



Creative Resilience: Soviet Composers' Strategic Relationship with the State Censor (A Tale of Two Sofias)

Leah Goldman

Lecturer in Modern European History,
Department of History, Northern Arizona University
Fellow, Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

In the course of creating new music, Soviet composers expended substantial energy interacting with official censors.¹ While new works were subject to review by Agitprop, the Party's main censorship agency, during the majority of the compositional process, was the Committee on Arts Affairs (KDI), the Soviet state's main censorship agency. Ultimately, the composers needed KDI's in order to see their creative efforts through to completion. Unfortunately, due to its high position on the bureaucratic ladder, KDI was responsible for far more subsidiary agencies than it could manage. And when KDI fell on the job, composers paid the price, as they were dependent on it for their careers and livelihoods. As commissioning, contracting, reviewing, and purchasing new works, as well as recommending them for performance and publication fell by the

wayside, Soviet composers quickly learned KDI could not be trusted to carry out its duties. In response, they developed a range of extra-procedural strategies for reminding KDI of their presence, and ensuring it kept on track in dealing with them.

Drawing on a unique file of KDI correspondence from the 1940s, this paper explores the strategies employed by one composer, Sofia Chicherina, in navigating the late-Stalinist music censorship process. Chicherina proactively appealed to KDI censors and singled out one in particular, Sofia Gotgelf, with whom she forged a personal relationship, enlisting her support by addressing her by turns as a partner, a sympathizer, and a friend. That Chicherina exercised such agency and won a modicum of control over her creative life is a victory. However, as I will argue, the fact that she had to resort to extraordinary measures, rather than being able to rely on the system, had troubling implications for her, as well as all composers', place in Soviet society.

KDI was created by the Central Committee in December 1935, to centralize control

1. Versions of this article were presented at the 23rd International Conference of Europeanists in April 2016 and the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies National Convention in November 2015. I am grateful to Kiril Tomoff, Randall Halle, Kevin Bartig, Andrea Bohlman, and Gregory Weinstein for their helpful commentary. I also wish to thank the Fulbright-Hays DDRA Program, the Mellon Foundation and Council for European Studies, and the University of Chicago's Social Sciences Division for funding my research, as well as the archivists at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI) for their valuable assistance.

of the arts in a single, powerful agency.¹ KDI slotted into the state apparatus just below the Council of People's Commissars (after 1946, the Council of Ministers), while the newly established creative unions, including the Composers' Union, and the Union-level theaters were subordinated to it.² Within its own structure, KDI managed departments with control ranging from fine arts, to performers' tours, to the circus. Most importantly for composers, nested under KDI's wing, was the Main Administration for Musical Institutions (GUMU), which effectively served as the gatekeeper for their professional success. After passing through GUMU, new compositions had to undergo one final check by its sister agency, Glavrepertkom. But it was primarily with GUMU that composers interacted on issues of commissioning, contracting, payment, performance, and publication of their works.

Composers' interactions with GUMU began in one of two ways. For smaller works, composers completed the music first, and then submitted it to GUMU for audition. Upon approval, GUMU then drew up a contract for purchase. For larger works, the contract was drawn up in the early stages of composition, based on review of preliminary sketches. In this case, the composer received an advance, while the balance paid after the final product was auditioned and approved.³ Both types of contracts were classified as state

1. "Postanovlenie Politbiuro TsK VKP(b) 'Ob organizatsii Vsesoiuznogo Komiteta po Delam Iskusstv' ot 16 dekabria 1935g.," in Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov, eds. *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia: Dokumenty TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b)-VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kul'turnoi politike, 1917–1953gg* (Moscow: Demokratiia, 1999), 281. On the failure of KDI's predecessor, Glaviskusstvo, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Emergence of Glaviskusstvo: Class War on the Cultural Front, Moscow, 1928–1929," *Soviet Studies* 23, no. 2 (October 1971): 236–53.

2. Union-level theaters were subordinated to KDI just over a year after its creation, in January 1937. See endnote to "Postanovlenie Politbiuro TsK VKP(b) 'Ob organizatsii Vsesoiuznogo Komiteta po Delam Iskusstv' ot 16 dekabria 1935g.," in Artizov and Naumov, eds., 765 n.113.

