THE EARLY YEARS OF THE FOLK REVIVAL MOVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN CULTURE (1960s-1980s)

Laura Olson
University of Colorado
Project Information

Sponsoring Institution: University of Colorado

Principal Investigator: Laura Olson

Council Contract Number: 814-9g

Date: September 21, 2000

Copyright Information

Individual researchers retain the copyright on their work products derived from research funded through a contract or grant from the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEER). However, the NCEER and the United States Government have the right to duplicate and disseminate, in written and electronic form, reports submitted to NCEER to fulfill Contract or Grant Agreements either (a) for NCEER’s own internal use, or (b) for use by the United States Government, and as follows: (1) for further dissemination to domestic, international, and foreign governments, entities and/or individuals to serve official United States Government purposes or (2) for dissemination in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act or other law or policy of the United States Government granting the public access to documents held by the United States Government. Additionally, NCEER may forward copies of papers to individuals in response to specific requests. Neither NCEER nor the United States Government nor any recipient of this Report may use it for commercial sale.

* The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract or grant funds provided by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, funds which were made available by the U.S. Department of State under Title VIII (The Soviet-East European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained herein are those of the author.
Executive summary

The origins of the revival movement in Russian folklore lie in the Khrushchev-era academic world. Only a decade or so later did the performance of folk music and dance begin to reflect revivalist activities. A movement gradually coalesced out of the isolated actions of individual musicologists and musicians. This paper focuses on the activities of the Pokrovsky Ensemble, which laid the foundations for a revival movement. It shows how Pokrovsky’s approach grew out of the ideas of musicologists whose work was not favored during the Stalin period. The ensemble’s methods of dissemination reflected the tenor of the early Brezhnev years, when underground status could work in an artist’s favor. Rather than working for a broad audience, the group had a select public that it could rely on to understand its quasi-academic goals.

A few concepts became central in folklore revival movement. One was the idea of local styles, the notion that a small region could possess its own styles in folk art, and that these were worthy of study; this view flew in the face of the Soviet idea of a “unified national style.” Another was syncretism, the view that all folk phenomena are inextricably related, and must be studied and learned as a system. A third was collectivism or sobornost’, the notion that Russian rural culture is collective in nature, that folk traditions necessarily reflect that social structure, and that folk music and dance cannot be practiced in the atmosphere of competition that the Soviet policy of professionalism bred. Finally, this paper considers the part nationalism plays in the Russian folk music revival movement. The notion of “genetic memory” is widespread among revivalists and it seems this idea may be traceable to the work of the Pokrovsky Ensemble, despite the leader’s assertion that his group’s aims were not nationalist.
In 1987, a group called the Pokrovsky Ensemble gave a performance of Russian folk music in a classroom at Harvard University. The audience was made up largely of Slavic Department professors, graduate students, and undergraduates. I was a graduate student as well, visiting from Yale University.¹ As befitted the setting, the performance was accompanied by short lectures on various aspects of Russian folk singing. For instance, the ensemble’s leader, Dmitri Pokrovsky, told the audience that a bylina (epic song) was sometimes sung chorally, and might last several hours; that with the choral rendition, the words would be so stretched out that one might sing a single word for several measures.

The audience members had heard of the existence of byliny, but probably none had ever heard a bylina sung. I certainly had not, and it seems to me now, looking back, that I had never considered the possibility that they could be sung. Byliny were just texts in books assigned for courses in ancient Russian literature, not songs. When the five men in the group of ten singers performed the song, I was enthralled. It had something of the character of a sea chanty, but the musical texture was unfamiliar and exciting. The manner of performance was also unusual. The singers in simple linen peasant shirts appeared to be fully immersed in their musical communication with one another and with the audience. They swayed slightly and used arm gestures to punctuate certain beats or words. Everything about their bearing seemed completely natural, not forced or showy.

For me and for many Americans who went to concerts of the Pokrovsky Ensemble during its tours, this was our first brush with ancient Russian folk traditions. We might have seen professional choruses on television or at restaurants for tourists in Moscow or Leningrad, but this was different. This was not just entertainment and these were not just songs. Pokrovsky was talking about ancient traditions that were still living, about the ways that singing imitated bird sounds or reflected geography. We did not

---

¹ I was a Ph.D. student in the Slavic Department at Yale University in New Haven, CT, and had driven to Cambridge, MA to hear the concert.
know that we were witnessing not just the performance of folk music but the heyday of an important cultural movement in Russia.

The movement consisted of groups like the Pokrovsky ensemble in nearly every major city in Russia. These groups were often headed by folklorists or musicologists and were affiliated with institutions of higher learning or culture organizations. They held expeditions to villages, sponsored concerts and holiday festivals in the open air, organized classes and schools of folk culture for students of all ages, published pamphlets, books, cassettes and videos. They were trying to promote their view of Russian folk culture. By the late 1990s, between one and three million people were involved in activities surrounding authentic folklore in Russia.

How did this small explosion of interest in the roots of Russian culture come about? What were the origins of this vibrant, if somewhat small and select young people’s movement?

**The Khrushchev Era and Village Prose**

Perhaps the most important impetus to revival was the end of the Stalin era and the beginning of the Khrushchev era. In fact, one might even say that without the Stalin era, the revival movement might never have occurred. As Tamara Livingston has shown, most musical revival movements take place “in opposition to aspects of the contemporary cultural mainstream.”

The totalitarian nature of the Stalin era produced conditions in which many artistic intellectuals defined themselves in opposition to the mainstream culture.

The period of the expression of this opposition was “the Thaw,” the time when it became possible to discuss some of the mistakes of the Stalin era, and when intellectuals began to seek new sources of value. Some turned to the West as a reaction against the isolationism of the Stalin era. Especially among urban young people, there was increased interest in jazz and rock music, foreign films, and Western

---

2 Viacheslav Shchurov, interview with author, Moscow, 9 November 1998.
clothing styles. Others turned to Russian peasant culture as an important source of sincerity and authenticity in Russian culture, since it was presumed to have remained untouched by the hypocrisy and doublespeak that characterized Soviet public life under Stalin. Rural culture seemed like a possible place of refuge from a system that had become obsessed with industrialization at any cost.

This time saw the birth of a new literary movement called “village prose,” which was characterized by “the revival of Russian national and religious sentiment, a search for national values, a concern for the environment, and a nostalgia generated by the loss of traditional rural life.” In works such as Solzhenitsyn’s “Matryona’s House” (1963), writers envisioned village dwellers, particularly elders, as conveyors of true values such as kindness, modesty, and simplicity, and held them up as sources of redemption for a society concerned more with greed and care for appearances. Writers represented village life, including superstitious beliefs, folklore, and local dialects in great detail. Many writers based their narratives on their remembrances of childhood in the village; the recollections are cast in the glow of nostalgia, while collectivization and World War II represent the only bitter notes in the picture. Memory plays a large part: “the focus in Village Prose is on the radiance not of the future, but of the past.” And the past is represented by a place, the village.

The Russian folk music revival movement was characterized by a similar nostalgia and a foregrounding of the chronotope of the village: it represented the living past and a source of values for the present. For both movements, it was important to re-imagine the rural sphere: in effect, these intellectuals were protesting the Potemkin village of Soviet propaganda and countering that image with one they felt represented the genuine Russia. If the Soviet village was a place of change and modernization, the village of the revivalists’ and village prose writers’ imaginations was a locus of cyclical time, ancestral time, and childhood time.

While the prose writers conveyed this symbolic rural place in the form of memoiristic, essayistic, and fictional narratives, the revivalists did what earlier generations of populists and revivalists had done:

---

5 Parthe, 21-22.
they went to the village and attempted to bring ‘it’ back to the city. They dressed in ornate ancestral costumes bought from peasants, performed songs and dances they had learned from peasants, and recounted stories of their travels and what they had learned amongst the village dwellers. Like the village prose writers, they became mediators between the village and the city, cultural intermediaries who could translate village life into something understandable and desirable, as well as exotic and complex.

