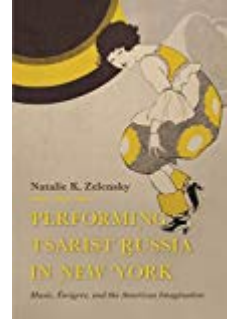


Natalie K. Zelensky. *Performing Tsarist Russia in New York: Music, Émigrés, and the American Imagination.* Russian Music Studies Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. Illustrations. xiii + 235 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-04118-0.



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The book's metaphoric title alerts readers to its central theme: the Russian émigrés who left Russia after the Bolshevik revolution and the civil war used music to enact an image of Russia they not only wanted to remember but also wanted to share with future generations of Russians and non-Russians. To call this a performance without an audience would be untrue, although it is not necessarily an audience that sits in front of a stage and watches and listens. This audience consists of New Yorkers, of the first wave of the Russian diaspora and its descendants. Natalie K. Zelensky opens her densely researched book with a personal reflection about her interest in the question of emigration, with a discussion of research on emigration patterns, not exclusively Russian, and questions she proposes to answer: How did music define the first wave of Russian emigrants? How did the repertoire change from the beginning to later waves and how did these changes reflect migratory patterns? She also rightfully asks how the chosen and settled site of migration contributed to the shape of its musical culture. In this case, the

chosen site was New York City, Harlem in particular, and Christ the Savior Church and its parish, and the period of emigration continued beyond World War II until the present century. This time frame, she explains, is unique to her analysis, as is her focus on musical practices or “musicking,” a term she borrows from Christopher Small (pp. 9-10).

The book has five chapters, moving chronologically but also thematically as the primary cultural events and individuals change over time. Of particular interest in the first chapter is her identification of key philanthropists who were not necessarily émigrés but were key financial supporters of the church and parish. Some of these supporters were performers as well, but the philanthropy of others can be traced to other cultural events that had Russian themes, demonstrating what might almost be thought of as a philanthropic diaspora (Zelensky does not call it this but the connections shed important light on this period). The first chapter also raises the question of differences between the stylized singing of folk songs by these

emigrants and the Russian traditional manner. Connections did exist to authentic Russian styles, but what did the ordinary émigré listener perceive? Zelensky wants us to accept the role of exile art (not exiles) in creating a collectively imagined past and the role of performance in bringing this mythologized homeland to life. Her argument is carefully and convincingly made and is returned to in the final chapter of the book, but for the reader who cannot experience this, we can only rely on our trust in Zelensky's argument.

Chapter 2 focuses on the arrival of Nikita Balieff and his vaudeville theater, the *Chauve-Souris* (French for *Letuchaia mysh'* in Russian or Flying Bat in English) in 1922. Although performed in Russian, and the first season consisting of one skit played each night, it was still quite popular and played a key role in initiating a Russian vogue that involved fashion, food and drink, and music. This Russian vogue, although it did not ignore a quality of exotic otherness, was rooted in the prerevolutionary culture and the idea of a lost nation; in short, this was a Russianness that was shaped by the émigrés, Americans, and performances in the *Chauve-Souris*, to which one might add the role of the sheet music published by the Harms music publishing company. This combination of sources, creating an image of Russia that may not have been either true or false, points to an intriguing place for advertising and publishing that may have been more substantial than the role played by Harms. One wishes for more development of this theme and more examples of the stage sets and covers of the music, but I speak here not as a musicologist but as an art historian. To be fair, Zelensky is not dedicated to an art historical analysis of the work done for Balieff but uses the *Chauve-Souris* to demonstrate the popularity of things Russian, albeit modified not only by the émigrés but also by American fashions. This chapter, perhaps the richest of all in pulling together a variety of trends, including the jazz vogue in Russia and in New York City, might also be faulted for packing so much into a chapter that could easily have been a complete

book in itself with more detail and exploration of the various versions of the Russian vogue and the contributions of Balieff. As it stands, each sentence references important figures and developments, climaxing in the middle of the chapter with a statement about the way this cultural sharing, which occurred long before serious attempts at cultural diplomacy were made in the 1950s and '60s, hinted at "the possibility of Russian-American dialogue through the swinging beats of jazz" (p. 86). The chapter proceeds to discuss the auto-orientalism of the émigrés and the development of an image that might be thought of as the Russian gypsy in musical language.

As this summary can only suggest, the book is rich with examples and hypotheses about the evolving image of Russia in both the eyes of the émigré population and the city in which they settled. The introduction and first two chapters occupy about half the book and less than half of the twentieth century. Chapter 2 perhaps epitomizes an unexpected complication of the book's subject, the development of an image of the émigré. Zelensky is a musicologist and naturally centralizes the role of music in this process, but in this chapter so many additional aspects of the communal image come into play and unfortunately they are not all addressed with the same depth or insight as the role of music. This may be more or less frustrating to readers, depending on their backgrounds. Whereas other reviewers have pointed to the potential benefit of having a website of recordings to associate with the book's content, I would add that image reproductions would also be invaluable. Still, it would be a loss for the non-musicologist to avoid reading this rich book.

The third chapter focuses on a significant change in the goals of the émigré community: preservation of the culture that had been assaulted by the Soviet regime. This period is one in which the émigré population includes children of the first wave, a new and later population to be called the second wave, and the beginning of seeing New

York City rather than Paris as the cultural capital of the Russian emigration. Zelensky here focuses on the use of music to establish and negotiate boundaries between the various waves' images of Russia and in the discourse concerning the definition and themes of "True Russia." To be sure, this role of music is not unique to the Russian situation and affects other émigré communities as well. Yet it is difficult to know how best to accommodate those readers who may not be familiar with the music she writes about. Perhaps the problem is not that we cannot hear the music but that more detailed description is needed. Song titles are not always sufficient.

In the introduction, Zelensky informs the reader that unlike existing studies of the Russian émigré community, she does not stop with World War II but continues to study the émigré community following the war. In the fourth chapter, she turns her attention to Vernon Duke and Radio Liberty and the creation and communication of a Russian voice that, unlike the Voice of America, speaks for the diaspora and is not the voice of the Soviet government. Chapter 5 moves into the twenty-first century, when Russian Harlem no longer exists and most of the musical leaders of the émigré community are remembered only in their recordings or in books. The focus of this chapter is dance and Russian balls in New York City. This chapter ties together various strands from the beginning to the end of the book, including the author's personal involvement in exploring this history. We meet again the Russian gypsy, the exotic other, the role of folk costumes and carnival, and finally, the role of the ball itself as it contributes to the creation and representation of an imagined past. Most of us can visualize the kinetics of Russian dancing but how we would love to watch a video segment of one of these balls as we approach the conclusion of the book.

This book dissects the meaning and creation of émigré communities through music, a topic that is probably less studied than others. It is detailed

and well researched, offering new ways to think about the Russian diaspora in New York City, as well as any other diasporic community, and raising questions not only about how music performs the role of creating identity but also about how it does this in conjunction with other arts. No art has truly been ignored by Zelensky, if, at times, we may wish for more about some of the others. It is not a criticism so much as a recognition of how much she has opened up to say that one wishes for more in many respects: more about the parallel art forms in Russia at the same time as we encounter them in New York, more about the visual arts, and more about the actual performance, not only of music but of theater as well. Of course, I am not a musicologist and therefore cannot judge her discussion of music so much as her use of concepts that are broader than the discipline of musicology and enlighten anyone with an interest in Russian culture, especially when that culture is not in Russia. In this, she is very successful. A small quibble but not enough to prevent reading the book is that the transliteration is not always correct, and this can be a distraction to readers who are familiar with Russian.

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