

Musical Education

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**Elena Malinovskaya: Theatrical and Musical Education
in the Late 1910s–1930s*****Petr N. Gordeev**

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Abstract. The article discusses the views and influence of the prominent figure of the Soviet theater, Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya (1875–1942), on educational institutions in the field of music and theater. The latter included the Theater School of Moscow and one of its successors, the Ballet College, various studios, and the Moscow Conservatory. For many years, Malinovskaya was at the centre of Moscow’s theatrical life, holding various responsible positions: following the October Revolution, she headed Moscow’s state theaters until 1924; for a significant part of this period, she was also the director of the Bolshoi Theater, as well as heading it again from 1930–1935. Thus, Malinovskaya’s legacy included a considerable impact on prominent institutions that taught theatrical and musical arts. The article is the first attempt to study her activities based on archival materials recently introduced into scholarly circulation. It is shown that Malinovskaya’s influence on educational institutions in the field of the performing arts was quite various: if the Ballet Academy fell under her direct control, she could only influence the conservatory indirectly using her extensive network of connections.

Keywords: Bolshoi Theater, Moscow Conservatory, Moscow Academy of Choreography, Theater School of Moscow, Elena Malinovskaya

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Introduction

Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya (1875–1942) held many responsible positions following the October Revolution. Having been appointed Commissar of Moscow Theaters in November 1917, she directed the state (from 1919, “academic”) theaters of Moscow until 1924, for a significant part of this period also being the director of the State Academic Bolshoi Theater. She returned to leadership of the latter in 1930 and remained in this post for an additional five years. In the history of the Bolshoi Theater, the time of her leadership can without hyperbole be referred to as the “Malinovskaya era.” Her authority in the artistic world — and perhaps more importantly, influence among the party elite — concentrated a large amount of power in her hands. When combined with her undoubted passion for the performing arts, questions about her influence both on the theaters she managed and on theater and music education in general become independent research tasks. Although the latter strand has not yet extensively featured in the work of theater historians, the uncovering of new archival materials provide an opportunity to shed some light on it.

“In Such a Way That a Conscious, Cultured Troupe Would Be Nurtured...”

In the first years of her administrative activity in the theaters, Malinovskaya, as far as can be judged, did not have independent views on theatrical education, mainly entrusting this responsibility instead to individual directors and organisers of studios in which the pedagogical and creative processes were combined. One of the most revered figures in the performing arts, Fyodor Komissarzhevsky¹

expressed his disappointment with his work at the Theater of the Moscow Council of Workers’ Deputies (MCWD, formerly the Zimin Opera) in a letter dated 16 December 1918: “We cannot make the Studio dependent on Soviet Opera. One has nothing in common with the other. And if we have anything valuable now, it is only the Studio, which is all in the future, while the Soviet Opera is all in the past.” [1, p. 383] Komissarzhevsky attached to the letter a note to the Board of the MCWD Theater, in which he asked to be relieved of his responsibility for the artistic part of the theater but agreed to participate in the training of new singers: “I will remain in charge of the Studio courses (school), if the Board so desires.” [Ibid.] Malinovskaya, who had been trying for many years to attract Komissarzhevsky to the theatrical institutions she managed, believed in his talent as a director and teacher. She also patronised the Opera Studio of Konstantin Stanislavsky (which opened and existed for the first years at the Bolshoi Theater); while the latter was not an educational institution in the direct sense of the word, a certain pedagogical element associated with the presentation and assimilation of the ideas of the great director was, of course, present in this studio.

During the initial period of Malinovskaya’s administrative activity in the theater sphere, the ballet school demanded more attention. During the first years of the Civil War, the building of the former Imperial Moscow Theater School was occupied by various organisations. It was only towards the end of 1919 that a glimmer of hope arose for its possible return to the world of theater. In December 1919, the management of the Bolshoi Theater (de facto headed

¹ About their relationship, see: [1].

