

Galina Ustvol'skaya

- Biography -

The Russian composer **Galina Ustvol'skaya** was born in Petrograd on 17 June 1919. From 1937 to 1939 she studied at the college attached to the Leningrad Conservatory and then, until 1947, at the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory itself. She subsequently became a postgraduate student and taught composition at the college. Her composition teacher Dmitri Shostakovich, who seldom praised his students, said of her: 'I am convinced that the music of G. I. Ustvol'skaya will achieve worldwide renown, to be valued by all who perceive truth in music to be of paramount importance.' On several occasions Shostakovich supported her in the Union of Soviet Composers against opposition from his colleagues. He sent some of his own as yet unfinished works to Ustvol'skaya, attaching great value to her comments. Some of these pieces even contain quotations from his pupil's compositions; for example, he employed the second theme of the Finale of her clarinet trio throughout the Fifth String Quartet and in the Michelangelo Suite (no. 9). The intimate spiritual and artistic relationship between the two composers resembles that of Schoenberg and Webern.

The music of Galina Ustvol'skaya is not 'avantgarde' in the commonly accepted sense of the word and for this reason was not openly censured in the USSR. However, she was accused of being unwilling to communicate and of 'narrowness' and 'obstinacy'. It is only in the recent past that her critics have begun to realize that these supposed deficiencies are in fact the distinguishing qualities of her music. The composer Boris Tishchenko has aptly compared the 'narrowness' of her style with the concentrated light of a laser beam that is able to pierce through metal.

Galina Ustvol'skaya's works of the 1940s and 1950s sometimes sound as if they had been written today. By remaining uncompromisingly true to herself and her musical ideals she has come to resemble a lonely rocky island in the ocean of twentieth-century compositional trends. Such self-sufficiency and stylistic and aesthetic isolation is probably unique in the music of our time. Her specific idealism is informed by an almost fanatical determination; this should be construed not only as a typically Russian trait, but also – in terms of Dostoyevsky – as a 'St. Petersburgian' one. Ustvol'skaya was evidently the only one of Shostakovich's pupils able to attain to the second cosmic velocity needed to escape from the gravitational field of a 'massive planet' such as Shostakovich. He wrote to her. 'It is not you who are influenced by me; rather, it is I who am influenced by you.' People quote Ustvol'skaya; she does not quote them.

All of Ustvol'skaya's works are large-scaled, in intent, no matter how long they are or how many players are involved. "My music is never chamber music, not even in the case of a solo sonata." The composer sometimes treats the parameter of time in an unconventional manner, thereby suggesting an affinity to Minimal Music. Such a comparison would be incorrect inasmuch as Ustvol'skaya's music is largely based on tension and density. Her tension-laden rests are in no way inferior to those of Anton Webern.

As a rule Galina Ustvol'skaya writes ascetic music, and the notation eschews the use of barlines. This does not betoken indifference or flaccidity. Rather, it leads to remarkably asymmetrical polyphonic combinations supported by an incredible rhythmic drive. Dynamic contrasts are virtually confined to terrace dynamics, with the abrupt juxtaposition of ppppp and fffff. However, Ustvol'skaya's penchant for extremes transpires not only in the dynamics, but also in the choice of unique ensembles (Compositions 1-3, 3rd and 4th Symphonies). The texts she sets to music are aphoristic and condensed.

In Galina Ustvolskaya's music we search in vain for traits that are commonly regarded as 'feminine'. Some of her compositions have religious connotations; this manifests itself in titles or sung liturgical locutions. Their message reveals a severe and independent spirit and an inexorable will – a voice from the 'Black Hole' of Leningrad, the epicentre of communist terror, the city that suffered so terribly the horrors of war.

Viktor Suslin

(Translated by Alfred Clayton)