

*Musical Theater*

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***‘I Invoke You to Understand My Despair  
Due to the Disruption of the Production Plan.’  
Yuri Shaporin, Elena Malinovskaya  
and the Bolshoi Theater in the First Half of the 1930s***

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the history of the interactions between the important Soviet composer Yuri Shaporin with the State Academic Bolshoi Theater in the first half of the 1930s. The research is based on archival materials to a considerable degree brought into scholarly use for the first time. A special role for disclosing the theme was played by the documents of the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (preserved in the personal archives of Yuri Shaporin, director of the Bolshoi Theater Elena Malinovskaya and, of course, the archive of the Bolshoi Theater) and the Russian State Archive of Social-Political History.

In the early 1930s the directory of the Bolshoi Theater, which was headed by Malinovskaya, was actively looking for works pertaining to a new, “Soviet” repertoire; the necessity of the theater’s “renewal” was also constantly reminded both by the press and the country’s leadership. In these conditions serious hopes

Translated by Dr. Anton A. Rovner

were set on the collaboration with Leningrad-based composer Yuri Shaporin, who committed himself to presenting a symphony and an opera. The latter, which was supposed to have written on the plotline of the insurrection of the *Decembrists*, was more crucial for the theater. Malinovskaya expected this composition to open with itself a grandiose musical cycle devoted to the history of the revolutionary movement in Russia: the two following operas which Shaporin was expected to write were supposed to be devoted to the members of the *Narodnaya Volya* [People's Will] revolutionary movement and to the Marxists. However, the work on *The Decembrists* began to be delayed unacceptably, which was the result both of the irresponsible behavior of the composer, who worked only from time to time on the composition entrusted to him, as well as his disagreements with the writer Alexei Nikolayevich Tolstoy, who was working on the libretto based on his own novelette written by him earlier. As the result, prior to 1935 (the year Malinovskaya resigned and there was a change of the directory of the Bolshoi Theater) *The Decembrists* were not completed (this happened much later, in 1953, already in different historical conditions).

**Keywords:** Yuri Shaporin, Elena Malinovskaya, the Bolshoi Theater, the 1930s, Soviet music, Soviet opera, *The Decembrists*

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*Музыкальный театр*

Научная статья

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**«Призываю Вас понять мое отчаяние  
из-за срыва производственного плана»:  
Ю. А. Шапорин, Е. К. Малиновская  
и Большой театр в первой половине 1930-х гг.**

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена истории взаимоотношений крупного советского композитора Ю. А. Шапорина с Государственным академическим Большим театром в первой половине 1930-х годов. Исследование основано на архивном материале, в значительной степени впервые вводимом в научный оборот. Особую роль в раскрытии темы сыграли документы из Российского государственного архива литературы и искусства (хранящиеся в личных фондах Ю. А. Шапорина, директора Большого театра Е. К. Малиновской и, конечно, фонде Большого театра) и Российского государственного архива социально-политической истории.

В начале 1930-х руководство Большого театра, который возглавила Малиновская, активно искало произведения нового, «советского» репертуара; о необходимости «обновления» театра напоминала и пресса, и политическое руководство страны. В этих условиях серьезные надежды стали возлагаться на сотрудничество с жившим в Ленинграде композитором Юрием Шапориным, который обязался представить симфонию и оперу. Последняя, написанная на сюжет о восстании декабристов, была более важной для театра. Малиновская рассчитывала на то, что это произведение откроет

величественный музыкальный цикл, посвященный истории революционного движения в России: две следующие оперы, которые предстояло написать Шапорину, должны были быть посвящены народовольцам и марксистам. Однако работа над «Декабристами» начала недопустимо затягиваться, чему виной были как беспечность композитора, работавшего лишь время от времени над порученным ему произведением, так и его разногласия с писателем А. Н. Толстым, работавшим над либретто по мотивам собственной повести, написанной ранее. В результате вплоть до 1935 года (отставки Малиновской и смены руководства в Большом театре) «Декабристы» так и не были завершены (это произошло много позднее, в 1953 году, в иных исторических условиях).

**Ключевые слова:** Ю. А. Шапорин, Е. К. Малиновская, Большой театр, 1930-е годы, советская музыка, советская опера, «Декабристы»

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The tense, drama-saturated history of musical life in the USSR in the 1930s continues to attract the attention of researchers. In recent times in the scholarly literature of Russia and other countries some elucidation was provided on subject matter connected with the realized and unrealized productions on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater of works by Sergei Sergeevich Prokofiev — the ballet *Le pas d'acier* and *The Love for Three Oranges* [1, pp. 16–26; 2], the operas *War and Peace* [3, pp. 155–160; 4, pp. 179–180; 5, pp. 132–156] — and by Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich [6; 7, p. 44–46]. Attention is drawn to the relations of these composers with the totalitarian state, in general [8; 9; 10; 11, pp. 213–224; 12; 13, pp. 194–196], as well as the tragic fates of concrete musical scores — for example, one of Gavriil Nikolayevich Popov's best compositions, his First Symphony [14, pp. 154–160]. However, there are still blank spots remaining in the history of Russian music of this period.