3. See, for example: RGALI, f.962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), op.5, d.1049, ll.252–252ob, a standard contract between GUMU and composer Boris Aleksandrov for writing a song. Point 8 specifies the amount of the honorarium and the amounts to be paid at each stage of the process.

commissions. After auditioning, GUMU could accept the work, reject it, or instruct the composer to revise and resubmit. As there were no other buyers in the closed state system, revisions were not optional for those who hoped to make a living. Finally, GUMU completed its censorial role by recommending a subset of approved pieces for performance and publication.

Because irregularities cropped up so frequently, composers realized it was in their best interest to be assertive in dealing with GUMU, engaging its censors as partners in the censorship process. At worst, one's request might be denied. But the benefit of keeping oneself on GUMU's radar, updating a particular censor on one's progress, and pushing for assistance were simply too great to overlook. The lesson for composers was clear: communicate with GUMU early and often, and build strong personal relationships with censors. GUMU held the power, but gaining its censors' support was one of the few paths available for taking charge of one's career.

In their efforts to attract the attention and assistance of GUMU's censors through correspondence, composers employed a range of tones and tactics. Some checked in with censors at every step, adopting a tone of polite distrust to make clear their assumption that GUMU would fail to follow through if left to its own devices. Others resorted to trickery, particularly when seeking to distract GUMU from missed deadlines, which would normally result in contract cancellation. Yet others sought to mobilize a discourse of rights, legality, and fairness to press their cases, assuming a tone of indignation that proper procedure had been violated – though, of course, it was rarely followed in practice. Finally, those who found polite distrust insufficient but were not well versed in the legalisms of their relationship with GUMU applied a heavy

layer of guilt in their petitions, adopting a tone of long-suffering martyrdom in hopes of spurring censors to act by pricking their consciences. This last technique was Sofia Chicherina's forte, though not the only weapon in her arsenal.

The first Soviet woman to earn a degree in composition, Chicherina was not one to stand idly by while GUMU let her work gather dust.¹ Tenacious to the point of exhaustion, she wore down the defenses of GUMU's censors with a steady stream of passionately scrawled letters, never letting up until her aims were achieved. For example, in 1947, she signed a contract with GUMU for her *Celebratory Overture*. Upon completion, she proactively requested GUMU's recommendation for performance. However, after auditioning the piece, GUMU declined. This decision deprived Chicherina of both the satisfaction of seeing her work reach the public and of the attendant fees, a substantial portion of a rank-and-file composer's income. Often, this would have been the end of the story, but Sofia Chicherina was not one to concede defeat. In January 1949, she went over the auditioning censors' heads and wrote directly to GUMU's Chair, Ivan Anisimov. In concerned tones, she acknowledged that GUMU had judged the piece "unremarkable," but persisted: "Considering this work serious and worthy of being conveyed to listeners, I ask your assistance in recommendation for performance." She further attested that several "authoritative specialists," including Dmitrii Shostakovich, had evaluated the work favorably. Anisimov was unmoved, but, fatefully, he passed her letter on to Senior Inspector Sofia Gotgelf without comment.²

Gotgelf filed the letter without action, but

1. For biographical information on Sofia Chicherina, see: http://tambovodb.ru/oblast/data/mus_chicherina.html (Accessed November 6, 2015).

2. RGALI, f.962, op.5, d.1123, l.254.

apparently Chicherina's persistence stayed with her. A month later, Chicherina wrote again, this time to Gotgelf directly. It seems she was unaware that Gotgelf had received her first petition; having heard nothing from Anisimov, she simply selected Gotgelf as a censor who might be more sympathetic and was powerful enough to influence her case. And indeed, with Anisimov having laid the groundwork, Gotgelf proved open to Chicherina's appeal. In this second letter, Chicherina explained she had requested GUMU recommend her overture for performance, while omitting that this request had already been denied. Adopting a personal tone, she wrote, "If you can help with this, help me. At a distance it's very hard for me to do anything. [Your supervisor] probably won't protest." Chicherina concluded with a declaration of the toll taken on her by the overture's non-performance, lamenting, "I'm exhausted from need."³ This missive, by turns pleading, bold, and pathetic, had its desired effect. Gotgelf spoke to Anisimov, and a week later, Chicherina finally received his reply. While stating firmly that GUMU had already made its decision and the overture would not be performed in Moscow, Anisimov now conceded that the agency could send the score to provincial orchestras and let her know if any were interested.

