

# LEONID SABANEEV'S *APOCALYPSE* AND MUSICAL METAPHYSICS AFTER 1917

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Reflecting on the changes introduced by the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, music critic Leonid Sabaneev (1881-1968) wrote from emigration that

a new era began for me from the moment when, on a far from lovely day, all the so-called 'bourgeois newspapers' were closed by the Bolsheviks and my thoughts about music and musical performances were left hanging in silence.<sup>1</sup>

Sabaneev contrasted the new Soviet regime with the "good old days" in Russia, in which, he claimed, with nostalgic longing for the Silver Age, it was generally believed that music existed "outside of" politics – a worldview brought to a crashing end by the new Marxist ideology of the state. From emigration, this earlier era in which music had existed outside of political or social trends seemed hopelessly naïve. What point was there, Sabaneev concluded with resignation, in even *discussing* this "prehistoric" (*доисторическое*) time before 1917 when everything had changed irreversibly? This mood of bitter resignation towards a transformed (and apparently inferior) modern world, together with nostalgia for an earlier Russia, where he believed that art had still held "mystery", were common in Sabaneev's musical criticism during his years of emigration.<sup>2</sup>

In actual fact, however, Sabaneev's relationship both to the prerevolutionary and early Soviet eras of musical life was far more complex than this self-narration would suggest. It was, after all, an eminently strange kind of "silence" that stranded Sabaneev's thoughts

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<sup>1</sup> Sabaneev, L. "Zhurnalizm i rabota v gazetakh" (undated), Box 1, p.1, Bakhmeteff Archive, Sabaneev Collection.

<sup>2</sup> A number of these articles are held in the Bakhmeteff Archive, Sabaneev Collection. Some were also recently republished in Sabaneev 2005.

about music and musical performances after 1917. A short perusal of the composer and critic's activities in the fledgling Soviet state are impressive: Sabaneev served as a founding member of the State Institute for Musical Research (ГИМН – Государственный институт музыкальной науки), the president of the Moscow branch of the Association of Contemporary Music (АСМ – Ассоциация современной музыки), and, from 1921, as chair of the Academy of Artistic Sciences (ГАХН – Государственная Академия художественных наук).<sup>3</sup> He also contributed countless articles to early Soviet music periodicals and found the time both to offer general-educational lectures to the Soviet “masses” and to publish a series of books devoted to making musical knowledge and education accessible to a broader audience, all prior to his departure from the Soviet Union in 1926.<sup>4</sup>

It is tempting to read Sabaneev's intellectual shifts from imperial Russian to Soviet to *émigré* life as mere political expediency, the zigzagging path of an individual seeking to carve out a space for himself within a rapidly transforming world. Indeed, Sabaneev's apparent reticence to acknowledge his Soviet-era work was hardly surprising given the internal tensions of the Russian *émigré* community vis-à-vis the new Soviet state.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, his decision not to return to the Soviet Union after an approved business trip to Europe in 1926 left an indelible black mark on the music critic and composer's status within the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Sabaneev's creative trajectory was actually far more consistent than such apparent political maneuvering would suggest. Ultimately, the very conceptual categories through which Sabaneev made sense of the world around him, themselves forged within the hothouse culture of late imperial Russia, continued to guide his interpretation of the world through the upheaval of revolution, adaptation to life under a new political order, and ultimate emigration.

As a cultural-intellectual historian, I am deeply interested in *how* former residents of the Russian empire made sense of the upheavals they had experienced. What conceptual frameworks did they employ to make sense of their lives? How did they strive to connect their past and present

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<sup>3</sup> Together with Vladimir Derzhanovsky, Sabaneev helped to found the Moscow ASM on November 29, 1923 (Nelson 2004, 49).

<sup>4</sup> Sabaneev 1923; Sitsky 1994, 291-302; Nelson 2004, 41-43. Journals that Sabaneev contributed to include *Teatral'naia Moskva*, *K novym beregam*, *Muzykal'naia kul'tura*, *Sovremennaia muzyka* and *Muzyka i revoliutsiia*.

