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Introduction to Evald Ilyenkov, "Notes on Wagner"

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Evald Ilyenkov (1924–1979) is famous for his powerful analysis of Marx's dialectical method. Ilyenkov's fusion of Hegel, Marx and Spinoza rejuvenated Soviet Marxism during the Thaw period. The philosopher's interest in aesthetics is lesser-known. Presumably written in the mid- to late 1950s, "Notes on Wagner" are a testimony of Ilyenkov's passion for music, particularly Richard Wagner. However, these fragments are more than mere "notes" on Wagner: they are philosophy written in the medium of music; they reveal a thinker deeply steeped in nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse; and they provide an early example of how Ilyenkov's creative philosophy broke with the Soviet doctrine of *diamat*. However, why would a committed Marxist turn to the composer embraced by the Nazis only a decade earlier? How did Ilyenkov become a Wagnerite? Also, was there such a thing as a "Soviet Wagner"?

Wagner's influence on Russian composers, artists and poets of the Silver Age is well-documented (Bartlett 1995; Gozenpud 1990; Muir and Belina-Johnson 2013).[1] Arguably, nowhere else did Wagner find more devotees than in fin-de-siècle Russia.[2] Wagnerism influenced, to name just a few, Aleksandr Skriabin, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Vyacheslav Ivanov. Wagner's total artwork found another echo in the Symbolists' "zhiznetvorchestvo" (life-artwork). In fact, any study of the Russian avant-garde is incomplete without considering Wagnerism. However, what was the afterlife of the German composer after the Revolution? One might assume that Stalinism and Wagner's appropriation by Fascism put an end to his reception in the USSSR in the 1930s. However, that was not the case at all: the story of a "Soviet

[1] It is somewhat difficult to write about a "Russian Wagner" in 2023 without considering how the *Wagner Group* (Gruppa Vagnera) currently appropriates the composer's name. A Russian state-funded private military company, this group of mercenaries first emerged in 2014, during the war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea. The Wagner Group has been accused of committing war crimes and atrocities worldwide, including in Syria, Libya, Mali and Ukraine. The group's links to the composer are rather vague but its name can invoke memories of Wagner's appropriation by the Nazis during World War II (Mauceri 2023).

[2] Wagner's Russian reception is entangled with the enormous popularity of Friedrich Nietzsche among the intelligentsia at the turn of the century (Rosenthal 1998). Therefore, Russian Wagnerism, and if indirectly, also engaged with Nietzsche's sharp criticism of Wagner's philosophy after his initial endorsement of the composer (Nietzsche 1888).

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Image: Ilyenkov playing the piano. Photo from the family archives. Credits: Elena Illesh.

Wagner" is more eventful (on Wagner's reception in the Soviet Union, see Bartlett 1995, pp. 221–295; Fairclough 2016; Motazedian 2021; Raku 2014, pp. 315–450).[3]

The Soviet case of Wagner

"Soviet Wagner" is a revealing case study. The Russian musicologist Marina Raku described Wagner's legacy as "one of the most controversial" in Soviet culture (Raku 2014, p. 315).[4] Attitudes towards Wagner, on the side of critics, censors and artists, were in constant flux. Since the 1930s, hundreds of articles have been published on Wagner in the leading journal *Soviet Music* (today, *Muzikal'naia Akademiia*).[5] In fact, Wagner shaped Soviet culture throughout the century, from ideas of 'life-building' in the avant-gardist *Left Front of the Arts* (Lef) to late conceptualist projects of "Gesamtkunstwerk" (Groys 2011). In his final *Symphony No. 15 in A major, Op.*

[3]Thanks to Richard Louis Gillies for his musicological advice on Wagner's Soviet reception. I would like to thank Andrey Maidansky, Trevor Wilson, Kyrill Potapov and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts. Finally, my warmest thanks to Elena Illesh for her kind permission to reproduce the material from her family's archive.

[4]If not stated otherwise, all translations from Russian and German are my own.

[5]All articles on Wagner that were published in *Muzikal'naia Akademiia* between 1933 and 1979 (the year of Ilyenkov's death), can be found in the journal's online archive: https://mus.academy/search?search%5Bcontent%5D=%D0%92%D0%B0%D0%B3%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%80&search%5Bauthor%5D=&search%5Btitle%5D=&search%5Bkeyword%5D=&search%5Byear_from%5D=1933&search%5Byear_to%5D=1979&type=magazine_articles (Accessed on 21 October 2023).

141 (1970/71), Dmitri Shostakovich famously recycled the opening of *Tristan and Isolde* and the "fate motif" from Wagner's *Ring* cycle.

