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Can the Post-Soviet Play? An Analysis of the Cultural Power Relations of Europe

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Introduction

On the 7th of November 2023, I went to see Dutch conductor Raymond Janssen live in concert, where the well-known Carmina Burana would be played. When I arrived at the concert, I read an information pamphlet and realized that all the soloists that would play that evening were from Moldova, accompanied by an orchestra and choir from the Ukraine. Having studied classical music at conservatories in both the Netherlands and Bosnia for five years, I was surprised and slightly ashamed that I hadn't heard of these musicians, who together constitute the National Choir of the Ukraine (Dumka) and the highly esteemed International Symphony Orchestra of Lviv. Reviewing the pamphlet further, I read that Raymond Janssen had brought all these musicians to the Netherlands himself, due to his passion for connecting the 'East' and the 'West'. He described Eastern Europe as having its own preserved musical tradition that he wished to share with the Netherlands and the rest of Western Europe. Raymond Janssen has started the company Cadenza European Productions, which seeks to show Western Europe that the East can also play. Though this is in itself a noble goal, there are many biases and assumptions that precede the action of 'showing the West that the East can play'. As such, in this paper I ask the question: How does the work of Dutch conductor Raymond Janssen reflect existing power relations between Western Europe and the Post-Soviet pace? To answer this, I consider the cultural-political position that the Post-Soviet finds itself in, examining both the influence of Russia and the intervention of the EU. I then perform a case study of Raymond Janssen and his company through a content analysis of the above-described concert's information pamphlet, and Raymond Janssen's own site. This analysis will utilize a post-colonial framework.

The field of classical music is not one that is immediately related to the field of international relations, especially not in a post-colonial context. Wallach & Clinton (2019) point out that it wasn't until the end of the 20th century that (ethno)musicologists started to pay attention to the influence of colonization in the musical field. Even then, these analyses focus solely on the overseas European colonies, not on the Post-Soviet space. Valenza (2022, 2023) has broadly researched the cultural diplomacy of Russia and the EU but does not focus specifically on the musical arts. As such, this study wishes to add to the relatively small scholarship of the musical cultural relations between the EU and the Post-Soviet space. Additionally,

this study presents high social relevance in the Western classical music scene, which has not yet faced its colonial foundation and discriminatory practices. In the Netherlands, it has only been in the last few years that a conversation about these problems has arisen, which means there are very widespread and problematic biases against non-Western, non-White classical musicians, even (or maybe especially) in the most elitist classical institutions (Sanders, 2022). There is a need to start looking critically at how the EUropean identity is created, how exclusionary practices are maintained, and how these issues can be resolved. This paper aims to initiate a start of this conversation.

The Struggle of the Soviet Cultures

To understand the position of Post-Soviet countries in the context of music production, it is of great importance to discuss the historical circumstances that led to the situation that is presently at hand. When analyzing the cultures of Post-Soviet countries, the history of oppression by the totalitarian Soviet regime must be taken into consideration. The forced repression of cultural tradition under Russian rule (Frolova-Walker, 1998), the violent persecution of artists during the height of Stalin's regime (Fitzpatrick, 1992), and the importance of cultural diplomacy during the cold war (Schmelz, 2016) are all closely related to the position of East European artists in the current political environment. Within the scope of this paper, however, it would be impossible to discuss this all in detail. As such, I will try to provide a concise overview of the strain under which the Post-Soviet cultural scene was created.

Though many might believe the repression of culture started during the Stalinist regime, the Russian Empire had already pressed its imprint on the cultures of Eastern Europe before they were merged into the Soviet Union. As social control tightened under the rule of Stalin, every piece of culture that was produced had to be done for the purpose of creating a common nationalist, socialist identity. For music this meant that every Soviet Republic had to have its own operas and symphonic pieces based on folk music, and at least one theater and opera house, all created in a particular Russian style that was not allowed to emulate the Western style (Frolova-Walker, 1998). Additionally, even though this new music was based on folk songs, the original indigenous traditions were not allowed to be publicly displayed (Sonevytsky, 2022). Musicians

