

A stylized map showing the outlines of Scotland and Russia. The title 'The Scotland-Russia Forum Newsletter' is written across the map in a large, bold, black serif font. Below the map, the text 'Issue 15' and 'September 2006' is centered.

The Scotland-Russia Forum Newsletter

Issue 15 September 2006

www.scotlandrussiaforum.org scotrussforum@blueyonder.co.uk

Readers are encouraged to provide feedback on the Forum Newsletter; to submit comments on, and provide proposals for, content and for the Forum's events programme; and to correspond on issues likely to be of interest to the membership. All such contributions will be welcome at the address below. Please also advise omissions and errors; these will be rectified where possible.

Members who are willing to receive the newsletter electronically should let the editor know at the address below; hard copy will continue to be available to those who prefer it. This issue (No 15) is going in hard copy to all, because of the seasonal inserts from organisations of interest to readers. (Proposals for further relevant inserts are welcome; commercial ones on the basis of payment for postage, charitable at no cost.)

With the start of 06-07 season, we have information about upcoming events, both our own and some others of potential interest.

Other items include an interesting article from Jenny Carr, written during her summer in the USA, principally about the Russian language teaching and learning situation encountered there; an account by Mike Falchikov of the noteworthy and appropriate memorial event held for the poet Aygi, who had special connections with Scotland; and a review of a biography of the conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky, very timely in this Shostavovich anniversary year and of interest from musical and historical perspectives.

SRF PROGRAMME SEPTEMBER -DECEMBER 2006

Unless otherwise stated, talks will be held at 7.30pm in the hall of Old St Paul's Church, Jeffrey Street, Edinburgh. Jeffrey Street leads off Market Street, which runs behind and very close to Waverley Station. The hall is adjacent to the church entrance. (This was the venue for the SRF Christmas party last December.)

Entrance £2 members and students, £4 non-members - incl. light refreshments

Friday 6th October – AGM + concert by Elena Domozhirova

After the AGM there will be a concert of Russian songs given by Elena Domozhirova, a skilled performer of traditional Russian music. Between 1984 and 1990 Elena led expeditions to many distant regions of the Russian countryside to locate elderly persons who could remember the songs, dances, ceremonies and costumes which had formed part of the old traditions. These she recorded and re-arranged for stage performance. In 1991 she was awarded a Master's degree by the Moscow Academy of Music for her work.

The evening will finish with light refreshments.

<p>This newsletter is published by the Scotland-Russia Forum. The opinions expressed are those of the contributors, and not necessarily those of the committee or the editor.</p>

Email: annscaldwell@gmail.com

SRF members should have received details of the AGM agenda. Non-members also very welcome to attend (on a non-voting basis). If any non-members would like a copy of the agenda please request from: scotrussforum@blueyonder.co.uk

MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE DUE

Wednesday 18 October – Glas 'Russian Writing Today: War and Peace'

'War and Peace' is a new collection of short fiction from ten of Russia's leading writers of the younger generation. Published by Glas, this new anthology is a compelling portrait of post-perestroika Russian life. The collection includes controversial stories about life in the Russian army during the war in the Caucasus alongside tales of the contemporary lives of Russia's women, dealing with issues such as ageing and the generation gap.

The Scotland-Russia Forum, in association with New Writing North, is delighted to bring to Edinburgh three writers from the anthology – Olga Slavnikova, Maria Rybakova and Arkady Babchenko – and Glas publisher Natasha Perova to discuss both their work and the current state of writing and publishing in Russia. They will also read from the book. There will be plenty of time for informal discussion.

12-1.30pm, The Scottish Arts Club, 24 Rutland Square, Edinburgh EH1 2BW

Members of Scottish Arts Club and Scotland-Russia Forum – no charge; others £5

Thursday 9 November – Gannibal

A talk by Hugh Barnes, author of a recently published book on Gannibal, the African ancestor of Alexander Pushkin (previously reviewed in the SRF newsletter). The author has uncovered many new and fascinating facts about the antecedents of Russia's greatest poet. His book will be available for purchase at the talk.

