

Hon-Lun Helan Yang, Simo Mikkonen, and John Winzenburg, *Networking the Russian Diaspora: Russian Musicians and Musical Activities in Interwar Shanghai*

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Between the “October Revolution” of 1917 and the end of World War II in 1945, tens of thousands of “White” Russian refugees and several thousand “Red” Soviet citizens emigrated to China. Most of them settled either in the Manchurian frontier city of Harbin or in the treaty port city of Shanghai. Those who lived in Shanghai contributed substantially to the cultural and social life of the city and to its reputation as a cosmopolitan Asian metropolis. Russians trained in music and performance (dance especially) in the conservatories of St. Petersburg and elsewhere made deep and long-lasting contributions to the modern musical culture of Shanghai and that of China as a whole. This excellent book tells the story of how a highly trained and talented community of exiled, stateless Russians proved crucial to the creation of modern Chinese music. They did so in particular through their participation in the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, the leading orchestral body in China and East Asia, and through their pedagogical contributions to the National Conservatory, which was established in Shanghai in 1927 and developed a Western-style music program and curriculum to educate the first and subsequent generations of Chinese musicians and composers. With three authors, each contributing his or her own field of expertise, and the use of archival sources in English, Russian, and Chinese, this book makes an outstanding and unique contribution to the cultural and social history of Shanghai as well as enhancing our understanding of the Russian diasporic experience.

Chapter 1 provides a background to the Russian diaspora and the emergence of a Russian community in Shanghai while arguing for the importance of music in creating and sustaining communal identities among the otherwise disparate ethnic groups that constituted Russian society. This chapter notes that there was a general flow of Russian refugees in the 1920s and 1930s from Russia to Harbin and then from there to Shanghai, where most of the community collected over time in the area known as the French Concession. Like other long-term settlers, Russians who settled in Shanghai built schools and churches, organized their own societies and clubs, and became deeply involved in the cultural and social life of this multinational metropolis. Yet unlike most other foreign nationalities, the Russian refugees arrived in Shanghai relatively poor and powerless, and they had to carve out their own lives as “second-class Whites” in a city in which the British dominated, with their racist colonialist ideology and their general antipathy toward Chinese culture. Positioned in between Europe and Asia, and identifying with both parts of the world, Russians were able to bridge the wide gaps between Euro-American settler societies and the Chinese population of the city, which dominated in sheer numbers if not in cultural or political power.

Chapter 2 offers us a broad survey of the different musical societies, institutions, and performances in which Russians actively participated, which included a Russian choir, a Russian opera, as well as dramatic and musical-education societies. Already it becomes clear that Russians were making a substantial contribution to the highbrow musical culture of the city by the 1930s. Chapter 3 then focuses on the most important cultural institution in Shanghai: the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra (SMO). This orchestra arose

out of the Municipal Band that was supported and funded by the Municipal Council, the governing body of the British-run International Settlement. The arrival of exiled Russian musicians in Shanghai after 1917 coupled with the decision to hire the Italian director Mario Paci in 1919 (he would remain in that position until the orchestra was dissolved in 1942) resulted in the best symphonic orchestra east of St. Petersburg. By the 1920s, Russian musicians made up more than half of the orchestra. The authors take pains to reveal how the precarious status of Russian exiles made it harder for them to negotiate decent salaries and earn a living for themselves and their families. Indeed, many Russian refugees, musicians included, fell prey to alcoholism and depression. Nevertheless, Russians constituted the backbone of the orchestra for nearly three decades. In chapter 4, we find that their presence, and that of a relatively large Russian community in the city, encouraged the SMO frequently to perform orchestral works by Russian composers, which helped to solidify the communal identity of the Russians in Shanghai, as a long table in the chapter reveals.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to the National Conservatory. Founded in Shanghai's French Concession in 1927 by leading Chinese educator Cai Yuanpei and by China's leading musicologist Xiao Youmei (both men earned their PhDs in Germany), the new national conservatory was intended to educate a new generation of Chinese musicians in Western classical music as well as training them to modernize China's own age-old musical traditions. Russian musicians served as the first generation of teachers and contributed substantially to the curriculum and the pedagogy of the conservatory. Among them was the pianist Boris Zakharov, originally from Russia, where he trained in the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Arriving in Shanghai in 1929, he trained a whole generation of Chinese musicians in classical pianism. According to his Chinese students, Zakharov and the other Russian masters blew both hot and cold depending on the talents and performances of their students. If a student performed well on a given day, she might be swept up in a bear hug by the imposing master. If a student shirked his duties, he might be subject to a berating, or even slapping of the hands or head. It is little wonder that some Chinese students hoped that the next generation of teachers would be from their own country. Nevertheless, students treated Zakharov with great admiration and respect, especially since he went to great lengths to assist and support his students both on and off campus.