who did not align themselves with the rules, such as Ukrainian composer Nikolai Roslavets, were ostracized, and lost their position in the cultural society (Frolova-Walker, 1998). Up until this day, Russia uses culture to claim and create a unity among the Post-Soviet states. As Medvedev (2011) writes: "the past is used as a resource" (p. 231) and Russia uses its cultural works as a way to spread its traditional values and conservatism. By doing so, a unity is envisioned that is based on everything that "the West" is not (Valenza, 2023). For Putin's Russia, the Post Soviet countries are part of the Russian sociocultural entity, and thus belong to the Russian territory. This connection to Russia has led to a constant misevaluation of the Post-Soviet cultures. Because the West views them as little more than Russian puppets, and Russia wishes to maintain this image, the cultures of the Post-Soviet receive little appreciation and remain poorly known outside of their own environment (Plokhy, 2011).

EUrope and Eastern Europe

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, EUrope has found different ways to put their claim on the Post-Soviet space. Most prominently, in 2004 the EU became involved in the Eastern European countries through the Eastern European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In 2009 the more extensive Eastern Partnership (EaP), which includes six Post-Soviet countries; Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, was established (European Commission, 2023). Since December 2023, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have also received the EU candidacy status (European Commission, n.d.), which precludes more intrusive EU intervention in the countries' political, social, economic and cultural structures. Though not the main focus of this research, these policies give an insight into the EUropean mentality vis-à-vis Eastern Europe. In order to create an EU and a EUropean identity, it has been essential to create a non-EU next to it; a border that shows where the EU ends. The Eastern European countries, among which some Post-Soviet countries, have been given the role of the non-EU. Kolvraa (2017) argued that the EU used exclusionary language in the creation of the Eastern European Neighbourhood Policy, by demarcating the Eastern European states as EU Neighbors, as thus not European enough to become the EU. This is further exemplified by the stringent requirements that are put on EU candidates, which force the countries to implement European cultural

values. Additionally, Valenza and Trobbiani (2019), found that within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU mostly funds and supports organizations that align with European values, and that are structured in a manner that the EU finds professional, without taking into account local specificities and cultural nuances. In analyzing the original foundations of the European Neighbourhood Policy, Kuus (2004) argues that the EU takes on the position of a teacher towards an uneducated and irrational "East". As such, the Eastern European Post-Soviet countries suffer from, on the one hand, having to recover from the Russian colonial power, and on the other hand, having to adapt and prove their worth towards the new power, the EU. Whereas the EU still deems them under the influence of Russia, and not developed enough to join the EUropean game, Russia is actively pursuing an agenda in which relies on an historical, and partly imaginary, notion of which territories belong to its empire (Medvedev, 2011). As a result, the cultural scene in these countries is ambushed between a violent colonizer, and a belittling teacher.

The Postcolonial Position

The previous discussion has shown the difficult position that Post-Soviet countries find themselves in. As they recover from a colonial legacy, the EU is imposing its own values onto their cultural system, based on an implicit sense of superiority. There are few works that theorize on the position of the Post-Soviet through a post-colonial framework. Tlostanova (2015) writes about the precarious position that scholars from the Post-Soviet are in, as they struggle to adapt to the knowledge production in the West, while coming from an institutional system heavily influenced by Soviet thought. In this position, scholars who write about the unequal systems of knowledge production are often dismissed and deemed not worthy of acknowledgement by the West (p. 48). The work by Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013) reflects on these issues from the EUropean side of the problem. They state that there are three dimensions that can lead to the decentering of Eurocentrism: provincializing, engaging and reconstruction. Provincializing concerns the act of questioning how Eurocentrism has shaped the world we live in (p. 286). Engaging means actively trying to gauge non-European perspectives, and to learn to think beyond essentializing notions of the 'Other'

(p. 289). Reconstruction, finally, means using both provincializing and engaging to create a new non-Eurocentric paradigm of knowledge construction (p. 292).