7.30pm, Teviot Row House, Bristo Square, Edinburgh. The Middle Reading Room (1st floor).

Wednesday 6 December – Chekhov's Russia

A talk by Rosamund Bartlett. Dr. Bartlett has taught at universities in the United States and the UK, and was most recently Reader in Russian at the University of Durham. She has published extensively in Russian music and cultural history, and is most recently author of Chekhov: Scenes from a Life, chosen as the Moscow Times Biography of the Year, and editor of Chekhov: A Life in Letters. She has also worked as a translator: her Chekhov volume About Love and Other Stories was shortlisted for the Weidenfeld Translation Prize. We hope to have copies of these books for sale at the talk.

WHAT'S ON

To find past SRF notices look at <http://russian-scotland.blogspot.com/> - it's all there .

Saturday 18 November 2006 - Group Visit to Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum, Argyle St, Glasgow

11.30 am - guided tour highlighting Russian Connections starts (free but any donations welcome); 13.00 lunch in Kelvingrove Café (lunch prices from £6.25 to £12.95); 14.30 - those wishing to revisit the Museum at their leisure may do so.

Transport - either by train from Edinburgh or in pre-arranged groups by private cars. Details later. If you would like to join this visit please contact Peter Harvey Harvey.peter@free.fr without delay.

This follows the visit of the delegation from St Petersburg in September to the newly re-opened Kelvingrove.

The SRF Russian Conversation Group continues with its meetings as before. On Saturdays the venue is French cafe 'Le Marche Francais' at 9A West Maitland St. near Haymarket station, 2 :00 to 4:00 p.m. On Wednesdays the group meets in the evening from 6:00 to 7:00 p.m in the second floor of Cafe Nero at 58 Rose Street (between Frederick and Hanover St).

For further details about Saturday meetings please contact Irina at rennie1@rambler.ru or at eileen@voloshinov.freemove.co.uk.

For details of Wednesday meetings please write to Yana at yanaz@tiscali.co.uk

All welcome.

Russian Edinburgh

Russian Edinburgh, an initiative of Russian speaking parents together with the Scotland-Russia Forum, runs a Russian School on Saturday mornings offering children with Russian speaking parents:

- fun and games
- songs and nursery rhymes in Russian for children aged 0-12
- opportunity for children to learn the Russian language in an easy and affordable way with the help of qualified teachers
- a playgroup for under 4's
- place to meet other Russian speaking parents
- library of Russian books and films for children and grown-ups

Meetings are on Saturday mornings 12 am - 2 pm (nursery group finishes 1.30pm) at Drummond High Community School, 41 Bellevue Place, Edinburgh EH7 4BS.

Dates for this term are:

September 16, 23, 30;

October 7, 28 (mid-term 14, 21);

November 4, 11, 18, 25;

December 2, 9.

Our traditional New Year Party will take place on 16th December.

Further information: Julia Mikhniak 07789 748987, email russianedinburgh@yahoo.com.

Edinburgh University Russian Society

EU Russoc has launched with a bang. They have already put together an exciting draft programme and hope those studying/interested in Russia as well as Russian students and staff at the university will get in touch.

For further details contact Katja or Xenia at russian.edinburgh@goolemail.com

Beyond the Palace Walls

Still on, if you missed it in the cornucopia of Festival events, is "Beyond the Palace Walls" at the Royal Museum in Edinburgh. The display showcases around 200 pieces from the State Hermitage Museum at the Winter Palace in St Petersburg, many of which have never been seen outside of Russia. The works of art come from as far afield as Egypt and China, and the pieces on show date from the eighth to the 19th centuries.

The exhibition, which costs £6 for an adult and £4 for children, continues until November 5 and is open daily from 10am to 5pm.