The final two chapters of the book focus on two Russian musicians who made a substantial and unique impact on the musical culture of Shanghai and of modern China. The first is the Russian concert pianist and composer Alexander Tcherepnin. Unlike most of the other Russian masters, Tcherepnin was only a temporary resident of Shanghai, having arrived there in 1934 during a world tour. He subsequently spent the next three years moving between Shanghai, Beiping (Peking or Beijing today), and Tokyo, where he performed, composed new works, and trained Chinese students. Tcherepnin proved open to Chinese musical influences, and indeed he sought them out actively, studying popular and folk music on the streets and in the opera houses, and befriending Mei Lanfang, the famous opera star, among others. Recruited to teach at the National Conservatory, Tcherepnin helped a young and talented generation of Chinese composers to blend their own folk heritage and musical traditions with the structures and methods of the Western classical tradition. One result was the famous piano work by He Luting, "Buffalo Boy's Flute," which won a composition contest judged by Tcherepnin, Zakharov, Xiao, and other masters (he would go on to become a famous composer and eventually the president of the Shanghai Conservatory, which lost its "National" status after 1949).

Meanwhile, Tcherepnin composed his own pieces out of an amalgam of Chinese musical traditions, borrowing techniques from the Chinese instrument known as the *pipa* and transferring them to the piano. The result was a stunning piano suite known as the “Homage to China.” The key influence behind the creation of this set of tone poems was not the country itself but rather the female piano student Lee Hsien-min (Li Xianmin), who eventually became Tcherepnin’s second wife after his first marriage to a wealthy American woman, Louisine Peters Weeks, dissolved. She continued to support her exiled Russian ex-husband and his new family long after their divorce.

Another Russian musician is the subject of the final chapter of the book. Aaron Avshalamov was a Russian Jewish exile who was raised in Siberia by a Jewish merchant family. Surrounded by Japanese and Chinese communities and nursed by a Chinese amah, he grew up with a fascination for Asian culture and music. After traveling abroad for many years and studying music in the United States, he returned to China with a renewed zeal for Chinese folk music. In 1931 he arrived in Shanghai and spent the next fifteen years there, eventually moving back to the United States in 1947. While in Shanghai, Avshalamov composed orchestral works that blended Chinese folk opera styles with Western symphonic styles. These included the symphonic suite “The Soul of Chin,” a symphonic poem called “In Hutongs of Peking,” a ballet called “Incense Shadows,” a piano concerto, and a music drama called “The Great Wall,” among many others. His compositions, performed in the city’s theaters and symphony halls, and his friendships with leading Chinese composers, performers, and educators such as Nie Er, He Luting, and Mei Lanfang proved influential and helped to shape the course of modern Chinese music for generations to come. Nevertheless, upon returning to the United States after World War II, he eventually sank into penury and obscurity.

While this multi-authored book is a remarkable combination of musicological, ethnomusicological, and historical studies, it does leave the reader with a few caveats. As I have made clear, the focus is on the relatively elite sphere of Western classical music rather than on the popular sphere of music that famously existed in the city’s ballrooms and cabarets. Here one detects a significant bias of the authors toward the Western classical tradition, even though they acknowledge that Russian musicians and dancers also contributed to the popular music sphere by working in nightclubs and cabarets.

Unfortunately, we learn very little about this world of popular music, since the book focuses almost entirely on the musicians and the institutions that promoted the highbrow musical arts associated with symphony orchestras, chamber orchestras, operas, and music conservatories. An additional chapter focusing on Russian contributions to the popular music and nighttime entertainment world of Shanghai would have further enriched this study of Russians’ contributions to the musical life of Shanghai. One final caveat is that the long tables in the middle chapters might have been better positioned in an appendix, since they get in the way of reading the text. Regardless of these two points, the book does a remarkable job of synthesizing archival sources in multiple languages to provide us with a detailed account of the musical life of the city in the 1920s–1940s and the substantial role played by Russians in making that world as well as helping to create modern music for China.

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