The discourse of folklore revival

The origins of the revival movement in Russian folklore were in the academic world: it began during the Khrushchev period with the renewal of interest in the study of folklore. Only a decade or so later did the performance of folk music and dance begin to reflect revivalist activities. A movement gradually coalesced out of the isolated actions of individual musicologists and musicians. Even though the movement now has as its primary focus performance of folklore, the initial impetus given by writings about folklore played an extremely important role. A discourse of revivalism was created, that is, new writings about folklore and about revival helped to give birth to a core ideology with which the various revivalists could identify themselves. At first the writings centered on criticism of the way folklore had been produced and presented during the Stalin period and afterwards. Later, starting in the 1980s, an abundant literature was published explaining how to collect and learn how to perform folk music, form revivalist groups, and present folklore on stage.

Immediately after Stalin’s death, criticism began to be heaped on the Soviet conception of folklore. Dozens of folklorists who had been involved in the production of new Soviet epics glorifying Stalin and Lenin now spoke out to criticize the way that such folklore had been created. One reviewer of a Stalinist-era history of Russian folklore called the newly created pseudofolklore pieces “stillborn

---

6 Parthe, 52-61.
8 On the importance of discourse and ideology in revival movements, see Livingston, 69.
forgeries of folk creation that cannot be regarded as folklore."⁹ In their writings, folklorists now
redefined the conception of folklore to exclude the creations of one person. They also criticized the view
that had became canonical during the Stalin era, that folklore was essentially a branch of literature.
Instead, they now stressed collectivity of origin, anonymity, traditionality, and orality.¹⁰

Furthermore, while during the Stalin era it had been common for folklorists and other scholars to
proclaim how active and robust the traditions of Soviet folklore still were, now folklorists began to assert
that the traditions were dying out. They saw a general lack of interest in folk traditions in the
countryside; only the older generation still sang traditional songs, while “songs of Soviet composers and
songs from foreign films had completely replaced traditional songs among the youth” in certain regions.¹¹
Folklorists began to paint a different picture than the Potemkin village of the Stalin era; now, they
reflected on the deplorable state of affairs of folklore in the countryside. This story of folklore’s
imminent disappearance was to be a major impetus for the revival movement.¹²

Criticism of Folk Music Performance

This period was characterized by a “crisis” in the genre of folk chorus performance as well.
Critics began to call for the inclusion of traditional, unarranged folk music in the repertoire of the
choruses; their calls were couched in stronger and more specific terms than were the government’s
pronouncements on the subject. As the critic A. Koposov wrote in 1962, the job of the choruses was
supposed to be “the propaganda of the best models of contemporary and ancient vocal, instrumental, and

---

¹⁰ Frank J. Miller, Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era (Armonk, NY: M. E.
Sharpe, 1990), 103-104.
¹² To a large extent this story of folklore’s death has political implications. Folklorists have privately criticized the
government’s policies towards the village and indicated that these are responsible for folklore’s likely premature
death in certain regions. Of course, it is a matter of interpretation whether folklore is “dying out” or is simply
“changing.” It is my view that folklore changes; certain traditions may die out or become unrecognizable, but
folklore as a whole does not generally die. The difference revolves around the definition of folklore: Soviet
folklorists and musicologists do not tend to think of contemporary material as constituting any folkloric interest
dance folklore.” But what they were showing was not “folk creation” but “their own creation” [not “narodnoe tvorchestvo” but “svoe sochinitel’stvo”]. Clearly, by mentioning authorship of folk creation, Koposov is referring obliquely to the creation of “pseudofolklore” during Stalin’s reign. One can also read this comment politically, in terms of Khrushchev’s criticism of Stalin as inaugurating a “Cult of Personality.” Composers of works for folk choruses, in foregrounding their own “creation” and not that of the nameless folk, were seeking kudos for themselves.13

Another musicologist, Feodosii Rubtsov, criticized the system created to manage amateur folk performance in the Soviet Union. He said “it’s not a secret to anyone that among the kolkhoz peasantry the organization of so-called ‘amateur artistic creation’ is often very weak and sometimes takes on a completely debatable, if not harmful, character.” He reported examples where folklorists had attended amateur concerts in villages in which “not a single local folk song, not even a chastushka,” was performed, although the performers knew many of their own local songs and chastushki. This phenomenon could be explained by the “disdainful attitude towards local folk creation” and towards folklore in general on the part of village cultural organizers.

Rubtsov’s call for more inclusion of music from local traditions in the repertoires of the village amateur folk choirs was new, and revolutionary: part of the Soviet approach to folklore involved the lumping of all Russian traditions into one notion of Russianness, which would in turn represent the favored culture of the Soviet Union. The contrary notion, that small villages might have their own “word” to say on the broad scene of Russian folk culture, became a rallying point for the revivalists.

Rubtsov also pointed out one of the paradoxes of the entire Soviet project: although much of the Soviet rhetoric glorified the leading role of the workers in building a Soviet state, in fact in the totalitarian state workers received only narrowly defined, prescribed roles. Folklore was supposed to be a grassroots artistic form in which the ordinary people could express themselves creatively; but in fact, it was organized into a pedagogical and entertaining show, performed by and for ‘the people’, but always ultimately controlled from the top.

Rubtsov divides Russian folk singing into two traditions: the amateur artistic activity organized by Soviet government personnel, and the music that takes place during people’s leisure time. He terms the latter *authentic* folk music, because it is sung by people just because they like the music and want to sing it; their continuing to sing it is what makes it “folk” music. By contrast, the music promoted and created by the Soviet establishment is not folk music, because it is artificially *created as* folk music, and people are urged to sing it in order to produce a show, at reviews and concerts. The organization of folk music essentially creates worthless music that is in extremely poor taste, false and banal, with “official, formal themes, sugary lyrical content,” and “stereotyped” images of Soviet life.

Rubtsov’s definition of Soviet-organized folklore as being “for show” became a central rallying point for revivalist discourse and practice. Revivalists saw themselves as opposing this way of viewing and presenting folklore; instead, they aligned themselves with “authenticity” and “sincerity.” This is a central component in revivals in general, according to Livingston: “‘Authentic’ music is believed to have been passed on through the generations outside of (or in spite of) mainstream markets. The ideology of authenticity, which combines historical research with reactionary ideas against the cultural mainstream, must be carefully constructed and maintained….”

In the context of the folk music revival in the Soviet Union of the 1970s, revivalist discourse was constructed against the Soviet mainstream, i.e. that which was supported and maintained by the government. By contrast, ‘authentic’ music was that which had managed to exist outside or in spite of the Soviet framework of amateur artistic activity. In calling for revival of unofficial music, Rubtsov is essentially saying that something that is very valuable to the culture has gone unseen and unstudied – and un-revived. Meanwhile, a totalitarian government system run by poorly educated people (with a lack of aesthetic taste) has run its own mock revival. The mock revival is in danger of obliterating that which is truly valuable, unless scholars do something about it now. Thus, in the context of the 1960s folklore

---

14 Livingston, 74.
revival movement in the Soviet Union, the concept of authenticity becomes defined as that which is not tainted by contact with the Soviet bureaucracy.