Monday 13 November 2006 Film 'Conflict Tiger'

Nominated as part of the FICA Environmental Film Festival in Brazil this year, winner of the Ecotourist section of the Ecovision Festival 2006 and receiving 'special mention' at the TURIN film festival, 'Conflict Tiger' is a confronting film outlining the fragile balance between man and beast in this world. "This film impressively tells the complex story of the difficulties encountered by men and animals when forced to share the same vital space." - jury report,

2005 Turin Environmental Film Festival. Director Sasha Snow uses the perspective of both the tiger and the poacher to present a stunningly impressive look at the poaching trade currently active in Russia's Far East (subtitled). Edinburgh Zoo, Lecture Theatre
3.00 entry, £2.00 for RZSS members

Saturday 11 November 2006, Study Day: Alexander Kastalsky And Russian Church Music Of The 19th And 20th Centuries

Reconciling folk and Russian Orthodox traditions, the composer Kastalsky (1856-1926) created modern music based on ancient melodies, founding schools of choral writing and performance which continued in the USSR and the emigration. The study-day is richly illustrated in images and sound.

The tutor: Dr Svetlana Zvereva is a graduate of the St Petersburg Conservatoire and of the Institute for the Study of the Arts in Moscow, where she is a Senior Research Fellow. She is a leading specialist in Russian church music.
10-4, University of Glasgow

Department of Adult and Continuing Education
Tel.: 0141-330 1835 (general enquiries)
e-mail: dace-query@educ.gla.ac.uk
www.gla.ac.uk/adulteducation

Saturday 11 November Concert

8pm, St Aloysius' Church
25 Rose Street, Glasgow G3 6RE.

Related to this study day is a concert given by the Strathclyde University Chamber Choir conducted by Alan Tavener. Kastalsky's Requiem for Fallen Brothers will be performed with other music appropriate to the season of Remembrance by Russian and British composers (Grechaninov, Rimsky Korsakov, Vaughan Williams, Taverner) .
Tickets: £8.00 (concessions £6.00, Students £4.00)

Everyone attending the Kastalsky study day (see above) will be admitted to the concert at the student rate on stating their name at the door.

Courses On Tchaikovsky

Tutor: Dr Stuart Campbell

The Essential Tchaikovsky

The Russian composer's life and work will be surveyed through a handful of compositions, including The Nutcracker, Francesca da Rimini and Mozartiana. . This course is self-contained and does not overlap with the course Tchaikovsky and the Theatre, which complements it.

Edinburgh 5 meetings, 14.00-16.00, Thursdays from 19 October 2006, Dalkeith Room – fee £36 (£24). Course M113

Glasgow 5 meetings, 19.30-21.30, Tuesdays from 24 October 2006, University Campus – fee: £33 (£16.50). Course 106

Tchaikovsky and the Theatre

Compositions from his maturity, including Eugene Onegin, Swan Lake and Mazeppa, are set in the context of the theatrical life of his time and the opinions he expressed about it. This course is self-contained and does not overlap with the course The Essential Tchaikovsky, which complements it.

Edinburgh 5 meetings, 18.30-20.30, Thursdays from 19 October 2006, Dalkeith Room – fee £36 (£24). Course M104

Glasgow 5 meetings, 14.00-16.00, Tuesdays from 24 October 2006, University Campus – fee: £33 (£16.50). Course 070

For Edinburgh course:

Tel.: 0131-650 4400, Fax: 0131-667 6097

Email: OLL@ed.ac.uk

www.lifelong.ed.ac.uk

For Glasgow course t:

Tel.: 0141-330 1835 (general enquiries), Tel.: 0141-330 1829 (brochure requests), Fax: 0141-330 1821

e-mail: dace-query@educ.gla.ac.uk

www.gla.ac.uk/adulteducation

Russian /East European food shop opens in Edinburgh

The Glasgow shop "Nostalgia" which has been so popular on its Sunday openings at the Edinburgh Ukrainian Club is opening a shop in Edinburgh at 368 Gorgie Road (opposite McDonalds).