On June 21, 1941, one day prior to the beginning of the war, Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya (1875–1942), the previous legendary director of the Bolshoi Theater, and at that time a pensioner, who held the modest position of a consultant of the theater museum, wrote to Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko about the letters she had recently reread, which she had received from outstanding contemporaries — Nemirovich himself, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Feodor Shalyapin and others, including Yuri Shaporin and Shostakovich, having concluded: “It is clear that I have not lived in vain.”<sup>1</sup> The list of great people were thereby concluded with the figures of two composers, the fame of the first of which somewhat faded in time, and the second of which has become truly world famous. Both of them were connected with an important stage of the history of the Bolshoi Theater, which insistently searched for the path of renewal of the repertoire, which was invoked by both the ideally motivated critics and the Communist Party leadership. Shostakovich’s collaboration with the Bolshoi Theater in the first half of the 1930s has been quite well-researched ([16, pp. 12–123, 17, p. 10; 18, pp. 85–101], [6]). This happened less than two decades ago — back in 2006 Philip Bullock noted that “With the exception of <...> *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Soviet opera of the 1930s is comparably little studied.” [19, p. 83] Many of the sides of Shaporin’s artistic interaction with the largest musical theater in the USSR have remained on the periphery of research interest up to now.

Yuri Alexandrovich Shaporin (1887–1966) began his professional activities as a composer by creating music for drama theaters in Petrograd (*The Large Drama Theater* [20, p. 128], the former *Alexandrinsky*, and others<sup>2</sup>), and in the second half of the 1920s he “was becoming famous” in the theatrical and musical world.<sup>3</sup> In 1925, in connection with the centennial anniversary of the uprising of the *Decembrists*, he began working on an opera on that subject matter, having taken as his libretto Alexei Nikolayevich Tolstoy’s play *Pauline Geuble*, written with the participation of historian Pavel Shchyogolev. Already on December 27 at the *GATOB* (the *Mariinsky Theater*) two scenes from the new opera were performed, but then the work on the large-scale composition, which underwent numerous revisions, began to be delayed.<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that Shaporin was not the first among the Soviet composers who turned to this subject. Already in the first half of the 1920s an opera titled *The Decembrists* was written by composer Vassily Andreyevich Zolotaryov

1 Cit. from [15, p. 95].

2 Bogdanov-Berezovsky, V. M. (1934). *Yu. A. Shaporin i yego simfoniya* [Yuri Shaporin and His Symphony]. Leningradskaya filarmoniya, pp. 5–7.

3 Druskin, M. S. (1977). *Vospominaniya* [Memoirs]. In Druskin M. S. *Issledovaniya. Vospominaniya. [Research Works. Memoirs]* Sovetskiy kompozitor, p. 206.

4 Shumskaya N. (1956). *Yu. A. Shaporin i yego opera “Dekabristy”* [Yuri Shaporin and His Opera *The Decembrists*]. “*Dekabristy*” *Yu. A. Shaporina* [“*The Decembrists*” by Yuri Shaporin]. Gosudarstvennoe muzykal’noe izdatel’stvo, pp. 8–9; Katonova S. V. (1959). *Yu. Shaporin. “Dekabristy”: opera* [Yuri Shaporin. *The Decembrists’: Opera*]. Sovetskiy kompozitor, pp. 3–6.



(based on the libretto of V. A. Yasinovsky); on the day of the centennial anniversary of the day of the insurrection, when Shaporin had only two scenes ready, Zolotaryov's opera was shown in its entirety at the Bolshoi Theater, and then continued its life on other Soviet theater stages, as well.<sup>5</sup> However, with Malinovskaya's return in 1930 to direct the Bolshoi Theater, they decided at the latter venue to make a bid on participation with Shaporin.

### *The Colossal Plans of the Directory of the Bolshoi Theater*

On March 21, 1931 the directory of the *Bolshoi* Theater signed a contract with Shaporin, who undertook to compose a symphony for the theater and to complete his opera *The Decembrists* [18, p. 86]. From that very month the theater began paying the composer a monthly salary [21, p. 212]. On May 31, 1931 at a session of the Governmental Commission for Supervision over the Bolshoi Theater under the chairmanship of Voroshilov, the repertoire for the 1931–1932 concert season proposed by the directory, which also included Shaporin's *The Decembrists*, was confirmed.<sup>6</sup> The next day, Malinovskaya, who became convinced of Shaporin's talent, brought him to make the acquaintance with her old friend Alexei Maximovich Gorky. "This happened on June 1, 1931. We entered the mansion on Nikitskaya Street," the composer remembered many years later. "The aim of the visit by Malinovskaya, a long-time acquaintance of Gorky's from the time of his life in Nizhni-Novgorod and a close friend of his, was the wish to obtain from the writer a libretto for an opera of his novel *The Mother*. The real reason she took me along was so that I could play the role of a consultant."<sup>7</sup> Although the plan of receiving the libretto "suffered a fiasco," as Shaporin later recounted, he became closely acquainted with the writer and subsequently appeared frequently at his house.<sup>8</sup> In reality, Malinovskaya developed a grandiose plan of an entire huge opera cycle, virtually equal in its scale to Wagner's *Ring*, and was thereby able to capture the interests of both Gorky and Shaporin. In the spring of 1932 she informed Voroshilov in an internal memorandum that "upon the completion of the opera *The Decembrists*, composer Shaporin would proceed to working on two operas based on Maxim Gorky's libretto *Members of the Narodnaya*

5 Sverdlovsky operny teatr imeni Lunacharskogo. Dekabristy. Opera v chetyryokh deystviyskh, 8 kartin [podgotovka postanovki [The Sverdlovsk Lunacharsky Opera Theater. *The Decembrists*. An Opera in Four Acts, 8 Scenes... [being prepared for production]. (1933). n. p. pp. 3, 25.

