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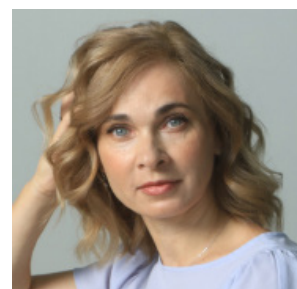
**China in Soviet Opera:
Sergei Vasilenko's *Son of the Sun* and Its Stage Fate**

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Abstract. The attitude of the general public and musical circles to the work of Sergei Nikiforovich Vasilenko (1872–1956) changed more than once. Now that it becomes possible to consider his work more objectively, it is attracting the increasing attention of performers and researchers. One of Vasilenko's most interesting works yet to receive critical reappraisal is his opera *Son of the Sun* [*Sin Solntsa*] (1929). A year after its premiere at the Bolshoi Theatre, the opera was largely forgotten; however, as the present work sets out to demonstrate, this was primarily as a result of political and not artistic factors. Up until now, *Son of the Sun* has not been the object of detailed musicological analysis. Fortunately, the score, archival materials and critical responses to the production have been preserved. By turning to them, one can reconstruct the atmosphere of its creation to provide this important work with an unbiased assessment and answer the question about the reasons for its

Translated by Thomas A. Beavitt

unhappy stage fate. The relevance of *Son of the Sun* today is determined by another circumstance: it is the only Soviet opera whose subject matter is connected with China: the libretto by Mikhail Galperin is based on the events of the Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1901. As well as drawing on elements of romanticism, impressionism, and modernism, Vasilenko’s music reveals a keen interest in Chinese folklore: in addition to repeatedly quoting themes from Chinese folk music, the composer finds new ways of working with them that correspond to the nature of the material itself. In the musical dramaturgy of the opera, four independent lines can be distinguished: ethnographic, lyrical, revolutionary–ideological and “topical”. In the last of them, the composer comes close to the genre of *Zeitoper*, which became popular in European musical theatre during the 1920s and 1930s. The study of Vasilenko’s forgotten opera on the eve of its 100th anniversary shows that *Son of the Sun* has many merits that justify its more thorough study and new attempts to bring it to stage.

Keywords: *Son of the Sun*, Sergei Vasilenko, Soviet opera, China in music, *chinoiserie*, East in music, opera genres, opera dramaturgy, stage fate of opera, *Zeitoper*, Boxer Rebellion

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*Музыкальный театр:
вопросы истории*

Научная статья

**Китай в советской опере: «Сын Солнца»
С. Н. Василенко и его сценическая судьба**

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Аннотация. Отношение публики и музыкальных кругов к творчеству Сергея Никифоровича Василенко (1872–1956) менялось не раз. Сейчас произведения композитора наконец стали рассматриваться объективно, его музыка привлекает внимание исполнителей и исследователей. «Сын Солнца» (1929) — одно из несправедливо забытых сочинений Василенко. Через год после премьеры на сцене Большого театра опера сошла с подмостков и была забыта — как доказывается в статье, прежде всего в силу политических, а вовсе не художественных причин. До сих пор «Сын Солнца» не становился объектом специального музыковедческого анализа. К счастью, сохранилась партитура, архивные материалы и отклики на постановку. Обратившись к ним, можно восстановить атмосферу создания, дать этому сочинению непредвзятую оценку, а также ответить на вопрос о причинах его несчастливой сценической судьбы. Актуальность «Сына Солнца» сегодня обусловлена еще одним обстоятельством: это единственная советская опера, связанная с Китаем. Либретто Михаила Петровича Гальперина основано на событиях восстания ихэтуаней 1899–1901 гг. Музыка Василенко опирается на традиции романтизма, импрессионизма, модерна, но при этом насыщена интересом к китайскому фольклору: композитор не просто многократно цитирует народные темы, но находит новые способы работы с ними, соответствующие

природе самого материала. В музыкальной драматургии оперы выделяются четыре самостоятельных линии: этнографическая, лирическая, революционно-идеологическая и «злободневная». В последней из них композитор вплотную подходит к явлению *Zeitoper*, ставшему популярным в европейском музыкальном театре 1920–1930-х годов. Обращение к забытой опере Василенко в преддверии ее 100-летия показывает, что «Сын Солнца» имеет немало достоинств, а потому нуждается и в изучении, и в исполнении.

