

In Memory of a Colleague

Personalities

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"Star of the Russian Musicological Firmament..." The Milestones of Tamara Levaya's Intellectual Path

Tatiana B. Sidneva

*Glinka Nizhny Novgorod State Conservatoire,
Nizhny Novgorod, Russian Federation,
tbsidneva@yandex.ru[✉], <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7411-6477>*

Abstract. The present article examines the creative path and scholarly ideas of one of the leading Russian musicologists, Doctor of Art History, Tamara Levaya (1938–2025), who for many years headed the Department of Music History at the Glinka Nizhny Novgorod State Conservatoire. The evolution of the scholar's main musicological interests is traced along with examination of the role of the thinkers and teachers who played a decisive role in her professional development. Here special mention is given to Levaya's works on Paul Hindemith, Alexander Scriabin, Dmitry Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, Nikolai Myaskovsky, as well as on the issues of contemporary Russian music as presented through the writings of Valentin Silvestrov, Sergei Berinsky, Giya Kancheli, and Boris Getselev. The important role played by Tamara Levaya in the revival of the works of many forgotten composers (Arthur Lourie, Nikolai Roslavets, etc.) is emphasised. Having educated several generations of musicologists, Tamara Levaya created an independent scientific school based on the organic combination of careful analysis of musical texts and a reliable description of the broad cultural context. The article also considers the validity of using the "star" metaphor in the academic context. Having chosen a quote from the famous scientist Inna Barsova in the title of the article, based on the definition of the broadest research range of Tamara Levaya, comes to the conclusion that this scientist was truly a "star" — both in terms of the scale of her talent and the power of her influence on other researchers. The work of scholars like Levaya, which is commensurate with an entire era, stands as confirmation of the boundlessness of human knowledge.

Keywords: Tamara Levaya, musicology, scholar, scientific school, Russian music

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Introduction

The title of the article is presented in parenthesis due to its referring to a quotation from the outstanding musicologist Inna Barsova, who used these terms in her assessment of the large-scale contribution of Tamara Levaya to contemporary musical scholarship. The metaphor of a “star” is not very typical for the academic world, but in relation to the subject of this article it has been repeatedly pronounced (and even recorded in publications) by a variety of musicians independently of each other and seems not only an acceptable, but also an accurate characterisation. However, putting this quotation in the title of the present work might seem a risky move, since the professor in question was rather modest in terms of realising her “stardom” and tended to react rather ironically to the appellations of “queen” and “Queen Tamara” addressed to her. An additional certain complexity arising in this connection is related to the fact that Tamara Levaya was the present author’s teacher and close colleague. Thus a serious obstacle presents itself in terms of the lack of distance for an objective description of the scale of the activity, much less for creating a holistic portrait of a bright, charismatic personality, gifted with a rare ability to accurately define the subtlest nuances of contemporary intellectual and artistic life.

Indeed, there are topics that are difficult to write about, since they are always in the field of our experiences and thoughts and as such are inseparable from the space of everyday life. “Ontically, what is nearest and known is

ontologically the farthest, the unrecognised and in terms of its ontological meaning constantly overlooked” [1] — a reminder of this truth uttered by Martin Heidegger seems here not only appropriate, but also extremely important, since it testifies to the

need for a careful and detailed study of the immediate environment. It is only in this situation that the dialectic of the momentary and the eternal, the general and the local, is revealed, and abstract ideas and theses acquire a concrete “personified” meaning.

For many years, Professor Tamara Levaya, Doctor of Art History, headed the Department of Music History at the Glinka Nizhny Novgorod State Conservatoire. She is the author of fundamental works, including a joint monograph with Oksana Leontyeva on Paul Hindemith (which remains highly relevant today as the only monograph in Russian on a classical composer of the 20th century), [2] research on Russian musical symbolism, which became the subject of further close attention largely thanks to her works, as well as on the classics of the avant-garde and contemporary music. In 2005, Tamara Levaya became the head of a major scholarly and educational project comprising a textbook on the history of Russian music of the second half of the 20th century, [3] in which she was one of the first to turn to the study of the works of Valentin Silvestrov, Sergei Berinsky and Giya Kancheli. A co-author of academic encyclopedic publications (including *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*), she worked as part of a team of scholars preparing the 150-volume *New Collected Works by D. D. Shostakovich*.