Russian Spectacular UK Tour

The Belarus army band and folk dancers will be back in Scotland 18-22 October as well as visiting several other places in the UK: see www.russianspectacular.co.uk

18 Oct - Macrobert Theatre, Stirling 01786 466666

19 Oct - Lochgelly Centre, Lochgelly 01592 418141

20 Oct - Caird Hall, Dundee 01382 434940

21 Oct - Queen's Hall, Edinburgh 0131 668 2019

22 Oct - Music Hall, Aberdeen 01224 641122

Sharmanka Gallery/Theatre has been relocated to the new address – 64 Osborne Street, just 100 metres away from the old. The building at King Street/Trongate has been closed for re-development to create "Trongate 105" Visual Art Quarter, an exciting development which will be open to the public from early 2008. Sharmanka is one of nine art organisations to be housed there. Details of the relocation and the current programme are at www.sharmanka.com

Days of St Petersburg September 2006

This was a series of cultural events brought to Scotland by the City of St Petersburg and encompassing art exhibitions and concerts by the St Petersburg String Quartet. Receptions were held in Glasgow and Edinburgh. It is hoped to publish a fuller account of events in the next issue.

EVENTS IN LONDON

GB-Russia Society Events can all be viewed and booked online

<http://www.gbrussia.org/index.php>

War and Peace - New Russian Writing

Tuesday 10 October 2006, 7:45 pm

Pushkin House

The Glas writers who are meeting the SRF on the 18th in Edinburgh
Host: Andrew O'Hagan

Wednesday 11 October - Russian Music In And Around Chekhov

(illustrated with audio and video examples, projected onto a big screen, of music by
Chaikovskii, Rakhmaninov, Fleischman/Shostakovich, Gavrilin & Shchredin)

Professor Arnold Mcmillin

Chaikovskii and Rakhmaninov both wrote pieces based on or inspired by Chekhov's writing.
Shostakovich observed that Chekhov's writing is in itself extremely musical and some of his
works seem to reflect generic musical forms, such as that of the sonata. 6.30 for 7.

Wednesday 25 October - The Sacrifice – Tarkovsky's Last Testament

Mrs. Layla Garrett

(a talk IN RUSSIAN, illustrated with TV and Video)

Pushkin House (5a Bloomsbury Square WC1A 2TA) 6.30 for 7.00pm

Thursday 9 November - War On Terror And Central Asia

Mr. Hamid Ismailov

From 5.45 p.m. until 6.00 p.m. Complimentary Wine Reception (in Room 3E)

6.00 p.m. THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

At 7.00 p.m. (or before, if the AGM takes less than one hour)

University of London Union, Malet St. WC1E 7HY at 5.45 for 6.00 p.m.

Wednesday 22 November - Bolshevik Propaganda And The Building Of A New
Society 1917-1945: The Power Of Posters

Dr. Beryl Williams

Cardinal Inn, 23 Francis St, London SW1P 1DN 6.30 for 7.00 p.m.

Monday 4 December - OSCE Election Observation In The FSU

Mr. Martin Dewhirst.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe arranges for elections to be
observed in many countries, including the former republics of The Soviet Union. Martin
Dewhirst will talk about his experiences in observing no fewer than 9 different such elections.
5a Bloomsbury Square WC1A 2TA) at 6.30 for 7.00 p.m.

PUSHKIN CLUB PROGRAMME 2006 – 2007

Pushkin Club, Pushkin House, 5A Bloomsbury Square, London WC1

www.pushkinclub.org.uk - website shows programme right up to June 2007.

Tuesday 3 October 2006

RACHEL MORLEY. The pre-Revolutionary Films of Evgenii Bauer.

Tuesday 31 October 2006

NOAH BIRKSTED-BREEN. Contemporary playwriting in Russia: in search of a
tradition.

Tuesday 14 November 2006

JOHN ELSWORTH on Andrei Bely's novel, 'The Silver Dove'. John Elsworth's new
translation (Angel Books, 2000) makes the complete work available in English for the first
time.