Ключевые слова: «Сын Солнца», Сергей Василенко, советская опера, Китай в музыке, шинуазри, Восток в музыке, оперные жанры, драматургия оперы, сценическая судьба оперы, *Zeitoper*, восстание ихэтуаней

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Introduction

The name of Sergei Vasilenko (1872–1956), a talented and at times highly regarded composer, conductor, mentor and teacher, fell into undeserved obscurity following his death. Currently, assessments of his work are being revised; as a result, Vasilenko’s music is increasingly being performed and studied, conferences are being held,¹ and a website dedicated to his work has been created.²

Vasilenko made his mark as a composer and conductor during the early years of the 20th century. An heir to the traditions of the Russian school of composition, who studied under Sergei Taneyev, Vasily Safonov and Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov, he received the gold medal of the Moscow Conservatory for his diploma work, the cantata³ *Legend of the Great City of Kitezh and the Quiet Lake Svetoyar* [*Skazaniye o velikom grade Kitezhe i tikhom ozere Svetoyare*] (1902) [1, p. 249].⁴ Already in this work, the features characteristic of his future work were defined: vivid timbres and a desire for exoticism.

In 1906, Vasilenko began teaching composition and instrumentation at the Moscow Conservatory, at which he would remain for the next 50 years. During the pre-revolutionary years, he was part of the Russian artistic elite, a member of the Literary and Artistic Circle [3, p. 154], and associated with Savva Mamontov, Valery Bryusov, Mikhail Vrubel, Viktor Borisov-Musatov and others. Features of the latest trends of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (impressionism, symbolism, modernism) were evident in the composer’s best pre-revolutionary works including the symphonic poem *The Garden of Death* (after Oscar Wilde) [*Sad smerti* Op. 13] (1907–08) and the vocal suite *Invocations* [*Zaklinaniya*] (1909).

In 1917, the direction of Vasilenko’s creative aspirations changed dramatically: in his own words, he “was the first among Moscow composers who came... with an offer to provide his services to the state.”⁵ As a result,

¹ In March 2022, in the composer’s hometown of Lipetsk, the Scientific and Practical Conference *S. N. Vasilenko and His Time* was dedicated to the 150th anniversary of his birth.

² Vasilenko S. N.: Composer. Bringing the Legend to Life. Retrieved December 2, 2024, from <https://vasilenko-legend.ru/tvorchestvo/obwestvennaya-deyatelnost/>

³ The cantata was later transformed into an opera [1, p. 249].

⁴ From here on, the dates of creation of the works are given according to the *Chronological Index of Works by S. N. Vasilenko* from the book by Georgy Polyanovsky [1, pp. 248–264]. In a recent article by Pavel Karpov, a slightly different formulation of the title and the following dates are given: 1901 — performance of the cantata *Skazaniye o grade velikom Kitezhe i tikhom ozere Svetoyare* from the piano score at Vasilenko’s final exam, 1902 — premiere of the orchestral version of the cantata at the Symphony Assembly of the Musical Society, 1903 — first performance of Vasilenko’s opera of the same name, created on the basis of the cantata [2, pp. 129–133].

⁵ Vasilenko S. N.: Composer. Bringing the Legend to Life. Retrieved December 2, 2024, from <https://vasilenko-legend.ru/tvorchestvo/obwestvennaya-deyatelnost/>

Vasilenko headed the Concert and Organisational Bureau of Moscow, was one of the initiators of the creation of the music editorial office of the All-Union Radio, wrote the first Uzbek opera (together with Mukhtar Ashrafi) and ballet, *Concerto for balalaika and orchestra* [*Balalaika Concert*, op. 63] (1931), *Arctic Symphony* (1935) and *Kolkhoz Suite* (1953), and was awarded two Orders of Lenin and the Stalin Prize 1st degree for his work. The stylistic shift from late romanticism and modernist movements to the principles of socialist realism occurred so quickly in Vasilenko's work that at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century his name was generally associated with conformism and creative opportunism. But today new facts about the composer's biography have emerged that demonstrate the full complexity and tragedy of his relationship with the Soviet authorities [4, p. 82].

