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7 Soviet legacies and global contexts

Classical music and Russia's cultural statecraft

Elina Viljanen

A YouTube video of Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, went viral in May 2017: while waiting to meet his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the 'One Belt, One Road' forum, Putin performed two Soviet popular songs on a shiny grand piano. 'It's shameful that Putin could not play better', commented a Russian master's student after seeing the video in my class in the Finnish Summer School for Russian Studies. 'He is, after all, the president of Russia'. Indeed, I too wondered: why did the president of Russia choose to play the piano (and poorly!), just before an important summit and in the obvious presence of the international media?

My Russian student's comment suggested that the Soviet concept of *kul'turnost'* (cultured, civilised) has been recycled for contemporary Russia, as the president was expected to offer a more sophisticated performance. Yet, Putin's piano show epitomised how Russian music is part of the soft power politics of the Russian government, a politics that can be understood through the complex societal and political history of Russia's cultural statecraft. Putin's performance offered a mix of something that is popular and folkish and at the same time highly cultured and elitist. The Soviet popular songs 'Gorod nad vol'noĭ Nevoĭ' (also known as 'Vecherniĭ pesnĭa' (The Evening Song, composed in 1963) and 'Moskovskie okna' (Moscow Windows, from 1962) that were played in a salon of the high-profile international summit could be widely recognised, including by a Western audience. However, it is not so well known that these popular songs were composed by two high-ranking Soviet classical composers, Tikhon Khrennikov and Vasili Solvyov-Sedov. It is perhaps even less known that such a clever conjunction of 'high' and 'low' – or, better put, 'popular' – cultural ingredients was one of the central recipes of the Leninist *kul'turnaĭa revoliutsiĭa* (Cultural Revolution) in the 1920s. The goal of that revolution was not only to 'civilise' the citizenry but also to reunify it after the Russian Civil War that took place from 1917 to 1922. Albeit a poor performance, the Putin-grand piano-phenomenon was a product of what I have called the 'Soviet cultural theory of music' (Viljanen, 2020). Yet, the act also had a symbolic meaning in Putin's contemporary ideology of 'state-civilisation', according to which Russia forms its own system of special cultural values (cf. Tsygankov, 2016, p. 146).

In this chapter, I examine cultural statecraft as an interaction and entanglement of these two spheres, the culture of music and the governmental politics of the state in Russia. I argue that classical music as cultural statecraft is embedded in the identity politics of the Russian state. I view classical music as a form of art in general and as a cultural, civilisationalist discourse in particular, a genre through which the Russian state identifies itself as a civilised and sovereign power and promotes its political interests in opposition to the neo-liberal values of the West. Cultural statecraft can thus be perceived as a coordination and organisation of the skills of political agency, in the form of a state organ and its actors seeking to direct national cultural resources and the general theoretical and practical knowhow of culture into political usage.

How, then, has classical music gained a symbolic status in Russia's contemporary civilisational politics, and what does it tell us about Russian soft power and cultural statecraft in general? Russian classical music culture can be characterised by a conservative atmosphere and a continuation of the political conformity of the former Soviet classical music elite in the post-Soviet space (cf. Viljanen, 2017). If we analyse cultural statecraft as a negotiation between state politics and Russian classical music practitioners as an 'interest group', how should we interpret the perceived political conformity of the Russian elite performers? And to what extent is the Russian government a cultural actor itself? By pointing out in the beginning that Putin's performance was itself a product of a popular cultural theory of music, I argue that cultural statecraft is not only based on the state *pretending* to be a cultural actor by its conscious utilisation of (in this case) Russian music as a soft power instrument. As the leading representative of the state, Putin *is* a cultural actor who possesses the ability to utilise cultural knowledge as social capital while pursuing the state's political interests. Russian governmental power identifies itself as a cultural actor, and this identification resonates in the field of classical music.

Likewise, classical music has renegotiated its existence in post-Soviet Russia by parading its important international social and cultural power: the classical music elite makes classical music a politically relevant agency to be promoted. Putin's state-civilisationism is a good example of cultural statecraft, which applies a contemporary transnational intellectual current that also has an extensive cultural history in Russia as a discursive practice. It is important to note how the Soviet cultural theory of classical music became entangled with concepts of Russian civilisationism, not only intellectually as a cultural discourse but also politically, as its espousers were an interest group seeking cultural power in the 1920s. With the cultural theory of music, I do not just refer to the main thesis of the intonation theory (*Intonaitsiia*, 1948, developed between 1916 and 1948) of the Soviet musicologist Boris Asafiev, who maintained that music is a cultural discourse. I also refer to his theory as a highly popular one in Soviet musicology, which constituted various schools of thought, laying down the basis for a Soviet

cultural conception of music and its position in society. The theoretical basis of Soviet music was laid down well before the Stalinist political doctrine of socialist realism emerged in the mid-1930s. Thus, socialist realism mainly explains the political context in which Soviet theories of art and music developed in those years. Classical music gradually became a constituent of a broad and heterogenic discourse of Russian civilisationism during the Stalin era and beyond. As the classic foundation of contemporary Russian musicology, the theory still explains the Russian popular conception of classical music as a symbol of high culturedness (Viljanen, 2017; 2020).