Rubtsov defines folklore quite liberally.15 His definition of folk music as anything that people continue to sing is characteristic of a certain branch of revivalist discourse – and of Soviet-era folkloristics in general. Rubtsov avoids calling for a return to a particular time in the past when Russian folk music was “pure” or “authentic.” He does not confine the definition of “folk-ness” [narodnost’] to music that forms part of the old agricultural way of life; instead, he intentionally broadens that definition, stating that that which has “folk” status will change continuously. Folklorists need to value and study everything that people sing, because this is folk music. His views are not new; they were voiced by several Soviet folklore scholars prior to the mid-1930s. Although these views were seen by their proponents as Marxist, they were in disfavor throughout most of the Stalin period.16

The approach sometimes referred to as the “sociological school” of folklore study had at its basis an acknowledgment that folklore is part of the culture and daily life of specific geographical regions and particular classes of people. In contrast to the Romantic view of folklore, this approach accepts the process of change as organic and unpredictable, and does not necessarily view transformation as bad. In the romantic-nationalist view, only that which is sung or spoken by village dwellers prior to or apart from their contact with civilization, i.e. city culture, is valuable as folklore. Here, by contrast, we have the notion that whatever people sing and however they tell stories or say incantations – and whether they dispense with those practices – is of interest as folklore.

Also belonging to this approach is the recognition of the interrelated nature of cultural phenomena, known in Russian as “syncretism.” Many folklorists working in the 1920s said that village culture, more than urban culture, was distinguished by the interrelation of different aspects. For example, in the village, no one was a specialist in one area of artistic activity. Singers did not simply sing, and tellers of tales did not simply narrate texts: they accompanied their performances with gesture, mimicry,

15 Livingston, 74.
and movement. In order to make multi-dimensional studies of peasant culture, teams of researchers in different fields of study set out to work together on specific regions in the 1920s.\(^{17}\)

A noted proponent of these views and one of the ideological “fathers” of the folklore revival movement of the 1970s was musicologist Evgenii Gippius. In 1926-27, as part of a team of researchers in such fields as anthropology, ethnology, art, literature, linguistics, music, and theater, Gippius helped create an in-depth study of two regions in the Russian north. Gippius wrote that because folk music is constantly changing in an “organic” and “irrational” process, because of its natural “spontaneity” [\textit{stikhiinost’}], he found it necessary to use the “descriptive method” of musical study, in which one tries to “record . . . everything that sounds.”\(^{18}\) Although Gippius’ own method of study was not sociological but more formalistic, his work and those of his colleagues on this project was informed by the underlying views of the sociological school.

Gippius and others were prevented from pursuing this line of study during the Stalin period. The Soviet definition of folklore, inaugurated in the first half of the 1930s, was that folklore was the oral creative work of the masses – that is, verbal lore, related to literature. Investigations of non-verbal phenomena, or of the context where these phenomena were performed, were not seen as part of the study of folklore; rather, they were ethnography. And both folkloristics and ethnography were exhorted to perform mostly practical tasks – the former had to encourage contemporary authors of folklore texts, while the latter had to discourage religion.\(^{19}\)

To be sure, the Soviet approach prided itself on its contemporary, realistic conception of folklore as that which is sung, played, and narrated in cities and villages nowadays; and it formally rejected the romantic view that folklore was the ancient lore of peasants.\(^{20}\) However, its heavy focus on the content of folklore and its underlying assumption that folklore was best used as propaganda meant that those


\(^{18}\) Gippius, “Krest’ianskaia muzyka Zaonezh’ia,” 149-50.

\(^{19}\) Howell, 335-36

studying anything deemed ideologically improper, or those not paying due attention to the content of folklore, were silenced with heavy criticism. This was the case with Gippius, who in 1949 was criticized for having used “bourgeois” formalistic and sociological study methods.  

Both before and after his criticism, Gippius was highly respected by the Moscow and Leningrad intelligentsia in the fields of music and folklore. Many of the young scholars who worked with or under him in the 1960s and early 1970s were profoundly influenced by his views on folklore. It was precisely Gippius’s syncretic approach and his interest in local styles rather than a “unified national style” that interested these young scholars.

**The Pokrovsky Ensemble and the beginnings of the folklore revival movement**

Andrei Kabanov, one of the founders of the Russian folklore revival movement, recalls how he came to work with and was influenced by Gippius. When Gippius came to work at the Folklore Commission of the RSFSR (an organ of the Union of Composers) in the 1970s, he looked for students. Kabanov was a recent graduate from the Moscow Conservatory in his mid-twenties, and he became one of Gippius’s “loyal” followers. Kabanov recalls that Gippius’s approach of working deeply in a single region, seeking to put together a typology of songs, was not widespread at the time: “He had the conception of local styles. Gippius yelled about this and insisted on it. It wasn’t so obvious as it seems now. In those days, there was a task set: for instance,… to make a volume of “Wedding Songs of Russia.” Such a thing can’t be done. The wedding is different everywhere. And to put it all in one volume means not to know what’s what.”

The significance of studying local styles was enormous in the context of Soviet folklore study. Of course, it flew in the face of the Soviet view that there was a unified national style. Furthermore, it was antithetical to the notion of the Soviet folk chorus, which sang composed songs in literary Russian. And finally, it was antithetical to the Soviet project itself. While Gippius was interested in identifying the

---

22 Andrei Kabanov, interview with author, Moscow, 13 November 1998.
The government aimed to wipe out such places, and replace them with huge collective farms. The study of local styles became one of the foundations of the revival movement. If it were not for the analytical work of scholars like Gippius, the revivalists would have had nothing to revive. When, through the work of teachers like Gippius, future folklorists and musicologists were exposed to the existence of extraordinarily rich local cultures, they were fascinated and inspired.

In the course of his investigation of local traditions, Gippius had studied the hidden rules or laws by which folk songs are sung in a specific way. Later, other musicologists, notably Anna Rudneva, an influential researcher and professor at Moscow Conservatory, also took specific interest in how village singing collectives [kollektivy] sang. This preliminary work brought new attention to traditions of village folk singing; it suggested that folk music was as challenging and valuable as classical music.

These researchers were saying that the polyphony of village singing was extremely complicated and difficult to reproduce, since each member of a village ensemble would improvise a distinct part that behaved as an independent melody, and each melody differed from, yet was dependent upon, that which other members of the ensemble were singing. Furthermore, each melody or part would vary each time the group sang the song. The musicologists theorized that there was a system of collective singing in place, the rules of which were extremely difficult for outsiders to understand.

All of this was noted by the young scholars of the time, many of whom had taken classes with these theorists at the Moscow Conservatory or the Gnesin Institute. Thus, it is probably not coincidence that 29-year-old musician Dmitri Pokrovsky came in 1973 to Gippius and Kabanov at the Folklore Commission with a plea for folk song material – with the intent to sing it. At that time, very few people thought to sing the music that was being collected. Kabanov himself did not think of it: he was concerned

with the complexity of a melody, the genre, the musical structure of a song. He remembers: “This music that was recorded by us [in villages] was intended for composers, so that they could get some kind of melodies out of it, pitches, and then they’d compose real music, ‘Now listen to this music, done by Soviet composers.’ It [the music we recorded] was meant for composers to rework so that choruses could sing it, folk choruses, – but the way it sounded itself wasn’t taken into account.”

In fact, there were already people singing the music straight from the notations of the folklorists – without its having been arranged first – but only a very few. Viacheslav Shchurov, a student majoring in choral conducting at Moscow Conservatory in the early 1960s, did try to sing: he formed a male trio that sang songs they collected on folklore expeditions. A few years later, Shchurov, then a teacher at the Gnesin Institute in Moscow, organized a group of students that also sang newly collected folk songs.

When one listens now to the 1968 recording of Shchurov’s ensemble, one sees the difference from the folk chorus style: the music is understated, without abundant vocal “tricks” such as yicks or hollers, and without the sweetness characteristic of the folk chorus. However, the vocal quality is similar to that used by the folk chorus; and overall one has the impression of classically-trained students singing village folk songs from written music (even though these are their own transcriptions). Kabanov was not impressed with it at the time: “They’d sing like academic singers – a different tune, but some kind of solfeggio was present nonetheless. Clean, clean singing, maybe loud, but average.” Indeed, Shchurov himself would later write that he and his singers used a “softened, academicized vocal manner.”