<sup>5</sup> On internal divisions within Russia Abroad, see for instance Raeff 1990; Jordon 2016.

<sup>6</sup> On this negative view of Sabaneev, see for instance Sitsky 1994, 291-302.

into a coherent narrative? How were prerevolutionary intellectual concepts and categories adapted to new realities, and how did they influence perceptions of past, present and future in the aftermath of revolutionary upheaval? And finally, how did music and perceptions of music shape this attempt to make sense of their lives? Employing the tools of Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), in this paper I use Leonid Sabaneev as a case study through which to examine how music's symbolic importance continued to be interpreted within intellectual categories developed prior to 1917.<sup>7</sup> While the framework within which he conceptualized the role of music remained surprisingly consistent, gradual disillusion with the ultimate triumph of human progress – and modernity itself – led Sabaneev to embrace a subjective temporality of an idealized past associated with the lost world of late imperial Russia.

In his study of modernity, Koselleck emphasized the “space of experience” (*Erfahrungsraum*) and “horizon of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizont*) that shape human history, demonstrating that, in the modern age, the space of human experience no longer served as the central basis from which people imagined their future. Ideas of progress and a search for newness replaced an older emphasis on tradition and a world in which one's future expectations were directly shaped by past experience.<sup>8</sup> In late imperial Russia, growing anxiety over the path history seemed to be following gave rise to a conception of “musical time” as an alternative to “historical” or “calendar” time: through music, ordinary temporality, the temporality of modernity, could be transcended. Whether salvation from the present was to come through progression to a new level of humanity or a return to “eternal values”, there was a shared idea that music was a path through which to escape the contradictions and uncertainties of the modern age (Mitchell 2016, 27-49).

But what happened to such conceptions of temporality within the context of war, revolution and emigration? Despite Leonid Sabaneev's claim that there was “no point” in “remembering” events prior to 1917, in actuality the Russian émigré community (like Sabaneev himself) was *obsessed* with memory and with the problem of historical time. Klára Móricz has argued that emigrants seemed to have remained trapped in the vanished time between January 31, 1918, of the old Julian calendar and the

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<sup>7</sup> Koselleck 2004; Koselleck 2002. Koselleck's approach, which acknowledges that certain concepts underpin all human experience even while their content shifts over time, provides a valuable methodology for tracking both shifts and continuities after 1917.

<sup>8</sup> For Koselleck, *Erfahrungsraum* includes personal experience as well as cultural, social and political circumstances.

next day, February 14, 1918, of the Gregorian calendar adopted by the new state. Within this “suspended time,” she claims, the utopian temporality of the pre-revolutionary years, in which the future took precedence over the present, was replaced with a new temporality, in which the past predominated. (Móricz 2014, 18) In <sup>other</sup> words, the temporality experienced by many Russian <sup>émigrés</sup> actually reversed the temporal claim advanced by Koselleck: the realm of experience often proved more desirable than the horizon of expectation, leading to a renewed emphasis on, and idealization of, the past.

Building on Koselleck’s conceptual framing of time in her analysis of the phenomenon of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym asserted that “nostalgia, as a historical emotion, is a longing for that shrinking ‘space of experience’ that no longer fits the new horizon of expectations” (Boym 2001, 9-11). Thus, she concluded, nostalgia itself was a quintessentially *modern* conception of temporality; one, moreover, that was common amongst the first wave of Russian <sup>émigrés</sup>. Leonid Sabaneev, once one of the most outspoken supporters of modernist musical progress, offers a particularly striking example of this temporal shift from progressive time to nostalgic memory. From envisioning a world of constant human progress, in music as in science and society as a whole, Sabaneev gradually dissociated himself from the very idea of progress, retreating uncomfortably into a not-quite-idealized memory of Russian Silver Age culture, a past that he embodied in both his music criticism and in many of his still unpublished later musical compositions, most notably *The Apocalypse*.

