

## Viktor Suslin

### - Biography -

**Viktor Suslin** was born on 13 June 1942. He belongs to a generation of Russian composers which, as a result of the Second World War, is in fact rather small in numerical terms. Although it has much in common with the prewar generation (Pärt, Gubaidulina, Schnittke, Denisov), there are important and obvious differences. For example, the atmosphere at the conservatories in the first half of the 1960s was quite different to the one which had prevailed a decade earlier. Whereas it would be true to say that the "thaw" initiated by Krushchev was both uncertain and deceptive, it nonetheless led to a flowering of the arts and a greater open-mindedness in cultural life. And it certainly widened the student's horizons. Composers born in the 1930s, such as Volkonsky, Denisov, Silvestrov, Gubaidulina and Schnittke, profited more from the thaw than those who were about ten years younger. The former, who were all about 30, were now able to secure performances of their first important works, and to make a name for themselves abroad.

In this respect life was more difficult for Suslin and his generation. On the one hand he was fortunate enough to have had excellent teachers – he studied composition with Nikolai Peyko, who had previously taught Sofia Gubaidulina, and the piano with the distinguished pianist Anatoly Vedernikov. On the other hand his career as a composer began at the very moment when the political and cultural "thaw" was abruptly terminated by Brezhnev in October 1964. The consequences of this soon became apparent. For example, it proved impossible to obtain an orchestra for his graduation exercise, the piano concerto (1966). Music of this kind suddenly began to be frowned upon. Subsequently, in the 1960s and 1970s, many planned performances of New Music were banned. This policy was applied to Suslin's works just as much as to those of his senior colleagues, and in the end he decided to emigrate.

Suslin's character is lyrical by nature, and not dramatic. His music avoids coarse contrasts and cheap dramaturgical effects, and, although most of his works have a programmatic title, he rejects the use of literary models and what might be called 'musical journalism'. For this reason his music does not fit in with the tradition established by Shostakovich. Although Suslin does not have an unduly long list of works to his credit, his music is characterized by its diversity. He never repeats himself, and, in terms of compositional technique, is quite clearly concerned to impart individuality to each new work. His broadly-based expressive range reaches from ecstatic warmth (*Patience, Leb' wohl, Poco a poco II, In My End is My Beginning*) to fervent meditation and lyricism (*Trio-Sonata, Mitternachtsmusik, Le deuil blanc*), wit and humour (*Sinfonia piccola, Drei Chöre nach Daniil Charms, Gioco appassionato, Terrarium*), and to works with mystical and magical qualities (*Chanson contre raison*). Suslin has never made specific use of texts from the liturgy, though some of his pieces have religious connotations. For example, *Lamento for Organ* is a work which demonstrates that a musical structure can in fact have an intrinsically symbolic meaning.

In his early works Suslin developed a language that is very much his own. He rejected minimalism and the use of polystylistics, basing his music instead on pluralistic material, and not on stylistic pluralism. Perfect consonances coexist with twelve-note complexes, which can be coloured in a large variety of way (for example, structures consisting of concatenations of identical intervals, or the use of major and minor chords within the framework of twelve-note logic), controlled aleatory techniques, microtones which result in a 'non-Euclidean' modality (for example, the resolution of the triton in quarter-tone steps to the perfect fifth or perfect fourth – or the transformation of a large interval into a small one, and vice versa). Furthermore, Suslin's music also demonstrates his

dislike for the all-interval row (with its characteristic statistical entropy) and his preference for unvarying and self-contained symmetrical rows with the smallest possible number of intervals.

Another feature of Suslin's music is that he fails to draw a clear distinction between chamber music and symphonic works. Thus it would be difficult to describe pieces such as the Sonata for Violoncello and Percussion or *Le deuil blanc* as chamber music. Suslin likes to join several movements into a single unit, and is not particularly interested in the dialectics of sonata form. When devising his clear and perceivable structures he sometimes relies on Oriental concepts of form, though this is something the listener hardly ever notices. Suslin's polyphonic technique has nothing in common with academic polyphony or linear twelve-note composition (which is just as academic). In contrast to this, his music often makes use of a very personal kind of layered polyphony consisting of major and minor chords which are impelled by "twelve-note logic".

Suslin also believes that timbre and colour are important structural elements. In this respect his lengthy collaboration with the composers S. Gubaidulina and V. Artyomov in the ASTREYA improvisation ensemble founded in 1975 was of especial significance. For a number of years it gave Suslin the chance to become acquainted with a large number of standard and exotic instruments. In the course of his research he devised new ways of playing percussion and string instruments, and used these techniques for the first time in some of his works. Suslin's works continue to be played in many different countries. Since 1979 they have been performed at contemporary music festivals in Paris, Cologne, Tokyo, London, Salzburg, Lockenhaus, Davos, Zurich, Moscow and St Petersburg. This is partly due to the fact that a number of famous musicians such as Kremer, Geringas, Lyubimov, Grindenko, Tonkha, Pekarsky and Herz have become ardent champions of his music.

Suslin has also directed radio workshops (WDR, NDR), and given masterclasses (for example, at the Mozarteum in Salzburg in 1993, in Èesky Krumlov in the Czech Republic in 1996, and in Avignon 1998).

(Jürgen Köchel)