It was hardly A-list treatment, but it was all Chicherina required. She followed up these leads and three months later triumphantly announced in yet another letter, to KDI Chairman Polikarp Lebedev, that her overture was in rehearsal.⁴ Chicherina's behavior is instructive: not only did she begin by specifically asking GUMU to recommend her piece, she followed up consistently, identifying Gotgelf as a potential partner, enlisting her support, and working this connection until she achieved results. If at any point Chicherina had been less assertive, her

3. RGALI, f.963, op.5, d.1123, l.253.

4. RGALI, f.962, op.5, d.1123, ll.253, 251, 116.

overture would have gone quietly into her archive. But “no” was not an option for Sofia Chicherina. She steadfastly pursued GUMU’s recommendation, writing persistently to individual censors until she found a partner in Gotgelf, who convinced her superiors to find a compromise. As a result, the overture received its premiere, and Chicherina’s career took a hard-won step forward.

With her *Celebratory Overture*, Chicherina’s strategy was to enlist Gotgelf’s partnership. Yet she also did not hesitate to play on her sympathies. And while doing so she carefully laid the groundwork for future projects. Thus, in her February 1949 letter, after her pathetic declaration of exhaustion and poverty, she deftly shifted gears to her symphony, then in progress. Aiming for Gotgelf’s sense of guilt, Chicherina wrote, “I’m developing the symphony, slowly but well. Before, there was no support at all. Now there is moral support, though unfortunately to me that’s little. But I intend to do it as it should be done.”¹ This well-placed barb, with undertones of martyrdom and perseverance through suffering, ensured Chicherina again stood out in Gotgelf’s mind as a composer who had patiently put up with GUMU’s dysfunction and thus deserved consideration. Again, her tactic worked; GUMU soon auditioned sketches and signed a contract for the symphony. In her letter to Lebedev about the overture later that month, Chicherina assiduously kept focus on her symphony, assuring him she was already hard at work on it. A month later, GUMU’s Repertoire head, A. Kholodilin, informed her the advance would be sent in August.² Chicherina’s dealings with GUMU were now proceeding with alacrity, thanks to her guilt-laden letter campaign and Gotgelf’s consequent behind-the-scenes efforts on her behalf.

As usual with GUMU’s operations, irregu-

1. RGALI, f.962, op.5, d.1123, l.253.

2. *Ibid.*, ll.116, 20.

larities soon crept in. In June, after receiving Kholodilin’s confirmation, Chicherina wrote specially to Lebedev seeking early disbursement of her advance. She recounted in wounded, guilt-inducing tones how, even in signing her contract, she had been required to write a promissory note guaranteeing completion, due to her status as an “obscure composer.” She had submitted to this charade, yet, she wrote, “So far, I have not been sent material support, in consequence of which it’s very hard for me to work.”³ In other words, not only had she been humiliated by GUMU’s distrust, she had also been left in dire financial straits, punished doubly for not achieving the fame of her contemporaries. Nevertheless, Chicherina assured Lebedev that she had soldiered on, completing the first movement and beginning the second. Far from complaining, she accepted her fate and asked only that he instruct GUMU to settle accounts with her. Strictly speaking, Chicherina was not within her rights to request her advance early. But as a composer who dealt regularly with GUMU, she was well aware of its uneven procedures. Short of cash and seeing an opportunity to use the guilt tactic to secure early release of funds, she gave it a try.

Unfortunately, Lebedev was a tougher nut to crack than Gotgelf, and her plea fell on deaf ears. Undaunted, in July, Chicherina telegraphed Anisimov and wrote yet another guilt-driven missive to Lebedev about the advance. Feeling GUMU had abandoned her, she lamented, “Circumstances force me to turn to you directly.” After Kholodilin’s confirmation, she had trusted she could concentrate on the symphony and had not sought other work. But the advance had not come, which “left me in an extremely difficult condition. I cannot work and provide for my creative endeavors.” She reminded Lebedev that she had quickly composed, orchestrated, and submitted her overture,

3. *Ibid.*, l.10.

proof she was a diligent worker for Soviet music. In closing, Chicherina bemoaned her fate, musing, “Creatively, I developed late, and it seems I’m still improving. But without moral and material support I can’t continue... What I need now is maximal consolidation of my work time, not dissipation of my strength.”¹ While this impassioned avowal of martyrdom still did not suffice for early disbursal, she clearly pricked Lebedev’s conscience. He sent her note to Kholodilin, who took the unusual step of sending a second assurance that her advance would be sent by August 8. In the end, it was not sent until August 27, but for GUMU that was remarkably close to on time, for which Chicherina’s guilt-inducing letters deserve credit.²