On the eve of the October Revolution, Wagner was at the "epicentre of Russian cultural life" (Raku 2014, p. 332). His work was quickly integrated into the revolutionary fervour of the avant-garde. In 1923, the *Soviet Wagner Society* was founded. Cosima Wagner herself sent a gift to Russia after meeting one of its members in Bayreuth (Fairclough 2016, p. 40). As Raku put it, with reference to Vladimir Maiakovsky, after 1917, "the 'ghost-ship' of Wagner's 'Flying Dutchman' began to personify revolutionary Russia" (Raku 2014, p. 335). The myth of Wagner's ghost-ship resurfaced in the revolutionary imagery of Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin* and Vladimir Tatlin's Constructivist stage designs (Bartlett 1995, p. 223). Eisenstein would later claim that Soviet cinema manifested the synthesis of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk (Motazedian 2021, p. 201). In short, the Revolution brought no halt to Wagner's cult status in early Soviet culture – on the contrary, it was Wagner who came to embody the revolutionary spirit of those years.

The first Commissar of Narkompros, Anatoly Lunacharsky, endorsed Wagner with particular enthusiasm. Lenin, too, was fond of Wagner's music (on Lenin and Lunacharsky's views on Wagner, see Bartlett 1995, pp. 227–237). In his 1919 speech *On musical drama*, Lunacharsky called for new forms of opera that evoked "bright Titanic emotions" within the listeners. For Lunacharsky, Wagner was the visionary forefather of proletarian music: "Being a revolutionary and hoping for social revolutions, he expected the working class to save the theatre" (quoted after Raku 2014, pp. 341–343). Accordingly, in the season of 1918/19, the Bolshoi Theatre staged *The Valkyrie, Tannhäuser* and *The Rhine Gold* (Raku 2014, p. 345). In Petrograd, the Mariinsky Theatre performed *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *The Valkyrie* and *Siegfried* in its 1922/23 season (Bartlett 1995, p. 241).

In the 1930s, at the peak of Stalinism, monumental opera à la Wagner became a major genre. According to Boris Groys, "the Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project" (Groys 2011, p. 36). Tahirih Motazedian retraced how a "Soviet Wagner" was continually rebranded to serve shifting ideological purposes. After the Revolution, for instance, Siegfried was reframed as a model revolutionary, whereas Parsifal was considered unsuitable (Motazedian 2021, p. 186). Bartlett similarly observed how a 1923 production of *Lohengrin* at the Bolshoi Theatre excised all references to German mythology, replacing it with the monumental struggle between good and evil forces. The stage design, lighting and costumes illustrate this battle with alchemical metaphors: white, silver and light gold symbolised the good, juxtaposed with red, black, violet and dark gold (Bartlett 1995, pp. 243–245). This version of *Lohengrin*, emptied from its original folkloristic content, and replaced by revolutionary alchemy, was performed until 1936.

The 50th anniversary of Wagner's death in 1933 was commemorated with an experimental new production of *The Rhine Gold* at the Mariinsky Theatre; it created, in the spirit of Skriabin, a "coloured symphony of light which would synthesise with the music" (Bartlett 1995, p. 269). By 1933, the Wagnerite Lunacharsky's tone had changed. Now, he spoke of Wagner, already appropriated by Hitler, as posing a "problem" for revolutionary socialists. However, Lunacharsky insisted that Wagner's

achievements – his "powerful music, the passionate emotions, the shining artistry of this genius" (quoted after Bartlett 1995, p. 270) – should not be discarded. From a Soviet point of view, Parsifal and Siegfried were counterposed to represent Germany and Russia: Parsifal, the gloomy German mystic, against Siegfried, the heroic socialist hero (Bartlett 1995, p. 271).

A few years later, the Hungarian Marxist philosopher György Lukács, who worked in Moscow from 1930, contributed to the Soviet case of Wagner. At that time, Lukács also discovered the young Marx's unpublished writings. Lukács responded to Lunacharsky with an unabashed appraisal of Wagner. An epigone of "true socialism,"[6] Wagner translated Feuerbach's philosophy into music. Wagner's criticism of capitalist culture, Lukács wrote, "reveals features of Romanticism that are not so noticeable among 'true socialists'." Wagner's gaze was not directed to a mythologised past "but to the coming revolution, which should abolish capitalism and its harmful influence on culture" (Lukács 1937). For Lukács, Wagner's musical revolution restored genuine artistic creativity. Like Ilyenkov after him, Lukács emphasised the importance of Siegfried, a hero doomed to tragic death.