6 Protokoly zasedaniy komissii prezidiuma Tsentral'nogo ispolnitel'nogo kommiteta Soyuza SSR direktsiy Bol'shogo i hudozhestvennykh teatrov SSSR s dololnieniem materialov [Proceedings of the Sessions of the Commission of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR for the Direction of the Bolshoi and the Artistic Theaters of the USSR with a supplement of the materials]. In *RGASPI [Russian State Archive of Social-Political History]*. Fund 74. List 1. Portfolio. 396. P. 9.

7 Shaporin Yu. A. (1969). O Gorkom [About Gorky]. In Shaporin Yu. A. *Izbrannye statyi [Selected Articles]*. Sovetskiy kompozitor, pp. 118–119.

8 Ibid., p. 119.

*volya* and *The Marxists*".<sup>9</sup> Shostakovich, who used to call in jest Shaporin's *The Decembrists* as *The Marxists* [21, p. 212], apparently, did not even suspect, how close he was to the repertoire plans of the Bolshoi Theater.

A central position in the manifestation of these plans was taken up by Shaporin who, according to the testimony of Mikhail Semyonovich Druskin, knew him personally, was "bustling, good-natured, but emotionally unstable."<sup>10</sup> Another acquaintance of the musician, Valerian Mikhaylovich Bogdanov-Berezovsky, remembered:

Shaporin was constantly in work. He was swamped by a societal temperament. All saturated with music and his artistic plans, whether he was on the street, on a tram, or at a session, thinking over the details of some figuration or instrumentation, he had the time to direct a section of the Association for Contemporary Music, to debate at a meeting of the direction of the authorial society Dramsoyuz directed by Glazunov, to carry out demonstrations of the editorial board of the cooperative publishing house *Triton*.<sup>11</sup>

Soon after that, the directory of the Bolshoi Theater was forced to convince itself that punctuality in fulfilling the artistic obligations taken on himself cannot be counted among the composer's merits.

A close associate of Malinovskaya, the head of the musical section of the Bolshoi Theater, Victor Lvovich Kubatsky wrote to Shaporin resentfully on July 20, 1931 from the rest home *Polenovo*: "Is it noble, or is it mean? I am living here for five days, nine days in Moscow, and I have not received any piano-vocal scores!!! I beg you — send me the entire piano-vocal score of *The Decembrists*, since this time is exclusively favorable for work for me."<sup>12</sup> Having expressed the hope that his correspondent had already received the money owed for him, Kubatsky expressed his interest whether or not Shaporin had supported his connection with Gorky, who was supposed to create a libretto for the connection of the opera cycle ("Regarding Gorky. He lives outside of Moscow, and it may be possible to communicate with his trustee — I called him a thousand times, but was not able to reach him. Having departed, I passed on this affair to Arkanov. Do you have any news from him?"), as well with the producer Nikolai Vasilyevich Smolich and Tolstoy:

9 The letters of the directors and the artists of the Bolshoi Theater to Bubnov, to the Central Executive Committee and to Voroshilov regarding official and personal matters; the directory's correspondence with organizations and with the artists of the theater; a note about the goals, plan, repertoire, personnel and other sides of the activities of the Bolshoi Theater; about the tours abroad of the artists of the theater, projects of the rulings of the governmental commission about the reorganization of the management, the provisions about the Bolshoi Theater, the report about the trip to the Far East of a brigade of artists from the Bolshoi Theater, etc. In *RGASPI [Russian State Archive of Social-Political History]*. Fund 74. List 1. Portfolio. 394. P. 30.

10 Druskin, M. S. (1977). *Vospominaniya [Memoirs]*, p. 206.

11 Bogdanov-Berezovsky, V. M. (1971). *Dorogi iskusstva [The Paths of Art]*. Book 1. Muzyka. Leningrad Section, p. 114.

12 Pis'ma i telegramy Kubatskogo Viktora Lvovicha k Yu. A. Shaporinu [Letters and telegrams of Victor Lvovich Kubatsky to Yu. A. Shaporin]. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 2642. List 1. Portfolio 320. P. 1.

“Did Smolich visit you? In what condition is your artistic personality? Is Tolstoy trying your patience<sup>13</sup> or not?”<sup>14</sup> Kubatsky’s letter, apparently, did not exert any considerable impact on the speed of the composer’s work, and already on September 12 of the selfsame year 1931, Shaporin was sent an official reminder from the name of the directory of the Bolshoi Theater, signed by the deputy director Boris Samoylovich Arkanov. Indicating at the composer’s deadlines for providing the scores of the symphony and the opera *The Decembrists* preconditioned in the contracts, the directory demanded “to turn immediately to submitting the work, in order to avoid the consequences indicated [in] paragraph 13 of the contract.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Malinovskaya’s Anger and Shaporin’s Pleas for Defense*

When this also failed to help, Malinovskaya personally intervened in the affair, having written a letter to Shaporin on October 5, 1931:

All the deadlines scheduled in our contract with you are violated. This compels me to write to you. I don’t know, to what degree such an order is considered to be normal in Leningrad and in Moscow it is inadmissible. We must carry out our production plan firmly and without any changes, and meanwhile it is being violated through your fault, since *The Decembrists* cannot be produced with your tempi of work.<sup>16</sup>

Malinovskaya demanded an immediate answer: “Are you intent on annulling our contract (naturally, returning the received sum of money), or on spending all of your energy on finishing *The Decembrists* in the shortest possible time, so that it would be produced at least to the end of the season”.<sup>17</sup> Fearing that in connection with Tolstoy’s presumable departure to Sorrento, “the affair would come to a total standstill,”

13 One of the meanings of the Russian word “manezhit” is “to wear somebody out, to torment him, making him wait for a long time” (see D. N. Ushakov. (Ed.) (1938). *Tolkovy slovar’ russkogo yazyka* [Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language] (in 4 volumes). (Vol. 2). Gosudarstvennoye izdatel’stvo inostrannykh i natsional’nykh slovarey, p. 138).