Tuesday 28 November 2006

LESLEY CHAMBERLAIN on the subject of her book, 'The Philosophy Steamer'. (SRF members have already heard a talk on this subject.)

OTHER NEWS

A number of members have expressed concern about developments in Ingushetia; an article on the subject can be read in Amnesty International's journal 'The Wire'.

<http://web.amnesty.org/wire/September2006/Ingushetia>.

If anyone would like to receive Amnesty mailings on Russia please contact:
Graham Jones
Amnesty International (UK)
Russia Country Action Programme Coordinator
9 Scott Road
Sheffield S4 7BE
United Kingdom
0114 243 8559
ggwj@firshill38.freeserve.co.uk

Readers may have noted that some of the Russian and FSU companies whose Fringe Festival Events were trailed in the last issue (no14) of the Newsletter had success in the various awards on offer. You can check all the results at:
<http://www.edfringe.com/area.html?id=53>

Three of the award-winning companies are Derevo, New Riga Theatre and Semyaniki.

New magazine devoted to Central Asia www.steppe.com - the website is worth a look for anyone interested in this area; a subscription to the journal, very well illustrated, costs £20 p.a.

AN APOLOGY

The following report was omitted in error from the last edition of the SRF Newsletter (No 14). Although it is now some time since the events recorded, they are of interest and importance to the membership. Assuming Victory Day in Glasgow does indeed become an annual event, it is hoped next year to give advance notice as well as carrying a more timely report.

EASTERN EUROPEAN ANNIVERSARY: THE DAY THE WAR ENDED

Strathclyde Suite of the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall

Tuesday, 9th May 2006

The efforts of the Russian Cultural Centre in Glasgow and its Director, Julia Atlas, have ensured that the end of World War II is not only remembered but also enjoyed. Every string of influence must have been pulled to provide a free concert in every sense – the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall and supporting staff were provided free of charge; all the performers gave freely of their services; and the tickets were free. Not surprisingly, the place was packed out as it had been last year when the first of these now annual events took place

The standard was exceedingly high and very varied. Little Amy Steindl started off the proceedings with a very accomplished piano recital – her first public performance at the age of 6! We had a wonderful pair of young ballroom dancers – Irina Severinchik and Dennis Megdalskiy – who seemed almost to float over the stage. For me personally the star of the evening was a powerful soprano from St Petersburg, Maria Kozlova. A truly magnificent voice! She surely has a big future ahead of her. There was, of course, the wonderful violinist, Lev Atlas, who also appeared as part of the group Koshka with Oleg Ponomarev (violin) and Nigel Clarke (guitar) in the finale. Truly breathtaking - a fusion of classical music, jazz, gypsy! A fitting way to end the evening! S Dnem Pobedy!

Tania Konn-Roberts



ARTICLES

A TRIBUTE TO GENNADY AYGI (1934-2006)

Scottish Poetry Library, 21st August 2006

Gennady Aygi, who died last February, is now regarded as a leading poet of the Russian avant-garde, though for many years under the soviets he was virtually unpublishable. Peter France, a long-time friend, as well as his translator, introduced this tribute to a remarkable poet and a remarkable man, on what would have been his 72nd birthday. Peter spoke first about Aygi's precarious existence during the Brezhnev years, living on the margins of soviet society and writing "difficult" free verse. During perestroika, his situation improved, he was at last permitted to travel abroad and paid 4 visits to Britain, including Scotland, which he came to regard as having an affinity with his native Chuvashia. Peter read two of his poems in Russian and English translation.

Recalling Aygi's first visit to Scotland in 1989, Duncan Glen also gave a reading and reminisced about the visit, including the well-known episode of Aygi and the satirist Mikhail Zhvanetsky going AWOL from a Glasgow cultural conference and only turning up the next day somewhat the worse for wear. This was followed by a tribute from Tessa Ransford, reading one of her own poems, inspired by Aygi.