Revolutionary Wagner: Eisenstein and Ilyenkov

From the 1940s, Wagner's Soviet fame began to recede. Lunacharsky and Lukács's attempts to install Wagner as a model for socialist realist artists had failed. One final project evoked Wagner's revolutionary potential. In 1940, Sergei Eisenstein was commissioned to stage a historic production of *The Valkyrie*, with the ambitious goal of tempering Soviet–German relations following the Non-Aggression Pact (Bartlett 1995, pp. 271–282; Motazedian 2021; Vogman 2018, pp. 247–256). Eisenstein's synaesthetic *The Valkyrie* experimented with spatial montage and non-linear temporalities; the stage was transformed into a polyphonic, "plastic image" (Vogman 2018, p. 249). Eisenstein's avant-garde production of *The Valkyrie* was the final *Ring* performance in the Soviet Union before the cycle was banned.

Wagner's music slowly returned to concert repertoires during Krushchev's Thaw. In the 1950s, several Wagner concerts took place in Moscow, including a performance of *Lohengrin* at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1956 and *The Flying Dutchman* the year after, in co-production with the GDR. In the mid-1950s, Wagner once again came to the Soviet Union as a revolutionary "fighter for new mass art" (Bartlett 1995, pp. 290–291). It is here that Ilyenkov's "Notes on Wagner," written in the 1950s, enter the story of the "Soviet Wagner." Like Eisenstein, Ilyenkov aimed to "save" the German composer from posthumous distortions. Further, "Notes on Wagner" were an attempt to reanimate the spirit of creative Marxism from the early revolutionary period. As such, Ilyenkov's notes are a striking commentary on post-Stalinist culture.

Born in Smolensk in 1924, Ilyenkov grew up in Moscow where he began studying philosophy on the eve of World War II. Already in early childhood, Ilyenkov developed a passion for Wagner. Yuri Kuznetsov recalled his friend as a teenager:

[6]Lukács referred to the political and philosophical movement in Germany of the 1840s, associated with Moses Hess, a Hegelian philosopher and forerunner of Zionism. It is in this context, following the Revolutions of 1848, that Wagner took part in the Dresden uprising in May 1849.

> Evald was particularly fond of certain composers. Skriabin and especially Richard Wagner greatly delighted him. When the major rumbles [*mazhornie raskaty*] of *Poem of Ecstasy* or the bravura, wind-like sounds of *Flight of the Valkyries* played, his round face with large, slightly bulging eyes was transformed. Looking at Evald at that moment, at his sparkling eyes, firmly compressed lips and head nodding in time with the music, I felt that something was happening to Evald that was yet out of reach for me…[7]

Ilyenkov's first experience of a Wagner concert was in 1940, when a German orchestra came to the USSR and Eisenstein staged *The Valkyries*.[8] In August 1942, Ilyenkov was conscripted into the army and fought as an artillery lieutenant at the front in Belarus. In 1945, he participated in the battle for Berlin and served in the occupying forces in Germany (Bakhurst 2023, p. 109). The traumatic experience of war left a sensitive young man scarred for life; he was to end his own life three decades later. After the war, Ilyenkov attempted to enrol into art school in Moscow but was denied admission. While eventually pursuing the study of philosophy, Ilyenkov sustained a lifelong interest in art; he skillfully played the piano and had a talent for drawing.

From Berlin, Ilyenkov brought back an intensified love for Wagner. In the 1950s, it was difficult to find Wagner records in the Soviet Union. One can speculate that some journeys to the GDR might have exposed Ilyenkov to Wagner records. Another source was crucial: Ilyenkov's close contacts with Italy. The Italian communist Sergio D'Angelo, who worked in Moscow for a radio station, smuggled Wagner records from Rome into the Soviet Union, mostly as gifts for the Ilyenkov family. D'Angelo used to spend Sundays in Peredelkino, visiting both Boris Pasternak and the dacha of Ilyenkov's father, himself a respected writer. D'Angelo recounted bonding with the young Evald over Wagner's music.[9]

Siegfried, the fallen hero, plays a major role in Ilyenkov's "Notes on Wagner." Reviving the revolutionary spirit of early Soviet culture, Ilyenkov evokes Wagner as a half-forgotten alchemist of revolution. In fact, Ilyenkov claims, Wagner was the most important counter-figure to Marx in the nineteenth century. In Wagner's music, Ilyenkov discovered "a cosmism, the idea of the tragedy of absolute power and the power of gold, that destroys all organic human relationships – the bonds of friendship, love, blood" (Mareev 1997, p. 6). Drawing on Bernard Shaw, Ilyenkov describes Wagner's *Ring* as the musical equivalent to Marx's *Capital*: the monumental "phenomenology of spirit" of a bourgeois century. Ilyenkov's Wagner was a "socialist realist" who wrote anti-capitalist operas.