*Plot of the Opera Son of the Sun:
Political and Cultural Context*

The second of the six operas written by Vasilenko, based on a libretto by Mikhail Petrovitch Galperin (1929), is the only work in this genre created in the USSR that is connected with China. The appeal to China was not accidental: the East attracted Vasilenko over the course of his entire creative life. According to Zuo Zhenguan, he felt early on that “the era of Westernisation was over” and that it was time for non-European musical cultures to “inject fresh blood” into Western music [5, p. 15]. The composer's predecessors of the opera were *Maori Songs* (1913), *Exotic Suite* (1916), *Two Oriental Melodies* (1918), *Armenian Serenade* (1921), incidental music for the play *The Legend of Joseph the Beautiful*, *Oriental Dance* for clarinet and piano (1922), the ballet *Noya* (1923), *Eight Japanese Melodies*, *Opium Flowers* (Chinese melody) (1924), *Three Sinhalese Melodies*, *Melodies of the Kazan and Ural Tatars*, *Chines of the East*, incidental music for the play *Chu Yun-wai* (1926), as well as the *Hindu* (1927) and *Chinese* (1928) suites. Vasilenko not only wrote in a certain “oriental” style, focusing on the traditions that had developed during the 19th century and processing the melodies of various peoples, but also made a serious studied of the music of the East. In 1919–1923, he lectured on the history of music at the First Moscow University [1, p. 74], where, in particular, he introduced listeners to the ancient musical culture of the Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Assyrians, as well as investigating its development in China, Japan, India, and Oceania. In his future oeuvre, the “Eastern period,” in the words of the composer, would continue in his work for many more years [Ibid.].

The basis for *Son of the Sun* was taken from the memorable events of the “Boxer Rebellion” of 1899–1901, which took place against the background

of European dominance in China.⁶ In the opera, these events become the backdrop for a love story: a feeling arises between representatives of two warring camps, the American woman Aurora and the Chinese sage Lao-Sin.

During the 1920s, Chinese motifs became popular in Soviet art for two reasons. On the one hand, the increased interest in China was determined by the political agenda of the 1920s. In 1922, the IV Congress of the Comintern decided to create a united anti-imperialist front in which China, which had chosen a path similar to Russia's, became the USSR's closest ally. Following the abdication of Emperor Pu Yi (1912), revolutionary changes began; in 1924, the Kuomintang Party took a course towards cooperation with the USSR. As political scientist Alexander Vladimirovich Lukin notes, "until the end of the 1920s, the Soviet authorities saw the Chinese as friendly representatives of the 'proletariat' of the neighbouring country" [8, p. 196].

On the other hand, the 19th-century traditions of romantic exoticism and associated new wave of chinoiserie or "Chinese style" that flooded European art at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries had not yet been extinguished. In Russian literature, the most striking manifestations of romanticised chinoiserie arose in the poetry of Nikolai Gumilyov, while in music, Stravinsky's opera *The Nightingale* made similar cultural reference. New aspirations were rethought in 1926–1927 in the mainstream of modernist "meta-exoticism" (a term coined by Chu Jinyi [初金一]) in the paintings of Pyotr Konchalovsky and Natalya Goncharova (see more details [9, pp. 52–84]), picked up by the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Mikhail Svetlov were then reflected in Reinhold Glière's ballet *The Red Poppy*. According to Edward Tyerman, the ballet was intended to shift an "erotic narrative into a political one, substituting for the generic trope of the desirable foreign prince the salvational narrative of Soviet Russia's transformative influence on semicolonial China" [10, p. 119]. The stage fate of *The Red Poppy* in the 1920s is symptomatic: during the first Moscow production of the ballet in 1927, the design of the performance was still largely maintained in the pre-revolutionary traditions of chinoiserie, but by 1929, the Leningrad directors were specifically emphasising the "alarming atmosphere of the growing struggle, fraught with the danger of an explosion" [11, p. 136].