The first section of this chapter looks at soft power and cultural statecraft as theoretical concepts from the point of view of culture and Russian classical music as cultural diplomacy. In the second section, I lay out the theoretical and historical basis for my explanation of why classical music has become an essential soft power tool for Putin's conservative cultural politics. The third section presents a case study on the political meaning of classical music in the context of a Russian performance in Palmyra, Syria. I argue that the conductor of the performance, Valeri Gergiev, continued a Soviet political tradition of music, representing the autonomy of art on the one hand and ethical and educational national responsibilities on the other. Finally, I analyse Russian soft power politics in Palmyra from the point of view of different audiences: the domestic and foreign, in the West as well as in the East.

From Soviet cultural diplomacy to Russia's cultural statecraft

In recent years, the post-Soviet scholarship of Soviet music history has approached cultural diplomacy through Joseph Nye's (e.g. 2004, p. 256) concept of 'soft power' with various explanations. High culture in general and classical music in particular played an important role in Russian cultural diplomacy from the beginning of the Soviet era, with the aims of reducing international tensions, showcasing communist cultural achievements, and promoting national interests in international politics (see, David-Fox, 2012; Ezrahi, 2012; Fairclough, 2013; Mikkonen, 2013; 2019; McDaniel, 2015; Tomoff, 2015; Herrala, 2016; Mikkonen and Suutari, 2016). However, although Nye's concept has its theoretical strengths, its application in relation to Soviet cultural diplomacy or Russian soft power politics also has its problems and weaknesses.

Since the start of Putin's presidency in the 2000s, Russia has reinvigorated its cultural and public diplomacy to re-establish the country's presence in the global arena and improve its international image (Feklyunina, 2008, pp. 605–606). The Kremlin has also come up with its own definition of cultural diplomacy (Klyueva and Mikhaylova, 2017, p. 127). This occurred almost hand in hand with Russia formally introducing its own conception of soft power in 2013 (Sergunin and Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 347). Conceived as tools to counteract the 'propagandistic' efforts of the West, and those

of the United States, in particular, Russian policymakers have viewed cultural diplomacy efforts as an instrument of Russian soft power, capable of advancing their state's influence in the international arena (Klyueva and Mikhaylova, 2017, p. 129). Instead of generating a positive projection of cultural and political attractiveness, Russia has been perceived to be fighting the spread of Western soft power by directly challenging it, by exposing the Western political ethos as being self-contradictory and destructive of traditional values (Slobodchikoff and Davis, 2017, pp. 28, 33). Related to this soft power strategy, it has become customary to talk about a 'conservative turn' in Russian politics since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012.

The crucial problem of Nye's perspective on soft power is the ethnocentricity of his analysis (cf. Fan, 2008). Moreover, defining culture vaguely as 'a set of practices that create meaning for a society', Nye (2008, p. 96) mainly draws from a rather outmoded distinction between high culture (such as literature, art and education, which, according to him, appeals to the elites) and popular culture (which focuses on mass entertainment). However, Stuart Hall's way of understanding culture offers a fundamental challenge to Nye's conception, as Hall views culture as an active participatory agency in relation to politics – something that shapes human experiences, everyday life, social relations, and power.¹ An approach to culture through communication is particularly relevant when we address classical music, since communication has been one of the essential perspectives on music in the modern era. The way music appeared in Russia as a cultural, aesthetic, political, and social discourse, as musicians sought to communicate their existence and interact with culture and society, formed the politics of music.

Post-Soviet scholarship on Soviet soft power politics tends to reduce artists to supporters of power, powerless victims, autonomists, or those actively rewarded for engaging in political activity (Ezrahi, 2012; Tomoff, 2015; Herrala, 2016; Mikkonen, 2019). While these are relevant dimensions of artistic culture and political power, I consider the relationship between music, culture, and politics to be a more complex issue. Direct political motives were often in the background in Soviet times, and the function of cultural exchange benefitted artists and audiences instead of states and political parties, as Simo Mikkonen (2019, p. 10) points out. However, the politics of art (such as national aesthetics and styles of performance) and of the artistic community matter in cultural exchange, even when there is no direct involvement of state politics. As a social activity, music is embedded in a specific socio-political context and loaded with symbolic meanings, which are subsequently interpreted from the point of view of the receiving society, as Emilija Pundziūtė-Gallois (2018, p. 236) underlines. As such, music can also become a means of miscommunication (ibid., p. 238).