Familiar with the works of Eisenstein's friend Lev Vygotsky, Ilyenkov most likely knew of Eisenstein's *The Valkyrie*. In fact, their respective Wagner projects share some astonishing similarities. During production in 1940, Eisenstein wrote the essay

[7] Andrey Maidansky shared with me these unpublished memories by Ilyenkov's childhood friend Yuri Kuznetsov, which come from the archive of A. Illesh (Ilyenkov's son-in-law whose father, Vladimir, was friends with and lived in the same house as Ilyenkov).

[8] I owe this knowledge of Ilyenkov's earliest contact with Wagner's music to Maidansky.

[9] Trevor Wilson pointed me to Ilyenkov's Italian connection that is explored in detail in his forthcoming article on Ilyenkov and Western Marxism. I drew on Wilson's research on D'Angelo, who was associated with Ilyenkov's Italian publisher Feltrinelli.

"The Incarnation of Myth" [Voploshchenie mifa]. It was the director's attempt to "recover" Wagner from the Nazis (Vogman 2018, p. 247). Eisenstein suggested that a major concern in *The Valkyrie* was the restoration of human dignity by liberating the masses. He also claimed that "the curse of private property" was a leitmotif in Wagner's *Ring*. In other words, Eisenstein's Wagner was communist at its heart. After him, Ilyenkov, too, rehabilitated Wagner as a socialist, radical composer. For both Eisenstein and Ilyenkov, Siegfried is a revolutionary hero who threw off "the yoke of property" (quoted after Motazedian 2021, pp. 189–90).

Wagner's compositional method, to create a flow of leitmotifs, shaped Eisenstein's own experiments with dialectical montage. Similarly, Ilyenkov's Wagner demonstrated "the absolute inevitability of the logic of decomposition, however, not by means of strict concepts, but by means of sensual-emotional images, equally strict in their necessity, their movement, their evolution, their development, accomplished through collisions [stolknoveniia], both external and internal – psychological." That notion of collision, or shock, was of course crucial to Eisenstein's montage technique. There is another striking parallel between Eisenstein and Ilyenkov: under the influence of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, both worked towards reconstructing the method of Marx's *Capital*.

In "Notes on Wagner," Ilyenkov recalls Shaw cross-reading Marx's *Capital* and the score of *Tristan* in the British Library. In 1928–29, Eisenstein worked on a similar project. Instead of *Tristan*, Eisenstein superimposed Joyce's *Ulysses* onto *Capital*. The Soviet director planned to use Marx's *Capital* as a "script" for a film that would set in motion a revolutionary stream of consciousness. Eisenstein's intense visual research into *Capital* produced hundreds of pages with images and notes (Vogman 2019). Allegedly, Stalin responded to the *Capital* project with "Eisenstein, are you insane?" (quoted after Vogman 2019, p. 28). Not surprisingly then, the monumental film remained unrealised. From 1932, Eisenstein's notes on *Capital* morphed into *Method* [Metod], another unfinished magnum opus (Vogman 2018).

Marx's dialectical method was at the heart of Eisenstein's research. The problem of value in Marx was sensually transposed to various images, with the aim of instigating a "revaluation through montage" (Vogman 2019, p. 41). For Eisenstein, the "concrete" was a leitmotif in *Capital*. According to Vogman, concreteness was closely linked to Eisenstein's sensual thinking, a method of embodied cognition. In Eisenstein's cinematographic rewriting of Marx, associative chains of concrete elements, attractions, dialectical images, various repetitions and speculative relations formed an eclectic assemblage, a "dance of values." Eisenstein's montage of *Capital* elicits both demontage and metamorphosis.

In light of Eisenstein's *Capital* project, we might attempt to read anew Ilyenkov's *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's "Capital"*. Published in 1960, Ilyenkov's landmark study set out on an equally ambitious reconstruction of Marx's method. Here, Ilyenkov resumed compositional concerns that already occupied him in "Notes on Wagner", where he emphasises the dialectical form of Wagner's music. In a similar vein, Theodor W. Adorno, in "Attempt at Wagner," written between 1937 and 1952, suggested that Wagner's fragmented leitmotifs strive to concretely reenact the atomisation of processes of industrial production and labour (Adorno 1964).