## **Sabaneev’s Conceptual World: Musical Metaphysics Before 1917**

One of the few consistencies in Sabaneev’s uneven path is his continued engagement with the worldview of musical metaphysics: a worldview that emerged in late imperial Russia, whose conceptual roots continued to feed both early Soviet and <sup>émigré</sup> life. In late imperial Russia, a curious meld of aesthetic ideas borrowed from such figures as Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer and Russian philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev gave rise to a widespread view of music as a metaphysical, mysterious and unifying force, able to overcome the divisions of modernity and reunify Russian society: a worldview I have elsewhere defined as “musical metaphysics” (Mitchell 2016). It was an interpretation circulated by cultural elites (writers, philosophers, musicians) who were themselves centered in urban centers of the empire (particularly Moscow and Petersburg). This cluster of ideas connected with music provided a shared framework within which

music's significance was widely interpreted in the periodical press, contemporary program notes, and personal letters.

Musical metaphysics can be summarized in three overlapping categories: music as unity, musical time, and the search for Orpheus. Building on ideas borrowed from Schopenhauer (*The World as Will and Representation*) and Nietzsche (*The Birth of Tragedy*), music was seen as the ultimate unifying force, able to overcome the divisions of modernity (whether political, social or cultural): regardless of where an observer found the *source* of contemporary disunity, *music* was commonly cited as a central means of transcendence. It was also generally believed that music could lift the listener (or participant) out of normal temporal experience into “musical time”: a space of aesthetic transformation that would ultimately serve to usher in a better future. Finally, such an emphasis on music's power gave rise to widespread attempts to define *which* contemporary Russian composer might be able to fulfill music's promise. In this search for a contemporary “Orpheus”, different composers with contrasting musical styles were alternately touted or condemned according to their perceived ability to create music with the proper effect on its audience.<sup>9</sup>

As an active member of Moscow's musical community, Sabaneev was a key figure in the construction and propagation of musical metaphysics as a worldview. Born in Moscow in 1881, Sabaneev pursued the study of physics, mathematics and music at the Moscow Conservatory and Moscow University.<sup>10</sup> His involvement in scientific as well as musical studies strengthened his belief in the need for a scientific, scholarly approach to music that complemented his essentially idealist conception of music's influence. Sabaneev soon established himself as an active music critic, composer and close friend and supporter of Alexandr Skriabin, the composer who for a time embodied the greatest “Orphic” expectations of the era. It was in this guise that Sabaneev's own variety of musical metaphysics took shape.

Embedded in Sabaneev's particular vision of “musical time” was as an aestheticized approach to human progress that he identified in both scientific and artistic realms, arguing that each historical era needed music that responded to the unique spirit and developments of that era. In 1911, he argued that “the current epoch is distinguished specifically by the reevaluation of the most basic principles upon which music has rested for

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of this worldview and its application to Rachmaninoff, Skriabin and Medtner prior to 1917, see Mitchell 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Leonid Sabaneev to Boris Iurgenson (February 25, 1915), RGALI f.931, op.1, ed.khr.96.

many centuries,”<sup>11</sup> and claimed that human hearing was evolving into an ever more refined skill in which attentive listeners could make out more precise tonal differentiation than had been possible for earlier generations. Indeed, Sabaneev’s admiration of Skriabin was based on an interpretation of the composer that found in his creative development the ultimate embodiment of this “modern” temporality. Skriabin was, for Sabaneev, the embodiment of the new “Orpheus”: the composer whose music would usher in a fundamentally new era in the history of the human spirit. This argument formed the basis, both of his interpretation of Skriabin’s “Prometheus” chord as an intuitive uncovering of the natural series of overtones governing all music, and his own attempts to establish a new, 53-note scale that could serve as the basis for contemporary musical creativity (Sabaneev 1910a, 6-10; Sabaneev 1910b, 85-88; Sabaneev 1911a, 26, 286-294; Sabaneev 1911b 16,: 452-457; Sabaneev 1912b 14,, 334-337; Sabaneev 1915, 18-30; Mitchell 2016, 87-90).