As may have become clear, neither of these works focus on the influence of colonial thought on *music* production. Despite obvious problems with diversity and inclusion in the world of classical music (Sanders, 2022), (ethno)musicologists have only recently started to implement postcolonial thought into their work (Wallach & Clinton, 2019). Manuel (2019) theorizes about the imposition of the dominant culture upon the culture of a marginalized population, which also echoes the Marxist conceptions of hegemony and cultural imperialism. He argues that many popular forms of music, such as the classical sonata form, are based on a socio-economic base of capitalism, and through the capitalist mode of production spread to peripheral places (p. 64). Seeing this in a post-colonial perspective, it can be argued that the sonata form is widely spread, because the colonizing powers enforced it upon the colonized people. A clear example of this is how the Soviet Union imposed its musical ideas upon the Soviet republics and forced them to change their style of music making (Sonevytsky, 2022). After the fall of the Soviet Union, this put the Post-Soviet musicians in a state similar to that of the Post-Soviet scholars, suffering from the legacy of colonization, and being forced to adapt to foreign methods of music making.

A second important notion is that of unequal exchange, which similarly has its roots in Marxist theory, but translates into the postcolonial framework. The idea behind unequal exchange is that colonial structures that were enforced on colonized countries do not disappear once a country gains independence (Wallach & Clinton, 2019, p.115). Within the field of (ethno)musicology, there have been divergent ways in which scholars theorized on unequal exchange. Whereas Schiller (1991) points out how Western multinational corporations dominate the cultural scene across the globe, Taylor (1997) noticed that non-Western musicians use orientalist conception of non-Western music to their benefit. As such, there are different ways of looking at this unequal exchange, and the power structures function differently in different settings. Within the Post-Soviet, musicians are stuck between the West and Russia, where Russia, as

mentioned before, uses culture and music to justify its lasting influence over the region, and the West actively tries to enforce their cultural norms onto them (Medvedev, 2011; Valenza, 2022).

What can be noticed here is that there are two types of studies in the framework: the studies that analyze the postcolonial position of the production of knowledge in and about Post-Soviet countries, and the studies that examine how colonial practices have shaped musical scenes of overseas Western colonies. In the following section, I will attempt to combine these two insights to create a framework on how the double colonial position influences music making and production in the Post-Soviet space.

Methodology

In order to put these two frameworks together, I present a qualitative case study of Dutch composer Raymond Janssen. This case study carries two research objects. Firstly, it reviews the information pamphlet that was distributed during his concert on the 7th of November 2023 in Utrecht, on which is explained which music is performed, why it is performed, and who performs it. Secondly, I use the official site of Raymond Janssen to analyze how he profiles himself and his work to the general public. This site can be found at: https://www.raymond-janssen.com/website/. I qualitatively code the pamphlet and several texts and articles from his site using atlas.ti technology. From this coding, categories were derived, that guide the rest of the analysis. Afterwards, I will relate these results back to the theory describe above, in an elaborate discussion. Any translations from Dutch are done by me. Additionally, I attempted to contact Raymond Janssen himself to conduct an in-depth discussion on his motivations and the reception of his work, but unfortunately, I did not hear back from him.

Results

After performing the qualitative analysis, I could distinguish two broad categories that are important to understand the work of Raymond Janssen. Firstly, the music, and secondly, the mission.

The Music

Raymond Janssen has quite an unusual choice of repertoire in his concerts with Eastern-European performers. Instead of playing the famous classics such as a Beethoven Symphony, or Brahms Concerto, Janssen put together programs consisting primarily of film music. The piece that he advertised most prominently on his site is the Star Wars Suite by John Williams, which is the topic of five of the first eight new articles that are uploaded. For his current tour, the main concert piece was the Carmina Burana, which is broadly advertised on the information pamphlet (see Appendix A). In an interview with the Dutch TV channel MAX, Janssen explains that he considers this type of music more accessible to a general audience (Tijd voor MAX, 2018). However, Janssen organizes his concerts at the most esteemed concert halls in the Netherlands and abroad -- places that generally do not attract a particularly broad public, but are sites where, whether willingly or not, the cultural elite gathers.