by Malinovskaya, who combined the posts of director of the academic theaters and, from September 1919, “director of administrative affairs” of the Bolshoi Theater; from the same month, Yakov Lunacharsky, the brother of the People’s Commissar, became director of finance and head of the school²) prepared a statement addressed to Anatoly Lunacharsky. Reporting on a rumour that had reached the theater about the departure of the 14th combined evacuation hospital from the school and the intention of the Belostok hospital to take its place, the authors of the appeal noted that it was extremely important “to prevent the occupation of the School for a new hospital” (judging by the note on the document, it was decided to proceed with the application through a family line, i.e. via Yakov Lunacharsky).³ With the resumption of the ballet school’s activities, the pedagogical process in it was reorganised, as Malinovskaya herself would later write, “in such a way that a conscious, cultured troupe would be nurtured in it and the theater would receive artistic material capable of realising the new tasks facing the art of ballet. The delivery of general education subjects was no different from that of second-level schools; in specialised subjects, along with mastering technical skills, particular attention was paid to music, facial expressions, improvisation, and make-up.” [2, p. 74]

In March 1924, Malinovskaya, beset by numerous opponents both inside and outside the Bolshoi Theater, was forced to resign both from her post as its director and from her position as head of the Moscow academic theaters. However, having now become the chief administrator of the “Committee

for Assistance to the Peoples of the Northern Outskirts under the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee,” she continued to closely follow events in the theater department. At the end of 1926, Malinovskaya compiled and sent a detailed note to members of the Soviet government, in which she harshly criticised the activities of her successor (both as director of the Bolshoi Theater and in the Administration of Academic Theaters), Grigory Koloskov. Among other sins of the latter, she noted his attitude towards budding dancers: “The exploitation of the students at the Ballet School is especially outrageous. They replace employees to participate in most ballets and operas. The number of performances a student makes varies from 8 to 12 per month, even reaching 17 times per month. For each performance, 3 rubles 50 kopecks are due; however, this money is not given to the participants in cash but is used to offset the ‘subsidy’ given to the Ballet School.”⁴

In January 1930, Malinovskaya returned to her post as director of the Bolshoi Theater, simultaneously also gaining control of the ballet vocational school. Although she tried to attract outstanding musical figures and teachers to the group she led, such endeavours were not always successful. A draft of Mikhail Gnesin’s response letter to her on this topic on 12 May 1930, which is full of notes and corrections, has been preserved by the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art. Thanking Malinovskaya for the invitation to attend Lunacharsky’s lecture in the Bolshoi Theater building (“I am very interested in the lecture and would certainly come. In recent years, I have often attended lectures and all sorts of meetings organised

² A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theater Museum (SCTM). Fund 154. No. 523. P. 1.

³ Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RSALA). Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 26, pp. 203–303 back side.

⁴ RSALA. Fund 1933. List 1. Portfolio 61. P. 8.

by the theater — for some time I was even a member of the Council”), Gnesin nevertheless resolutely refused it: “But since the theater permitted itself to indulge in the most vile and completely irresponsible mockery of one of the most remarkable artists of our country, one of our few genuinely progressive musical figures, M. A. Bichter, I resolved not to enter into any further relations with this theater — and, in particular, not to accept any ‘pleasantries’ from it. I feel sick even walking past it on the street.”⁵ Gnesin’s complaint, as far as can be understood from the somewhat confused text, was that the “brilliantly gifted musician” Mikhail Bichter was never offered a position as conductor at the theater, despite having counted on it due to his involvement for several months in the production of the opera *Sadko*.⁶ Perhaps Malinovskaya did not think it advisable to engage Bichter due to the musician’s notoriously harsh character. [3, p. 67] One way or another, the failure with Bichter complicated relations between Mikhail Gnesin the Bolshoi Theater — including with Malinovskaya personally.

Attempt to “Conquer” the Conservatory

During the first half of the 1930s, in her restored position heading the Bolshoi Theater, Malinovskaya paid significant attention to the ballet vocational school. However, she also tried to bring the Moscow Conservatory under her control. Ekaterina Vlasova, who discovered the document cited below, draws attention to

the context: Malinovskaya not only wanted to create a personnel reserve for the Bolshoi Theater, but also to “save the Conservatory from the final collapse to which it was led by the actions of members of the Red Professors’ faction and former Production Collective of Student Composers of the Moscow Conservatory (Prokol) members who became leaders of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM).” [4, p. 313] At the end of winter or beginning of spring 1932⁷ Malinovskaya⁸ approached Kliment Voroshilov, one of the leaders of the Government Commission for the Management of the Bolshoi Theater and the Moscow Art Theater, who also held the post of the People’s Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs, with a detailed note on the needs and requirements of the Bolshoi Theater.