Sabaneev’s obsession with musical progress was intimately tied to the belief that music had a clear psychological impact on an audience. At the basis of all music, he argued, lay “the direct and immediate language of emotions, willful impulses.” The task of the contemporary composer was the “gradual expansion of the emotional content of music”: to awaken new, more refined emotions and moods that would in turn help to usher in a new era of history.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary humanity had moved beyond the emotional expression of a composer like J.S. Bach so that, Sabaneev argued, Bach’s music no longer had noticeable emotional impact on audiences (Sabaneev 1912a, 170). Skriabin’s music, in contrast, offered new aural possibilities to listeners and awakened new kinds of emotions unrecognizable to earlier generations of humanity. It was, in a word, the very epitome of progress.

Having framed his interpretation of musical progress so decisively around the work of Skriabin, Sabaneev was shocked by the sudden and unexpected death of the composer in 1915, and he struggled to incorporate this new development into his narrative of music. Already in his 1916 book *Skriabin* Sabaneev assailed the composer’s failure to fulfill the task of Orpheus – earning him the opprobrium of many of Skriabin’s more mystically-inclined admirers (Sabaneev 1916). In an act of either mourning or of hubris, Sabaneev took on the task of composing a massive piano sonata (Op.15) in memory of Skriabin. This work, built in part upon ideas borrowed from Skriabin’s unfinished manuscript for his *Preparatory*

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<sup>11</sup> Sabaneev 1911c, 12, 1210-1214. See also Sabaneev 1911d 17,, 1242-1248.

<sup>12</sup> Sabaneev 1911c, 12, 1210-1214. See also Sabaneev 1911d 17,, 1242-1248 (53-note scale).

*Act (Предварительное Действо* – a work that itself had been conceived by Scriabin as an intermediary work on the path towards the ultimate completion of his *Mystery*) almost seems to have been conceived as a demonstration of Sabaneev’s ability to succeed compositionally where Scriabin had failed. Though published only in 1924, it stands as the final product of Sabaneev’s pre-revolutionary identity.<sup>13</sup> Disenchantment with Scriabin, however, did not lead to disillusion with musical metaphysics itself, as his activities in the early Soviet state demonstrate.

## **Redefining Musical Metaphysics in a Workers’ State**

In the years after 1917, Sabaneev quickly found his footing within the new Bolshevik regime. Indeed, his emphasis on the need to scientifically understand the basis of music, as well as his belief that music had a direct impact on human psychology found a sympathetic audience within the Soviet regime. Active in multiple state-supported institutions, and serving as music editor for *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, Sabaneev initially found it possible to adapt to the Soviet context with relatively little reworking of his vision of musical metaphysics (Sitsky 1994. 291-292). He maintained his evolutionary idea of musical progress, while adding a new gloss about the historical role of the bourgeoisie and the need for education of the masses. Applying Charles Darwin’s idea of evolution to music, he argued that the most important aspects of the classical musical tradition would be preserved through education of the masses. The other creative works, which were connected solely with the “moods and feelings of the bourgeoisie”, had no purpose in building a new society and would simply vanish (Sabaneev 1925, 28-33).

While opposed to an overly simplistic reduction of music to a form of ideology, Sabaneev retained his belief that music’s power to affect the human psyche had a real and demonstrable effect that would be of use in the contemporary age.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in 1925, Sabaneev argued that music had the ability to influence the listener, imposing upon him or her a sequence of definable experiences. “Music not only organizes sounds, but organizes

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<sup>13</sup> Sitsky 1994, 291-302. Sabaneev, Sonata op.15. I am grateful to Jonathan Powell for sharing his reflections on this Sonata with me.

