# Nature, *Narod* and Emotion: Engaging Socialist Realism and the Arts in Kyrgyzstan

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**Abstract:** In aiming to rethink the project of socialist realism while shedding new light on the arts in Kyrgyzstan, this article highlights the project of the pre-Soviet Russian avant-garde as it morphed into that of Soviet socialist realism and the way in which this project changed alongside the conditions of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. In presenting continued engagement with the Soviet project through the persona of a single artist and composer, Alexei Alexandrovich Agibalov, this article offers a glimpse of the ongoing historical circumstances within which contemporary artists live and create. The affective experiences, memories, and engagements with the natural world presented in this article offer a rare glimpse into the individual world of Soviet and post-Soviet artists. They also provide insight into the larger histories and social processes from which art extends. The same Soviet cultural policies which brought about the concept of *narod* and the resulting constructions of ethnicity and nation have also formed a distinctive artistic tradition – socialist realism- with which contemporary artists, knowingly or unknowingly, remain closely engaged.

**Keywords:** Socialist Realism, Russian guitar, music, Soviet composers, Shostakovich, ethno-nationalism, Kyrgyzstan

## Art as Dialogue

Mikhail Bakhtin has demonstrated that art must be seen as a polyphonic dialogue, spanning time and space: the term polyphonic makes use of a musical metaphor eliciting the sonic image of countless and often contradictory voices resounding simultaneously. Likewise, the word "dialogue" evokes a rich and animated process of mutual engagement enabling ongoing change and growth (Bakhtin 1982). Applied to the arts in Kyrgyzstan, this theoretical frame enables illumination of the interactions between Russian and Kyrgyz artists and arts wrought by joint participation in the Soviet Union. Within this analysis clear distinctions between pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet dissipate: the lives of artists span these political periods even as their art continues into eras and contexts unimaginable to their original creators.

In aiming to rethink the project of socialist realism while shedding new light on the arts in Kyrgyzstan, the first portion of this article highlights the project of the pre-Soviet Russian avant-garde as it morphed into that of Soviet socialist realism. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, engagement with the Soviet project did not cease; rather, it changed alongside the conditions of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. In presenting continued engagement with the Soviet project through the persona of a single artist, Alexei Alexandrovich Agibalov, the second portion of this article offers a glimpse of the ongoing historical circumstances within which

contemporary artists live and create. The information presented on Alexei Alexandrovich is a synthesis of informal conversations held between October 2011 and June 2012 as part of a larger research project. The conversation with Alexei Alexandrovich is illuminated through an impulse towards social transformation that gained force among Russian artists even as society pushed towards revolution (1917) that would dismantle the Tsarist system, replacing it with that of the Soviet Union.

**The Russian Avant-Garde and the Soviet Project of Social Transformation**

According to Boris Groys, socialist realism as advocated by the Soviet Union arose from the interplay of numerous and often divergent voices within two interwoven threads of thought: the notion of the artist as shaman, prophet and visionary and the notion of art as a means of social transformation (Groys 1992). These ideas grew in part from an Eastward looking Russia that conceptualized itself as irrational, primitive, and driven by the unconscious. These constructions were made in opposition to Western rationalism and in an attempt to overstep the West by overcoming history and progress: in casting an oriental gaze and embracing an Orientalized self, Russian intellectuals and artists were seeking an alternative to the dominant ideas of 'modernity' modeled by Europe.

Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution artistic and intellectual encounters with the 'Other' brought an influx of new imagery amidst the building push for transformation. The nature of such encounters, and the ways in which they came to be incorporated into emerging revolutionary identities, calls into question any notion of a one-way flow of culture between Russia and its subaltern, among which the Caucuses, Siberia and Central Asia are included. For instance, the idea of artist as shaman was prevalent in the work of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). Kandinsky had become fascinated with the idea during his work as an ethnographer among the Finno-Ugric, Lapp, and Siberian people of Imperial Russia (Weis, 1995). Kandinsky was also inspired by Persian miniatures (Daftari 1992). The futuristic poet, Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922), imported a messianic nature to his concept of the artist from Iran where he served in the Russian Imperial Army (Khlebnikov 1990). Likewise, the composer Alexander Scryabin (1872-1915), deeply engaged with the myth of Dionysus, maintained the view that "the artist, as a microcosm, could affect the macrocosm of human activity" (Morrison 1998: 287).

