala especially excels in providing a fascinating and grounded discussion of the musicologist Boris Asafyev and his role in the 1948 resolution that deeply affected several composers including Dmitry Shostakovich, Sergey Prokofiev, and Nikolay Myaskovsky. In her analysis of hand-written drafts and other documents, Herrala challenges long-held criticisms of Asafyev's engagement in the discrediting of these composers by demonstrating the extent to which Asafyev was involved in the authorship of the infamous speech against musical formalism. In so doing, she offers a sensitive and detailed account of his participation in the collectively authored speech, revealing a grief-stricken figure that, as she implies, was haunted by a series of events that appeared to spiral out of his control. Although Asafyev and the 1948 resolution were indirectly part of her discussion about opera and cultural politics, her self-proclaimed focus for the book, this chapter is an example of her attempt to create a nuanced reading of this particular event and the difficulty of the artistic individual's negotiation with the state in its multiple manifestations.

Herrala's book is a worthwhile contribution to English-language scholarship. Although written in a difficult style, marred with errors in organization and language, and lacking reference to much musicological literature in the West, the content and substantial research still makes this book an interesting and valid read for scholars engaged with Soviet cultural politics.