<sup>14</sup> Thus, in 1924, Sabaneev wrote that “Music IS NOT IDEOLOGY which is somehow attached to it. It is a pure construction of sound [....] [M]usic does not express ideas, it does not express ‘logical’ constructions. Rather it has its own musical aural world, its own musical ideas, and its own internal musical logic. It is a closed world, and the gulf between it and logic and ideology usually can only be breached in a forced and artificial way.” Quoted and trans. in Nelson 2004, 50.

the human psyche with these sounds,” he argued. This allows the composer to call forth a given experience in a person through the combination of music’s basic elements (rhythm, melody, harmony, connection of voices and timbre). (Sabaneev 1925, 13)Reinvigorating yet another trope of musical metaphysics, he emphasized music’s unifying power as a factor in its social importance for the Soviet state: not only could music express the experience of a single person, but it could actually combine the masses in a single emotional experience. The problem faced by music in “bourgeois” society was that it had been torn away from this uniting task, and Sabaneev spared no ink in targeting those modernist and “Leftist” musical trends that he saw as deviating from music’s true purpose (Sabaneev 1925, 5-6).

### **Section Three: Emigration and the Temporality of Nostalgia**

In the sources I have examined, the precise cause of Sabaneev’s decision to abandon the Soviet Union is never openly stated; nevertheless, his celebration of the inherently progressive nature of the Revolution seems to have dimmed by 1925.<sup>15</sup> By this time, Sabaneev had already begun work on the massive work that would preoccupy him in coming years: *The Apocalypse*. An extant piano sonata, based on “themes from the Apocalypse” demonstrates a mental shift from an embrace of progress to an emphasis (at least artistically) on destruction and, perhaps, transcendence of time.<sup>16</sup> However, it was only after Sabaneev’s permanent departure from the Soviet Union in 1926 that he began to openly express disillusion with his image of temporality as constant progress to new levels of human experience. For Sabaneev, this was not so much disenchantment with the *goals* of musical metaphysics, but rather with the disjuncture between contemporary society and what he considered to be the true role of music. Rather than continuing to forge new realms of human experience through music, Sabaneev mourned, contemporary society no longer saw the need for the power of music. Music, it seemed, had become a space of the past rather than a maker of the future. As he reflected in an article for the British journal *Music and Letters*,<sup>it may very well be</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> According to the records of the State Academy of Artistic Science (GAKhN), Sabaneev applied for permission to go abroad on a work-related trip on January 7, 1926. This request was approved, and Sabaneev was on official leave from January 18 to June 7, 1926. He was officially removed from the list of the Academy as an “emigrant” on December 1, 1929. See RGALI f.941, op.10, d.541, esp. ll.24-32.

<sup>16</sup> “Sonata (Sur les thèmes de l’*Apocalypse*),” 1925, LC Sabaneev collection.

that music in general is <finished> \_ music as an historical document of the culture of the European world. Personally I am more and more inclined to this exceedingly pessimistic opinion. (Sabaneev and Pring 1928b 1., 502)

Repeated extensively from emigration, Sabaneev's sharp critique of contemporary life and music focused on several interrelated complaints: first, the commercialization of music and unsophisticated demands of a broader listening audience had destroyed the high art that had once existed, leading to a "vulgarization" of music. Second, the contemporary world itself, a world of "hygiene" was no longer conducive to musical creativity. Music, Sabaneev argued, like the world itself, had lost its "mystery": everything has become plain and easy to understand [...] [T]he annihilation of mystery in the world, its <accessibility> has also destroyed the sense of mystery in the hearts of men, has made their psychology dull and ordinary. (Sabaneev and Pring 1928b 1., 502-503) Like European civilization, Sabaneev concluded, "music has grown old [...] It seems suddenly to have wrinkled and withered, and this has occurred of late years, almost during the war and post-war period" (Sabaneev and Pring 1928b 1., 503). The years since 1917 thus came to mark for Sabaneev the entry into "a new era, an anti-musical era, in which, generally speaking, there will of a surety be no place for music" (Sabaneev and Pring 1928a, 209-210). Aghast that music had lost its pioneering spirit, Sabaneev even occasionally lashed out against the very musical metaphysics that he had once believed in so fervently. As he wrote to Aleksandr Krein in 1928: "I remember our 'old, other' specialties. Truly the sun rose and set in a single composition. Only here [in emigration] did I understand that this was only hypnosis and delusion, that our musical slavery was a small dead end in a large world. For his reason, I now have a skeptical and angry relationship to the musical sphere [...] What good are these universal perspectives which never offer any sort of happiness, but only a thrashing of nerves and a spoiling of life?"<sup>17</sup> Music, it seemed, had become a space of the past, rather than a maker of the future.