Many scholars have attributed Scryabin's interests in combining sound with light and sense to synesthesia, a neurological condition in which stimulation of one sensory pathway leads to experience in another, such as the perception of numbers as having color. I argue instead that synesthesia was a symptom of the times: not only were Russian artists beginning to collapse the barriers between mediums, they were moving from art as a means of representing the world to a means of transforming it. According to Groys the most articulate of these transformative voices was Kazimir Malevich (1897-1935) who postulated that God could be replaced by the artist-analyst. In this process, all art would cease and the entirety of the material world including

mankind would be built according to a single artistic plan, a plan that eventually came to be dictated by Joseph Stalin (d. 1953) (Groys 1992).

Groys observes that socialist realism brought with it a new definition of mimeses or 'imitation': Unable to imitate the internal spiritual reality of medieval art or the externally observable reality of the Renaissance, art came to imitate the essence of the utopian future; the artist carefully selected those aspects of history and art which could bring that vision into being (Groys 1992). Through multi-directional flows of cultures, these reinterpreted myths came to coexist and even mix with those that predated them. In Kyrgyzstan today a continued impulse toward the incantation of society is exemplified in the current push to rename Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, "Manas" after the epic hero who is said to have founded the current nation by uniting 40 tribes. In renaming the city it is hoped that repetition of the hero's name will channel the "cosmic energy" of the Kyrgyz people, enacting positive change in Kyrgyzstan. [1] This hope is connected to longstanding beliefs that position Manas –and epic recitation- as an active spiritual force (Aitpaeva 2009). Soviet elevation of the Manas epic, however, has enabled indigenous beliefs and practices to intermingle with Soviet ideas of art (Prior 2002).

## The Inseparability of the Political and the Aesthetic

In Russia as well as the five autonomous regions of Soviet Central Asia the project of social transformation was supported by the discipline of ethnography (Hirsch 2009). In creating the Soviet Union (1922), Party leaders and activists sought to define, solidify and dispel the backwardness of the many ethnicities and nations that comprised it, a project that occupied much of the 1920s and 30s. In doing so, Bolshevik leaders were joined by local reformists such as the Jadids who, in the late 1920s, hoped to promote nationalism, education and socialist reform without abandoning Islam (Adeeb 1998). For Khalid Adeeb, the Soviet Union's and Party's embrace of the equalizing force of Marxist theory separated it from the colonial projects of Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. Still, the Bolsheviks were faced with the question of what different national groups will look like when they arrive at their final destination: "The answer," Adeeb writes "was deceptively simple: all groups will remain national in form but will acquire a universal socialist content" (Adeeb 2006: 238). In stating this Adeeb repeats the same phrase uttered by Stalin in defining the principles of socialist realism: art should be "national in form, socialist in content". Indeed, drawing upon Soviet interpretations of Boris Asaf'ev (1884-1949), Theodore Levin asserts that *otdalenie* or "divergence" of peoples into different *narody* or ethno-nations and their *sblizhenie* or "drawing together" and *sliianie* or "merging" through socialism begun in the 1920s, is precisely what Communist Party leaders hoped to "intone" through the project of socialist realism (Levin 1984).

In the Soviet Union, the careful creation of *narodnaia muzyka*, a term referencing music of folk and ethnos-nation, was directly tied to the creation, maintenance and progressive cultivation of various *narody*. Joseph Stalin defined *narod* as "a historically formed and stable community of people which has emerged on the basis of common language, territory, economic

life and psychological make-up, the latter being manifest in a common shared culture"; as the Soviet scholar Julian Bromley writes, *narod* is inclusive of sub-categories such as "tribes, nations, small populations, large populations, people who have vanished from history, people who are territorially compact and people who are dispersed over widely separated areas" (Bromley and Kozlov 1989). Tied to Stalin's definition of *narod* is the notion that "human history is not only a history of states, outstanding personalities and ideas, it is also the history of people-ethnoses" (Tishkov 1998: 4). Music was just one of the many mediums through which ethno-national identities were formed and solidified and transnational socialism built.

According to Marina Frolova-Walker this project began with an attempt to recreate in Central Asia the musical nationalism of nineteenth-century Europe, beginning with the systematic collection of folk material upon which operas and symphonies would be based. Party activists did not consider that unfamiliarity with Western styles and genres might result in awkward, unrefined and aesthetically disinteresting compositions. Mass orchestras of ethno-national instruments were developed, even as indigenous musical instruments were altered and refined to suit the needs of western style music and associated performance contexts (Frolova-Walker 1998).