14 Pis’ma i telegramy Kubatskogo Viktora Lvovicha k Yu. A. Shaporinu [Letters and telegrams of Victor Lvovich Kubatsky to Yu. A. Shaporin], p. 1 backside.

15 Perepiska teatra s artistami, teatrami i drugimi organizatsiyami o debyutah, gastrolyah inostrannykh artistov, ob uchastii v yubileyah (10-letiya teatra im. E. Vakhtangova, 10-letiya Instituta krasnoy professury. Pis’mo teatra kompozitoru Shaporinu Yu. A. o napisanii opery “Dekabristy.” Spiski artistov, prinyimavshikh uchastie v Hudozhestvennoy gazete plenuma, posvyashchennogo 14-y godovshchine Oktyabrskoy revolyutsii. Polozhenie o finansovoy chasti Bolshogo teatra [The theater’s correspondence with artists, theaters and other organizations about debuts and tours of artists from abroad, about the participation in anniversaries (the tenth anniversary of the Evgeny Vakhtangov Theater, the tenth anniversary of the Institute of the Red Professorship). The letter from the Bolshoi Theater to composer Yuri Shaporin about writing the opera *The Decembrists*. Lists of the artists taking part in the Artistic Newspaper of the Plenum devoted to the 14th Anniversary of the October Revolution. Position about the Financial Section of the Bolshoi Theater. In *RGALI* [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 804, p. 323.

16 Pis’ma i telegrammy Malinovskoy Eleny Konstantinovny k Y.A. Shaporinu [Letters and Telegrams of Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya to Yuri Shaporin]. In *RGALI* [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]. Fund 2642. List 1. Portfolio 341, p. 1.

17 Ibid.



Malinovskaya consented to a delay of the symphony promised by Shaporin, so that the composer would finish the opera quicker: “You must understand, it what position you have placed me: *The Decembrists* are placed in the production plan, I have cleared out the path for it from half of November, and there will be no *Decembrists*. I cannot think of such a shame.”<sup>18</sup>

In his letter of response from October 18, 1931 Shaporin tried to calm Malinovskaya down and at the same time to present an argument for the delay in his work:

The radical revision of the symphony composed by me upon commission of the Bolshoi Theater that I have undertaken, having as its consequence the improvement of the indicated composition, on the one hand, and on the other hand, led to a violation of the deadlines for presenting the opera *The Decembrists* commissioned to me stipulated by the contract. Being firmly convinced that the quality of the work commissioned to me should be of foremost consideration, I, nonetheless, cannot but be aware of the significance of deadlines provided by the contract on the basis of which the theater would build its production plan.<sup>19</sup>

Considering these circumstances and wishing “to assist the production of the opera during the following season worldwide,” Shaporin promised to exert “all his energy towards completing the opera, meeting the deadlines, which would allow the theater to still carry out a production of *The Decembrists* during the 1931–1932 season,” asking to set the new deadline for submission of the piano-vocal score of the opera on February 28, 1932 and promising to complete the orchestration by May 10. “I am firmly convinced that considering the completion of the symphony, I can give all my time exclusively to the work on completing the opera, the deadlines which I propose for your approval are indispensable for me,”<sup>20</sup> the composer added for more persuasiveness at the end of his letter. At that moment, apparently, he was not guiling, and he really set to work. His wife (who was quite critically disposed towards her husband) wrote in her diary on October 30, 1931: “Yuri moved here and is working, working so much, as never before in his life.”<sup>21</sup>

18 Ibid.

19 Perepiska teatra s kompozitorami, librettistami i dirizhorami o napisanii i postanovkah oper, o gastrol'nom dirizhirovanii, ob avtorskih gonorarah i po drugim voprosam. Spisok pisateley i dramaturgov, rabotayushchih nad opernymi libretto. Protokoly zasedaniy komissii aktiva baleta po prosmotru novyh libretto i muzyki. Kopii dogovorov s avtorami i postanovleniy arbitrazhnoy komissii o dogovorah [Correspondence of the theater with composers, librettists and conductors about the writing and productions of operas, about conducting tours, about authors' royalties and concerning other questions. List of writers and playwrights working on opera librettos. Proceedings of sessions of the commission of the ballet troupe for examination of new librettos and music. Copies of contracts with authors and establishments of arbitrage committees about contracts]. In *RGALI* [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 745, p. 145. The correspondence between Yuri Shaporin and Elena Malinovskaya (in October 1931) was first discovered and brought into scholarly use by Olga Digonskaya [18, pp. 88–89].

20 Perepiska teatra s kompozitorami ... [Correspondence of the Theater with Composers...]. In *RGALI* [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 745, pp. 145–146.