Kabanov must have expected similar results when he was approached by Pokrovsky, a balalaika player who had graduated from the Gnesin Institute, where Shchurov worked. Pokrovsky and his ensemble had a steady gig performing folk and jazz music for tourists in the Golden Room of the restaurant of the Hotel Rossiia. The ensemble included his wife at the time, Tamara Smyslova, a former

26 Viacheslav Shchurov, interview with author, Moscow, 9 November 1998. The first recording of the Folklore Ensemble of the Gnesins Institute was a 45 issued in 1968. The group also made LP recordings in 1977 and 1978.
soloist of the professional Omsk Folk Chorus; three accordionists; and a classically-trained trumpet player.  

When Pokrovsky announced that they intended to learn to sing the songs as the musicologists had transcribed them from their recordings, Kabanov thought to himself, “it’s nonsense, nothing will come of it.” Nevertheless, Kabanov gave Pokrovsky two songs, which he had notated from his own recordings: one was a bylina of the Tereg Cossacks, “Ne po moriu” [Not by sea]; the other was Kabanov’s “arrangement” of different versions of the Don Cossack song “Svetit mesiats rano s vechera” [The moon shines early in the evening].

Many would agree that Pokrovsky’s reappearance at the Folklore Commission with the group of six singers a month later marked the beginning of the folklore movement in Russia. Kabanov remembers:

And then a month or so later, he came. It was something tremendous. I remember it now. I remember where they were standing, and how it was. That is, you and I are sitting, and Gippius was there, and Leonid Pereverzev, a specialist in American music . . . So, imagine, one, two, three, four young men, [Pokrovsky,] and Tamara . . . We had heard several [folk groups] – the Gnesins Institute, Shchurov’s ensemble, . . . “Solovka.” They didn’t fire up any particular impressions at all . . . And suddenly these – to this day I remember that the sound itself amazed me. It was – it came tumbling down – it was incredibly powerful. It was probably loud, but the loudness wasn’t it, although it was loud . . . [It had] the effect of a huge chunk of emotions tumbling down, suddenly, without stopping, on the listener . . . This was hysterical, aggressive, but one’s own, completely engrossing, like as if – you should impress people [with your singing], but instead you say, “why should I impress them? I exist.” Strange feeling.

Kabanov’s comments point to a feeling of authenticity that Pokrovsky was able to get across. “Impressing people” was what the Soviet folk choruses did; Pokrovsky’s group did not participate in that showiness. They seemed to manage to avoid two pitfalls: being understated and academic, like Shchurov’s group, and being loud and showy in a swaggering way, like the folk chorus.

Pokrovsky’s group presented themselves as they were – saying “here I am,” like people communicating with other people. According to Kabanov and many others in the folklore revival movement, without this “hysterical, aggressive” yet “completely engrossing” sound of the Pokrovsky ensemble, there might not have been a mass youth folklore movement. The sound carried people away,

---

infected people. Kabanov recalls: “It didn’t just carry me away, it carried everyone away. After a concert, for 30, 40 minutes, we’d feel like we had taken drugs.” 29

Not only was the sound new; Pokrovsky had also figured out how to make the village songs come alive, to turn notes from a page into living music. Kabanov:

[They sang] my song, that I recorded. And suddenly it sounds like I’ve never heard it before. I didn’t hear it that way from the old men [in the village where I recorded it]. For me it was valuable as a melody, as a genre. As a local style. But living, as something that stirs me up, I couldn’t understand how it could be like that. . . . It was immediately obvious that he was doing some kind of improvisation. You had the impression that it was all yours, and here you have four young men, and Pokrovsky and Tamara . . . and it’s like you have six people, all composers. And most importantly, it was my song, after all, I had heard it 10 times, and transcribed it, and knew it well. 30

This comment implicitly reflects on the stereotype that had existed throughout the Stalin period and later, that groups that sang only ancient folk songs would come across like a “museum.” 31

Pokrovsky’s role in the youth folklore movement was to show that ancient folk music did not have to be a relic, passively presented in the form of dry, dusty, uninteresting examples of “how our forefathers lived”; emotionally speaking, it could be more “alive” than newly composed music.

Where did Pokrovsky get his ideas about this amazing sound? Whence the idea to sing this complex, polyphonic folk music that hardly anyone had ever heard, in this engaging and outlandish fashion?

As Pokrovsky’s former wife Tamara Smyslova describes it, there were two important influences in Pokrovsky’s choice to sing Russian village music. First, he had had contact with villages: he had been on expeditions with his mother, who was a researcher and teacher of folk art. Many of those in the folklore revival movement said that they became interested in folk music during fieldwork expeditions. In the Soviet Union, most future musicians, musicologists, linguists and literary scholars had to participate in at least one expedition to villages to collect samples of folklore as part of their required

28 Tamara Smyslova, interview with author, Moscow, 11 November 1998.
30 Kabanov, 13 November 1998.
31 See, for example, the response by N. Kotikova to an article by E. Rodygin. “O russkikh narodnykh khorakh,” Sovetskaia muzyka, no. 2 (1957): 153.
course-work. These requirements were instituted after World War II, and in many cases they are still in effect. Many students on such expeditions had never been in a village previously; here, they got acquainted with the daily life, culture, lore and music of Russian villages, which differed so greatly from urban culture.

Second, Pokrovsky and other leaders of the youth folklore movement received exposure to Russian village singing, instrumental music, dance and ritual through concerts of village folk performers held in Moscow and other major cities with active centers of folklore study. The concerts were organized by folklorists and musicologists, who would bring in groups that they had worked with in the field. At the concerts, these folklorists would typically provide commentary on the music and rituals presented.

Starting in 1966, a series of concerts was held at the Moscow House of Composers. At the second concert the audience was overflowing, sitting on the stage. Many of the young people in the audience were hearing “true” folklore, rather than the state’s stylized versions, for the first time. Smyslova remembers that her folklore teacher from music high school invited her to one of these concerts, and she brought Pokrovsky along. Afterwards, he was “fired up,” and became excited about introducing authentic instruments and vocal styles to his group’s repertoire.33

This music was made even more accessible by the work of musicologists like Viacheslav Shchurov, one of the organizers of the Moscow concert series. Based upon the popularity of the concerts, Shchurov began to put out records featuring just one or two villages each.34 To have accessible collections of the folk traditions of single villages meant that amateur folk music lovers could study and come to know these traditions in great detail.

Pokrovsky himself writes about the reasons for the formation of his ensemble in more theoretical terms, which bring us back again to Gippius and his study of folk music as inextricably interrelated with

32 Viacheslav Shchurov, 9 November 1998; see also I. Zemtsovskii, “Zatrubila trubushka rano na zare,” Sovetskaia muzyka, no. 3 (1967): 47.
33 Tamara Smyslova, 11 November 1998.
all other elements of a specific local culture. When Pokrovsky appeared in front of the Folklore Commission of the Union of Composers of the Russian Federation in 1973, as described above, his apparent intention was not only to receive approbation for a new performing ensemble, but also to propose acting as an experimental ensemble that could help the Commission (of which Gippius was a part) to learn about the rules of folk singing.

The Commission accepted this proposal and “adopted” the ensemble, giving it unofficial sponsorship. In a 1980 article, Pokrovsky describes the group as an experiment which was still then ongoing. The group would learn songs from transcriptions made by musicologists, then travel to villages and sing the songs with the people from whom the material was originally collected. Through their interactions with village groups, the experimenters would try to discover what were the essential rules for singing particular local styles of village polyphony. What were the functions of the various musical parts within the collective?

This kind of work was entirely new. The idea of singing village-style, polyphonic, unarranged choral music was not strictly unique in the history of Russian music – it had been done previously in the early twentieth century by the Piatnitsky Peasant Chorus and Evgeniia Lineva’s chorus. For folklorists to work with urban performers in a chorus was not entirely an innovation, either, since Lineva had done that. But for urban intellectuals to go to villages specifically to learn how to sing from peasants was a completely new idea.