Jean During has presented these changes as a "poison" doled out by Soviet authorities (During 2005). Similarly, Levin has observed that this has led to the canonization of musical form and loss of virility in performance (Levin 1996). Ali Iğmen, however, presents the possibility of active, creative partnership through his examination of Kyrgyzstan's cultural houses (Iğman 2002). I too suggest that through these projects local musicians learned to slip between different musical systems and related worldviews, thus gaining the "bi musicality" discussed by Mantle Hood (Hood 1960). I assert that the project of socialist realism was not merely imposed by the state; it was a project in which individual artists, musicians and audience members became actively engaged and through which many continue to define, claim and negotiate identities within a changing post-Soviet world.

## Creativity in the Kyrgyz Context

In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, this engagement has resulted in continued interest in the "ethno-national" arts, which are experiencing a rich, diverse and multi-faceted renewal. Even as the myth, custom and ritual practice of the Kyrgyz people are being (re)interpreted, their forms and contents are also being transposed into alternative genres and mediums, providing new meanings and new purposes. This proliferation has made the "national" arts a source of much beauty, and yet Julia Kristeva reminds us that beauty and suffering are two aspects of the same phenomenon. In Bishkek, I found this captured in a decaying sculpture of a "Rhinoceros Turned to Stone": The fore and hind legs of the beast mark the space where the body has crumbled; the head however, remains intact and a frozen tear has formed under one eye. Kristeva defines beauty as "an Imaginary", a representation of the "Self" that is pure whole and stable which can restore hope and enable creative pleasure (Lacan 1977; Julia Kristeva 1989). As I have discussed

elsewhere, such beauty can be found in performances emerging from *koshok* or ritual lament performed by ethnic Kyrgyz (Pritchard 2012). Yet with a recent rise of ethno-nationalism and inter-ethnic tensions, the constructions of ethnicity that fuel the arts have also become a prominent source of social suffering: Arthur Kleinman defines social suffering as the ways in which structural tensions press down and leak into everyday experiences creating narratives of pain, sorrow, alienation, marginalization and loss (Kleinman and Good 1995).

Figure 1: "Rhinoceros turned to Stone", Bishkek, 2012. Photograph by author.

In June 2010, violence between (ethnic) Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities erupted in the city of Osh, bringing back the memories and the bitterness of 1990 when tensions over land and language rights brought rioting and bloodshed. According to official reports, approximately 470 people were killed, 1,900 were hospitalized, 111,000 fled the borders and 300,000 were internally displaced. In addition 2,800 properties were damaged. [2] Although ethnic Uzbeks comprise 44% of the southern population, since 2010 there has been an increased political push in favor of speakers of the Kyrgyz language paired with unofficial discrimination. If in imagining a national community questions are asked concerning who we (the nation) are now, were in the past and will become in the future (Anderson 1992), in Kyrgyzstan these questions are being framed only in regards to the Kyrgyz who hold the status of titular nationality granted by the Soviet Constitution.

This brings a sense of urgency to my research: Whereas individuals whose art is deeply engaged in Kyrgyz folk tradition may see their practice thriving, others find the emphasis on Kyrgyz folk motifs limiting, even as they perceive these limitations as spreading into all other aspects of life. As one artist of Kyrgyz ethnicity with whom I spoke in the course of research said, "There are some people who would *prekloniat* or kneel before [the epic hero] Manas, make all Kyrgyz art folk art and have the entire world speak Kyrgyz, but it can't be like that. My genre [oil painting] came from the West, after all (author, field notes). " In the pages remaining, I hope to illuminate this through conversation with a single artist who takes material and inspiration not only from land and people of Kyrgyzstan, but also Russia and Europe, engaging closely with the project of socialist realism without being bound by it.

**Nightingales and Folk Artists**

"There are so many nightingales in our garden. I don't know why they come to us," Alexei Alexandrovich said, speaking of the family *dacha* or summer home just outside Bishkek. "There are many more luscious gardens there, but it is ours that they have chosen (author field notes)". Born in Tashkent in 1940, Alexei Alexandrovich is a guitarist, composer and metal artist of Russian ethnicity. His kind, patient eyes sit above a rounded nose, and he has a well-trimmed white moustache and beard. Delighting in the sights, sounds, scents, tastes, textures and movements of the natural world, Alexei Alexandrovich sees an intimate relationship with nature, engagement with the traditions of a given *narod*, and the experience of deep emotion to be the guiding principles of good art.