21 Shaporina, L. V. (2017). Dnevnik [Diary]. (Vol. 1). Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, p. 111.

In a short while, having received neither any letters, nor, most importantly, any money, Shaporin once again reminded Malinovskaya about himself. On November 24 he wrote her from the former *Tsarskoe Selo* (at that time — *Detskoe Selo* [*Children's Village*]), trying to vindicate himself: “On November 11, I sent letters by special delivery: to you, Boris Samoylovich<sup>22</sup> and Victor Lvovich<sup>23</sup>. Almost two weeks have passed since that time, but I have not received any answer, despite the fact that in these three letters there were questions requiring immediate solutions.”<sup>24</sup> In connection with the departure of theater artist Vladimir Vladimirovich Dmitriev continuously being postpone (“and he could have placed you au courant of what is happening at the *Detskoe Selo*”),<sup>25</sup> the composer decided himself to tell about the state of affairs, resorting to the epistolary form. “The opera’s libretto is gone through together with V.V. Dmitriev in the utmost detail and 2/3 of the work is completed. The delay in the completion and the dispatch of the ready materials can be explained by Alexei Tolstoy’s illness, which kept him in bed for 16 days.”<sup>26</sup> “You must agree,” Shaporin convinced Malinovskaya, “that in such an unforeseen circumstance I am not at fault, and, meanwhile, it is no less important for me to receive the libretto completed and approved by you, and to receive it as soon as possible, as it is for the *Bolshoi Theater*.”<sup>27</sup> Having sent to the Bolshoi Theater one third of the libretto directly from the copyist, without Tolstoy’s corrections, the composer “invoked upon himself the former’s wrath.” “As the result of the untimely completion of the libretto, I am standing at the converging roads of displeasures,”<sup>28</sup> Shaporin noted.

The second part of the letter was devoted to financial questions:

“My financial position could not be worse,” the composer complained. “Having begun working for the Bolshoi Theater, I have rejected and continue to reject all other offers and, therefore, the sums received by me from the Bolshoi Theater take up a significant position in my budget. At the same time, if I do not receive money from Moscow, this would create the necessity for me to prowl around Leningrad with the aim of obtaining some more rubles. I am wasting precious time on this, but still I cannot obtain the necessary amount of money. And at the same time, unluckily, my daughter became ill (a setback of arthroidal rheumatism and chorea), and I have no possibility of creating such opportunities for her that are so necessary upon these conditions.”<sup>29</sup>

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22 Arkanov.

23 Kubatsky.

24 Pis'ma Shaporina Yuriya Alexandrovich Malinovskoy E. K. [Yuri Alexandrovich Shaporin's Letters to Elena Malinovskaya]. In *RGALI* [*Russian State Archive for Literature and Art*]. Fund 1933. List 2. Portfolio 68, p. 1.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–1 back side.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, p. 1 back side.

29 *Ibid.*

Having emphasized his acute need for money, Shaporin asked Malinovskaya to answer him promptly.<sup>30</sup>

Malinovskaya replied to the subsequent delays of the deadlines substantiated by the composer with an angry letter from November 28, 1931:

“I am confounded by your naïveté and, to put it delicately, your irresponsible attitude towards the obligations you have committed yourself to. You are absolutely at fault, and at the same time you are taking on the offensive!” the director of the Bolshoi Theater thundered. “Your arrival and Tolstoy’s reaction were absolutely thoughtless. The dinners, the suppers, the meetings at Gorky’s place — that was at the center of your attention, while you could not find the time to gather together with us, at least once.”<sup>31</sup>

Having reminded Shaporin the promises he had given to send out the libretto by November 1 and the finished score by November 15, Malinovskaya wrote:

Only in the second decade of December (and not by November 1), I received the libretto to the two scenes<sup>32</sup>. Since I was lying ill, I asked B. S. Arkanov to write to you that two scenes do not comprise the entire libretto, and that I demand that you send the entire libretto, and also that in these two scenes it is unacceptable that Annenkov was absolutely indifferent that in his presence his mother’s grooms strip the girls naked to give them a whipping, and is the whipping necessary at all, if it is to remain?<sup>33</sup>

Highlighting that the work was not yet finished up to that time (“Today it is November 28, and I still do not have the libretto before me, and I am the one who is to blame!”), Elena Konstantinovna presented an ultimatum to the composer:

There is a limit to everything, Yuri Alexandrovich, and I, not intending to squeeze rubles out of you, demand from you: 1) immediately to send me, Malinovskaya, the entire libretto in the form that it exists at the present day. I shall send it back to you in two days’ time, not longer than that, with a lengthy letter, 2) immediately to send me the score of the symphony. We do not wish to have it copied in Leningrad and to depend on your copyists.<sup>34</sup>

Close to the end of the letter, the director’s tone softened down, and she, in order to avoid any further confusion, “was begging” Shaporin to come to Moscow for a certain period of time (“V. L. Kubatsky is offering you to live in his room”) and to work together with the producer and the conductor of the Bolshoi Theater. “We esteem you highly as an artist, and we shall try to furnish the dwellings so that it would be easy and good for you to work. I assure you — this is the only thing that could save the situation. If you are worried about where you could leave your daughter — if you wish, I could arrange for you to leave her here at a *good*<sup>35</sup>

30 Ibid.

31 Pis'ma i telegrammy Malinovskoy Eleny Konstantinovny k Y.A. Shaporinu [Letters and Telegrams of Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya to Yuri Shaporin], p. 2.

32 It must be reminded that the two scenes were written by Shaporin (and even presented on stage) back in 1925.

33 Pis'ma i telegrammy Malinovskoy Eleny Konstantinovny k Y.A. Shaporinu [Letters and Telegrams of Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya to Yuri Shaporin], p. 2.