A different episode from the 1989 visit was recalled by Ian Revie, who accompanied Aygi and a group of poets to Dumfries to visit the Burns mausoleum. Aygi seemed to have particularly enjoyed his day, which was charmingly reflected in Ian's reading of his own poem on the subject. Jane Yeoman then read two poems from "Veronica's Book", translated by Peter France and published by Polygon in the year of Aygi's first visit. Antony Wood, publisher of the 1997 bilingual edition of Aygi's collected poems, reminded us of Aygi's work to encourage and publicize Chuvash poetry. He wrote entirely in Russian after 1960, but never forgot his childhood roots in Chuvash language and folklore. The final contributor was Sandy Hutchison who brought the evening to a rousing climax with a song which he admitted had no connection with the poet we were celebrating, but believed Aygi would have enjoyed heartily.

Afterwards, there was an opportunity to watch a video of one of Aygi's fairly recent readings and to purchase editions of his poetry, supplied by Angel Books. All in all, an enjoyable and often moving evening.

Mike Falchikov



ERSKINE MEMORIAL IN ALVA

Dr. Robert Erskine, a native of Alva (near Stirling) was Peter the Great's chief physician, director of the Kunst Kammer, a noted botanist and much more. His achievements have now been honoured by the Clackmannanshire Heritage Trust and the Saltire Society with a tablet in Alva churchyard, unveiled on 8 September by George Reid MSP.

Forum member Margaret Street, a former chairman of the Saltire Society, had long campaigned for a memorial to Robert Erskine in Alva and her efforts have latterly been supported by Svetlana Sobyanina. Dr. Sobyanina, who trained as a doctor in Russia and has researched the biography of Dr. Erskine, spoke on his life and influence on Russian medicine at the Alva ceremony. Other speakers were Erskine's descendant and chairman of the Heritage Trust the Earl of Mar and Kellie, Russian Consul-General Mr. Vladimir Malygin, the Rt. Hon. George Reid MSP and Trust member Mrs. E. K. Roy. The president of the Saltire Society, Lord Cullen, was also present.

The memorial tablet can be found at the top end of the cemetery.



LETTER FROM BOSTON - JUNE 2006

Impressions of Russian teaching in Massachusetts schools

Dear members,

Apart from keeping up as best I can with Scottish-Russian events, as those of you who receive our emails are aware, I am finding Boston a rich source of Russian experiences. My first inclination was to enjoy the “little Russia” in the Brighton suburb of Boston and sample the seminar programme at Harvard’s Davis Center. I booked for an evening with Yevtushenko, listened to discussions about Putin and Yeltsin, and cycled round Brighton investigating grocery stores and bookshops where not a word of English is to be heard. I return from these expeditions laden with prianiki, vatrushki, and pelmeni as well as several equally irresistible items from the Petropol and Knizhnii Mir bookshops (I’ll worry about airline weight restrictions later). Some days I seem to speak more Russian than English – and, as it pours with rain outside, I plan to put my feet up today in front of a rental DVD of “Dr. Zhivago”. I have also been in close contact with the SRF’s nearest Boston equivalent, the Russo-American Cultural Center – and envy their large premises and access to free intern help in the summer, while they are interested to hear of the range of our activities.

However this is not Russia – and there is at least one way in which Boston sadly reminds me of Scotland: schools with the language still on the curriculum are rare and getting rarer all the time. Languages most commonly studied in schools in the Boston area are Spanish, French and Latin. Most popular by far is Spanish – understandable in a country where it seems well on the way to equal status with English. French is losing out (and German not often available) though Latin seems to be offered in almost all senior schools. Chinese is still rare, though fashionable and said to be popular where it has been introduced. Russian has in fact never accounted for more than 0.1 or (briefly, in the 60s) 0.2% of all US high school enrolments in foreign languages and is now in freefall – down 36% 1990-2000 while in the same period enrolments in all languages increased by an average 40%.