As measured by citation indexes, Levaya is one of the leaders of the Russian art history rankings.

Along with the encyclopedic erudition and intellectual depth of research, it is impossible not to notice another quality of the personality of the scholar — the beauty of her thought. In this connection, we may recall the characteristic definition of Thomas Hobbes: “Beauty is a sign of future good” (quoted from: [4, p. 268]). The main idea of this naive Enlightenment assertion that beauty “gives us grounds for expecting the good” [Ibid.] has been repeatedly scrutinised in subsequent times. Fortunately, the possibility of this harmony is preserved by Nature herself. The example of Levaya is evidence of this, since her appearance, way of life, scholarly and pedagogical attitudes, professional responsibility, remarkable modesty and a kind of girlish reticence express a rare harmony and “magnetism” of personality. The assessment of Svetlana Savenko is highly characteristic: “Tamara attracted people primarily with her appearance. Not only did they follow her with their eyes, but they simply stood frozen in the street, turning to follow her like sunflowers to the sun. <...> At the same time, she was surprisingly lacking, even in microscopic doses, of any narcissism — a perfectly natural quality in a beautiful woman. <...> There was something different in her appearance: dignity, the integrity of a reserved and slightly closed nature. She did not want to feel like a star, she was too smart for that.” [5, p. 6] To this characteristic definition we will add that many colleagues and students called her a “star.” “And this quality ‘stardom’ was only emphasised by the exceptional modesty, noble restraint and charming femininity of her entire appearance.” [6, p. 11] And this created a special, unforgettable image of a rare harmonious integrity of personality.

The Difficult Path to High Scholarship

Levaya’s path to high-level scholarship was not easy and involved overcoming a number of obstacles. Tamara Levaya was born in the Novosibirsk region, in the city of Barabinsk. She does not have childhood photographs, because her family was going through tragic times at that time: shortly before Tamara’s birth, her father fell victim to the Stalinist purges: by the time he was released, he was already a very sick man. The daughters (Tamara and her two sisters) had a hard time due to the harsh Siberian climate and the family was forced by circumstances to move around a lot. Thus Levaya ended up in Gorky, where she graduated from high school with a silver medal, as well as from a music school, whose teachers encouraged her to enrol in a music college. After graduating (having mastered the programme as an external student, in three years) she entered the conservatory, where she studied in 1958–1963 at the historical-theoretical department.

To imagine the atmosphere of the Gorky Conservatory at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, let us turn to the events of those years. In 1959, on the eve of the Khrushchev “thaw,” the Council of Ministers of the USSR adopted a resolution “On the closure of the city of Gorky to visits by foreigners.” In the “closed” city, a unique atmosphere was created, literally imbued with creativity, heuristic enthusiasm, and the spirit of inner freedom. This was the time of the first “Contemporary Music” festivals in the country (held by the Gorky Philharmonic since 1962), in the organisation of which the conservatory’s teachers took an active part. The students published a wall newspaper, *Sinkopa* [Syncopa], which was bold, daring, and open to discussions of avant-garde artistic events in contemporary culture. The atmosphere at the conservatory was full of inspired creativity and a desire to learn new music and

new art. During the classes the students studied the music of “silenced” and banned composers. The unique space of freedom of the “closed” city paradoxically raised a remarkable generation of artists and scholars. Levaya also belonged to this generation.

Her first term paper, which was written under the supervision of Vladimir Tsendrovsky¹ was dedicated to Scriabin. This fact is remarkable since Tamara Levaya would turn to the study of the composer-philosopher’s work many years later: his work would become one of the main focuses of her doctoral dissertation; moreover, in the following years the researcher’s interest would be embodied in ever new and even unexpected turns of this inexhaustible topic. And in 1995, as a member of the Scriabin Society (then headed by the composer’s grand-nephew Alexander Serafimovich Scriabin), she was among the initiators and organisers of the First Scriabin Piano Competition (held in Nizhny Novgorod) and a co-author of a unique publication dedicated to this competition, the *Nizhny Novgorod Scriabin Almanac*, which, among other interesting texts, included the memoirs of Maria Scriabin and Marina Scriabin.