Next to the choice of repertoire, the way in which he publicizes it is peculiar. In none of the news articles on his site from the last five years is it mentioned that any music by local composers from the Ukraine or Moldova is played. However, during his most recent tour through the Netherlands, two pieces by Ukrainian composers were included in the pre-show; a Spanish Dance, by Myroslav Skoryk, and Stoit Hora, by Oleksandr Los & Oleh Marynchenko. The first of these is a contemporary short violin piece, whereas the second is based on a Ukrainian folk song. Neither during the concert, in the pamphlet, or online, does Janssen explain these pieces, where they come from, or what their cultural value is. This seems to be a missed chance to educate his audience on the intricacies of the Ukrainian musical scene. Instead, his November 2023 concert tour was solely focused on the Carmina Burana, with no possibility to find which other pieces were played online. This was only written in the pamphlet that was given away at the concert itself. Of course, the Carmina Burana is a famous piece that sells well to Western audiences. It is also heavily embedded in a Western European culture. As written in the pamphlet, the piece originated in 1937, when German composer Carl Orff decided to put to music Latin songs that were written in 13th century Germany. Whereas the orchestra and choir represent the Ukrainian and Moldovan people, the repertoire seems to be lacking a dedication to the composers and culture from the region.

The Mission

This seems in contrast to Janssen's self-proclaimed mission: "to connect Western and Eastern Europe". As it is written on the homepage of his site, Janssen and his company Cadenza Productions aim "to establish cooperation between East European musicians and performance venues in West European countries, based on the belief that Eastern Europe harbors enormous musical potential, born from a rich tradition." (Cadenza European Art Productions, n.d.). A Dutch article from 2018 re-emphasizes this point, pointing out that the goal of the company is to "let their sounds be heard in our countries as well". (Schaap, 2018). What exactly these sounds are, however, is not further specified. In several articles, a sentiment that Moldova and Ukraine were isolated under communism, and thus their culture developed differently, is mentioned (Cadenza European Art Productions, n.d.; Schaap, 2018). In an interview on Dutch television, Janssen explains: "We have been looking around us for a very long time, we were influenced by France, by England, by the US. They have managed to keep their own character, their own identity, and I think it is wonderful what they have maintained" (Tijd voor MAX, 2018). Several points can be taken from these comments. Firstly, Janssen has a dedication and fascination with the Eastern European way of making music, though in the files that I analyze, he has not mentioned explicitly what this different style entails. Secondly, a cultural difference between "us" the West and "them" the East is repeatedly created. Though not with bad intent, Janssen perpetuates the idea that the countries behind the Iron Curtain could not develop as the West, because they could not draw inspiration from the West. As such, they have kept their own way of making music. Hereby he omits the idea that they have been influenced by all of the countries and cultures in the former Eastern bloc, actually have been forced to change their cultural practices, and have been living in at least partly functioning open democracies for the last three decades. The idea of an Eastern culture that has been isolated without any outside influence and is not for the first time 'seeing the daylight', seems to have some tone of orientalism.

Discussion

Out of these results, several important characteristics of the power inequalities between Ukrainian and Moldovan musicians vis-à-vis West European musicians can be distinguished. Taking into account the framework of Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013), three factors are necessary to decenter Eurocentric knowledge production; provincializing, engaging and reconstruction (p. 286). I argue that these factors can also be applied to music production. In the case of Raymond Janssen, provincializing would entail the questioning of the origins of classical music, and how it has spread around the world and across Europe. Through the work that he does, these origins are not questioned. Instead, by keeping to a Western musical repertoire, and not publicizing the local music that is played, he is contributing to an idea that the Western music is universal. This satisfies a broad audience, but does not lead to any structural changes in how Eastern Europe and its cultural scene are viewed and experienced. Rather, it perpetuates the idea that it is normal for the East to adapt to the West, and that they have to do so in order to gain recognition. This reflects the mentality of the EU forcing the East European countries to adapt to their values, in order to develop in a way that the EU deems appropriate (Kolvraa, 2017; Valenza & Trobbiani, 2019). In his publications, Janssen did note that the musicians play with their own preserved technique and sound, but for the listeners, this will not be clear as long as they play well-known Western material. This also confirms Manuel's argument that Western European classical music has a hegemony in the musical scene (2019). The marginalized peoples have to perform the music of the dominant power and show that they are at the same level as them to get acknowledged for being talented.