Putin's launch of the Russian state as a civilisation, or 'state-civilisation', from 2012, forms the title of the current cultural and historical identification by the state, which has come to stand for openly supporting traditional patriotic cultural values (President of Russia, 2019a). In 2013, Putin

announced that ‘culture is essentially the collected moral and ethical values that form the foundation of national identity, one of the key symbols of Russian statehood and historical continuity, and what unites us with other countries and peoples’ (President of Russia, 2013). The ethical, moral, and international tasks of culture were also emphasised in a presidential decree in April 2014, which stated that ‘the main goals of the state programme are, in particular, realising the potential of Russian culture as a spiritual and moral basis of human and social development, as well as the development of tourism’ (Government of Russia, 2014). An aim of the governmental policy for arts and culture launched in April 2014 was to bring the goals of artistic and cultural institutions closer to the state policies that were promoting the cultural unity and heritage of Russia. In a public conversation with Putin, Vladimir Tolstoy, the president’s advisor on cultural policy, emphasised the role of classical music:

As far as foreign policy goes, you have probably heard from Valery Gergiev, Vladimir Spivakov and many of our other cultural figures about how many provocations take place before their concerts in the West, but how when the concerts are over, audiences of thousands of people give them standing ovations. This is exactly the kind of soft power that should be one of the state’s biggest priorities today, and this is the role that our national culture can play. This will send an important signal to our country and the world that Russia is a nation famed for its great culture and will continue to look for and encourage new talent, especially creative talent

(President of Russia, 2014)

Cultural statecraft can therefore be viewed as a top-down process to the extent that high politics seeks to use culture for the purposes of statecraft. In practice, however, culture brings to political situations its own life as a complex social and historical process, with phenomena that can be approached as political cultures themselves.² To understand the civilising role, meaning, and consequences of the political culture of classical music in Russian culture and politics, we must go back to the arguments that established the basis for Soviet music as a culture, an art form, and an institutionalised scientific discipline.

Civilisationism, the Soviet cultural theory of music and Soviet cultural diplomacy

The origins of the idea of ‘Russian civilisation’ can be found in the eighteenth and 19th-century civilisationism of Francois Guizot, in the Slavophiles’ reaction to Petr Chaadaev’s judgement of Russia lacking an enlightenment, and in Nikolai Danilevski’s scientific model of civilisational development. These were all inspired by European intellectual trends

from the Enlightenment to German Romantic thought (Mjør and Turoma, 2020, pp. 8–11). One of the more modern European sources was Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918), which gained popularity among Soviet intellectuals and Russian emigrant theoreticians, not least because of its Nietzschean romantic pessimism. Spengler's idea of culture (1991, p. 24) as a state of *becoming* into a civilisation – in the sense of a progressive historical narrative – became rooted in the general discourse of the Soviet Cultural Revolution in various ways. Soviet intellectuals working in different fields developed popular variations of it in the 1920s and 1930s, variations which both resembled and served the practical realities of the young state that was building its national identity as a socialist empire. One of the policies for becoming a civilisation was the emergence of campaigns of *kul'turnost'* in the 1920s, based on Lenin's idea of the 'cultivation of civilised behaviour', a method of *Novyi Byt* (new everyday life), and as part of the Cultural Revolution (David-Fox, 2015, p. 105). The concept of *kul'turnost'* gained both Marxist and non-Marxist philosophical formulations in different fields. Musical elites participated in the Cultural Revolution in the 1920s, with its general patriotic mission of educating the new cultural elite and its particular ethical mission of unifying the Russian people after the Civil War. The Cultural Revolution also sought to advance music's own inner goals as a national discourse and secure the continuation of Russian traditions in dialogue with the 'modern' West.

One of the greatest paradoxes of Soviet musical culture during the Stalin era came to be its elitist understanding of culture and 'good' music. Stalin favoured high professionalism in music, which institutionalisation made it also more controllable. Virtuoso classical music displayed the very standards for all music (Frolova-Walker, 2016, p. 201). Along with many representatives of the Soviet professional cultural elite, Asafiev, the father of Soviet musicology, emphasised throughout the 1920s that high art was not to be lowered for its intellectual standards but that people had to be educated to participate in its creation and reception. During the Stalin era, *kul'turnost'* – also musical *kul'turnost'* with specific measures – served not only as a symbol of sophistication but also as a means of promoting the specific cultural values of the government in Russia (cf. Dunham, 1976, p. 22). Although denounced as a fascist by Stalin's regime, Spengler's legacies flourished. For him, high culture was the 'consciousness of one single, colossal organism', which made not only 'the customs, myth, techniques, and art, but also the peoples and classes it incorporates, the bearers of one coherent form language with a unified history' (Spengler cited in Farrenkopf, 2000, pp. 24, 29, 35). The politics of *kul'turnost'* in the Stalinist anti-formalist campaigns (1936–1938, 1947–1948) became part of the Soviet politics of internal control. Using Western avant-garde techniques and popular music (as opposed to Soviet popular music) as a symbol of anti-Soviet and vulgar behaviour, world classics, including Russian 19th-century music with politically updated content and messages, were harnessed as examples

for creating socialist-realist music. In addition, the most general idea of civilisation – that it is composed of constituent elements, or ‘cultures’, which are interwoven with one another – was well-suited to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Soviet territory (cf. Wei, 2011, p. 2).