In reviews of the premiere of *Son of the Sun*, contemporaries also noted the consonance of the depicted events with what was happening in Soviet Russia:

⁶ The Boxer Rebellion (义和团运动, Yìhétuán yùndòng) was an anti-European, anti-imperialist, and anti-Christian movement in northern China in 1899–1901. The uprising was led by the religious and mystical secret society 义和团 Yìhétuán ("Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists"), which called for the destruction and expulsion of foreigners (see [6]). The Yìhétuán were trained in hand-to-hand combat, for which reason Europeans called them "boxers". The rebels committed mass murders of Christians, destroyed churches, spiritual missions and European embassies, and occupied Beijing and Tianjin. Following the Eight-Power Alliance's war with China and the betrayal of Empress Cixi (慈禧太后), the rebellion was eventually suppressed [7, pp. 353–356].

“China’s struggle today has the same basis.”⁷ Rodion Makarov’s sets for Vasilenko’s opera were far from romantic exoticism and emphasized the idea of the old-world destruction (*Illustrations 1, 2*).



Illustration 1.

Son of the Sun. Uprising scene. Set design by Rodion Makarov⁸



Illustration 2.

Son of the Sun. Scene from Act 1. GOTOB 2, 1929⁹

⁷ Worker Correspondent Shavkutenko (1929). Mashinotrest. Vdogonku za sovremennost’yu [Mashinotrest. In Pursuit of Modernity]. *Sovremenny Teatr* [Modern Theatre], (26–27), 383.

⁸ Image from the collection of the St. Petersburg State Theatre Library. Retrieved December 2, 2024, from <https://teatrbiblio.wixsite.com/mysite/сын-солнца>

⁹ Image from the collection of the St. Petersburg State Theatre Library. Retrieved December 2, 2024, from <https://teatrbiblio.wixsite.com/mysite/сын-солнца>

While Glière's ballet *The Red Poppy* and Vasilenko's opera *Son of the Sun* became the main works on Chinese themes in Russian music of the post-revolutionary period, their stage fates turned out to be rather different. Although the situation turned out in favour of the ballet, from the point of view of its artistic merit, Vasilenko's score is not inferior to Glière's. *The Red Poppy*, later to be edited and renamed *The Red Flower*, became firmly established in the Soviet musical and theatrical repertoire, while *Son of the Sun* did not appear on stage after 1930.

There are a few reasons for such a clear difference in the subsequent fates of the respective works.

First of all, Vasilenko turned to China two years later than Glière, so the novelty effect no longer excited the imagination of viewers. It is also necessary to remember that the opera genre on the domestic stage of those years was in the shadow of ballet: newspapers wrote about the "extraordinary love for ballet now observed on the part of the democratic part of the public, who buy up tickets for all ballet performances"¹⁰ (the audience even allowed themselves to quarrel, demanding a repetition of their favourite dances, as happened at one of the public rehearsals of the Mariinsky Theatre, during which demands were heard from the audience "to bring the dancers and orchestra to heel"¹¹). But the main reason for the swift and unfair oblivion of the *Son of the Sun* for many years was, as we shall see, political.

The first critical reviews of Vasilenko's opera after its premiere on May 24, 1929, at the Bolshoi Theatre (GOTOB 2¹²) were positive. Thus, Leonid Obolensky, in a detailed review written for the magazine *Sovremenny Teatr* [*Contemporary Theatre*], noted the "serious and talented music" and "development of colossal ethnographic material,"¹³ while "worker correspondents" in the same publication admired the performance of Alexander Pirogov (Lao-Sin), the scenery, as well as the "revolutionary enthusiasm of the masses" shown on stage.¹⁴ The literary and artistic satirical magazine *Chudak* gave Vasilenko's "Chinese" opera an aphoristic but ambiguous assessment: "the music is good, the singing is poor, the production is bad, and the plot is rubbish."¹⁵ (We may note here that it was the music that was rated as successful.)

¹⁰ Skandal v Mariinskom teatre [Scandal at the Mariinsky Theatre]. (1918, May 30). *Novaya Petrogradskaya Gazeta* [*New Petrograd Newspaper*], (108), 4.