34 Ibid.

35 In the original the word is typed completely in capital letters.

hospital?” Malinovskaya proposed, concluding her epistle on a reconciliatory note: “So, I invoke you to understand my despair due to the disruption of the production plan and seriously take up to fulfilling your obligations.”<sup>36</sup>

But even this desperate invocation did not compel Shaporin to enhance the tempo of artistic activities to a considerable degree. A number of telegrams has been preserved in the archives (predominantly, rough drafts) to him sent by Malinovskaya and Arkanov (without any indication of the year) with the request to complete the work on the libretto of *The Decembrists* soon and send it out to the Bolshoi Theater.<sup>37</sup> In June 1932 the composer travelled to Moscow, attending the rehearsals of the symphony, the work on which went faster than the work on the opera.<sup>38</sup> The administration of the Bolshoi Theater, in its turn, attempted to provide Shaporin with the optimal conditions for work, worrying even about supplying him with music paper, which was deficient at that time. On March 8, 1932 Arkanov wrote to conductor Albert Coates (this time, requesting music paper already for Shostakovich): “Is there any way he could be provided with paper, as you are now doing for Yuri Shaporin? Knowing your exclusively good attitude both toward our theater and, in particular, toward Shostakovich, I took the risk of exploiting you once more regarding this question.”<sup>39</sup> The conclusion can be made from the letter that Coates, who ordered music paper in Berlin, was “exploited” only for the first time for Shaporin’s sake.

Meanwhile, the creators of other operas titled *The Decembrists* – composer Zolotaryov and librettist Yasinsky – decided to remind the directory of themselves (possibly, having found out about Shaporin’s delays with his work). On June 12, 1932 they addressed Arkanov in writing: “During your time as the director of the Sverdlovsk Opera Theater, you have produced the <...> opera *The Decembrists* written by us”<sup>40</sup>, the authors of the appeal wrote, trying immediately to cut themselves into Arkanov’s confidence. Zolotaryov and Yasinovsky pointed at the performance of their composition that took place at the Bolshoi Theater several years earlier, emphasizing that the opera “was not revived in the subsequent seasons, since it was contemplated for performance numerous times after that, there were rehearsals taking place, but somebody’s influence always withdrew the opera from the repertoire.”<sup>41</sup> Now, finally, the composer and the librettist “decided to make a number of changes,” including “altering the scene of the rebellion, strengthening the role

36 Pis'ma i telegrammy Malinovskoy Eleny Konstantinovny k Y.A. Shaporinu [Letters and Telegrams of Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya to Yuri Shaporin], p. 2–2 back side.

37 Ibid., p. 3–5; Arkanov. Telegramma Shaporinu Yu. A. [Arkanov. A Telegram to Yuri Shaporin]. In *Russian National Museum of Music*. Fund 222. No. 106, p. 1.

38 Shaporina L. V. Dnevnik [Diary]. (Vol. I), p. 115.

39 Cit. from: [16, p. 23].

40 Perepiska teatra s kompozitorami ... [The Theater’s Correspondence with Composers...]. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 745, p. 101.

41 Ibid.



of the people, endowing it with a flurry of activity, at the same time emphasizing the discord between the insurgent princes and the people,” “to strengthen the characteristic feature of Tsar Nicholas, bringing in the scene of interrogation of Trubetskoy, where the quailing courtier is crawling on his knees and imploring the belligerent martinet-tsar to forgive him,” “to give prominence more saliently to the figure of Decembrist Kakhovsky, who at the meeting of the Decembrists demands resolute and relentless actions from the overly tolerant princes.”<sup>42</sup> Zolotaryov and Yasinovsky presumed that after these changes (corresponding to the spirit of the frightening 1930s, rather than the romantic 1820s) the question of reviving the production of *The Decembrists* on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater could be raised again.<sup>43</sup> But the appeal did not have any success. Notwithstanding his long-time relations with Zolotaryov stemming from his prior collaboration with the composer back in Sverdlovsk, Arkanov answered him on June 16 with a short message that “the opera on the subjects of the Decembrists by composer Yuri Shaporin and writer Alexei Tolstoy is included in the repertoire of the Bolshoi Theater. As the result of this, the question of bringing back your opera into the repertoire is no longer topical.”<sup>44</sup>

*“I want so much to return your faith in my art work ...”*

In the second half of 1932 in the correspondence of the directors of the Bolshoi Theater there was already a certain amount of frustration with Shaporin’s music perceived. On October 13, 1932, in Malinovskaya’s memorandum Arkanov (the author is not indicated in the source and is determined from the context of the memo), commenting the musical competition which completed earlier, on which the jury decided not to award anybody the first prize, while dividing the second prize between Shaporin, Popov and Vissarion Shebalin, noted that Shaporin “was appreciated less than the others.”<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, there was absolutely no question of any estrangement with the composer, at the Bolshoi Theater they continued to wait with impatience the completion of the work on *The Decembrists* and the symphony,

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., pp. 101–101 back side.