In the specialty class, Tamara Levaya studied with the greatest music scholar and teacher, the founder of the Department of Music History, Daniel Zhitomirsky, who taught at the Gorky Conservatory for quite a long time (from 1955 to 1970) and, by the force of his authority, contributed to strengthening the high status of scholarship at the university. “A professional with a broad profile, combining the talents of a researcher, critic-publicist and teacher, he devoted himself to all these areas of activity with equal interest and temperament.” [7, p. 63] By the time he arrived at the Gorky

Conservatory, Zhitomirsky was already a well-known researcher of the works of Robert Schumann, Dmitry Shostakovich, and foreign music of the 20th century. He was an idol for students; each of his visits to Gorky turned into an intellectual celebration, a kind of “feast” of the spirit. Many years later, Levaya admitted: “...I owe my then and present interest in Shostakovich to him.” [8, p. 33] Her first serious work, written under the guidance of Zhitomirsky, was dedicated to Shostakovich’s piano cycle *24 Preludes and Fugues* op. 87. “One of the most subtle and profound interpreters of his work,” [Ibid.] Zhitomirsky not only influenced the choice of the topic of the student work, but also determined a lasting interest in the composer, to whose work Levaya, along with numerous articles and essays, devoted a monographic study, *Contrasts of the Genre*. [9]

Attached to the manuscript of the coursework “Some Features of D. Shostakovich’s Fugues, Op. 87,” which is kept in the library of the Nizhny Novgorod Conservatory, is a sheet of paper with the typewritten text: “Awarded a certificate from the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education of the USSR.” This student work was created in difficult times, when, as Tamara Levaya noted, “there was a very pressing need to rehabilitate our musical idols, who had only recently been overthrown by the 1948 campaign for their ‘formalistic perversions’.” [8, p. 34] The student took the risk of entering into a dispute with the “official” critical position of some musicologists and consistently (based on a detailed analysis of the themes, voice leading, and the play of tonal and atonal principles of the composer’s polyphonic thinking) proved the enduring

¹ Vladimir Tsendrovsky (1924–2012), professor at the Glinka Nizhny Novgorod State Conservatoire, Honored Artist of the Russian Federation, student of Igor Sposobin, author of research on the harmonic language of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

artistic significance of Shostakovich's opus. It is notable that her focus on the fugues of the cycle was partly due to the fact that "it was the fugues that aroused the critics' dissatisfaction (while the preludes were met with more leniency)." [Ibid.] Probably, to those fighting against formalism, the fugues appeared, in accordance with the 1948 Resolution, as "a violation of the polyphonic, song-based musical structure characteristic of our people."² The intellectual "density" of the fugue genre, along with its non-verbal nature, provided the main grounds for ideological criticism, resulting in accusations against the composer of formalist theorising and leading music towards decline. And the fact that Levaya's work was awarded a federal certificate testifies not only to the students' victory, but also to the larger significance of scholarly work. Indeed, this was one of the important signs of change in the understanding of Shostakovich's work and in the overcoming of the rigidity of ideological censorship, characteristic of the "thaw" period.

It was also under the influence of Zhitomirsky, that Levaya's diploma work also considered Shostakovich's *Ninth Symphony* — a work that experienced a difficult dramatic fate. And once again the student boldly joined in the discussions with "adult" musicologists. However, such polemical pathos did not become decisive in the creation of the diploma text. Here, under the guidance of a master, the author comprehends the semantic versatility and depth of Shostakovich's music to condense serious generalisations about the composer's creative philosophy and style.