According to Alexei Alexandrovich, these nightingales were his equal in composition. He loved their vocal richness and melodic complexities, calling them "Mozarts of the natural world". As a child, he had taught himself to catch and keep wild birds, becoming particularly fond of a red-feathered finch, which he described as a folk singer- *narodnyi pevets.* Echoing the description of any musician drawn forth from the folk-become-proletariat, Alexei Alexandrovich praised the bird for its "beautiful yet unrefined" voice, and its creativity. He fondly remembered a captured bird who shared his apartment for seven years, until it was freed by a friend of his wife. Alexei Alexandrovich had been crushed by its departure: he affectionately recalled how the bird had been audience to his guitar practice: "When I played the low notes, he didn't pay any attention, but as I moved up into the higher pitch range, he would cock his head and begin to sing." As illustrated in the description of *narodnyi pevets*, Alexei Alexandrovich's views had been formed through the experience of Soviet life and in close connection with Soviet education and ideology. The depth, richness and complexity of his individual world, however, presents a challenge to long-standing concepts of unthinking adherence to ideology, lack of individual creativity and a one-way flow of culture.

**(Un)Bordered Land; (Un)Bordered Art**

Having taught in the Bishkek Music Conservatory (1969-1975), Alexei Alexandrovich set the structure for our meetings in an informal pedagogical style: After a lengthy informal conversation that inevitably slipped into a light meal with tea, vodka and toasts he chose a portion of his work for us to listen to together. The first piece Alexei Alexandrovich played was a portion of a symphony entitled "Fresco". Making certain that I understood that a fresco is a painting made on plaster with pigments that dissolve in water, the composer offered me images of Constantinople, Byzantium and Michelangelo, expressing uncertainty whether these images were whole, in ruins or fragmented within the music. The composition began with an evocation of a bell whose ringing historically heralded the events of Russian life, followed by a string section, and then drums. Somewhere in the resonance of bell, string and drum a guitar began playing. Since its appearance in the European Renaissance ($14^{th}$ to $18^{th}$ Century), guitar has

primarily been a chamber instrument, played within small ensembles and intimate performance settings rather than with an orchestra, making the guitar's role in this work of interest.

Early in our conversations Alexei Alexandrovich stated that understanding Russian guitar requires understanding Russian music, especially music within the Russian art tradition. At the same time, the pairing of guitar and orchestra arose from a Soviet model which set folk instruments in a Western style ensemble or orchestra. Alexei Alexandrovich takes pride not only in his knowledge of and skill in seven-stringed Russian guitar, but also in "opening Russian guitar up to the world" through the development a new genre. For Alexei Alexandrovich, however, these innovations are inseparable from the trajectory of history that has captured him and his guitar: Asked how his parents had come to Tashkent, Alexei Alexandrovich answered "Theirs was a tragic story intertwined with the tragic history of the state". After the Bolshevik Revolution came civil war, followed by hunger and famine. His grandparents starved to death and his parents became orphans. Hearing there was food in Tashkent, "the city of bread", the villagers relocated. Alexei Alexandrovich moved from Tashkent to Bishkek because he "married a woman with an apartment and family in Kyrgyzstan; it was the Soviet Union so it was just like moving between states in the USA."

Recounting his family's story, the composer became visibly agitated, saying he'd "like to visit some graves there in Tashkent, but now there is a border". Indeed, the sudden rise of borders within a formerly borderless world is one of the most striking aspects of post-Soviet reality. The closing of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border has affected not only the flow of people and goods but also musical life: For example, Uyghur musicians living in Kyrgyzstan reported having to change their route, traveling to Urumchi rather than Tashkent to buy instruments. This post-Soviet reality is also captured in the following poem written by Leonid Borisovich Diadiuchenko in praise of Alexei Alexandrovich, and quoted by Alexei Alexandrovich in a memorial piece about his friendship with the writer:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Таков уж наш XX век –* | *Such is our twentieth century-* |
| *Сплошной поток «девятых валов».* | *the constant flow of strong waves[of change]!* |
| *Вдруг заграницей стал Бишкек* | *All of a sudden Bishkek became over-the-border* |
| *И семиструнник Агибалов.* | *as did the seven-stringed Agibalov.* |
| *Но у искусства нет границ,* | *And yet, art is without borders-* |
| *Виват талантливым и умным!* | *Long live the clever and talented!* |
| *Уральцы дружно пали ниц* | *Together the Urals have prostrated themselves* |
| *Перед талантом семиструнным!* | *before the talented seven-strings!* |

*(Agibalov 2009)*

That these borders were not only social, political and economic but also linguistic, cultural and ideological was highlighted by a Kyrgyz artist and instrument-maker who referred to the Soviet period as "the time before borders". Although he felt estranged by these borders, Alexei

Alexandrovich replied "I have not yet received a [cosmic] sign that it is time for me to run away from here."