44 Ibid., p. 100.

45 Zayavleniya i pis'ma artistov, dirizherov, kompozitorov i drugikh lits v direktsiyu i yacheyku VKP(b) Bol'shogo teatra, o vosstanovlenii na rabotu, zaklyuchenii dogovorov i po konfliktnym voprosam. Protokoly soveshchaniy: Upravleniya teatral'nymi i zrelishchnymi predpriyatiyami; treugol'nika Bol'shogo teatra. Proyekt postanovleniya komissii pri Namkomfine po otchetu i balansu Bolshogo teatra za 1928-1929 gody. Spiski artistov Bol'shogo teatra [Declarations and letters of artists, conductors, composers and other persons to the directory and the leadership of the Communist Party of the Bolshoi Theater about the reinstatement in employment, signing contracts and in questions of conflict. Proceedings of the conferences: Direction of the theatrical and spectacular events; the triangle of the Bolshoi Theater. Project of the provision of the commission affiliated with the People's Committee for Finances for reporting and balance of the Bolshoi Theater for 1928–1929. Lists of artists of the Bolshoi Theater. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 805, p. 71.

the latter of which the composer also “owed” the theater. On December 14, 1932 the Management of the Affairs of the Bolshoi Theater turned to Shaporin with the request “to send out immediately the score of the fourth movement <...> of the symphony (or which only the parts of the beginning were made for performance)” and the complete piano version of the fourth movement, noting that “a delay in the dispatch would result in a cancellation of the concert.”<sup>46</sup> A few days later, on December 19 (the year is determined by comparing this document with the previous one) Malinovskaya personally telegraphed Shaporin, encouraging him to accelerate his speed of work: “Coates is leaving on January 4, we are awaiting for your arrival and for your materials.”<sup>47</sup>

At the very end of 1932, the Shaporin family was struck by misfortune: the composer’s daughter Elena passed away after a serious illness. Apparently, Shaporin’s letter to Malinovskaya from January 20, 1933 became the answer to the condolences expressed by the management of the Bolshoi Theater. “Nobody has done so much for my music as the Bolshoi Theater has in your person, nobody had such a gentle and affectionate attitude towards me as you, and I have never brought more grief to anybody than to you and to the Bolshoi Theater,”<sup>48</sup> the father, stricken with grief, wrote “to dear Elena Konstantinovna.” “It is terrible that in the present situation such words as illness and death become my vindications.”<sup>49</sup> Shaporin found it necessary to emphasize, how he valued his relations with the director of the Bolshoi Theater: “I wish so much to return your faith in my musical creativity that I am convinced that I shall achieve this.”<sup>50</sup>

In the spring of 1933 Shaporin finally completed the work on the symphony, and on May 11 it was performed for the first time by the Bolshoi Theater orchestra under the direction of Alexander Shamilyevich Melik-Pashayev.<sup>51</sup> At the end of March and the beginning of April 1933 he wrote to Arkanov in a much more self-assured manner,<sup>52</sup> expressing his interest about whether “measures were taken about moving the grand piano to Klin, about which I asked and which you promised,” “was it necessary to bring pillows, bed covers and bedsheets to Klin,” and “how will things stand with the meals?”

46 Perepiska teatra s kompozitorami ... [The Theater’s Correspondence with Composers...]. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 745, p. 42.

47 Pis’ma i telegrammy Malinovskoy Eleny Konstantinovny k Y. A. Shaporinu [Letters and Telegrams of Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya to Yuri Shaporin]. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 2642. List 1. Portfolio 341, p. 6.

48 Pis’ma Shaporina Yuriya Alexandrovich Malinovskoy E. K. [Yuri Alexandrovich Shaporin’s Letters to Elena Malinovskaya]. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 1933. List 2. Portfolio 68, p. 2.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Martynov, I. I. (1966). *Yuri Shaporin*. Muzyka, p. 125.

52 The letter is not dated. The months are determined according to the content of the letter, and the year — both by the fact that it is written about in the letter about the composer sending the various movements of his symphony and his readiness to concentrate on the work on completing his opera, as well as his expressed intention to make a trip to Klin (where, according to Shaporina’s diary, the composer went in the spring of 1933. Shaporina L. V. *Dnevnik [Diary]*. Vol. 1, p. 168).

I am very modest in my demands, but even undemanding people have to eat within the limits of their unpretentiousness.”<sup>53</sup> When giving notice about sending out the various separate movements of his symphony, Shaporin emphasized that he was going to come to Klin on April 7 and spend five months there, “until the full completion of the opera.” Asking, as was usual, to transfer “the March sum of money to Detskoe [Selo],” and noting especially that he “wishes very much to work on the opera,” Shaporin asked Arkanov to send “his affectionate regards to the highly esteemed Elena Konstantinovna.”<sup>54</sup> However, even his sojourn in the spot that inspired Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky did not provide the composer with the strength for completing his work on *The Decembrists*.

While not losing hope in obtaining for the theater the opera the work on which was being delayed more and more, Malinovskaya<sup>55</sup> attempted to make an impact not only on the composer, but also on the author of the libretto. On May 14, 1933 Tolstoy signed a separate contract with the directory of the Bolshoi Theater, committing himself to present the text by June 1 of the same year,<sup>56</sup> however, this latest “deadline” was also not met. On October 20, 1933 Malinovskaya wrote to him: “I beseech you, upon receipt of this letter, to notify me, how the affairs stand with *The Decembrists*: whether or not Yuri Shaporin is working on them, how is the work progressing, and when is he intent on fulfilling the requirements of the Directory about sending the piano-vocal score.”<sup>57</sup> Lyubov Vasilyevna, Shaporin’s spouse, had her own explanations of the delay in her work on the opera. On November 8 of the same year, having listed in her diary all of her husband’s paramours, on which most of his time was spent, she wrote:

Unhappy dolt. It is already a year that he is not doing anything. I started noting his work day by day, since the middle of October. Since October 16 to November 8 he worked half a day each time. The rest of the time he floats in the air and cries: “This is tragic — I cannot compose!”<sup>58</sup>

“At the Bolshoi Theater they are inclined to think that he cannot complete the opera at all,” Shaporina emphasized on November 30, referring to Kurbatsky’s words passed on to her. “And I am already beginning to have my doubts.”<sup>59</sup> During

53 Perepiska teatra s kompozitorami ... [The Theater’s Correspondence with Composers...]. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 745, pp. 95–95 back side.