A father of multi-culturalism, Spengler was also an imperialist, painting a portrait of Western civilisation as superior in producing modernity (Farrenkopf, 2000, p. 24). Accordingly, the Soviet cultural theory of music was openly rooted in modern Western methodologies of music, while it also aimed to reveal the potential and specificities of Russian culture. Soviet musicologists reinterpreted the ideals of the Enlightenment for their own political needs. The historical narrative of intonation theory was anchored in the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, while Ludwig van Beethoven became the symbol of higher-level intellectual and ethical thought, whose legacy was cultivated further in Soviet music in a ‘democratic’ spirit (Asafiev, [1947] 1977, pp. 804–805). Asafiev claimed that, before the Soviet era, Beethoven had not been fully understood. His continuous praise of Beethoven’s ‘symphonism’ (*simfonizm*) was based on an idea of the ‘higher social appointment of music as an art form, which organises the consciousness and gives a particular aspect of knowledge of life’ (Glebov [Asafiev], 1927, pp. 17–32). Soviet music was declared as the vanguard of the deeply humane civilisational discourse of Beethoven, which had apparently gone astray in the West.

Along with its external political life, the Soviet cultural theory of music also affirmed artistic autonomy. Asafiev’s theory brought a double essence of music to Soviet thought. He approached music as an autonomous cultural discourse. The essential part of Asafiev’s philosophy was based on the Western neo-formalism of German musicologist Hermann Kretzschmar, a position according to which music is absolute, but with referential powers. As an emotional form of art symbolising a highly private intellectual sphere of thinking, classical music became seen as a domain in which the style of the performance and the emotional intellect of tone (intonation) were able to awake the subjective imagination of the public, and this act could not be controlled by the authorities. It is interesting how rarely the famous opponent of the Soviet system, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich made political statements. He, like most of the Soviet elite musicians, considered music more powerful than words (Rostropovich, 2005). Displaying his autonomy through music, Rostropovich was nevertheless not forced to emigrate because of his music, but because he supported a writer – Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. That underlines how entangled classical music and politics were.

Whereas *kul’turnost’* became a means of control in domestic politics, the proper *kul’turnost’* produced by Soviet cultural politics was also used as a cultural export. The historian Katerina Clark argues that, since the 1930s, culture – especially literature – became the Soviet secular surrogate for religion and central to the Soviet Union’s claim of international dominance. Soviet literature aimed to create an art, which would form the

builders of socialism and turn them into the true heirs of all of world culture. The Soviet Union built up its imperial culture not in isolation but by appropriating the great tradition of Western Europe (Clark, 2011, pp. 8–10). Clark, though, forgets about Western art music, which had been appropriated for the Soviet audience throughout the 1920s by Soviet musicologists and musicians themselves (Fairclough, 2016, p. 103). Kiril Tomoff (2015, p. 11) argues that a ‘cultural empire’ arose from these bases and that it very much directed the post-Second World War Soviet idea of cultural diplomacy that involved classical music. Classical music became part of the soft power that featured as the *sordino* of Soviet power politics from the 1940s, projecting an image of the Soviet Union as a sophisticated promoter of cultural and artistic excellence. Thus, cultural production was at the heart of the Soviet Union’s imperial ambitions from the start, and the Soviets used both hard and soft power together in this endeavour (Tomoff, 2015). Meri Herrala (2016, p. 88) talks about classical music as a ‘weapon of soft power’: Soviet elite performers ‘could be used to softly *invade* a country through the back door of diplomacy by influencing foreign policy through friendly and receptive audiences before the artistic *occupation* was even noticed’. Having gained a notable social position in the Soviet Union, the traditional classical artistic culture was one of the greatest cultural losers during the immediate post-Soviet years. In the context of the chaos of the market economy, it is understandable that, for many former Soviet artists, the sudden freedom and rapid spread of the new Western popular cultural forms appeared not only as a change for the better but also as a lost secured place in the cultural hierarchy.

Along with civilisationist arguments, the political tradition of *kul’turnost’* has been re-established in contemporary Russia (Viljanen, 2017). The view of classical music as a symbol of *kul’turnost’* forms one of the components of Russian contemporary cultural statecraft that can be viewed as a shared interest for both classical musicians and state politicians. For the musicians, it equates to an achieved social position that was lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union and is now being re-established with the help of state policies. For the politicians, it serves as a vehicle through which the contemporary Russian state gains control over culture and identifies itself in foreign political arenas as a civilisation. Along with the influence of Russia’s own civilisational theoreticians, the post-Soviet political discourse has been influenced by Western concepts and theories. Among them, Samuel Huntington (1996) offered in his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* a radical anti-universalist view of Western civilisation and a controversial reading of post-Cold War world politics. According to him, the West is a declining civilisation, but still able to regroup and redeem its power, if not necessarily its dominance of world politics (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 1999; O’Hagan, 2002, pp. 157, 182; Mjør and Turoma, 2020). Huntington (1993, p. 23) argued that the principal conflict of global politics would occur between nations and groups of different civilisations. Henry Hale and

Marlène Laruelle (2020, p. 591) demonstrate that the Russian state's invocations of 'civilisation' are vague and inconsistent, and the notion is strategically deployed in a highly situational manner. The 'state-civilisation' is among the several notions of civilisation used by state officials when referring to the country's identity: 'Russian authorities use "civilization" as a discursive repertoire to foster feelings of consensus, with the substantive contents emptied or filled in according to circumstance' (ibid.). A central theme of Putin's presidency has been his concern to restore Russia's standing in the world and, for this, he recognises the symbolic value of classical music in forming an image of Russia as a high civilisation (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016, p. 397).

