THE DEVELOPMENT OF JAZZ IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION: AN INTERVIEW WITH VICTOR LEBEDEV

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This interview took place on May 29, 1991, at the Institute of Culture in St. Petersburg, Russia (formerly Leningrad, USSR).

Mr. Lebedev is a well-known and respected composer of operatic works and music for orchestra and film. He is head of the Department of Conductors of Variety Music and Orchestras at the State Institute of Cultural Education in St. Petersburg, Russia. He is also a fine jazz pianist and has a firm grasp of the historical development of jazz in the United States.

Professor Lebedev was a guest lecturer in the Jazz Studies Department at the Oberlin Conservatory during the spring semester of 1991. Subsequently, he invited Jack Wilkins (assistant professor of Jazz Studies at Oberlin) and me to perform, present master classes, and observe the pedagogical methods employed at the Institute. The students and faculty at the Institute are intensely involved and seriously interested in improvised music and are, despite some limitations in terms of books, scores, recordings, and such, developing a program of quality.

Logan: Victor, it has been said that jazz began in the Soviet Union about the same time that it began in the United States. In your estimation, is this true?

Lebedev: No. This is not true. There was a gap when jazz was first heard in Russia and the time when it began to develop.

Logan: What year are we talking about? When was it first heard?

Lebedev: Jazz as a trend began to develop in the late 1950s. Before that, there existed some groups which were called, here, jazz bands, but they

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were not actually jazz bands. They played all varieties of music, light music, and they used tunes by Soviet composers, and they were arranged so that they [resembled] jazz to some extent, but this was not real jazz.

Logan: Who were some of the earliest jazz artists, and how did they gain access to the music?
Lebedev: At first these groups, these bands, were headed by and got the names of some people like Leonid Utyosov [a composer who worked in this field], but, of course, there were people who stood behind who did the musical part, who made the arrangements. In the 1930s there were such popular figures as Skomorovsky and Tsfasman [pianist and composer, respectively] who conducted these bands.

Logan: Was there a kind of parallel development in Moscow as compared to Leningrad?
Lebedev: Yes, it was parallel, but after the 1950s, jazz developed in an interesting way in the Baltic republics.

Logan: Why?
Lebedev: Because Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were always West-oriented, and the music that came from the West found a lively response there. But later, interesting jazz men appeared in many republics—in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and even Uzbekistan.

Logan: What were the early groups like in terms of instrumentation?
Lebedev: Those were big orchestras, symphonic jazz.

Logan: Did they have saxophones, strings, trombones, trumpets, etc.?
Lebedev: Five saxophones, four trombones, four trumpets . . .

Logan: And the rhythm section consisted of?
Lebedev: Drums and percussion.

Logan: No piano, guitar, and bass?
Lebedev: Of course there was a contrabass and a pianist, who did many solo parts in the [style] of the 1930s.

Logan: How about strings?
Lebedev: Five stands of first violins, four [stands] of second violins, three [stands] of violas, two stands of celli. The bassist played pizzicato and arco.

Logan: What was the government's position regarding this music, if any?
Lebedev: It didn't interfere, as in these years jazz was not real jazz, but just some music for entertainment, dance music. But at the end of the 1940s jazz began to be persecuted, and people who did jazz began to be persecuted too. At the beginning of the 1950s was the worst time for the people who tried to play jazz, and any student could even be expelled and teachers fired from the conservatories if they did it. Jazz was regarded as an agent for the enemy's ideology.

Logan: What were your early experiences with jazz?
Lebedev: There was a film, *Sun Valley Serenade* with Glenn Miller, and [we] heard the music, and this gave [us] an impulse. And then [we] began listening to the Finnish radio, because it was impossible to catch anything else, and [we] heard an hour program of the later development of American jazz. This was the time when many of our musicians came to know jazz, and then [we] began to listen to all the programs by Willis Conover [on Radio Free Europe]. And that is the way [we] came to know Charlie Parker, George Shearing, Stan Kenton, Gillespie, Bill Evans, Errol Garner. . . . [We] knew all the wonderful American jazz men. There were no disks. [We] used X-ray negatives to tape jazz because [we] had nothing else to put it on. (Laughter) And that was called "deep on the ribs." (Much laughter!) They didn't last long. You could only play it five to ten times and [we] passed it on.

Logan: What was it played on, a disk machine?
Lebedev: Yes, a mechanical phonograph. The first tape machines appeared in 1953 or 1954, and then [we] began to tape. But then came the time of Khrushchev's so-called liberal period, though it came a little later in the field of music, but little by little [we] began to get more information.