Of considerable interest is the section of the note entitled “Training of new personnel.” It begins with a categorical statement: “...it must be said right away that in terms of personnel for the opera, orchestra and chorus, the situation is catastrophic.” The author of the note shared her bitter experience as an employer: “The market for artistic labour is completely exhausted. This is eloquently demonstrated by the fact that the directors and representatives of all major provincial theaters live in Moscow almost without venturing outside the capital. They systematically seek the consent of the Bolshoi Theater management for transfers or tours to the provinces of Bolshoi Theater artists (not only accredited artists,

⁵ Ibid. Fund 2954. List 1. Portfolio 261. P. 1.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 1–1 back side.

⁷ Unfortunately, the note is not dated. On the first page there is a note by Kliment Voroshilov, made on March 7, 1932: “Give it to me in 3–4 days” [Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RSASPH). Fund 74. List 1. Portfolio 394. P. 26].

⁸ Although the document is not signed, Malinovskaya’s authorship can be established based on the consideration that only she, as director of the Bolshoi Theater, could have addressed the Government Commission with a detailed note on the urgent needs of the theater.

but also those occupying an obscure position); more often than not, they surreptitiously go behind the back of management to tempt one or another artist with a high fee, large advances and other tempting promises.” Noting that the even the Bolshoi Theater itself “feels a shortage of workers” and in the current season had even been “forced to invite a number of orchestra artists from Berlin,” Malinovskaya notes that the competitions held periodically “in the opera, orchestra and choir give the most deplorable results: for a number of years, the same people appear at the competitions, who in no way meet the requirements.”

The note also raised the question of the reason for the lack of artistic talent: “It is absolutely impossible to accept that among the working-class and urban working youth there is really such a shortage of musically and vocally gifted people. Therefore, the reasons for the catastrophic situation with young vocal and musical personnel must be sought in the inability to develop these forces and provide them with the necessary qualifications. The collapse of the former Moscow Conservatory, which turns out to have been completely incompetent in the responsible task of training musical and vocal personnel, is creating a complete crisis.” From the sad state of affairs described in this way, the following conclusion followed: “The Bolshoi Theater considers the only way out of the current situation to be the transfer of the former Moscow Conservatory to the jurisdiction of the Bolshoi Theater. This event will also be rational because the teaching staff of the Conservatory is closely connected with the Bolshoi Theater: the majority of the conservatory teachers are either current or former employees of the Bolshoi Theater.” In the event of the transfer of the conservatory to the jurisdiction of the Bolshoi Theater,

the author of the note promised quick positive results: “...it can be confidently guaranteed that its work will be established already in the second year,” and “in 4–5 years it will be possible to release the first replenishment both for the Bolshoi Theater and for other opera houses of the USSR.”⁹

The Battle for the Ballet School

The same note also refers to the Ballet School, at this point being under the control of the director of the Bolshoi Theater, as being certified in completely different terms. “The situation with the training of ballet personnel can currently be considered as favourable. The presence of a ballet vocational school at the Bolshoi Theater ensures the proper organisation of the training of ballet personnel. As a result of the events held this season, the vocational school’s educational and production work has improved significantly,” the note stated. True to the spirit of the times, Malinovskaya calls attention to a dramatic increase in the “working class” among the students at the vocational school: “If in the previous composition of students the children of workers and party members made up 17%, then among the newly admitted they make up 61% (the children of specialists make up 28%, the children of employees 11% of the total number of newly admitted).” The document emphasises that the objectives of the educational institution “have been significantly expanded since the current season: the vocational school’s curriculum is designed to train not only qualified ballet dancers, but also choreographers, directors, and teachers. Special courses have already been opened in the performing and choreography-directing departments. However, it has not yet been possible to open a pedagogical department due

⁹ RSASPH. Fund 74. List 1. Portfolio 394, pp. 32–33.

to a lack of space.” The studies also implied gradual inclusion in the creative process of the Bolshoi Theater, in whose performances the future artists underwent “practical training”: “The review of the results of studies in special subjects will be carried out by staging the ballet *The Nutcracker* by the students and a special performance for May 1st on the theme of the pioneer movement.”