According to Natalia Giliarova, professor of musicology at Moscow State Conservatory and leader of a revivalist folk ensemble, her group and many others like it would not have started had it not been for Pokrovsky’s ensemble. “He discovered – for me, at least – that a person who doesn’t

---

34 A 1992 catalog of published recordings of authentic folk music (on LPs and 45s) lists 92 entries under Russian and Cossack folklore. See I. Zemtsovskii, Muzykal’nyi fol’klor na gramplastinkakh: opyt diskografii (Moscow, 1992).

35 In fact, I have not been able to ascertain what the quality of the Folklore Commission’s sponsorship of the Pokrovsky ensemble was. Apparently, even if the ensemble was registered as an official research group of the Folklore Commission, this did not mean that they had permission to perform as a performing group. The group was unofficial from its inception until 1978. Levin, 20.
specifically study voice, can sing like that.” Giliarova and others in the movement recounted numerous stories of shy, polite urban young people learning to sing — that is, literally and figuratively “finding their voices” — in villages. Many of the ensembles in the revival movement utilized Pokrovsky’s basic approach of learning how to sing from villagers.

Later, looking back on his work, Pokrovsky called it “populism”; indeed, it had a lot in common with the populist movements of the late nineteenth century, when intellectuals traveled to villages seeking sources of wisdom in the peasants. In this case, the populism consisted not only in “going to the peasants,” but in bringing the music back to share with other intellectuals in the cities. Another fresh aspect of Pokrovsky’s approach was the idea of experimenting. Previously, no performing group had presented itself as a laboratory which could help to reveal truths about folk culture. In 1998, Kabanov was still carrying on this tradition by holding “laboratories” in which urban young people would sing alongside village dwellers.

As stated in Pokrovsky’s 1980 article, the premise for this experiment was that the “rules” that govern participation in any folklore presentation are unwritten and not consciously known. One cannot ask singers why they sing a certain way, or participants in a wedding why they say or do a certain thing. Pokrovsky proposed that, given such a state of affairs, it might be important to study folklore “from inside.” Of course, he wrote, such study is not easy because there is no “school” from which one can learn, and furthermore, anytime an outsider tries to enter a folkloric situation (such as a wedding) his or her presence changes that very situation. Thus, an entire ensemble separate from the village group but learning from and imitating them, would be able to model the “most important laws of folklore presentation,” to “produce the processes and situations which come up in authentic ensembles.”

38 In September, 1998 I witnessed Kabanov’s “Laboratory” at the biennial folk festival in a large village, Vorob’evka, in Voronezh oblast. The experiment that Kabanov constructed that day was quite challenging. Some music students from Voronezh walked out of the room in protest (and perhaps, out of fear of embarrassment) after Kabanov asked them to learn a song by singing it together with villagers.
39 Pokrovsky, 246-250.
In their visits with authentic ensembles, this experimental group could use their novice status as a way of learning about the music. They would substitute one of their singers for one of a village group’s, sing the song, and ask the group for their reaction. Or they would simply sing the song themselves, “as transcribed,” and ask for the group’s reaction. As Pokrovsky describes it, songs learned in this way were often not recognized by the people from whom they were originally collected: when one “keeps all the elements of the tradition, that is, when one keeps the melody, the texture, and the rhythm, but takes away the micro-form – the transitional processes between the stable . . . sounds – then the work is practically not recognized by the folk performers, they see it as belonging to another culture, it loses esthetic value for them. Even more, to their ear the work sounds very strongly distorted.”

Pokrovsky’s statement suggests the existence of a large gulf in understanding between village and urban dwellers. To the villagers, music sung from notes was not “their music.” But Smyslova remembers that there were several instances when in fact the villagers could give good advice to their urban “students.” When the urban revivalists tried to substitute themselves for members of a village singing group, the village singers were often able to tell them what they were doing wrong. “For example, Pokrovsky would ask that I, as a dishkant [descant], would sing instead of their dishkant. . . . And I remember, when I was in one small village [in a Don Cossack region], khutor’ Iamenskii, the babushka told me, “You weave more, weave. Why are you standing still with your voice? Wag it, weave it more.” And I started to weave, to wander around more with my voice, and I felt that it became easier for the others who were singing with me, and for me, too, of course.”

One of the methods of analysis utilized by Pokrovsky’s experimental group was a recent invention that musicologists studying choral folk singing had started to use. The method was “multi-track recording,” in which separate microphones or recorders were set up for each member (or each two members) of a village singing collective, capturing each individual part in all its variations.

---

40 Pokrovsky, 251.
41 Smyslova, 11 November 1998.
42 This method of recording was first used at the Department of Folk Music at Moscow State Conservatory. See A. Rudneva, V. Shchurov, and S. Pushkina, *Russkie narodnye pesni v mnogomikrofonnoi zapisi* (Moscow, 1979), 3.
Musicologists would transport village singing groups from various parts of Russia to Moscow and Leningrad, and would record the singers at their institutions; or, when the technology, personnel and transportation existed, they would bring the recorders to the performers. Using the recordings, they would painstakingly transcribe each part into Western musical notation. It was transcriptions of this detailed nature that Pokrovsky’s group obtained from Kabanov; they also had their own group recorded on multiple tracks so that their work could be more accurately analyzed.43

This gesture of recording themselves might suggest that the Pokrovsky ensemble singers viewed themselves as tantamount to folk informants. Indeed, the group went on to teach other newly forming folk music revival groups all over the Soviet Union. However, as Pokrovsky has said, this work in disseminating the craft of authentic Russian folk singing concentrated on creating “singing folklorists,” not in creating imitations of the Pokrovsky singers.44 In their turn, the Pokrovsky ensemble members were not, strictly speaking, imitating the villagers they learned from, but were trying to discover the secrets of local traditions.

As they learned a given song, the Moscow singers did not try to become someone else, to become the person whose part they learned; rather, they tried, as an ensemble, to approximate how the song would sound if they could learn the hidden rules of the tradition. They aimed to create a performance of a given song that would theoretically satisfy the villagers from whom it was “borrowed.” The subtlety of this approach partly explains the broad success of the Pokrovsky Ensemble: it satisfied intellectual audiences’ expectations of complexity and freshness because its members were always creating, always original, always “themselves.”

To be sure, for some folklorists and musicologists, being “oneself” in the performance of folk music is wrongheaded because it involves adapting rural music to the aesthetic tastes of urban audiences. This philosophical issue pointing to identity and its implications, and the moral question of what folk performance should be, proved to be a central point of controversy in the movement. Purist and liberal

44 Levin, 24.
factions developed. Those who followed the lead of the Pokrovsky ensemble took a liberal approach to folk culture: they believed that they could perform material from many regional traditions, that nearly any material was fair game as long as it was interesting to audiences, and that exposing audiences to elements of ancient pagan and Christian traditions was worthwhile in and of itself.

Meanwhile, the purists tended to specialize in one regional tradition, mastering it as well as possible; they believed that certain material (particularly material with hints of eroticism, or songs that originated in written traditions, such as romances) was not valuable and should not be shown on stage; thought that entertainment was not a worthy goal; and finally, attempted to educate audiences rather than simply to expose them to Russian folk material.

**Dissemination**

Livingston writes that “revivals almost always have a strong pedagogical component in order to pass on the tradition in a controlled manner.” The Pokrovsky Ensemble engaged in pedagogy in a number of ways: perhaps most importantly, it made its concerts into an opportunity for educating audiences. For the first five or six years, the ensemble was underground; and for three or four of those years, the KGB actually prohibited their performances. At the same time, a KGB man was organizing underground concerts for the group, and was getting large audiences to attend.\(^{45}\)

This bizarre twist emphasizes the extent to which dissidence was an essential component of the Soviet system under Brezhnev. While the group was not “dissident,” its activities were not officially sanctioned; this was the status of many artists who did not fit into Soviet mainstream culture in that period. In the 1970s it was not uncommon for artists of all kinds pursuing slightly eccentric styles or subject matter to have their works banned or not officially sanctioned.