The composer's attention to signs is part of a strong belief in destiny: "We live in a pre-written script, simply we don't know what has been written," he claimed. "My coming to Kyrgyzstan was part of a plan." Without mentioning God, Alexei Alexandrovich indicated a supreme force by pointing up at the sky. He explained that sometimes in his own mind he plays out another scenario: What if he had lived in Moscow? How would the difference in place have affected his life and art? For Alexei Alexandrovich the answer lies in the historical status of the guitar in Russia and its relocation to Soviet Kyrgyzstan: "For Russians," the composer said, "the guitar is the instrument of serfs, not kings; it is a low status instrument and due to that status, what could be done with it was very limited. In Kyrgyzstan there were no preconceptions about guitar; I had the freedom to do things I could never do in Moscow, like write symphonies for guitar and orchestra. " Although perhaps a Marxist-Leninist repositioning of an instrument once played in the courts of European noblemen, this view reveals how Alexei Alexandrovich found creative freedom in a new [Soviet] time, space and audience.

**Shostakovich as Vagabond**

Alexei Alexandrovich's relationship to socialist realism is illustrated by his views on another Russian composer about whom Frolova-Walker, Richard Taruskin and Esti Sheinberg have written: Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) (Sheinberg 2000; Taruskin 1997; Frolova-Walker 2007). According to Alexei Alexandrovich, "Shostakovich is a *bomzh." Bomzh* is a shortened form of *bez opredel' ionnogo mesta zhitelstva*, used to reference a person 'without fixed abode. ' In the Soviet Union all residents were required to have *propiska*, a residency permit and fixed address, the lack of which made gaining regular employment impossible. Being a *bomzh* was associated with *parasitism* or sharing in collective benefits without participating in collective responsibilities.

In calling Shostakovich a *bomzh*, Alexei Alexandrovich drew upon imagery of a useless, deviant and potentially dangerous vagabond. In doing so he created a metaphor for a perceived disconnect between Shostakovich's work and his *narod*. According to Alexei Alexandrovich, Shostakovich's work was not grounded in the art of the people or the work of prior composers and was therefore incomprehensible to audiences. This was *decadence* in music. Decadence, Alexei Alexandrovich explained, is epitomized by a certain poet who erroneously wrote 'my empty heart is my homeland'. Shostakovich's art was 'without a national home' making both the composer and his work as useless, deviant and potentially dangerous as a vagabond. The better art was exemplified by Georgy Sviridov (1915-1998) who "built a bridge over Shostakovich from Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) to the present day," exemplified in his recreation of Alexander Pushkin's well-known short story "Metel'" (1830) or "Blizzard" as it is known in English.

Despite advocating music rooted in a people, place and tradition Alexei Alexandrovich did not support nationalism as "small music created by nationalistic musicians". He decried "those [that] would make Kyrgyzstan an island by saying our language, our culture, our music, are enough for us. This is absolute idiocy! During the USSR, Kyrgyz people's level of civilization increased due to the intermingling of peoples and the friendship between nations [ethnicities]: great artists and great art were coming out of Kyrgyzstan. But after the dissolution of the USSR and the (re)separation of peoples, culture in Kyrgyzstan fell "to the level of the yurt". Implicit within the composer's statement is a perception that Soviet progress—which sought to bring the nations and peoples of the Soviet Union to a single unified point in Marx's historical trajectory—has been reversed. Although the image of the yurt is evoked often and in differing ways within Kyrgyzstan, in this particular instance, the composer presents the nomadic home as a site of patriarchy and feudalism which, according to Soviet historians, had once plagued the Kyrgyz proletariat.

For Alexei Alexandrovich the reversal of progressive history was signaled by post-Soviet chaos. This was as much exemplified in New Year's celebrations where men, women and children shot noisy fireworks off in every direction as in the crowds of unruly protestors who had twice overtaken the Kyrgyz White House. In 2005, these crowds had forced President Askar Akaev to flee from office and usurped President Kurmanbek Bakiev in 2010. Likewise, an unsuccessful attempt to oust President Almaz Atambayev was made in 2012: "Playing guitar is all that saves me from this life," the composer concluded. Indeed, the affective, intellectual and creative pleasure of performing and composing seemed to counterbalance the social, economic and political instability that surrounded him.