As she had many years before, Malinovskaya continued to consider it important to teach at a high level not only specialised, but also general education subjects. “Educational subjects in the ballet school are taught according to the program of the People’s Commissariat of Education, approved for seven-year schools,” she reported in the same note, linking this to the increased popularity of the vocational school: “...the influx of people wishing to send their children to the vocational school has increased enormously. It is characteristic that parents motivate their persistent requests for admission of their children, in addition to referring to the comparatively good school environment (light, air, food), mainly by the fact that the vocational school provides students, in comparison with other schools, with the most complete development. Indeed, the general education program in the seven-year period is linked in the vocational school with special classes, physical training, music instruction, language study, and socio-political education, carried out not only theoretically, but also through a variety of community work.” The growing interest in the vocational school, it would seem, should have led to the expansion of this educational institution; the note mentions as if in passing that an increase in “the number of students is impossible without freeing the

premises currently occupied by the vocational school by tenants.”¹⁰

Malinovskaya’s note depicts the state of the vocational school in almost idyllic tones; the only problem of the educational institution was, if we are to believe her, the lack of available space in the building it occupied. There were other opinions: at around this time, Malinovskaya was criticised for her ruthless exploitation of future dancers — interestingly, in almost the same terms in which she herself had earlier criticised the actions of Grigory Koloskov. On May 6, 1932, the secretary of the Bolshoi Theater cell of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) Safonov sent Kliment Voroshilov an extensive report on the activities of Malinovskaya and her circle, in which he criticised, among other things, the policy of the theater’s management regarding the use of students from the Ballet College. The latter were involved in the performance of *The Nutcracker*, which was intended as a final production, but for financial reasons was included in the repertoire and began to be staged more often. “There is no doubt that such a decision by the administration should have the most serious impact and is already having an impact on both the health of children and their general education. The curriculum remains the same, but daily rehearsals of *The Nutcracker* drag on until 10 p.m. After the performance, children leave the theater after 11 o’clock with frayed nerves, fatigue, etc.” The author of the note drew the attention of the People’s Commissar to the harm that this brought to the students: “We must not forget that their bodies are still developing, and such a load not only does not bring them any benefit, as the directors of the Ballet Vocational school

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 33–34.

assure us, but threatens to undermine their health, curtail their growth and deter their artistic formation.”¹¹

Clearly conscious of the aspersions he was casting, Safonov wrote: “Some girls of 15–16 years old, who perform their roles very well, feel the danger and are afraid that such work will overwhelm them before they reach the rank of worker of the Bolshoi Theater ballet. The danger is compounded by the fact that many of the students are poorly nourished.” The secretary of the party cell tried to influence the feelings of the high-ranking addressee: “Fatigue and an unchildlike pallor are already clearly visible in the children of the Ballet Vocational school. However, these questions are of little concern to those for whom the success of *The Nutcracker* strengthens their position at the Bolshoi Theater.” Citing as an example of “callous and heartless treatment of children” the case of Golovkina’s student, who became ill while dancing during “women’s days,” Safonov also took a jab at Malinovskaya’s protégé Viktor Semenov, who headed the vocational school: “One can’t help but recall that Semenov was expelled from the Leningrad Ballet School for torturing children. This is what the Chairman of the Regional Department of the Trade Union Rabis¹², Comrade Gorodinsky, assures.”¹³

On 13 May of the same year, 1932, a week after Safonov had compiled his report, both he and Malinovskaya, along with other representatives of the Bolshoi Theater administration, attended a meeting

of the Government Commission for the Management of the Bolshoi Theater and the Moscow Art Theater, which was chaired by the Secretary of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, Abel Yenukidze. It was then decided (probably based on a report from the Bolshoi Theater’s management) to rename the Ballet College into the Choreographic College and to build on the building it occupied on Pushkin Street in view of the “need to develop experimental production work.”¹⁴ The experienced and influential director of the theater withstood the pressure from the secretary of the party cell, which, however, had not ceased even a year later.

