

Alexander Knaifel

- Biography -

Alexander Knaifel, born on 28 November 1943 as the son of an evacuated Leningrad family in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, returned to Leningrad in 1944 and attended a special music school and later the Conservatory, which he completed in 1967 as a member of the composition class of Boris Arapov, a composition teacher who was particularly open to new tendencies. For a time (1961–63) he studied cello with Mstislav Rostropovich in Moscow. He taught composition at the Leningrad Conservatory from 1967 onwards. From 1970 to 1973 he was an editor for the publishers Sovetskij Kompozitor.

The youngest representative of the Soviet post-war avant-garde, he created a stir in the Russian musical scene, going his own way which included ideas of "instrumental theatre" and aleatorics. In 1987 Jacques Di Vanni considered his formative influences as being of the 2nd Viennese School and also the spirit of Shostakovich with his experimental opera "The Nose," the biting sarcasm of which are also found in Knaifel's opera "The Ghost of Canterville" (after Oscar Wilde, 1965/66). To this extent, his "provocative humour of a dadaistic type [...] shows itself to be related to the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s."

The spectrum of his oeuvre ranges from opera and ballet (*Medea*, 1968/74) to musical actions („choreographic striptease") and sarcastic scenes (*Lenin. Letter to the Members of the Central Committee*, 1969), film music, sonorous-aleatoric chamber compositions for children and religious works: *Like God* for two choirs (Cavriła R. Deržavin, 1985) and *Agnus Dei* for four instruments a cappella (both 1985). He has worked with poetic models including Lermontov, Samuil Marshak and Anna Achmatova, and the 15th String Quartet of Shostakovich in theoretical reflections.

Scenic connections have repeatedly been of importance for his compositional thinking, also in apparently purely instrumental works such as his *Lamento*. This work was inspired by paintings of Tiziano and Rodin and created as music for a choreographic scene "The Penitent Magdalena" in 1967 for the ballet director Leonid Jakobson adapted ten years later, after the latter's death, as an epitaph in his memory for violoncello solo.

Knaifel frequently provides only a structure – albeit a very exact and binding one – while ensemble, selection and sequence of the sections are left to the free discretion of the performer(s), as in *A prima vista* for percussion ensemble (1972).