**Kyrgyz Land; Russian Music**

One afternoon, Alexei Alexandrovich commented "Even the best of Kyrgyz music is no more than twelve years old; at my age [seventy two] a twelve year old has nothing to offer." Evoking Victorian theories on social evolution prevalent in the Soviet Union (Grant 1995), this is a statement of musical taste and values: Despite an astute musical ear, Alexei Alexandrovich cannot draw upon the Kyrgyz language and its associated stories, histories and traditions in the same way a Kyrgyz musician can. The nuances of timbre, so essential to *komuz* [Kyrgyz: three stringed lute] performance, are lost upon the classically trained composer who does not know what it takes to be a virtuoso on the *komuz*. Reduced to pitch and rhythm, *komuz* melodies are not complicated for a virtuoso guitarist and he prefers to hear them on the guitar, an instrument which he finds more sonorous. More importantly, these words are a statement of artistic identity. Claiming that his "umbilical cord went straight to Russia" Alexei Alexandrovich established his music as part of the Russian tradition, not the co-existent Kyrgyz one. Still, the Russian composer had dedicated an evening's performance to Kyrgyz and Kazakh melodies. More so, he used Kyrgyz melodies in his work. According to Alexei Alexandrovich this was a means of showing respect and thankfulness: "I live on their land, in their country, and they help me every

time I need an orchestra or a radio." In making such a statement Alexei Alexandrovich acknowledges his ethnic difference alongside the status of the Kyrgyz as the *khoziainy* or rightful owners of Kyrgyzstan.

Such statements disguise Alexei Alexandrovich's intimate relationship with Kyrgyzstan as a place captured in the image of *Beauty*, a bronze relief portrait of a nomadic woman whose beauty lies not only in her face framed by a hat and long beaded earrings but also in her skill on horseback, her courage in battle and her strength equal to that of a man. Likewise, much of Alexei Alexandrovich's art has been formed from the stone, wood and clay of Kyrgyzstan: One such piece is featured on the cover of a published version of his *Sonata No. 1* (Agibalov 2010). While verbally distancing himself from the Kyrgyz ethnicity and claiming an interest in Kyrgyzstan's natural world alone, land and people are as inseparable in Alexei Alexandrovich's imagery as in Stalin's definition of *narod.* The interest of a Russian composer in Kyrgyz folk motifs, however, stretches the concept of socialist realism so that the artist is free to draw upon more than the motifs of his own land, tradition or people.

This play of ethnicity in image and in music is further displayed in the following conversation: "What are they singing?" I asked in reference to three oval stones, each delightfully painted to resemble a singing Kazakh. Alexei Alexandrovich responded with a laugh: "Once a person saw these and said 'Domingo, Carreras, Pavarotti' [a group of three operatic tenors formed in the 1990s]. It hadn't crossed my mind until he had said it. " The imaginative incongruity of pastoral nomads pouring forth an operatic sound in unison paired with the ironic portrayal of world famous opera stars as Central Asian peasants amused the composer, and yet this image perfectly encapsulated Soviet aspirations for Central Asia and its music.

## Raising Up the Nation through Art

The first day that we met, Alexei Alexandrovich made a toast, quoting Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881): "Beauty saves the world". Many months later, I attempted to use these words to illustrate how playing the *komuz* had helped dispel the effects of surgery, chemotherapy and melancholia for a Kyrgyz musician with whom I was working simultaneously. Alexei Alexandrovich responded: "That's not what Dostoyevsky meant at all! Do you think that the *komuz* can save the world? It cannot even save Russia. Do you think your *kyl kyiak* [Kyrgyz: carved fiddle] can save America?!" In Alexei Alexandrovich's interpretation, Dostoyevsky had been referring to the total transformation of the human race exemplified by "indigo children". Popularized on Russian television, indigo children are bright, sensitive and precocious children with extraordinary memories and psychic powers. [3] Alexei Alexandrovich's assertion of their existence illustrates a belief in the possibility of human transformation, echoing the project of the Russian avant-garde.