A review by the reviewer, Valentina Kholopova, is attached to the manuscript of the thesis. Highly appreciating the graduate student's research, she notes that it is "the most fundamental work on the *Ninth Symphony*. A subtle sense of music, independence of theoretical reasoning, and a good literary style allow us to see in T. Levaya a serious, capable musicologist."³

It would seem that this reviewer's summary provides a logical and standard justification for the final grade of "excellent." However, the special level of the student research is confirmed by a subsequent event of great significance: in a rare case, the text of the diploma work, uncut and practically without editing, was published in a serious scholarly publication *Music and Modernity*. [10]

While still a student, Tamara Levaya taught the history of music — this situation was typical for the more recently established provincial universities. As a result of staff shortages, students were often recruited to teaching positions. Of course, the invaluable pedagogical experience of teaching her peers acquired in "field" conditions became one of the key factors in the further formation of Levaya's own academic and pedagogical school.

Dialectics of Pedagogical Activity and Scholarly Creativity

The graduate of the Gorky Conservatory was immediately (less than a month after receiving her diploma with honours) accepted to the position of senior lecturer in the Department of Music History. It was a time of intense activity:

² Resolution of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on the opera *The Great Friendship* by V. Muradeli dated February 10, 1948.

URL: <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/USSR/music.htm> (accessed: 21.04.2025).

³ Kholopova V. N. Review of T. Levaya's diploma work *The Ninth Symphony of D. Shostakovich*: manuscript. Library of the Glinka Nizhny Novgorod State Conservatoire. 1963. 5 p.

classes with students, conducting educational lectures and concerts, organising (together with Boris Getselev) scholarly conferences with subsequent publication of theses, writing musical-critical essays, as well as entering the newly opened postgraduate programme at her Alma Mater in the class of Daniel Zhitomirsky (1965). In line with the interest in the avant-garde and the latest musical compositions, trips to the *Warsaw Autumn* contemporary music festival became extremely significant. “A unique phenomenon of the artistic life of the second half of the twentieth century,” [11, p. 158] the festival *Warsaw Autumn* became, according to the accurate assessment of Svetlana Savenko, “a stronghold of new music, an ‘exhibition’ of its main achievements.” [Ibid., p. 171] Under seemingly impossible conditions and with insurmountable difficulties, students and teachers of the conservatory of the “closed” city nevertheless made three meaningful and productive trips to the festival.

Concerts of works by 20th century classics, premieres by representatives of the second wave of avant-garde, discussions about new music, acquaintance with foreign-language literature (among them are translations from Polish, carried out jointly with Getselev, of essays by Witold Lutosławski, a two-volume work by Bogusław Schaeffer *Classics of Dodecaphony*, articles in periodicals, etc.) — all this became a source of inspiration for the young generation of Gorky musicians. During these postgraduate years, Levaya also intensively studied the work of Paul Hindemith. In 1974, the Moscow publishing house “Muzyka” published the first fundamental monograph on Hindemith in Russian, which was written by her in collaboration with Leontyeva. And in 1976 (when the research materials on the German classics of the 20th century had already been duly appreciated in the musicological world and the results of the research were firmly established in university courses), Levaya defended her

candidate’s dissertation, *The Instrumental Works of Paul Hindemith* at the Leningrad Institute of Theater, Music and Cinematography.

In the 1970s and 1980s, she wrote extensive articles on Hindemith’s harmony and polyphony, which served as summary texts on his stylistic thinking. Soviet music had also become a significant area of art history studies during these years, whether in public performances, in articles, in lecture courses at the conservatory, or in students’ diploma theses. Indeed, Levaya’s main scholarly interests are focused on the domestic musical culture of the early 20th century. In 1991, the “Muzyka” publishing house published her book *Russian Music of the Early 20th Century in the Artistic Context of the Era*, which she defended at the State Institute of Art Studies as a doctoral dissertation in 1993. This fundamental work became one of the first studies to discuss Russian musical symbolism in a multifaceted manner, at a time when it did not yet have the “necessary rights of citizenship.” [12, p. 15] The author recreates a complete portrait of symbolism as a phenomenon of Russian musical culture, showing the significance of the “density” and “sparseness” of its manifestations. Along with the genius of Scriabin, close attention must be paid to Russian composers who were introduced to symbolism and were in its “magnetic field.” [Ibid.] In this regard, we emphasise the important role played by Levaya in the return from “oblivion” and revival of many forgotten composers — Artur Lourie, Nikolai Roslavets, etc.