As Smyslova tells it, their underground status worked to their advantage. They had a dedicated audience and a lot of artistic freedom. For example, Pokrovsky had studied religious music on his own, and introduced spiritual music to the group’s repertoire. “We had concerts at the Znamenskii Cathedral
near the Hotel Rossiia . . . , which at that time was a concert hall; we gave a concert there every month. And there were legends circulating around Moscow, at the end of the 70s, that some underground ensemble gets together at the cathedral and sings spiritual music.”

Because of the long-standing Soviet persecution of religious expression, the performance of spiritual material was strictly controlled. The audience at the underground concerts was loyal and would attend regularly, which permitted Pokrovsky to experiment with different concert programs and methods of presenting folklore. Smyslova’s description of their early concerts is worth quoting in full (with my questions in italics):

We showed folk songs, folk theater, songs from various oblasts of Russia, and a spiritual program, and a program of drawn-out songs [protiazhye pesni]. Drawn-out songs had to be in their own program, since [Pokrovsky] dreamed of singing drawn-out songs from beginning to end. He’d say, why should we only sing five verses, or only three because it’s too long. Look at the text, why is it that people used to sing it all? And in this program we sang songs from the beginning to the end.

**How many songs did you sing in such a concert?**
I’d have to look. But as a rule, not too many. We had to educate the audience. . . . He’d speak about the songs, where we collected them and from whom, but the content of the song is hard to tell. He’d say, you listen to what the precentor [zapevala] sings. Mostly, he sings the whole content, and then it is developed [raspevaetsia]. They sing on additional vowels, a o e i, it’s generally singing on vowels. And the drawn-out song has a lot of this inner development [raspeta vnutri]. He’d say, the content isn’t that important. But as a rule, the precentor will tell you it. For that reason, the audience would sit there and listen to what the precentor said.

**Did the audience react well to what you sang?**
Well, we had our own audience, we had prepared them for that. And Pokrovsky never tried to entertain. I see that nowadays, everyone tries to make the public laugh, to entertain them. But he always made their minds work, so that they’d exert themselves. And I think that when a person starts to understand that which he couldn’t understand earlier, which was unattainable for him, there’s a joy in that, and a person starts to feel differently about himself. . . . [Pokrovsky] was a scholar, so he didn’t have texts learned by rote, written especially for the concert; he improvised the whole time. He’d constantly study new data, his research would show here. And I really loved to listen to his commentary on the songs. Because I always found more and more new ideas of his.46

Smyslova’s description of the concerts suggests that from the beginning, one of the main enterprises of the ensemble was to educate. This was important because the music they were presenting

---

45 Levin, 20-22.
was at first totally unknown to the urban intellectual audiences. Making the concerts into a lecture-demonstration was a means of assuring that they had an audience who would listen appreciatively to their experimental performances. After all, at folklore concerts Soviet audiences were used to slick, entertaining performances of upbeat dances and lyrical romances.

Furthermore, they were accustomed to a version of folklore that anyone could understand. There were no unfamiliar dialects, no mysteries, no traditions with unspoken complex rules or ancient ritual beliefs, such as was the folklore that the Pokrovsky ensemble presented. This kind of folklore could have been monotonous or even boring, since it was so unfamiliar and since part of the tradition often involves the rendition of long texts that might be incomprehensible to urban dwellers. However, the material was put into context by Pokrovsky’s lectures, which often involved theories about the music’s style and the underlying reasons why the tradition evolved the way it did. Pokrovsky emphasized the relationship between geography and musical style, and told audiences about Slavic pagan traditions. Furthermore, the material was presented by the group with an energy and an emotional impact that was fresh and new. Of course, this impact was the subject of some controversy, mostly centering around the idea that the group’s performances distorted the true nature of Russian folk singing.

The pedagogical impulse occupied the group not only during concerts but outside of concerts, as well. Because the Pokrovsky ensemble had spent time learning how to learn local Russian folk traditions, they could pass on their methods to eager pupils among their concert-goers. After concerts, audience members who had gotten “fired up” about this music would ask how they could learn to sing this music in this manner.

As a result, in 1979, Pokrovsky and others from his ensemble formed a “Pokrovsky Ensemble Studio” and registered it as an official club at a House of Culture in Moscow. During the 1980s the group had several such studios at whatever Houses of Culture were available: the Society of the Blind, the

---

41 Levin, 17, 24; and personal memories of Pokrovsky ensemble concerts in Boston in 1987 and 1991.
42 See my manuscript, Making Memory: Russian Folk Music Revival and the Fashioning of Cultural Identity, for further development of this point.
Dukat Tobacco Factory, the Red Textile Workers, and the Saliut Factory in Moscow. The studio’s leaders sometimes received a small salary for their work. Every week, 20 to 30 young people would come, ranging in age from 18-30. When the studios were established, Pokrovsky started to announce them in the ensemble’s concerts. He would invite anyone in the audience to attend.49

As Kabanov describes it, the studios were not run like a class or club in folk singing. Instead, they were open to anyone who wanted to come, no matter how well or badly they sang. People came one time or many times, as they pleased, and no one kept track of attendance. The casual attitude and the notion that anyone could sing were new in the Soviet context. Even the amateur choirs had professional directors, followed a schedule, and had a regular roster of participants. They reflected the professionalism of the utopian Soviet society, even if they were amateurs.

By contrast, the studio’s approach represented an attitude more typical of folk culture itself: everyone was a participant. Kabanov would later flesh out and implement more intensively this theory that anyone could sing, no matter their given talent. In 1998, he reflected that he was “still checking this [thesis] every day,” by allowing people without a musical “ear” to participate in group singing.

The Pokrovsky ensemble also worked on disseminating their music and approach outside of Moscow. After being an unofficial performing group for five or six years, the group received a contract with RosKontsert, the Russian Concert Agency in 1978. This meant that the group would travel and perform all over the country, often in out-of-the-way places. Pokrovsky recalled: “We’d have an official performance and no one would come. But the next day, we’d arrange a performance for students in a conservatory or university or college. Students knew about us already. We had discussions, and we started to use the time that we spent in towns to teach students how to work with folksingers. We had expeditions with local students; we started to create groups like our group.”50

**Syncretism and collectivism [sobornost’]**

At the roots of the folklore revival movement were two concepts that had become accepted in certain types of studies of folklore. These were: syncretism, the view that all folk phenomena are inextricably related; and collectivism or sobornost’, the notion that Russian rural culture is collective in nature, and that folk traditions necessarily reflect that social structure.

That syncretism underlies the basic philosophy of the Russian folk revival movement may be seen in the fact that it is hard to pinpoint exactly what area of culture this movement belongs to. Certainly, it is a revival of Russian folk music traditions; but it is more than that. Revivalist performing groups that only sing and play instruments are very few. The majority of the amateur groups are interested in many aspects of village traditions, such as costume (including weaving and embroidery), everyday life, cooking, childcare, healing (including incantations and herbalism), craft making, holiday rituals, folk theater, dancing, and tale telling. Their performances reflect many of these interests.

As Smyslova described, the Pokrovsky ensemble’s early concerts represented many aspects of village life: for example, the group researched and performed folk theater pieces such as “The Boat,” “Kostroma,” and “Tsar Maximilian.” On their field expeditions, they learned how to dance in the local manner; subsequently, in their performances, they always danced those songs that were traditionally accompanied by dancing (dance songs, pliasovye).

Unlike the Russian folk choruses, they did not employ a choreographer to re-arrange steps from village traditions into a harmonious stage piece⁵¹; the steps and movements were not done uniformly and in unison; and they did not employ separate dancers to do the dances. Just as in a village, everyone in the ensemble danced and sang or played instruments; all dance movements were improvised according to the local style. Furthermore, the group learned about local holidays and ancient pagan and Christian practices and beliefs, and Pokrovsky told about these in his lectures, linking them with the song traditions.