Russian classical musicians in Syria in 2016

On 5 May 2016, conductor Gergiev stood up on the stage of an ancient Roman theatre in Palmyra, which had recently been recaptured by the Syrian army from the fanatical jihadis of ISIL with the help of Russian forces. Gergiev conducted a concert by the Mariinsky Orchestra from St. Petersburg, which performed pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach and two Russian composers from the Soviet era, Sergei Prokofiev and Rodion Shchedrin. The solo in Shchedrin's Quadrille from his opera *Not Love Alone* was played by the cellist Sergei Roldugin, a former rector of the St. Petersburg Conservatory and the artistic director of the St. Petersburg Music House, a federal institution. Not long ago, Roldugin, who is Putin's long-time close friend and his daughter's godfather, was also revealed by the so-called 'Panama Papers' to be a multi-billionaire businessman (see, Harding, 2016a). The concert was accompanied by a live video speech by Putin to celebrate 'the triumph of civilisation over barbarism', and the event was framed as a voluntary initiative of Russia's cultural elite (Plets, 2017, p. 18).

The Syrian Civil War had begun in March 2011 as a civilian unrest largely due to the socioeconomic inequalities in the country, but it quickly escalated into an international war. Russia's direct military intervention on behalf of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime began in September 2015. By collaborating with Assad's regime, Russia was not only setting up a military base in the Middle East but also supporting a long-standing military ally and political client, with an implied message to Western leaders that Russia also has friends who cannot be ousted at will by Western powers. Russia used the Syrian crisis 'as a vehicle for challenging the assumed US monopoly in the Middle East and achieving Russian diplomatic parity with the United States' (Pierini, 2016, pp. 1, 6–8).

On the same evening that Gergiev's concert took place (see, [Figure 7.1](#)), dozens of people were killed in the Kamuna refugee camp established by Turkish non-governmental organisations near Sarmada in northern Syria. It is still a contested matter as to whose bombers were behind the airstrike, but many commentators assumed at the time that the airstrike was committed



Figure 7.1 Russian conductor Gergiev leads a concert in the ancient Roman theatre in Palmyra (Reuters, 2016).

by the Syrian air force backed by Russian forces. Applying the logic of Nye, Russian soft power was seen as a failure by some Western commentators, who criticised Gergiev as a puppet of the Kremlin (Harding, 2016b). In his press release on 5 May 2016, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond condemned the bombing of the refugee camp. According to him, the attack took place against the backdrop of a concert in Palmyra, which was a

tasteless attempt to *distract* attention from the continued suffering of millions of Syrians. It shows that there are no depths to which the regime will not sink. It is time for those with influence over Assad to say enough is enough.

(GOV.UK, 2016)

However, commenting on the Palmyra case, *The Washington Post's* classical music critic Anne Midgette (2017) acknowledged other reactions to Gergiev's concert: 'The message that Russia was not only bringing peace, but high art, was meant to send a clear international signal and it was violently controversial: some saw it as a sign that the Russians had their priorities right'. *The Financial Times's* John Thornhill (2016) noted that 'the maestro Gergiev honoured as a People's Artist of Russia has also become one of the most prominent faces of Kremlin soft power'. When asked about the criticism of his political activism, Gergiev highlighted that his statements had often been misinterpreted in the Western media. While considering Putin to be

one of the few world leaders he has met who understands history and is prepared for the responsibilities of the job, Gergiev dismissed the talk about the relationship between his musical performances and Russian state politics with the comment: ‘It’s easier to find truth in the musical world than in the political world’ (Thornhill, 2016). As the music critic of *The New Yorker* Alex Ross notes (2013): ‘Gergiev wants to have it both ways: he dabbles in politics, yet insists that politics stops at the doors of art.’

If we follow Nye’s theory (2008), according to which non-governmental organisations can function as soft power tools without the direct interference of the state, then already before the strategic conservative turn in Russian politics, classical music functioned as a soft power tool that was promoting a positive image of Russian culture (Slobodchikoff and Davis, 2017, p. 24). As the various cultural organisations lost their governmental support after the collapse of the Soviet Union, institutions like the Mariinsky Theatre and individuals like Gergiev not only profited from agreements with Western theatres but also helped to spread Russian soft power. In 2003, Gergiev was appointed a UNESCO Artist for Peace ‘promoting dialogue between cultures and civilisations’ (UNESCO, Goodwill Ambassadors).³ However, the long history of a world-renowned Russian high culture, including its classical music, has also served direct political goals (Slobodchikoff and Davis, 2017, p. 28). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gergiev and other Russian classical music artists proved to be effective soft power tools to polish Russia’s image and drive national interests. Classical music became part of Russia’s cultural statecraft. This has undermined Gergiev’s image in the West as a promoter of peace and instead posited him as a tool of Putin’s foreign politics, which have not always been favoured by the West.⁴