After all, art in the Soviet Union did not exist simply for its own sake. According to Alexei Alexandrovich art served the purpose of "raising the status of the human being above that

of *skotina*", a domesticated farm animal that tramples everything underfoot: "Music, like books, has the ability to raise a person's consciousness or destroy it. Books can fill a person's mind with false information, foolish ideas or true information, good ideas- it is the same with music". Alexei Alexandrovich asserted that "globalization" had brought "cancerous" "American" genres such as rock, pop and rap into formerly Soviet spaces such as Kyrgyzstan, causing people to listen to "bad music" and music, as well as society, to be "destroyed in the process." For Alexei Alexandrovich the existence of these genres and their influx were the very effects of global capitalism and cultural imperialism which, due to its dissolution, the Soviet Union could no longer strive to counteract.

Commenting on rap music, Alexei Alexandrovich asked rhetorically: "How can the descendants of slaves, uncultivated people who have received no education- produce great music?" In saying this, Alexei Alexandrovich was not directly referring to ideas of racial inferiority propagated in Europe and the Americas, but to Soviet constructions of African-Americans as an oppressed people and potential proletariat (Fikes and Lemon 2008; Matusevich, 2008). Like his evocation of the image of the feudal and patriarchal yurt, the composer's use of the image of the oppressed and uncultivated slave placed African American people and their art in a particular point in Marx's trajectory of history. Perhaps in an effort to find an example relevant to his American listener, Alexei Alexandrovich turned to the pop star, Michael Jackson (1958-2009), using the performer and his music to further illustrate the negative effects of capitalism on musical life. According to the composer, when compared to the love poems of Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) or Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), Jackson's lyrics fell short, serving only to objectify and commodify female sexuality. More so, the composer claimed that Jackson's rise to fame resulted not from genuine artistry but rather from "the development of a new technology of dance". Thus, just as the capitalism encouraged slavery and stunted the development of people, so did it reduce sexual encounters to market exchanges and artistry to technological innovation.

Although such attitudes may seem strange to the generally educated American reader, they are the views of an educated man whose intellectual life was formed through Soviet experience and yet who has lived to see a completely different time. Alexei Alexandrovich is acutely aware of his existence in a shifting reality: Speaking of his publisher and friend, Matanya Ophee (b. 1932), Alexei Alexandrovich marveled that he had found an American—a person of the nation to whose politics he had always been opposed—so knowledgeable about Russian guitar. Not only had he discovered this person to be one of his long time listeners, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union this *American* had also became an important patron of his art. Alexei Alexandrovich's consideration of American culture, music, economy and politics has much to do with the composer's negotiation of shifting social, economic and cultural paradigms in a new post-Soviet reality.

It is much to the composer's horror that the music and dance style of Jackson has become popular even in Kyrgyzstan where the pop star is seen as an icon of American culture, celebrated, mourned and memorialized like any Soviet artist. Lacking an appetite for popular

music that might allow exploration of the nuances of these genres, Alexei Alexandrovich finds little difference between Kyrgyz, Russian or American versions of pop, rock or rap. At the same time, the composer's negative observations are not anomalous. His Kyrgyz counterparts also attribute changes in folk forms to the influence of popular music, citing a generational difference in the quality of voice or the use of more song-like melodies in ritual performance. Indeed, within my own observation audience impatience and misreading of performance cues were indicative of shifting musical values and changes in standard performance practices arising alongside a new economy. For Alexei Alexandrovich these changes were crystallized in the persona of Jackson as the transformative power of art gone wrong, furthering all that is oppressive, dysfunctional and hideous. In claiming that when Jackson "began to change his lips, his nose, the color of his skin, he became a demon- something frightening to behold", the composer demonstrated a perception that such music is the very antithesis of Soviet dreams for the creation of a new society and a new kind of person.

"But when you were young there must have been music which older people hated and younger people loved," I argued.

"When I was young, all music, all poetry and all art was screened by a board of professionals before it was let out into the public," Alexei Alexandrovich stated. This served as a startling reminder that even 22 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union there are those who believe Soviet censorship of the arts had benefited the greater good, as unchecked music could potentially reverse the flow of history and Soviet progress.

**An Internal World, One of Unbelievable Wonder**

One afternoon, Alexei Alexandrovich offered a brief history of American imperialism: It had begun with the conquistadors, the expansion of territory and the development of slavery. It could still be seen in the Occupy Wall Street Movement beginning in New York on September 17th, 2011. Through protest of corporate influence on politics and income inequality in the U. S. "the American people have gone the way of Marx and Lenin!" Referencing Leon Trotsky, Harry Truman, and U. S. intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, Alexei Alexandrovich painted a picture of ideological wars and the games of superpowers. "And amidst all this," the composer commented wryly, "Agibalov plays guitar."

"And why does Agibalov play guitar?" I inquired.

"It is an internal world, one of unbelievable wonder," he replied.