Despite this apparent rejection of music, however, Sabaneev found it impossible to disentangle himself from his own creative work, instead working obsessively on his *Apocalypse*. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Sabaneev's unpublished manuscripts is the insight they give us into his conceptual world after emigration: a space in which he seems to have fixated upon recapturing the lost world of late imperial Russia. Themes and motives drawn from prerevolutionary Russian culture, freely mixed with apocalyptic biblical imagery suggest a mental link between Sabaneev's pre-revolutionary world and his *émigré* existence. These found expression in a series of vocal works written by Sabaneev in the late 1920s

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<sup>17</sup> Leonid Sabaneev to Aleksandr Krein (January 5, 1928), RGALI f.2435, op.2, no.183.

and preserved in manuscript form at the Library of Congress. Included in these works are musical settings of poems by Silver Age poets Konstantin Bal'mont (*Зачем?*, *Why?*) and Aleksandr Blok (*Religio*) within a tonal palette deeply influenced by the works of Skriabin, as well as compositions for which Sabaneev (following the example of his erstwhile idol) composed both text and music.<sup>18</sup> The consistent atmosphere of these works is striking in their re-envisioned temporality. While in the pre-revolutionary era, Sabaneev had emphasized the progressive development of new emotional experiences for humanity, each of these later works dwells instead in a realm of suspended temporality. Loss and transcendence are highlighted, and the realms of the eternal and heavenly are regularly contrasted with the fleeting and earthly. This is perhaps best expressed in the work *Mantras*, in which the composer links together late romantic musical language (extended and tritone-based harmonies), and textual imagery that unites Hinduesque ideas of reincarnation with mourning for a lost “fatherland” and a transcendent moment when, in the hour when I remember all/ And when I am not afraid of the horror of my previous existence/ I will hear the bell proclaiming the end of time.<sup>19</sup> The memory of Skriabin, and his eclectic borrowing from Eastern thought is here evident.

The distinction between these shorter vocal compositions and the massive manuscript of Sabaneev’s *Apocalypse* is also blurred. Examination of handwritten text jotted on the side of the score for “*Mantras*” reveals a direct conceptual link between the two works: a quotation (in Latin) from the biblical Book of Revelation (the source of the text for the *Apocalypse*), Chapter Five, Verse Four: *Et ego flebam multum quoniam nemo dignus inventus est aperire librum, nec videre eum* [<sup>1</sup>cried bitterly because no one could be found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside it].<sup>20</sup> Could this be a lament that Skriabin had proven himself unworthy to serve as Orpheus and unlock the gates to the next, ecstatic stage of existence? Or disenchantment with the promised utopia of the early Soviet state that Sabaneev had recently abandoned? It is, in any event, clear that this compendium of works existed within a single conceptual universe that recoiled from Sabaneev’s earlier progressive conception of human creativity. Instead, they suggest a nostalgic gesture to

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<sup>18</sup> LC Sabaneev Collection. The unpublished vocal manuscripts include two settings of Bal'mont's “*Зачем?*”, two settings of Blok's texts (“*Religio*”, “*Рожденные в годы глухие*”) and several vocal works for which Sabaneev himself seems to have written both text and music (“*Горный Иерусалим*” [Mountainous Jerusalem], “*Мантрамы*” [Mantras]).

<sup>19</sup> Sabaneev, “*Мантрамы*”, LC Sabaneev Collection.