54 Ibid., p. 96–97 back side.

55 The document is not signed, and the authorship is established according to the context.

56 Dogovory, zaklyuchennyye direktsiyey Bolshogo teatra s kompozitorami, hudozhnikami, pisatelyami i baletmeisterami o napisanii muzyki i teksta spektakley i ob uchastii v postanovochnoy rabote. Perepiska o vypolnenii dogovorov. Text opery-agitki A. A. Zharova “Obetovannaya zemlya” [The contracts made by the directory of the Bolshoi Theater with composers, artists, writers and ballet masters about writing the music and the text for performances and about their participation in the production work. The written correspondence about fulfilling the contracts. The text of the agitation opera A.A. Zharov “The Promised Land”. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 776, p. 110.

57 Perepiska teatra s kompozitorami ... [The Theater’s Correspondence with Composers...]. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 745, p. 11.

58 Shaporina, L. V. Dnevnik [Diary]. (Vol. 1). P. 146.

59 Ibid., p. 149.

the course of yet another year, the situation did not change intrinsically. On November 9, 1934 Shaporina made another entry in her diary:

Yuri acted foolishly and in a mean way, all the way that he could do it, and he ended up in that blind alley which I long had a presentiment of. Now I have visited the Tolstoys. Yesterday Yokhelson and Pushkov came to him to speak about *The Decembrists*, about the libretto, about Yuri. “You know, Lyubov Vassilyevna, I brought Yuri out as much as I could, I reconciled him with Malinovskaya, I brought him to Alexei Maximovich, organized the money for him. Now he met with me with embraces, while, at the same time, he is speaking beyond the backs of Malinovskaya and the leadership of the Composers’ Union, he says that he isn’t writing the opera because of me, because of the total lack of coordination with the librettist. This is already treachery.”<sup>60</sup>

After her conversation with Tolstoy, Shaporina immediately noted the gloomy perspectives for her husband, who by that time had already left the family: “They want to pass the affair to the Communist Party representatives. Around 70,000 has been gathered for the opera. They will put Yuri under the threat of the Party tribunal.”<sup>61</sup> The author of the diary did not make any attempts to find any vindication for a man she had been close to before: “This is so much fun. I was expecting all of this. When in September Yuri was going to Moscow, I was repeating the same to him: ‘Do not complain about Tolstoy, it is not his fault, you yourself should work it out, prepare the libretto, and then he would write everything superbly.’”<sup>62</sup> However, already in a few days she adjusted her opinion in favor of her husband. On November 19, after the argument between Tolstoy and Shaporin about what the opera should be like, she wrote down: “After all, Tolstoy, although he is an intelligent man, does not have a broadness of outlook. <...> Most likely, Tolstoy and Shaporin could never agree with each other. Tolstoy is all everyday life, realism, anecdote, while opera is always romantic. Yuri’s songs – that is his creative tonality.”<sup>63</sup>

Notwithstanding all the delays, in the theater they did not reject the idea of collaboration with the composer. In the archival fund of the Bolshoi Theater there is an informational memo preserve, which was given out to Shaporin on December 31, 1934 “for the recommendation to the ‘Savoy’ Hotel, in which it was indicated that the composer ‘was really called out by the Direction of the State Academic Bolshoi Theater of the USSR to Moscow for official conversations.”<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, “the epoch of Malinovskaya” at the Bolshoi Theater was coming to an end: in January 1935 she was dismissed from her post as director, without ever having seen the premiere of *The Decembrists*. Incidentally, her successor, Vladimir Ivanovich Mutnykh was not able to see it either; as it is well-known, Shaporin completed his opera only in 1953.<sup>65</sup>

60 Ibid., p. 180.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., p. 183–184.

64 Perepiska teatra s kompozitorami ... [The Theater’s Correspondence with Composers...]. In *RGALI [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]*. Fund 648. List 2. Portfolio 745, p. 4.

65 Martynov I. I. *Yuri Shaporin*, p. 24.



*The Bitter Results of Collaboration*

Having examined the factual side of the interrelations of the Bolshoi Theater with Shaporin in the first half of the 1930s, several conclusions can be arrived at. First of all, at that time the administration of the theater insistently tried to show the public new, Soviet repertoire, which was also demanded both by the Communist Party and the ideologically engaged critics. This repertoire had to be created not merely with whatever means possible (just as long as the plotline would correspond with the party line) but in itself had to be of high artistic value. For this reason, at the theater they rejected the idea of working with Zolotaryov, who proposed the same *Decembrists*, in favor of a more significant authoritative figure in the musical world — Shaporin. Second, Malinovskaya threw in her lot with Shaporin: he was supposed to be the composer not only of one opera about the Decembrists, but of a grandiose opera cycle which would illustrate by means of the art of music the history of the revolutionary movement in Russia. However, the results of this collaboration turned out to be much more modest, having been limited in the examined time frame to the premiere of only Shaporin's symphony. The responsibility for the disruption of the initial plans lies on the composer and the librettist: Shaporin's lack of focus, the extremely slow tempo of his work and his differences with Tolstoy regarding the vision of the future have had a disastrous impact on the expected premiere of *The Decembrists*, having postponed it for several decades.

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