¹¹ Ibid..

¹² Second State Opera and Ballet Theatre, branch of the Bolshoi Theatre.

¹³ Obolensky, L. (1929). "Sin Solntsa." Opera S. Vasilenko [*Son of the Sun*. Opera by S. Vasilenko]. *Sovremenny Teatr* [*Modern Theatre*], (22–23), 348–349.

¹⁴ Worker Correspondent Viktorov (1929). Chuvstvuetsya revolyucionnyj ehntuziazm [One Can Feel the Revolutionary Enthusiasm]. *Sovremenny Teatr* [*Modern Theatre*], (26–27), 383.

¹⁵ Foreigner Fedorov. (1929). Nepogreshimaya formula [Infallible Formula]. *Chudak*, (23), 11.

During a year (since the May 24, 1929, till June 29, 1930), *Son of the Sun* was performed on the stage of the Bolshoi Theatre no less than 29 times,¹⁶ which certainly testifies to its serious success.¹⁷ There were also plans to stage the opera in Tiflis and the Far East.¹⁸

However, by the autumn of 1929, the tone of printed reviews had changed dramatically and was becoming increasingly aggressive. In September, the *Proletarian Musician* denounced the composer for his “obvious desire to push through philistine, petty-bourgeois music, sometimes even directly hostile to us, under the guise of proletarian production”;¹⁹ in December, he declared that the opera “plays a clearly reactionary role” and even represents “a libel on the idea of revolution.”²⁰ The main claims are made not from artistic, but from ideological positions. Such formulations in the main proletarian musical publications of those years meant an automatic death sentence for the *Son of the Sun*.

The sharp change in the critics’ position towards the opera was not accidental. It coincides precisely with a serious deterioration of relations between the USSR and China: in the summer of 1929, shortly following the premiere of the *Son of the Sun* at the Bolshoi Theatre, a conflict broke out on the Chinese Eastern Railway, resulting in an armed confrontation and a rupture in diplomatic relations between the countries. Thus, at the turn of 1929–1930, a crisis period began in the history of Soviet-Chinese musical contacts [12, p. 43].

Here again, we may compare the fates of the *Son of the Sun* and *The Red Poppy*. Even during the process of work, Glière and the group of directors initially demonstrated a willingness to fight when faced with negative assessments of their ballet. A large-scale campaign launched to ideologically justify the ballet in the press and among workers at factories and plants resulted in a public demand issued by the proletarian public to continue work on the production [11, p. 127–128]. According to Olga Tuminskaya, “*The Red Poppy* became the brainchild of proletarian ideology in dramatic art” [13, p. 23]. Later, the composer, in response to new unambiguously stated requests, repeatedly reworked both the plot and the music of *The Red Poppy* (the second version appeared in 1948; the third, now

¹⁶ Bolshoi Theatre. Electronic archive. Retrieved December 2, 2024, from <https://archive.bolshoi.ru/entity/PERFORMANC?sa-query=Сын%20Солнца&sort=90>

¹⁷ While in the monograph by Polyanovsky it is stated that the opera was performed at GOTOB-2 for three years [1, p. 113], a study of the complete list of performances from 1929–1932 from the Electronic Archive of the Bolshoi Theatre refutes this statement: *Son of the Sun* lasted on stage for just over a year, the last performance taking place on June 20, 1930.

¹⁸ Perspektivy opernogo sezona v Tiflise [Prospects of the Opera Season in Tiflis]. (1928). *Zhizn' iskusstva* [Life of Art], (40), 10; Far Eastern Theatre in the Upcoming Season. (1929). *Zhizn' iskusstva* [Life of Art], (31), 11.

¹⁹ Za dal'nejshee nastuplenie [To the Further Offensive]. (1929). *Proletarskij muzykant* [Proletarian Musician], (3), 2.