Her enemy continued to “hit” the same spot. On June 28, 1933,¹⁵ Malinovskaya wrote to Abel Yenukidze (her patron in the highest spheres of the Soviet apparatus): “The very next day after your departure, Safonov and his friends began an offensive, and the vocational school almost fell apart. But the district committee, i.e. its secretary Andreasyan, after a month realised that we had a squabble and where it was coming from, and everything has ended well for now.” Speaking about the graduating class of that year, whose star was Olga Lepeshinskaya, Malinovskaya, who had long been friends with the family of the artist Vasily Polenov and gradually occupied the “Polenov” places on the Oka for the rest of the Bolshoi Theater employees, wrote: “As a reward for¹⁶, we placed this class in Bekhovo, in 2 rooms, we are infinitely happy.” Justifying the significant

¹¹ The document is signed only by last name. However, Safonov’s initials and position are established based on materials from the Bolshoi Theater’s archival collection: RSALA. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 805. P. 64.

¹² Rabis — is an short abbreviation of “rabotniki iskusstva” [art workers].

¹³ RSASPH. Fund 74. List 1. Portfolio 400, pp. 11–12.

¹⁴ Ibid. Portfolio 396. P. 18.

¹⁵ The document does not indicate the year, but it does talk about the admission of Olga Lepeshinskaya to the troupe and the production of *The Flames of Paris* on the Bolshoi Theater stage — both events took place in 1933.

¹⁶ The word is read tentatively.

expenses (the work on the vocational school building alone required another 150 thousand), Malinovskaya confessed: “I admit our guilt, but we are doing so well, in my opinion, that we deserve leniency.” Finally, she also mentioned the famous estate of the Volkonsky princes near Moscow, which was planned as a place of rest for future dancers: “I inspected Sukhanovo, which you promise to give us for the vocational school, and made arrangements with the Head and N. A. Semashko.” The help of Semashko, whom Malinovskaya had known since her underground work in Nizhny Novgorod in the 1900s, played a role in quickly resolving the issue (“Now we are preparing the place together,” the director of the Bolshoi Theater noted in a letter to Yenukidze).¹⁷

Until the end of her work as director of the Bolshoi Theater (her final resignation took place in January 1935 [5, p. 89]), Malinovskaya continued to manage the vocational school. Thus, on November 21, 1934, she contacted Yenukidze, asking “in connection with the upcoming 125th anniversary of the Choreographic Vocational School of the Bolshoi Theater of the USSR” for “awarding a number of employees.” Yenukidze, reporting this to his fellow commission members (Voroshilov and the People’s Commissar of Education Andrei Bubnov), agreed with Malinovskaya’s petition: “This is a rare anniversary. It is necessary to mark this day by awarding the school employees the titles of Honoured Artists and Honoured Actors, as well as by issuing cash bonuses.”¹⁸ Organising the college’s anniversary was, in all likelihood, Malinovskaya’s last significant undertaking for this educational institution.

Principal and Schools: Results of Interaction

During the years that Malinovskaya spent in leadership positions in the theater department, she had to deal with issues of theater and music education more than once. During the initial period of her work in academic theaters, Malinovskaya only occasionally touched upon issues of training opera singers in her patronisation of the “studio” work of Fyodor Komissarzhevsky. Years later, in 1932, she attempted to take control of the Moscow Conservatory in order to transform it into a forge of creative personnel for the Bolshoi Theater. One can be sure that Malinovskaya’s energy and experience would have had a significant influence on the entire internal structure of this famous musical institution. However, the conservatory was able to defend its independence — and in general Malinovskaya did not gain any significant influence over the education of singers and musicians. The situation was different with the Ballet School, which for many years came under the patronage of the director of the Bolshoi Theater. Malinovskaya monitored both the living conditions in the vocational school (the condition of the building, conditions for recreation, etc.) and the educational process. She attached great importance to teaching not only specialised but also accorded significance to general educational subjects. At all times, she showed an interest in the successes of graduates and developing fledgeling talents, making constant efforts to involve them in the creative work of the theater even at the stage of study. The latter gave rise to accusations of “exploitation” of students, of which, at various times, Malinovskaya was both the author and the target.

¹⁷ RSASPH. Fund 667. List 1. Portfolio 19, pp. 57–59.

¹⁸ Ibid. Fund 74. List 1. Portfolio 394, pp. 161–162.

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