Beyond the historical timeline outlining the re-embrace of classical music as a part of Russian cultural statecraft, Russia’s own theory of soft power and public diplomacy should be viewed from the perspectives of different audiences. Cultural statecraft forms a larger prism than soft power does to view the connection between foreign and domestic politics. In the context of scholarly political analyses of Putin’s state-civilisationism, it seems unlikely that classical music – perceived as ‘high culture’ – is being used to ‘attract’ the Western world, which is in this case not the primary target of Russian public diplomacy. Instead, Russian officials have aimed to appeal to Russia’s allies and to show the West that the state appears as a notable civilisation.⁵ We can apply the argument of Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin (2015, pp. 348–350) and conclude that the Kremlin’s statecraft does not exclude the use of hard power tools, but that these are actually quite often combined with soft power ones. However, it still seems very unlikely that a classical music concert was designed by Russian political authorities as a *sordino* for the bombing of a refugee camp and was thus an example of Russia’s failed soft power politics, as was the verdict of the British foreign secretary.

In the field of foreign politics, classical music can be read as a soft power tool in the context of the Kremlin's soft power doctrine that has been developing since 2012. At that time, Putin announced that Russia had not been able to gain a respected position in the international community because it had neglected soft power instruments (Sergunin and Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 350). Regarding soft power, he announced:

The promotion of one's own interests and approaches through persuasion and the attraction of empathy (*simpatii*) towards one's own country, based on its achievements not only in the material sphere but also in the spheres of intellect and culture

(*Putin 2012, cited in Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016, p. 398*)

As Anna Velikaya (2018, p. 59) notes, Russian public diplomacy and humanitarian cooperation are focused on the Eurasian region and 'the countries disillusioned with the West, searching for a new joint international agenda, countering Western hegemony on setting universal values (mainly liberal ones)'.

Russian classical music was an apt choice as a soft power tool in Palmyra, if we interpret it in the context of Russian civilisational politics and the Soviet cultural history of Russian music. Gertjan Plets (2017, p. 22) argues that, by strategically mobilising its diplomatic networks through UNESCO in Palmyra, Russia helped Assad's regime out of international isolation, making Moscow a stakeholder in the international restoration of the cultural heritage of Syria and providing it with political capital to reaffirm itself on the international stage. Next to using military power, Russia challenged the global hierarchy of political power through an argument in which classical music serves as a symbol of the high cultural level of Russian civilisation. Classical music is suitable for this aim, since it came to Russia originally from Western Europe and is thus part of a global shared culture; the genre's symbolic status as 'high culture' is also recognised not only in the West but by the most important superpowers, including China. Although the American audience was not the main target, the Russian soft power in Palmyra continued the aims of Soviet cultural diplomacy from the Cold War era, which also sought to prove that Russia is more civilised than other countries in the world.

The choices for Gergiev's music underlined that Russia's 'civilisedness' was a legacy of Soviet culture. Shchedrin and Prokofiev were Soviet composers, whom Gergiev posited next to Bach – one of the most respected composers of the Western world. As the American historian David Schoenbaum (2016) wrote in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, '[Bach]'s chaconne is a pillar of Western civilisation'. The Russian pieces symbolised a civilisation that was challenging the direction of the West by the latter's own 'forgotten logic' of what civilisation is. And, as was the case in Soviet times, the Russian state has also rewarded artists who participate in Russian public diplomacy:

the Russian National Award for outstanding achievements in humanitarian work was given to the still-active composer Shchedrin in 2018 (President of Russia, 2019b).

Furthermore, because of the strong and complex cultural history of classical music in Russia, which is less known among the Western audience, we find another story for Russian soft power politics in the Russian domestic context. As pointed out, during the Soviet era, classical music had a civilisationary mission, and it appeared as a symbol of *kul'turnost'*. In domestic politics, Putin recycles the idea of *kul'turnost'* by positioning classical music artists as cultural authorities – as leaders of the Russian civilisation and bearers of Russian traditions. At the Sochi Olympic Games in 2014, Gergiev was a bearer of the Olympic flag and the conductor of the Russian national anthem. Along with his role in the Mariinsky Theatre, he is also involved with various educational programmes in Russia.

Russia had also adopted Gergiev as its own 'peace dove' even before the concert in Palmyra. His orchestra landed amidst the South-Ossetian War in 2008. When he expressed then in a speech in Tshingvali that music is a symbol of peace, he took a stance for Russian military intervention. Right after the Olympic Games in March 2014, Gergiev, along with many prominent Russian artists, such as pianist Dennis Matsuev, signed a declaration that supported Putin's policies towards Ukraine and the Russian separatists in its eastern regions. In December 2014, opera singer Anna Netrebko donated a cheque of a million roubles to the opera house in Donetsk in the disputed Ukrainian region of the same name, and the world saw a photograph in which she posed with the separatist politician Oleg Tsarov with a flag of *Novorossia* (BBC News, 2014). The Kremlin's cultural statecraft thus not only highlights patriotic and civilisational values in art but also selects artists who share these values. By separating music and politics, Gergiev also recycled the Soviet cultural theory of music's concept of the artistic autonomy of music with a patriotic mission.