Alexei Alexandrovich's internal world was indeed filled with wonder: The living room in his simple two-bedroom apartment featured a series of well-lit shelves filled with cut and polished stones, crystal, bone, petrified wood and fossils. All of these were artifacts from his journeys throughout the Soviet Union and abroad. These shelves were a museum of memories. Showing the plain and uninteresting exterior of an ordinary rock, Alexei Alexandrovich flipped the object to reveal a beautiful crystal interior. For the composer these were the secrets and treasures of a beloved natural world, whose discovery brought him happiness.

Asked how he had learned to recognize them, Alexei Alexandrovich answered, "I learned over time, going places, looking at things…Also people know. If they trust that you are not a thief and believe you can keep a secret they will take you to the places. " Alexei Alexandrovich commented that working with stone helps with guitar: one has to be careful –accurate- when opening a stone; one also to be careful –accurate- playing something new. For him both arts involved a similar process of opening and refining that which was already present in stone, wood or music. Just as the stones had their internal "hidden" beauty, so did places and people. Although he never said it directly, Alexei Alexandrovich was just as interested in the emotional world "hidden" inside the individual person as he was interested in the beauty locked inside of a seemingly plain and ordinary rock.

**Unlocking Deep Emotion**

As a musician Alexei Alexandrovich was keenly aware of art's ability to inspire deep emotion as illustrated in a nightmarish account of a performance in a Soviet women's prison: Upon entering the prison, the musicians were led through eight rows of female inmates, ages 17 to 90, into a concert hall seating 300. Dressed in long sleeves and skirts, with grey woolen shawls tied over heads and around hips, the women had done up their hair, making ornamental pieces from rags. The performance began with romances, a lyrical genre of sung poetry. As the guitarist played members of the audience cried out, moaned and wept. Feeling choked and threatened by pent up passions, Alexei Alexandrovich anticipated a riot. When the performance was over, he vowed never to do it again.

Likewise Alexei Alexandrovich touched upon these deep emotions in remembering a dear friend and writer, Leonid Borisovich Diadiuchenko, whose poetry is quoted above. According to Alexei Alexandrovich, Diadiuchenko was killed by the restructuring of the Soviet political and economic system known as *perestroika*. On his deathbed, the writer barely had strength to listen to the guitarist. After hearing only three pieces, he told Alexei Alexandrovich 'it's enough'. He died the next day. In recounting these sad memories, the composer commented that "out of the millions who had died [from *perestroika*] this one had wanted to leave with the sound of seven-stringed guitar". These memories are also recounted by Alexei Alexandrovich in an essay whose title references 'Poema de la Siguiriya Gitana' by Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936) (Agibalov 2009). On another occasion the composer had the opportunity to hear Lorca's poem read in its original language, Spanish. The reader had wept, opening a new aspect of his friend's *lichnost',* or person, for the audience present. Although a well-documented aspect of audience-performer interactions, affective response remains little explored in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts (Schieffelin 1976; Feld 1982).

## Conclusion

The internal world of an artist glimpsed through affective experiences, memories, friendships, engagements with the natural world and creative acts is a little touched upon topic in discussions of socialist realism, especially in Central Asia. At the same time, individual worlds such as that exemplified by Alexei Alexandrovich are entangled in larger histories and social processes of which art itself is an extension. The same Soviet cultural policies which brought about the concept of *narod* and the resulting constructions of ethnicity and nation have also formed a distinctive artistic tradition –socialist realism- with which contemporary artists, knowingly or unknowingly, remain closely engaged. If for Stalin this had been the pairing of a people to territory, for Alexei Alexandrovich this had been the pairing of an artist, as representative of a people, to a landscape. Likewise the transformative aspects of this project initiated by the Russian avant-garde have not been lost. For better or for worse, its aims are changing as Kyrgyzstan and its citizens navigate shifting post-socialist realities.

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[1] Reported by Irina Rudakova in a news article entitled 'Zamira Muratbekova: Renaming the Capital Manas helps Awaken Kyrgyz Talents' published August 9, 2011: http://www.knews.kg/ru/society/1574/

[2] For more detail see *The Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Events of Southern Kyrgyzstan* (June 2010) at http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_490. pdf and the Kyrgyz

government's response to this report at
http://www.fergananews.com/archive/2011/kg_comments_english_final.pdf

[3] The term 'Indigo children' was first coined by American synesthete and psychic, Nancy Anne Tappe: http://www.nancyanntappe.com/home