<sup>20</sup> Revelation 5:4, *Good News Bible* (London and Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 1976), 315.

a mystical worldview now considered (even by the composer himself) as “outlived”, despite the fact that his creative impulses continued to find fruition within the same conceptual framework of musical metaphysics that he claimed to have abandoned.

The shadow of Skriabin looms large over all the works, both in harmonic language and conception: Sabaneev repeatedly referred to the *Apocalypse* as his “Mystery”, even while, unlike his deceased friend, he had no vision of the work actually bringing about the end of the physical universe.<sup>21</sup> The echo of Sabaneev’s lost Orpheus is similarly notable in the sheer performance strength required by Sabaneev’s *Apocalypse*. While scarcely comparable to the approximately seven days that Skriabin’s *Mystery* was to have lasted, the massive proportions of the *Apocalypse* are not to be shrugged off. Estimated to last 10 hours in performance, and requiring a minimum of 272 performers to stage, including 10 solo singers (soprano, Alto, Contralto, 2 tenors, 2 baritones, 3 basses), a separate choir of 4 soloists (high tenor, tenor, baritone, bass), 3 choirs containing a minimum of 40 members apiece, as well as a full orchestra and organ, the requirements for staging overreached any possible performance strength Sabaneev might have imagined mustering while still residing in the Soviet Union, much less as an impoverished émigré in France.<sup>22</sup> Such financial challenges were indeed keenly on his mind, as he observed in an article from 1937: a composer, falling into the Abroad, was forced to create without the resonance of a listener, without performance, without publication, without the response of critics[...] [If] under these circumstances it nevertheless turned out that composers did not disappear, that they nevertheless write music, then this trend cannot be considered anything but the appearance of true artistic heroism.<sup>23</sup> Under such circumstances, Sabaneev himself clearly did not expect his work to actually see performance. As he expressed to Krein, he continued to labor upon his *magnum opus* merely “for himself”, without hope of a larger audience.<sup>24</sup>

In its musical language, the *Apocalypse* demonstrates a creative impulse unwilling to abandon that of the composer’s Silver Age idol. Its extended tonal palette evokes a similar tonal world to Skriabin’s late works. The score is full of bell-like chords, fanfares and markings such as “misterioso” and descriptions of the music’s expressive goal, such as “stars falling from heaven,” that reflect Skriabin’s influence, and demonstrate a clear creative continuity with the romances composed by

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<sup>21</sup> Sabaneev to Krein (May 25, 1929), RGALI f.2435, op.2, no.183.

<sup>22</sup> The performing requirements for the piece are given in the opening material for the score. See Sabaneev, “L’Apocalypse,” LC Sabaneev Collection (uncatalogued).

<sup>23</sup> Sabaneev, “Музыкальное творчество в эмиграции,” in Sabaneev 2005, 203-218, here 207. First published in *Современные записки* no. 64 (1937).

<sup>24</sup> Sabaneev to Krein (January 5, 1928), RGALI f.2435, op.2, no.183.

Sabaneev several years earlier. Apart from the “Voice of God”, which was to be projected through an invisible megaphone, modernist innovations Sabaneev had previously espoused (including his own imagined 53-note scale) are entirely absent.

What does such a score tell us? On the one hand, it encodes an intended performance, an envisioned aural expression that the composer himself had little hope of having performed in his lifetime. Sabaneev felt all too keenly the “untimeliness” of his work in a world that no longer needed music. While musical metaphysics had once posited the central role of music transforming life and providing a new collective basis for society, by the time he was working on the *Apocalypse*, Sabaneev viewed music as something that he worked on “for himself” in his spare time. In his quest to complete his own version of Skriabin’s unfinished mission, he lifted himself out of quotidian, everyday existence, devoting himself to the private, creative and “untimely” world of composition, a world in which the lost, mystical temporality of pre-revolutionary Russia could be recaptured. In contrast, reflecting on the current age, Sabaneev mourned: Today if there can be art, then it is only ‘industrial’ (*производственное*), in general the world strives towards simplification and to the destruction of feelings and sensations, to hygiene and sanitarily simple life. The future life (*быть*) will be hygienic, but not artistic – there will be comfort, wonderful waterclosets and washbasins, good cars and planes, but it will be weak in music and artistic work – they are not needed. It is very possible that music in general will be banned as a destruction of quiet and hygiene []<sup>25</sup>