⁵⁰ Levin, 23.
⁵¹ Later they did employ a choreographer, Evgeniia Rudneva, a Bolshoi-trained ballerina and the daughter of musicologist Anna Rudneva. I did not speak to Rudneva, but those who spoke about her said that she made herself into a specialist on authentic Russian folk dancing and, in keeping with the revivalist philosophy, was interested in studying and notating the village dances rather than transforming them into choreographed set pieces. Smyslova, 11 November 1998.
Sometimes the group would act rituals out in their concerts (for example, Christmas rituals or wedding scenes). The group also incorporated into concerts verbal texts (fairy tales or humorous tales) told in dialect.

This approach was continued by the other ensembles formed according to the Pokrovsky model. In 1998-99, I was repeatedly told by ensemble leaders that true folk performers do not “specialize” in one aspect of the tradition. Because of this belief, many of the youth ensembles are run in such a way that everyone learns to do many aspects of folk arts, with a gender division.

For instance, in the Moscow children’s folklore school “Veretëntse” [little spindle] the boys become proficient in sword fighting, folk theater declamation, and playing folk horns [rozhki] while the girls learn to play pan pipes [kugikly] and make costumes, and become acquainted with folk methods of child care. The urban children learn in rehearsals and classes what rural children of their gender might have learned, in previous years, through exposure to adults’ activities. In the ensemble children of both genders learn to sing and dance, but they focus on different traditions in their same-sex classes: the boys immerse themselves into Cossack men’s singing while the girls learn the songs that make up a wedding.52

A related idea in revivalism is sobornost’, an important concept in Slavophile thought. According to Aleksei Khomiakov, Russians achieved a kind of free or spontaneous unity by linking themselves economically, politically, and through common rituals of everyday life; they benefited from identifying with the group rather than considering their interests separately from those of the group.53 This concept was applied to Russian village music-making as well; in the early twentieth century Lineva wrote:

If the ideal of a disciplined chorus is the submission of the whole to the personality of the conductor, then a folk chorus represents, on the other hand, the free merging of many personalities into one whole. . . . A folk chorus sings not “like one person” but like many

52 See discussion of the ways that this ensemble’s program reflects syncretism in Elena A. Krasnopedeva and Olga V. Velichkina, “Proekt detskoi shkoly narodnogo tvorchestva,” Sokhranenie i vozrozhdenie fol’klornykh traditsii, ed. A. A. Banin (Moscow, 1990), 178. Information also based upon author’s observation of rehearsal 19 November, 1998, and conversation with Krasnopedeva, same date.
people, inspired by their common feeling of love for the song, pouring out into it their grief and joy.\textsuperscript{54}

Lineva’s pronouncement reflects the notion of \textit{sobornost’} in its negotiation of a paradox: every singer expresses his or her individual personality, yet each one gives his or her attention, love, and care to the whole. This idea became a leitmotiv of the folk revival movement in the late twentieth century, and formed another contrast to the way Soviet folk choruses performed. If, in the Soviet folk chorus, the push towards professionalism tended to promote certain individuals as soloists, then these revivalist singing groups eschewed solos, soloists, and all kinds of specializations and hierarchies in favor of group singing in which everyone participates. If Soviet-style folk singing in choruses involved submitting to the direction of the conductor, then revivalist groups sang without a conductor, and often without obvious leadership. In fact, the revivalists would eschew even the terminology of the Soviet folk choruses: their groups were not choruses but collectives, groups or ensembles.\textsuperscript{55}

The Pokrovsky Ensemble initiated an important ritual that helped to create a musical semblance of \textit{sobornost’}. The group would begin every rehearsal by singing a single pitch in unison (often on the vowel ‘e’) while standing in a circle. This was very different than the scales and exercises used in Western-oriented singing groups to warm up the voice. As Kabanov analyzes it, the use of unison and the attention to breath were probably two of Pokrovsky’s greatest contributions to folk singing practice. “In unison is a whole world. There are overtones, there is coordination of yourself with the ensemble, you

\textsuperscript{54} E. Lineva, \textit{Velikorusskie pesni v narodnoi garmonizatsii}, vyp. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1904), xxix. Lineva’s use of the term “artel” to mean “singing collective” was often cited by later musicologists. “Artel” (Russ. \textit{artel’} from Italian \textit{artieri}, artisans) means workers’ cooperative, referring to the Russian tradition in which artisans formed cooperative craft societies. Thus, Lineva tacitly situates singing as a kind of craft, and underlines the self-organizing feature of village craft societies. See Alison Hilton, \textit{Russian Folk Art} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 42-49; etymology of “artel” from \textit{Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language. Unabridged}. (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam, 1961), 123.

\textsuperscript{55} When I first started investigating the folk revival movement in 1998, I had to learn new terminology. I learned quickly that if I asked revivalists whether they had a chorus, they would say no; but if I asked whether they had a collective or ensemble, they would say yes. This was sometimes explained to me as a designation of quantity: choruses were large, and ensembles were small. However, it may have had something do to with the Soviet adoption of the term “chorus” for its folk choruses, and revivalists’ desire to avoid such associations.
feel another person, you adjust, you’re always in dialogue. There’s protection: you protect and you are protected with the use of that circle.”

Probably the kind of emotional closeness Kabanov talks of here was another reason for the Pokrovsky Ensemble’s success in performing. Group members who felt themselves “protected” in this way were likely able to take risks, to expose themselves on stage, to be emotionally open to the audience. According to Kabanov, however, it is not the unison technique alone which causes the feeling of protectedness. It is in the nature of folk performance and the folk song for the individual to feel protected in the context of the collective. In sobornost’, one does not feel the group as a hindrance to one’s freedom; rather, one feels that one’s relation to the collective provides the safety that allows the expression of individuality.

Such a sense of collectivity was a goal, if not a reality, to many of the groups in the folklore revival movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Many used the Pokrovsky technique of beginning every practice by singing a single tone in unison. Whether or not sobornost’ was created through this ritual, the existence of common rituals (such as the unison singing) throughout the movement helped to link the individual performing groups into a coherent “movement” with its own traditions. Indeed, although this movement was intended to “preserve” Russian folklore, in reality one of its most important features consists in its creation of a culture and a folklore of Russian folk revival.

**Genetic Memory**

Besides local village singing traditions, Pokrovsky was interested in “roots,” that is, the regional heritage of a given Soviet person. The Pokrovsky Ensemble concerts were designed to get people thinking about their roots in a different way than they had previously. Apparently, this campaign was successful: Pokrovsky partly attributes the group’s popularity to the fact that they gave audiences a sense of identity. “Before, what was supported and what was put on the stage as serious culture was something that looked or sounded Russian, but was really just a Russian variant of Western culture . . . By contrast,

---

we were showing something that was born in Russia; something that had roots in Russia. And most important – we didn’t sing Russian folk songs. We sang Smolensk songs, Belgorod songs, Don Cossack songs. The intelligentsia wouldn’t have accepted us if we had presented Russian music merely as ‘Russian.’ We – and our audiences – were very far from being nationalists.” That is, the audiences were by and large composed of urban artistic intelligentsia who tended to be politically liberal. He implies that although these people were not nationalists, they were hungry for a sense of identity that was truly Russian, not having its roots in Western culture. The Russian folk choruses had offered a version of Western culture; but the new revivlarist ensemble was giving a glimpse of Russia’s cultural roots, which were regional in nature.

For Pokrovsky it was not enough to know if one was Russian or Ukrainian; he wanted to know where one’s “people” were from. Pokrovsky would say that he himself had Cossack roots and attributed his interest and aptitude for Cossack music to this fact. Smyslova’s mother had been from the Don region, so she said this was why she also felt an affinity to Don Cossack traditions. Smyslova remembers that in the late 1970s they took two new women into the ensemble, one studying to be an actress and the other a literature and language student. It turned out that the actress was from Minsk, and Pokrovsky said that she should sing Western Russian songs. He said, “we need to look for our common Slavic roots at the border with Belorussia.” So they went as an ensemble to this area to study this style.