The second factor that Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis point out, is that of engaging, which "entails engaging non-European perspectives more directly" (2013, p. 289). Within the knowledge production of international relations this requires a deep understanding of and insight into one's own positionality, and that of others (Fisher Oner & Nicolaïdis, 2013). Within music, engagement could be interpreted as learning from each other's musical traditions and actively studying the techniques that are unfamiliar to you. In the case of Janssen's work, this is only partly applied. By bringing Ukrainian, Moldovan and Romanian musicians to EUrope, he makes people aware of their talents and makes the public interested in the countries

concerned. When this interest is sparked, and the public reads the pamphlet, however, these cultures are mostly described by their political isolation and by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which echoes an essentialist understanding of the lived realities in Eastern Europe. Janssen himself is deeply engaged in the cultural scene of the countries with which he collaborates; as mentioned before, he set up an orchestra and a choir in Romania, for young musicians to be able to showcase their talents. He visits these countries often, and knows their cultural system (Cadenza Productions, n.d.). Nevertheless, this engagement takes the form of unequal engagement, as was theorized by Wallach and Clinton (2019). By handpicking young talents, and guiding them on their musical journey, Janssen takes the position of a teacher, rather than a co-creator. He takes them to the 'land of hope', and teaches them how to become successful. As earlier pointed out by Kuus (2004), relating to the covert implications of the ENP, this is a role that the EU also takes on in its policy implementation in Eastern Europe. The way Janssen navigates himself within the Eastern European cultural field mirrors the teaching role that the EU holds towards these countries.

Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis' last point concerns re-construction, which means the rebuilding of the EUropean narrative (2013, p. 292). That includes the unequal power structures created by colonization, and the ways in which the EU still profits from this and perpetuates these structures. This is more difficult to translate into the musical field than the previous three points. However, here I want to draw further inspiration from Tlostanova (2015). She posits how scholars from the post-Soviet have been caught in a double colonial difference, in which the countries have suffered a colonial experience under Russia and have subsequently been belittled by orientalist Western powers that deem them as lesser developed human beings because of their Soviet past. As a result, the Post-Soviet is caught in a situation where they have to catch up with the Western powers but are functioning in institutions that do not have the same means and background as the West (p. 47). Those that try to emulate Western knowledge production, as Tlostanova states; "no matter how diligently they cope the Western teachers, their own place in the scholarly hierarchy has remained secondary and subservient with very few exceptions, the place of the native informant and not a producer of theory which remains a privilege of the West." (2015, p. 49). Taking into account the case of

Raymond Janssen, I think similar patterns can be seen in classical music production. The musicians that Janssen brings to the West have to convince the public that actually, *they can play*. However, the public can only be convinced of this because they are guided by Raymond Janssen, who is an esteemed Dutch conductor and as such is placed in a position to judge and teach these musicians. Additionally, the concerts that these musicians perform mostly contain film music, which in the world of classical music is often considered at a lower level than the 'real' classical music (Jakob-Hoff, 2008; Scruton, 2023). Being stuck between the biases of the Western audience, and the lack of opportunities in their own countries, these musicians are placed in the double colonial difference. In order to change this, reconstruction is essential (Fisher Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013).

Conclusion

In this paper I aimed to answer the question: how does the work of Dutch conductor Raymond Janssen reflect existing power relations between Western Europe and the Post-Soviet pace? I found that it reflects the power relations by the fact that 1) the musicians have to adapt to an extremely Western-European repertoire, 2) the musicians are put in a role of subservient student of the experienced Dutch teacher, 3) the musicians have to continuously prove their worth to the Western audience, without gaining the recognition they deserve. These three factors seem to overlap with the official policy of the EU towards the Post-Soviet space and show the difficulty of being stuck in a double colonial difference between EUrope and Russia.

Important to mention is that this work is strongly limited by the fact that I did not get to speak to Raymond Janssen himself. This would have provided much more insight into his motivation and into the reception of his work. Secondly, this work is a mere exploration of the cultural position of the Post-Soviet in relation to the EU and builds on a very small theoretical framework. Future research should take into account more contextual factors, such as the position of performance venues, the professional reception of the concerts, and the appreciation in the musician's home countries, and place this within a more complete framework of postcolonial musicology.

Nevertheless, Tlostanova (2015) and Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013) point out one very important thing. The only way to create change is to start thinking and writing. Hopefully, this paper will spark some thought, and lead to further explorations of the European cultural scene.

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Appendix A – the information pamphlet