By the late 1920s, Sabaneev had established himself in France as a leading music critic offering analysis of Russian music (both in the emigration and in the USSR) to both European and <sup>émigré</sup> communities. In his writings, he recycled ideas about art that had first appeared in his pre-revolutionary texts related to Skriabin. Thus, by 1931 he claimed that he had “always” held a mystical conception of art, and that he continued to acknowledge the “grandeur” of the “essence of the idea of an art-religion.” While Skriabin had been mistaken in the personal deviation of his vision of ecstasy, it was perhaps now the time “most fitting to remember Skriabin, if not in his music, at least in his religious idea” (Sabaneev and Pring 1931, 789-792). In order to find itself, he concluded, “music must abjure the idea that it is complete in itself” (Sabaneev and Pring 1931, 792). In order to survive, music needed, in short, to reignite the mystery

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<sup>25</sup> Sabaneev to Krein (May 25, 1929) RGALI f.2435, op.2, no.183

that had, in the realm of pre-revolutionary Russian culture, seemed so close to fulfillment.

Sabaneev's creative struggles provide insight into far more than just his own artistic path. Rather, they mirror an important shift in how many Russian émigrés came to experience and conceptualize temporality itself from the space of emigration, a shift echoed in numerous other émigré publications and letters.<sup>26</sup> As it became increasingly clear that the Bolshevik regime would not quickly fall apart and allow the return of those who had fled for political reasons, many émigrés retreated into an idealized world of Russian culture: a world that had existed before the revolution, a space not geographically bound to the physical borders of Russia, which they could still possess and in which they could continue to experience, imagine and create a "Russian" identity. For Sabaneev, this "Russian" cultural space was uniquely individual: a space in which he composed his *Apocalypse* and continued to dream of music's transformative power – albeit as a deeply inward space, rather than as a collective, world-shattering event. Sabaneev was far from unique in this creative path. The space of "memory" in émigré literature has recently drawn scholarly attention, while Klára Móricz has demonstrated the artistic trajectory of composer Arthur Lourié, whose obsession with temporality and memory bears marked resemblance to Sabaneev's own lesser-known path (Slobin 2001, 516; Móricz and Morrison 2014).

Sabaneev's unpublished musical manuscripts shared a fate similar to that of their creator. Never performed in his lifetime, Sabaneev tried at one point to sell his archive to the Library of Congress: an attempt to barter art for the fulfillment of daily, quotidian needs that failed. When his mystical and hopelessly untimely output was reduced to the status of a physical object, the mid-twentieth century proved itself to indeed be an era without use for his creative work. Only after 1973 was Sabaneev's creative output acquired by the Library of Congress from Sabaneev's widow, winding up in the archive's basement, uncatalogued and forgotten.<sup>27</sup> The laconic comment "*Apocalypse*: order uncertain" on one file folder demonstrates that this is a physical trace far removed from performed reality. It remains today an evocation of one particular émigré's experience of the liminal temporality of emigration: a nostalgic idealization of a bygone age in which music had the power to transform reality, a lofty era in which

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<sup>27</sup> Edward N. Waters to Mr. Valitsky (March 8, 1973). LC Music Division: Old Correspondence. In this letter, written in response to a previous letter from a Mr. Gherman, Mr. Waters asks about the possibility of purchasing the score to the *Apocalypse*, for which the widow had apparently requested a sum of \$350.00.

educated society had dared to imagine that Russia had a messianic calling to reawaken spiritual meaning for all humanity. Musical metaphysics lived on as a space of memory rather than in the active pursuit of world transformation. As Sabaneev himself had lamented to his friend Krein in 1928, “Today’s world is not for music.”<sup>28</sup>

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### **Short biography**

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