How should the conservative turn in contemporary Russian cultural statecraft be interpreted? While various commentators in the international media have described Russia as an 'international conservative power', the scholarship of international politics has critically analysed what this phrase means and whether it actually applies to Russian politics (Robinson, 2020). Both Mark Galeotti (2019) and Paul Robinson (2020) find Russian power more pragmatic than idealistic. Culture, which appears in the form of traditional or conservative ideology, is thus seen by both scholars to be merely playing the role of the rhetoric of Russia soft power politics. Kåre Mjør and Sanna Turoma (2020, p. 6) take a slightly critical view of this approach by arguing that (cultural) ideas should be taken seriously. Specific ideas that are produced by state actors, policymakers and others alike, the authors state, 'may be instrumentalised, but that does not mean that they are haphazardly and randomly chosen and reproduced'. Both perspectives make an important point that can be brought together under the common

denominator of cultural statecraft. What appears as rhetorical conservatism and populism in foreign policy looks like something else from the point of view of Russian domestic politics. In cultural and educational politics, the emerging conservatism – a strong emphasis on patriotic education and a rebuilding of national and state identity in an Orthodox religious framework – represents a not so moderate shift from soft to hard authoritarianism that is reflected in the state’s cultural policy (see, Turoma and Aitamurto, 2016; Turoma, Ratilainen, and Trubina, 2018).

The very task of Putin’s domestic soft power is to utilise culture to produce common values, through patriarchal, authoritarian cultural policies. Various fora have been created to this end in support of the state and its cultural politics. One such forum is the Tavrida National Youth Educational Forum in Crimea. When asked by Alexander Shkolenko, a Tyumen representative of the international Zero Plus International Film Festival,⁶ about the creation of a possible mechanism that would filter mass or pop culture for its negative ‘counter force’ to ‘human values’, Putin replied:

Speaking about censorship, which is what you were talking about, actually, yes, we do have a painful heritage in many areas, and censorship is one of them. On the other hand, the information chaos you have mentioned is a concern for millions of people. Let us do this together, let us think about creating such mechanisms together, and when I say “together” I mean both you and people of other creative professions and the managers of media outlets.

(President of Russia, 2017)

Russian cultural statecraft recognises culture as an active agency, which cannot be wholly controlled. Instead, contemporary Russian cultural statecraft is based on recognition, selection, and negotiation with representatives of culture who seek economic and social support for their cultural visions and values via the state’s policies – and who are likely to become the soft power tools of Russian politics themselves. Gergieiev is one example of this; others include the current *National Project of Culture* (2019–2024) under the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and the criteria and reasoning presented by the National Awards Committee (President of Russia, 2019b). From the point of view of classical music, two important strategies of contemporary Russian cultural statecraft can be pointed out. First, economic incentives (such as state awards and an increase of public funds) are used in domestic cultural politics to attract classical music non-governmental actors to work together with the government to establish common public policies and an ideological narrative that also benefits Russian foreign policy. Russian cultural economist Valentina Muzychuk (2013), who has spoken on behalf of the state’s larger role in funding culture, argues that despite the contradictions of the Soviet period in relation to the state’s support of culture, it is quite

legitimate to speak about path-dependence in a positive way in Russia (Muzychuk, 2013, p. 39; Muzychuk, 2017). The path dependency theory, which emerged in relation to technological development in the 1980s, has reached definitions in different fields and it is popular in Russia. However, Russian political scientist Vladimir Gelman's (2019, p. 185) analysis on Russian politico-economic order takes a critical stance showing that the path-dependence argument appears yet another useful device for the legitimation of the continuity of status quo used in politics to legitimate the continuity of status quo of what he calls as 'bad governance'.

In Russian political discourse, the idea of path dependence goes hand in hand with the arguments about Russia as a 'conservative power', which includes openly leaning on certain traditional cultural values. The path dependency argument goes together with the second important strategy of contemporary Russian cultural statecraft: cultural soft power identifies classical music as part of Russian *kul'turnost'* and grants it a respectable status in the cultural hierarchy. This status attracts musicians and music organisations to become soft power tools themselves. The National Project of Culture is motivated by a patriotic and conservative national identity politics that aspires to 'create conditions for strengthening civic identity based on the spiritual, moral and cultural values of the peoples of the Russian Federation' (Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2020). Thus, while Russian cultural statecraft has Western origins and Soviet legacies, it appropriates concepts and traditions from the point of view of Russia's current political interests.