At this point, Chicherina’s relationship with GUMU took a surprising turn. Having settled her immediate needs, she now returned to her “old friend” Gotgelf, sending a steady stream of letters on her progress. No longer playing the overburdened soul, Chicherina excitedly chatted to her pen pal about the symphony’s finer points, advice she had received, and changes in her creative plan, sketching out melodic lines to illustrate her ideas and even asking for return of the first movement’s score when she rethought it.³ In this way, Chicherina shifted from supplicant to sister-in-crime, a fellow striver for Soviet music, solidifying her partnership with Gotgelf. While one can imagine Gotgelf rolling her eyes with each new letter—in her final missive, Chicherina promised not to write again until she finished the symphony—she likely also grew accustomed to these letters, and developed a fondness for their author’s enthusiasm. Thus, by first mobilizing a wounded, guilt-inducing tone, then transitioning to eagerness and high spirits,

1. RGALI, f.962, op.5, d.1123, l.11; RGALI, f.962, op.5, d.1124, ll.154-155.

2. RGALI, f.962, op.5, d.1123, l.8; RGALI, f.962, op.5, d.1124, l.154.

3. RGALI, f.962, op.5, d.1124, ll.66, 7, 5, 1.

Chicherina sustained a strong emotional appeal that was highly effective in keeping Gotgelf and GUMU interested in her musical endeavors and keen to help her complete them successfully.

The trail of Chicherina’s correspondence with Gotgelf runs cold after December 1949, but we can assume that, after achieving success with her interventionist tactics, she continued to write letters, by turns concerned, wounded, and spirited, in her subsequent dealings with GUMU. Chicherina’s story is amusing, but it is also revealing about rank-and-file Soviet composers’ relationship to KDI, GUMU, and individual censors like Gotgelf. Like its parent organization, GUMU was responsible for an array of censoring duties, far more than it could keep track of. And when GUMU dropped the ball, those who suffered most were rank-and-file composers like Chicherina, for whom all roads led through GUMU in building careers and making a living from their music. Because GUMU was so reliably unreliable, such composers learned to be proactive, developing a range of tactics for managing their affairs with GUMU, creating partnerships with censors, and enlisting their support in shepherding new works through the censorship process.

On one hand, Chicherina’s success can be seen as a triumph of agency in her frustrating interaction with official censors. By asserting herself amid GUMU’s disorganized operations, she took charge of her fate, building bridges with an individual censor, advocating for her work, and often achieving the desired results. But on the other, her skill at manipulating the system, and her well-developed tactics for doing so, clearly indicate that such backdoor maneuvers had become the norm. Because GUMU operated so haphazardly, composers learned to intervene proactively to compel the agency to act, preferably in their favor. But this

proactivity also enabled GUMU to continue to malfunction, as censors, in turn, learned they could let their duties slide until composers applied pressure. As this symbiotic cycle spun itself out, any sense of “normal” procedure faded away, leaving in its wake only manipulative gamesmanship. That composers played well is a credit to their resourcefulness, but that they had to play remains problematic.

Ultimately, though composers like Chicherina were often able to navigate GUMU’s internal chaos successfully, being forced to do so did less to promote their agency than to erode it. The fact they had to operate extra-procedurally meant they had to abandon the behavior of citizens in a fully functional modern bureaucratic state. Indeed, rather than attaining the empowered citizenship the Soviet authority had promised, composers like Chicherina were reduced in their interactions with GUMU to permanent supplicants, ever dependent on the individual inclinations of censors like Gotgel’f. As Sheila Fitzpatrick explains, citizens treat their interlocutors as equals and freely criticize procedural failings, while supplicants adopt a deferential tone and frame their requests as favors to be granted.¹ As Soviet composers knew, criticizing GUMU’s lacunae would only harm their cause, while deference was the key to success. Such tactics often worked brilliantly, but they also left the possibility a censor might decline, which left the composer no recourse because she was, after all, only asking a favor. Thus, no matter how skillfully composers maneuvered, they never quite became true partners with GUMU’s censors, remaining instead mere supplicants, subject to the whims of their would-be patrons. While their tactics might achieve results, the larger effect of this process was to rob them of the opportunity to become

full musical citizens of the Soviet state.



1. Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s,” *Slavic Review* 55, vol. 1 (Spring 1996), 78–105.