Like most of my colleagues, I began to play jazz before [entering] the [Leningrad] conservatory. [We] had some small ensembles at the conservatory quarters. Each group had its favorite trend, and my favorite was cool.

Logan: Cool jazz of the fifties?
Lebedev: Yes.

Logan: So when we speak of conservatory quarters, we are talking about a dormitory or a hostel?
Lebedev: We played in the cultural centers, we call them palaces of culture and houses of culture.

Logan: But certainly not the Leningrad Conservatory.
Lebedev: But not at the Conservatory. The first jazz concert at the Conservatory itself was held in 1960.

Logan: What group played at that concert?
Lebedev: I played piano and there was a bass, guitar, and vibraphone, and we tried to imitate Lionel Hampton, John Lewis, and the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Logan: So you're saying that students actually played the first concert?
Lebedev: Yes.

Logan: What was the reaction from the faculty?
Lebedev: The audience consisted of students; teachers didn't, or very few teachers, came to our concert. The academic circles regarded jazz as something like the Gypsies singing. They considered it to be something second rate.

Logan: And that is the way that Gypsy music is considered in this culture, to be something that is second rate?
Lebedev: No, not now! Now, even the composers working in classical music sometimes write something and some part of their classical works is written in a jazz style, for example, Rodion Shchedrin wrote part of his classical concert in the style of Errol Garner; and Gennadi Rozhdestvensky, who is a conductor and normally works in classical music, plays jazz when we play together on two pianos.

Logan: Were you familiar with early jazz styles such as ragtime, worksongs, and New Orleans [jazz] from the very beginning?
Lebedev: Yes. Our interest was really serious, and we knew ragtime, blues, and New Orleans from the beginning.

Logan: Would you describe your official title at the Institute of Culture and describe your efforts in setting up a jazz program there?
Lebedev: Professor and head of the Department of Conductors of Variety Music and Orchestras. It was in the atmosphere already, the necessity to develop this trend of music and to take it up seriously somewhere, at some school. And of course, my being a world-known composer, writing for the cinema and for the theater, helped to organize this depart-

ment at our Institute. The best musicians were invited here to teach the students, and they work here and help me. This happened four years ago, in 1987. At first they had two years of an extramural or correspondence department, and now we have first- and second-year students in a five-year program. They get a diploma of "Conductor of Variety Music Orchestras or Ensembles."

Logan: Why is not such a program housed at the Leningrad Conservatory?
Lebedev: They will probably come to that. First, there are some technical difficulties: they lack equipment and classroom space. Second, they are still skeptical of the stylistics and they think that there should not be higher education in this kind of music, that probably it should be done at another level, not in higher school. Things are changing now, but still they are coming to it because composers are writing in this style and their musicians [the Conservatory's are] playing different instruments, take part in various jazz bands and ensembles. So, in the Soviet Union there are only two departments training musicians in this style: that is our Institute and the Gnesiny Institute in Moscow.

Logan: What are the specific courses that are taught here?
Lebedev: Classical harmony and the history of classical music, but it is not our department that is responsible for these courses. Our department [teaches] improvisation, composition, solfege, harmony, class ensemble, class orchestra, classes in saxophone, trumpet, trombone, guitar, voice, piano, all of the instruments, arranging . . . all of them must be proficient at the piano for arranging.

Logan: What are the employment opportunities for students after completing the program?
Lebedev: [For] orchestra conductors, work as orchestrators for the cinema and the theater, work in T.V. and radio. The situation is probably different in Moscow than in Leningrad.

Logan: In what way?
Lebedev: We have more professional musicians than in the rest of the country. But on the other hand, all of the work is being done in Moscow and Leningrad, and that is why these two cities attract musicians from all over the country.

Logan: Victor, is there anything that you might wish to add that I might not have covered?
Lebedev: There were some problems, as we started from zero. Teachers

had to bring their scores with them to teach the students, and we still have very few textbooks and aids. What we want to do is to oppose this wave of rather low quality music, the kind of rock music we have everywhere, and to show the younger generation what real music is like, to attract them to this kind of music.

We think that it is important to develop all [jazz] styles, and if we see that a person is interested in Russian folk music but he or she does it in such a way that it may be regarded as a variety of jazz, then we help them to develop it.

Of course, it is important to know all the existing trends in the history of jazz, ragtime, blues . . . and to be able to do it very well, but a real musician starts when he has a personality, and that is what I am struggling for, to make it visible. It is about the same as the Russian music of the first half of the nineteenth century [with respect to] European classical music: we have to learn to be professionals. When Glinka and Rimsky-Korsakov became professional composers, this was the time of the development of the musical culture in Russia, and now we have learned, beginning from the 1950s we have to learn jazz culture.