Conclusions

The Western criticism of contemporary Russian soft power politics reproduces the Cold War discourse of whether Russia is a legitimate carrier of the traditions of Western civilisation. Seeking for recognition as a sovereign power in world politics, Russian cultural statecraft aims to upgrade Russia's image but also to challenge the West, claiming that its culture is truer to the Western traditions. However, the display of Russian classical music civilisationism in Palmyra was not directed just to a Western audience but also to Moscow's allies in the Eurasian space. The notion of Russian civilisation at the intersection of the Western, Islamic, and Asian worlds, as Andrei Tsygankov (2016, p. 55) points out, is designed to appeal to those in Russia who favour the preservation of special ties with various parts of the globe and to those beyond Russia who gravitate towards it due to common historical experiences (and rather than just ethnic bonds). As a tool of domestic politics, Russian state-civilisationism has had a domestic appeal after the trauma of the Soviet collapse, but the civilisational soft power at home follows a different logic and has different results than abroad, testifying to the rise of political paternalism and authoritarianism on the domestic front.

The Soviet cultural theory of music provides a key to view music as an active political agency. Contextualising Asafiev's theory, this chapter has explained how and why classical music became a symbol of the civilised human being during the early Soviet era. The politics of music and state politics became entangled. The Soviet cultural theory of music emerged based on a two-fold identity of Russian music: its artistic autonomy and symbolic value, which originally stemmed from the patriotic ethical and educational national mission of music and a search for its societal recognition. During the Stalin era, classical music was strongly politicised. The political conservatism of classical music can be contextualised in the two-fold identity that produced societal engagement and political entanglement. Finally, by contextualising the current relationship between the classical music elite and the Kremlin in the lost societal position of classical music in the cultural hierarchy and economic catastrophe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, we can understand why notable figures of the genre revived their close relationship with the political elite. However, considering cultural statecraft as a negotiation between political power and culture does not mean that the whole field of classical music has supported Muzychuk's view about the state-supported cultural economy (see, Nemzer, 2005). The elite performers close to the Kremlin have their own political interests in being used as soft power tools for high politics. Another answer to their political cooperation lies in the age-old patriotic mission imprinted on the concept of Russian art itself. The patriotism of art should not necessarily be perceived solely as a sign of converging ideals with the politics of the Kremlin but also as an individual's principled loyalty to the country.

To conclude, classical music culture in Russia has never been just a mere passive victim that political authorities have taken advantage of. The strong emphasis on the autonomy of music present in the Russian cultural theory of music is combined with the national ethical mission of art. Thus, the autonomist position explains the views of artists who participate in politics. Russian classical music culture continues to balance between its own goals to preserve and develop a variety of cultural and aesthetic philosophies that partly grow from intellectual traditions. Russian classical music culture continues to balance between its own goals to preserve and develop a variety of traditional and new cultural and aesthetic philosophies (in dialogue with the modern global music markets) and Russia's contemporary *cultural statecraft*, which secures its economically important social position in the cultural hierarchy. Thus, cultural statecraft is a top-down process as a political aim, as Forsberg and Smith (2016, pp. 129–130) point out. However, a better dialogue between the study of international politics and the intellectual history of Russian culture and art can bring new dimensions to the interpretation of examples of Russia's soft power and cultural statecraft. These dimensions reveal the complex relationship between politics and the Russian intellectual thought of art that draws in many ways on a Soviet legacy – and which has hitherto not at all been understood in the West.

Notes

1. For the relevant perspectives of cultural studies on culture in this chapter, see, Douglas Kellner (2003, p. 2) and David Oswell (2006, p. 4). For Hall's view on active culture, see, James Procter (2004, p. 16).
2. Jan-Erik Lane and Uwe Wagschal (2012, pp. 3–4) use 'political culture' to refer to the 'political consequences' of various cultural phenomena, ranging from ethnicity and religion to secular values and traditions.
3. One of the partners of UNESCO, the Academy for Cultural Diplomacy, has a music program that identifies music as 'a powerful medium through which individuals, communities, and nations can express themselves': The academy maintains that, while music as a 'force for social cohesion can be seen to have emerged together with the earliest musical forms, the use of music to promote political, diplomatic, or societal objectives can be seen to have come to prominence during the Cold War' (Academy for Cultural Diplomacy, 2020).
4. For a standard American perspective on the 'politicisation' of Gergiev's activity, see, Alex Ross (2013).
5. Anna Velikaya, for example, claims that, unlike the public diplomacy of Western states, Russian public diplomacy is not focussed on exporting democracy. Instead, it is aimed at promoting international dialogue and strategic stability among various international players and used mainly for attracting allies and building dialogue with difficult partners. Through its public diplomacy and humanitarian cooperation, Russia promotes the message that the nation-state is the only reliable guarantor of international peace and a stable world order (Velikaya, 2018, p. 39).
6. The festival is focussed on fostering 'a positive, creative and formative worldview in children and young people', strengthening 'traditional common human values', and 'the integration of cinema and education through the formation of a collection of value-oriented films and the carrying out of educational screenings in schools and cultural and social institutions of the Russian Federation' (FESTAGENT, 2020).

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