Inspired by Wagner's compositional method, Ilyenkov's *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete* analyses Marx's dialectics. Dialectical logic is described as a universal method of scientific thinking that entwines abstract and concrete, ideal and material. Wagner's "collisions" reverberate once again in Ilyenkov's treatment of contradictions in Marx. Dialectical thinking does not reject contradictions; they are its very motor. As in Wagner's operas, collisions in *Capital* are the "springboard for a decisive leap forward" (Ilyenkov 2008, p. 251). Building up its inner tension, dialectical thought increasingly ascends from the abstract to the concrete. Wagner's symbolism of gold is transubstantiated into Ilyenkov's dance of values.

Wagnerism at the end of history

Ilyenkov's "Notes on Wagner" end on a tragic note: "The world is veiled in darkness. The darkness of helpless despair. The last sparks of the will to life fade away, vanishing without a trace." In Wagner's cosmic Night, Ilyenkov discovers the most terrifying pessimism one can find in music: "Everything dissolves in the realisation of utter hopelessness, giving birth to the highest manifestation of the World Will – the Will to death." The end of everything, Ilyenkov writes, that compels a person to live. In the 1960s, the Golden Age of the Soviet bards, Wagner briefly "gave way on a homemade tape recorder to the songs of Alexander Galich, to whom [Ilyenkov] listened by himself, forced his guests to listen to, and even reprinted (for an unknown purpose) the words of the best Galich songs, many of which he already knew by heart" (Illesh 2019, p. 8).[10] Galich's seven-string Russian guitar briefly replaced Wagner's horns and strings.

While the Soviet Union was under the spell of pop, Ilyenkov experimented with building radios and technical equipment in his free time. Finally, Wagner reappears in Ilyenkov's sci-fi fable *On Idols and Ideals* [Ob idolakh i idealakh], published in 1968:

> Albert Einstein – the founder of the theory of relativity – was a near professional in music, admiring the development of musical forms as a subject with an inherent, deep relationship with the perception of time. He loved Bach and Mozart and disliked Wagner and Richard Strauss. He was drawn to the former for their "harmony" of the musical weight in time. He did not find this in the latter, hearing in "new music" an entirely too nervous, agitated emotionality that prevented man from observing the world in a calm, "objective" view, the same view that was required of him in physics as much as mathematics. (Ilyenkov 2020, p. 432)[11]

For Ilyenkov in 1968, Wagner embodied a Romantic sense of harmony, lost in the cold, "too nervous" age of mechanical reproduction.[12] In the twenty-first century,

[10] Alexander Suvorov recalled how Ilyenkov once performed for him the song "Razmyshlenie o tom, kak pit' na troikh" in 1974.

[11] The quote comes from Trevor Wilson's forthcoming translation of *On Idols and Ideals*. Many thanks to him for sharing his draft with me.

[12] In the same year, the Soviet philosopher and cultorologist Aleksei Losev published an essay on "the problem of Richard Wagner" (Losev 1968; on Losev's Wagnerism, see Raku 2014, pp. 439–450). For

the "Case of Wagner" is still not closed.[13] Against Adorno, Alain Badiou emphasised Wagner's radical logic of rupture and discontinuity that leaves listeners without a final moment of reconciliation (Badiou 2010). Wagner created a new experience of time, shaped by paradox, transience and uncertainty. Badiou interprets Wagner's operas as dialectical compositions that build up differences. In an age obsessed with "ends", Badiou is drawn to Wagner's endings, particularly the finale of the *Ring* cycle, which he reads – very much like Ilyenkov – as a post-revolutionary reflection of Wagner's encounter with Mikhail Bakunin. This revolutionary Wagner, that is also Ilyenkov's, reveals a path out of the end of history. When all is said and done, Wagner's *Zukunftsmusik* invites us into future celebrations.

Declarations

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Losev, Parsifal is "a revolution of the spirit" (quoted after Raku 2014, p. 441). The early Losev was already attracted to Wagner's Romanticism. In the 1950s, similar to Ilyenkov, Losev returned to Wagner's work, aiming to grasp the "real" Wagner (Raku 2014, p. 443). At the same time, Adorno, too, revised his earlier work on Wagner. In a programme note to *Parsifal* (1956) and in the lecture "Wagner's Actuality" (1963), Adorno eventually found new critical potentiality in Wagner's music (Gordon 2016).

[13] Keti Chukhrov has recently read Badiou and Slavoj Žižek's appraisal of Wagner alongside Soviet philosophy. Chukhrov's book opens up another potential discourse, between Ilyenkov's Wagnerism and Mikhail Lifshitz's aesthetics. Arguing against critics of Wagner's "totalitarianism," Chukhrov suggests that Wagner wrote "music of difference and of traumatic deconstruction." Through the lens of Ilyenkov's notion of the ideal, Wagner's work appears as a zone of lack rather than redemption (Chukhrov 2020, p. 261).

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