Massachusetts is fairly typical – with exactly the average number of public school pupils studying Russian (224 in 2000). Another 40 states have similar numbers, 8 states have none (or under 10) and Alaska and New York stand out with an amazing 1500+ each. When I started to look for the Massachusetts schools that were teaching these 224 pupils I found a depressing picture – around five public schools (probably more) have closed Russian departments in the last ten years and I could only find four still teaching the subject. Two of those will close this year or next and the other two are under constant threat. Private schools fare little better. I found three: an academic day school a mile down the road from Harvard, a less selective Catholic high school on the outskirts of Boston, and a senior high (i.e. age 14-18) boarding school deep in the Massachusetts countryside. Teachers there also expressed little confidence in the continued existence of their subjects – but were not under immediate threat.

So far so similar.

What is different is the content of courses. Whereas the syllabus in both Scotland and England is ruled by the requirements of public exams – the American teachers in both sectors seemed to me to have admirable freedom in the content of their courses. There are no final exams in Russian and there seemed little interest in public exams in general. There are a wide variety of these, in a sort of pick and mix system – from the fairly basic and universal SATS (maths and verbal reasoning and some other subjects) to the more academic AP (a Russian version in the pipeline) – but university entry seems to be based as much if not more on internal assessments and evidence of outside interests and to be a somewhat opaque (perhaps just to me) system.

The only guidelines on course content, and those only applicable to the public schools, come in the form of the Massachusetts Department of Education's "Massachusetts Foreign Languages Curriculum Framework". Its four guiding principles are of interest, particularly no. III which I will quote in full:

I All students should become proficient in at least one language in addition to English... [Latin OR a modern foreign language]

II. Foreign language programs should begin in elementary school [this is not the case with Russian needless to say]

III Effective foreign language programs integrate the study of language with the study of culture, which includes daily life, history, literature, visual and performing arts, mathematics, and science. In this way, foreign language programs create natural links to all other disciplines.

IV Assessment of student learning is an integral component of effective foreign language instruction.

In the UK teachers have much more specific guidance on topics of instruction – e.g. the SQA Higher's "lifestyles, education and work, and the wider world" (detailed breakdown in Appendix 1 of the arrangements document shows these have very little to do with the culture of Russia but are mainly concerned with the pupil's own experiences and in a largely Scottish context: see <http://www.sqa.org.uk/files/nq/ModLangCO6212.pdf>) or the GCE's list of A Level topics and texts (where the cultural context is Russian). US teachers have no such guidance – and therefore have freedom to interpret culture in their own ways, reflecting their own interests and those of students. Lessons I observed included cultural topics such as aspects of film, the sights of Moscow, Chukovsky's "Телефон", recitation of poems and songs learned by heart, and the main geographical features of the FSU. From discussion with teachers, and the internal exam papers they showed me, I know that they also read a number of poems and short stories with students as well as teaching songs, Russian history, and basic art appreciation.

So much for culture. The other common element to all lessons observed was a thorough and constant attention to Russian grammar. Pupils were familiar with grammatical terms, in Russian in some schools, English in others, and able to parse sentences, recognise soft endings etc at all levels.

What about the SQA's topics? One lesson (for beginners) covered rooms in the house (cf Standard Grade's typically culturally-neutral topic description "own house and rooms"), and in a familiar way (oral Q&A with visual aids) albeit with the intention of practising a grammar point, adjectival agreement. As another teacher said – "I concentrate on grammar and culture, and the rest comes of itself". The almost constant use of Russian in all lessons did indeed seem to result in students with impressive oral skills on topics of the SQA type.

Another difference from the UK, where official figures for pupils studying Russian merely reflect exam entries and make no distinction between "heritage" speakers (those with Russian in the home) and true foreign language learners, is that in five of the six schools visited the pupils were all (or almost all) from non-Russian speaking families. In the sixth, a high school in an area with a large Russian population, Russian was introduced following pressure from Russian-speaking parents. The experiment has failed – combining heritage speakers with a small number of non-heritage is seen to discourage the latter. The class started with 4 non-heritage (and around 15 heritage) pupils and in its third and last year only one of the former will have stayed the course. That course closes next summer.