As for the literature student, who spoke “in a whisper,” Pokrovsky tried to find “her” tradition. “It turned out that her father was from Belgorod oblast, and when she went for the first time to Belgorod oblast, never having been in a village, and just went as if to her . . . unknown relatives, where her father is from – it turned out that she had a colossal voice.” The implication was that if one could ascertain one’s regional roots, one would naturally feel “at home” in the indigenous traditions from that area.

This notion of regional “roots” probably had its origins, again, in opposition. In the comment by Pokrovsky, above, it is clear that he means to define Russian culture against the mainstream Soviet-

57 Levin, 24.
58 Smyslova, 11 November 1998.
inherited definition of it. The concept of regional folklore styles was a core issue in the revivallist movement; the corollary principle of regional genetic links also became a common theme in the work of the revivallist groups, so that in 1998-99 I heard several revivallists attribute their interest or affinity toward a given tradition to their own family roots. Often, people mentioned they loved Cossack singing because of their Cossack roots. Indeed, sometimes it seemed as though Cossack roots were the most coveted ones; and that to have Cossack roots fully justified one’s interest in Cossack traditions.

A related idea appeared somewhat later in the movement, and was widespread when I was studying the movement in 1998-99. This was the notion of genetic memory, in which it was presumed that everyone had a kind of unconscious knowledge of folk traditions, which could be awakened through exposure to folklore. It was not the same as the regional roots concept, which emphasized diversity in Russian folk culture; rather, the “genetic memory” notion indicated that anything pertaining to Russian folk culture (no matter from which regional tradition) would awaken one’s long-dormant memory. A Russian would recognize and begin to appreciate Russian folk traditions. This was a nationalistic version of Pokrovsky’s conception of roots. It is interesting that while this view is different from Pokrovsky’s regionalism, the two views are not seen to be mutually exclusive by those who hold them. In fact, some of those who are interested in nationalist versions of “genetic memory” are also regionalists.

One can see this combination of regionalism and nationalism in the work of a Moscow ensemble called “Cossack Circle,” a purist regionalist ensemble that only performs music of Cossacks, and does so in an extremely authentic manner.59 In 1988 Volodia Skuntsev, the leader of the ensemble, clearly stated the nationalist “genetic memory” principle:

We need to wake up the genetic memory of our compatriots any way we can, to pester them, even surprise them with ‘memories.’ It’s impossible that our people would agree to the substitution of our culture, with its deep, thousand-year-old roots, for someone else’s defiantly garish, unceremonious, . . . in short, foreign culture. But that disastrous process of substitution is ongoing. And gradually, imperceptibly, in a frontal attack it takes root, is screwed in to our daily life, into the minds, hearts, and souls of adolescents.60

Here Skuntsev repeats a commonplace in the mythology of Russian nationalism and Slavophilism: namely, that Russian culture is at risk of disappearing because of invading foreign cultures. But, as the myth states, Russians will not allow this to happen, because their culture lies deep in their collective memory. The argument is essentially the same as the one made in the late nineteenth century about the “death of the folk song.” That is, it is presumed that “invading” foreign cultures (such as Western culture’s importation into Russia after Stalin’s death) will cause the demise of traditional Russian culture, unless something is done. This view of national roots is drawn from a Romantic conception of folklore, in which the culture of the rural people is said to express the national spirit, and change is viewed as destructive to the mythic “tradition.”

The notion became popular in the Russian nationalist revival that took place with Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost. The debates of the late 1980s contained much rhetoric criticizing the West for its decadent, morally corrupt culture; nationalist writers and politicians implied that Western culture was being exported in an attempt to harm Russia. Skuntsev’s comment, with its reference to a “frontal attack” against Russian culture, draws upon this notion. Compare a remark made in 1987 by novelist Yuri Bondarev, who laments the popularity of punk rock music, and suggests that it had been brought to Russia to undermine Russian culture: “Who brought this music to us? The radio? TV? Our Komsomol publications? Western American voices? Everyone who amuses himself with this music should himself understand at some time [. . .] who formed it, in whose name, and what it leads to, what its sense is.”

Skuntsev’s comment hints at a solution to the problem that Bondarev presents – that is, a return to “tradition.” Because of his reference to folk music as a saving grace for Russia, Skuntsev draws upon

61 Slavophile Aleksei Khomiakov argued, for example, that Russians were by nature more social and receptive and less individualistic and warlike than other nations, and therefore were more susceptible to foreign conquest and the loss of their national identity. See Walicki, 219.


63 Yu. Bondarev, Sovetskaia kul’tura, 18 July 1987, 6, quoted in Judith Devlin, Slavophiles and Commissars: Enemies of Democracy in Modern Russia (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 5. Bondarev is not a village prose writer, but some of the village prose writers have joined him in supporting the views of nationalist, fascist organizations like Pamiat’. See Parthe, 96.
nationalist conceptions of the *narod*, the people. According to this theory, the common people have always been Russia’s salvation. Another Russian nationalist thinker wrote in 1990: “Salvation depends upon closeness to tradition, on the ability to feel the courage of the people, to feel its history.”

Whether views such as this underlie the entire folk music revival movement in Russia is unclear. In the passage quoted above, Pokrovsky denied being a nationalist. He indicated that his group’s interest in *regional* styles precluded their promotion of a monolithic Russian identity. Indeed, the two notions of roots – one based in regional traditions, the other based in national ones – have as ideological background two different conceptions of folklore. As mentioned earlier, Pokrovsky’s ideological heritage comes from Gippius and other folklorists who studied the interrelationship of various folk traditions, the relation of folk culture to everyday life, the formation of regional styles, and the role played by geographical influences. They were interested in studying the processes of change, as well as the “constants” in rural areas. By contrast, the nationalist view is based upon the Romantic conception of folklore in which change is viewed as negative.

While the regionalist and nationalist views have different ideological bases, they may not be so separate as one might suppose. In fact, all revivalist theory and practice favors a constructed notion of “tradition” over change. The very notion of revival implies the existence of a definable tradition which needs to be preserved. It is obvious that the Pokrovsky Ensemble had interest in searching for the “true nature” of Russian identity (one may see this in their search for Slavic roots near the border of Belorussia, for example). Their performance of regional styles was an attempt to redefine Russianness; the notion of Russianness itself as an entity which could be understood and studied served as an important backdrop for their efforts.

One can see the nationalist “roots” of revivalism more clearly in the work of ensembles that copied the Pokrovsky repertoire and approach to folk music performance. Some of these have had no reason to carefully downplay their concern with Russian identity; after the dissolution of the Soviet

---

Union, the dismantling of the Community Party power structure and the revocation of censorship, it was no longer necessary to hide nationalist ideas.

Perhaps as a result, I discovered in 1998-99 that many revivalist groups, while not calling themselves nationalist, accepted the nationalist notion of genetic memory. The revivalist groups could be classified according to the degree of their acceptance of these two important concepts, regionalism and nationalism. Some of the groups that imitated the Pokrovsky ensemble approach embraced both regionalism and nationalism, while others favored one or the other underlying philosophy. Curiously, there was no correlation with the “purist” and “liberal” categories I suggested earlier. Some of the nationalist groups were purists who tried to copy folklore exactly as it was heard from village informants; others who had nationalistic leanings were liberal in their approach to folklore’s regional authenticity, and would sing anything from any region of Russia, as long as it was of interest to audiences.65

65 The complex ideological affiliations of the groups making up the folk revival movement in Russia are discussed in more detail in my manuscript, Making Memory: Russian Folk Music Revival and the Fashioning of Cultural Identity.