The highest scholarly value of this work also lies in its demonstration of the methodology of contextual analysis: different levels of the contextual existence of musical art are presented — *general artistic* (the relationship of music with other types of art), the level of *general cultural dynamics* and the *chronological* level. This provides a means for identifying the internal antinomies of turning points. This methodology is also valuable in the sense that it allows us

to convincingly present the significance of the entire vertical of culture — from everyday life to art. Another important feature of the work is the constant dialogue with researchers of different generations (in the book we encounter an incredible number of names! [13]⁴), which creates a special space for multidimensional discussion of the encountered problems.

An all-pervasive dialogicity became an important hallmark of all of Levaya's scholarly work. In the monographs *Scriabin and the Artistic Searches of the Twentieth Century* (2007) and *The Twentieth Century in the Mirror of Russian Music* (2017), she turns to the names and musical events described in early publications, thereby convincing us of the productivity of returning and rethinking problems. And it is here that another methodological "level" of context is revealed — *research*, reflecting the current level of study of the topic. Typical in this regard is the aforementioned book *The Twentieth Century in the Mirror of Russian Music*, which continues the study of the features of the cultural landscape of the twentieth century through the prism of composer creativity. This book is permeated with the author's dialogue with his previously written research. One of the essays in the book is entitled *Returning to Prometheus*. The method of continuing the germination of previously described ideas allows the author to lead the reader to an even deeper penetration into the miracle of the *Poem of Fire*. The essay ends with a brilliant metaphor "on the birth of seriality from the spirit of synaesthesia." [Ibid., p. 106]

Levaya's research has a solid humanitarian foundation, in the most direct sense of this definition — as a dialectic of "personified" (in Bakhtin's interpretation) and abstract-

logical knowledge, a combination of a deep understanding of specific musical processes with "an exit into society, into related branches of art and culture as a whole." [12, p. 3] This high degree of humanitarianism is directed against the hermeticism and isolationism of "narrow specialisation." It was only natural and logical that Levaya was invited to become the head of a large-scale scholarly and educational project, *History of Russian Music in the Second Half of the 20th Century*, a textbook created by leading Russian musicologists.

At the same time, there is a strong opinion voiced by the students that Levaya's texts are difficult to take notes on, so precise and capacious is her language, and filled with "dense" definitions and subtle metaphors. At the same time, her scholarly style is characterised by a natural lightness and freedom that is almost entirely free of heavy constructions of formulations. This quality has been noticed for a long time, it is no coincidence that the compilers of popular and educational publications invite Levaya as a co-author (it is enough to recall her participation in the creation of the dictionary *Creative Portraits of Composers*, in the compilation of the *Opera Encyclopedic Dictionary*, etc.).

Organically combining encyclopedic universality and depth of research reflection, subtly feeling the living pulsation of music and capable of capturing with a single glance the dynamics of the cultural aura, embarrassed by any praise and high marks, Levaya's state of mind was marked by a consistent intellectual curiosity. In her reports and texts of recent years, the genre of the "double portrait" is tested: Rimsky-Korsakov — Scriabin; Silvestrov — Mozart; Shostakovich — Schnittke. In the same vein, works have been created that present

⁴ The impressively voluminous index of names is, unfortunately, included only in one of Levaya's monographs, *The Twentieth Century in the Mirror of Russian Music*. [13, pp. 412–423]

the “double” view of different composers on a single problem. Here it is worth mentioning her study of Prokofiev and Myaskovsky’s positions on the relationship between the simple and the complex in art. [13] However, Levaya’s most favoured area of activity was music criticism and journalism. This area became a reflection of a fundamental position: the research was convinced that the path to music criticism and journalism lies only through academic musicology. The words of Levaya in one of her recent interviews are characteristic: “The profession of a musicologist covers broad horizons. At the same time, we must remember its basic, holistic nature. And it should not lose its integrity when branching out into separate applied specialisations (which has been actively taking place in recent years). <...> Vladimir Dudin, Georgy Kovalevsky from St. Petersburg are wonderful journalists, although they graduated from our conservatory in the traditional musicological format.” [14, p. 44]