Is the subject losing popularity because of this (old fashioned?) approach with teaching centred on literature, art, grammar, learning by heart... My feeling is not. Russian and other languages are losing out to Spanish, whose popularity grows by leaps and bounds as pupils and parents feel it will be useful to them in the US. Pupils who do choose Russian seem very keen however: one girl told me that this was because her teacher taught them so much about

Russian culture (her words); a teacher at a public school with a very active Russian club said the subject survived because of parent pressure – once their children had started the subject. Parental pressure on initial choice of language at that school as elsewhere favours Spanish (and to a lesser extent French and Latin – or the newly fashionable Chinese). That school sends almost all its Russian pupils on to study the language at university – a success in any terms. And as for grammar – American pupils are no more grammar-aware than British. I was told by several teachers that pupils' first encounter with grammar was in Russian (or German – this by a teacher of both languages). There were no audible groans – the contrary in fact – at lessons wholly dedicated to chanting noun and adjective declensions, though one class requested (and were rewarded with) a singalong pop song at the end of the lesson.

My conclusion is that the American approach has much to be said for it. But they, like us, have a lot of work to do persuading pupils, parents and society at large that it is worth taking up the language in the first place.

Have a nice day!

Jenny Carr

A fuller version of this article will appear in the SALT Newsletter, January 2007.

REVIEW

Yevgeny Mravinsky - The Noble Conductor by Gregor Tassie (Scarecrow Press, 2005, 288 pages, £39)

Yevgeny Mravinsky (1903 - 1988) is widely considered the outstanding Russian conductor of the Soviet period, and is generally credited with making the Leningrad Philharmonic - of which he was chief conductor for nearly 50 years - one of the world's great orchestras. However relatively little material about his life has been available in English. Therefore Gregor Tassie's biography deserves a warm welcome.

It has many virtues, not least that he brings to light some fascinating facts about Mravinsky's family background. These include the disgrace of his grandfather, a senior Tsarist official who was held partly to blame for the assassination of Tsar Alexander II because of his failure to prevent terrorists from gaining access to underground passages in St Petersburg. Tassie also draws attention to the fact that, although the society to which the Mravinskys belonged was far from sympathetic to revolutionary movements, Alexandra Kollantai was one of Yevgeny's aunts, a circumstance which may have helped him avoid even more serious difficulties with the Soviet regime than those he did encounter.

At his best Tassie makes good use of earlier published work, such as the reflections of Nikolai Cherkasov, one of Russia's greatest actors and one of Mravinsky's closest friends. He reproduces Cherkasov's attractive account of their first meeting as young men, which took place when they led the procession of boyars immediately behind the Boris of Fyodor Chaliapin in a performance of Boris Godunov at the Mariinsky Theatre.

Substantial parts of the book deal with the relationship with Shostakovich, for the most part successfully. However there are lapses: he is unconvincing in explaining why Mravinsky never performed Shostakovich's 13th Symphony, citing three different reasons within a page and a half.

This illustrates more pervasive failings in the book. The material is poorly organised and the analysis is weak. Moreover, while it appears to be scrupulously referenced with almost one thousand footnotes, it soon becomes clear that much of this has been carelessly done: some footnotes add nothing, while elsewhere there is no footnote precisely where there ought to be one so that the reader knows the source for a particular fact or claim. For example, in writing

about the 1970s he states baldly that Yuri Temirkanov, who much later became chief conductor of the Philharmonic, “matched his hatred of Mravinsky with his own forceful ambition”, but he cites no source or supporting evidence. There are some simple errors too, but they are mostly trivial.

More serious is that, while Tassie is interesting on Mravinsky's musical repertoire (a good deal more diverse than one might suppose from the available recordings) and about his musical life generally, he is less successful in illuminating his subject's personal life. At the end of the book I knew much more about Mravinsky, but did not feel that I understood him better.

For its many good features I do give this book a warm welcome, but because of its flaws I can recommend it only with caution.

David Caldwell

2006



ON THE ISLE OF BUTE

www.russiantavern.co.uk