The image of any university is determined by individuals who not only honestly and responsibly fulfil their professional duties, but also influence the general atmosphere, environment, state of mind, feelings and thoughts with their entire existence. For Nizhny Novgorod conservatory scholarship, the following figures were symbolic at various times: Igor Sposobin, who set an example of principled criticism toward the position of “dogmatically-minded musicologists” and boldly challenged the “fighters” against formalism; the eminent scholar Daniel Zhitomirsky; the outstanding educator Vladimir Tsendrovsky, who was called the “conscience of the conservatory”; the legendary lecturer and educator Valentina Blinova; and the nationally renowned teachers and musicologists Oleg

Sokolov, Mikhail Pekelis, and Oleg Eiges. In the constellation of names of music scholars who created the ground for the self-determination of Nizhny Novgorod musicology, there are “stars” — those who were nurtured by this soil determine the appearance of musicology in our university to this day. This is how Tamara Levaya can best be described in terms of her role in strengthening the position of the Nizhny Novgorod academic school.

It is interesting that in the anniversary book created in honour of Levaya, the most famous representatives of the academic world originally and in their own way formulated recognition of the musicologist’s uniqueness. And the leitmotif of the book was the metaphor of “star,” so uncharacteristic and rare for science...

A large, interesting and difficult to describe topic is “Tamara Levaya — Boris Getselev.” This topic cannot be ignored, since without it it is impossible to create a complete portrait of Levaya. The history of artistic creativity knows many stories where individuals are closely connected not only by their personal lives but also through collaboration in creative or professional work.

The composer, who is described as “the embodiment of sunlight and powerful musical talent,” [15, p. 9]⁵ and the musicologist, who acquired the significance of a recognised “symbol of Nizhny Novgorod musical scholarship” [Ibid., p. 5] formed a family union that lasted more than half a century in which there were no boundaries between everyday and professional life. Indeed, according to the original conception of human life, family and creative union are one and the same. Tamara Levaya was assigned the most difficult role of assistant, inspiration for the composer’s creativity, co-author of many articles and essays, ideologist of large-scale scholarly and

⁵ Words by Arkady Klimovitsky.

artistic projects of the conservatory (among them — *Art of the 20th Century, Pictures at an Exhibition*, and many others). This is a mission that has not yet been adequately defined. After Boris Getselev passed away in 2021, Tamara Nikolaevna worked hard to systematise the composer's archive, wrote research essays on his works, and, in collaboration with colleagues, completed the voluminous work *Music as a Way of Life*. And at the same time, she continued to discover new secrets of the works of Scriabin, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Schnittke and other composers, delicately, precisely and subtly “debunking” the illusion of the exhaustion of well-known and even “textbook” themes.

Conclusion

At the beginning of 2025, following the death of Tamara Levaya, many publications appeared to celebrate her highly significant role in Russian musicology. Along with emotional responses that inevitably testify to the bitterness of loss, texts have been published in the academic press that reflect the highest appreciation of the scholar's legacy. [5; 6]

The words “star,” “little star,” said about Tamara Levaya and mentioned at the beginning of this article, did not leave me with a contradictory state (confidence and doubt about the appropriateness of using these definitions). But after some time, when this unique person was no longer with us, in Boris Getselev's 2005 book it was possible to find a characteristic reflection on the phenomenon of the star: “If we discard the vulgar advertising aspect of this comparison, then, perhaps, it is not accidental. To see a star, a person must turn their gaze upward, detached from the mortal vanity of earthly concerns, and by doing so will think again and again about the greatness of the universe, about the many unsolved mysteries of the universe, about the limitlessness of human knowledge. Isn't this the goal of art: to awaken the best, the highest in man, to reveal in him those qualities of which he may not even suspect, to arouse an irresistible desire for perfection and improvement, without which a spiritually filled life is unthinkable?” [16, p. 187] And indeed, the greatest fortune of life is to meet such a star on your path.

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Information about the author:

Tatiana B. Sidneva — Dr. Sci. (Culturology), Professor, Vice-Rector for Scholarly Work, Head of the Department of Philosophy and Aesthetics, Glinka Nizhny Novgorod State Conservatoire, Nizhny Novgorod, Russian Federation.

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