²⁰ Vygotsky, N. (1929). “Sın solntsa” (k postanovke v GOTOBe) [Son of the Sun (for Production at GOTOB)]. *Proletarskij muzykant* [Proletarian Musician], (4), 30.

retitled *The Red Flower*, in 1957). In addition, an ideologically impeccable positive image was introduced into the plot — the Soviet Captain and sailors aboard his ship carrying the ideas of struggle and freedom. This idea was also emphasised in Glière's score: the musical characteristics of the Soviet sailors were expressed in the themes of two famous songs of the revolutionary era — Yablochko and Internationale. In this way, the authors of *The Red Poppy* protected themselves from political attacks and accusations of ideological unreliability, remembering that “truly Soviet’ means propaganda, serving social construction and changing everyday life” [14, p. 100].

The plot and music of *Son of the Sun* turned out to be much more vulnerable from an ideological point of view.

There is turmoil in Beijing's European Quarter. Lord Milberry, Baron and Baroness Gross, the French singer Edith Saliers, Lady Salisbury, missionary Von Kirsten and Colonel Shirkov are alarmed. Aurora, the daughter of the commander of the American troops, General Hamilton, has forgotten her fiancé, Lieutenant Watter, and spends her days wandering alone through the Chinese quarters, where an uprising is being prepared. It turns out that she is in love with the temple's minister, the Chinese sage Lao-Xing, who is known as the “Son of the Sun.” Love for a girl from the enemy camp places Lao-Xing outside the law, and the bonze top brass under the leadership of Tai-Tsung condemn him to suicide. Without telling Aurora about the court's verdict, Lao-Xing meets her for the last time on the shore of the lake, then says his prayers, takes poison and ends his life. The uprising begins. Aurora, unaware of the death of her beloved, hurries into the Chinese alleys to her certain death. The rebels seize the European Quarter and smash the embassies.

As can be seen from the summary, the plot of the opera is only formally connected with the ideals of the new proletarian art. Although it is about an uprising against European imperialism, its main driving forces are shown not to be the working class, but rather the Chinese bonze priests. The opera's portrayal of the opposing camp, comprising representatives of Western European embassies and the Russian tsarist colonel Shirkov, seems even more hostile from the point of view of the Soviet viewer. The starring couple comprising the daughter of an American general and a priest of the Sun cult, also fails to not correspond to the proletarian canon of positive heroes of that time.

The events of the opera are based on plot motifs typical for Western adventure novels about the Boxer Rebellion of 1900: the initial sense of danger, the restriction of movement for Europeans only to the territories of their concessions and then to the British diplomatic mission in Beijing, the dressing of the main characters in Chinese clothes, etc. [15, p. 98–129].

Music

In many respects, Vasilenko's opera remains closely connected with the traditions established during the Romantic period. First of all, it should be noted that *Son of the Sun* belongs to the type of opera whose rich, brightly timbred

and independent orchestral part features instrumental pictures, interludes and intermissions, as well as with an expanded system of leitmotifs, which brings it closer to Wagnerian style of musical drama (during research it was possible to count more than 20 leitmotifs in the score).

References to French stylistic elements are no less tangible: from grand opera (four-act structure with extended arias, ensembles, choirs and ballet, as well as a love story framed by historical events) to lyrical opera (emphasising the social differences between the characters, an “exotic” plot and the realism of crowd scenes as in Bizet’s *Les pêcheurs de perles*, Delibes’ *Lakmé*, Massenet’s *Thaïs*). In terms of its plot and style, *Son of the Sun* most strongly resembles both Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* and Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*: two irreconcilable camps to which the lovers belong, their selfless love and death, an emphasis on the lyrical component, and the soft, romantic melodiousness of the love scenes. Individual episodes, musical phrases and verbal clichés evoke in the listener’s memory other famous examples of Western European romantic opera: *Tristan und Isolde*, *Aida*, *Manon*, and *La bohème*.

Among the works of Russian composers, the predecessors of *Son of the Sun* include Alexander Dargomyzhsky’s *Rusalka* with its sharp drama, attention to everyday scenes and romance-like melody, as well as the romances of Pyotr Tchaikovsky (right down to the quasi-quotation: “*I opened the window*” — “*We will sail away with you*” from duet No. 15 of *Aurora and Lao-Sin*). The most immediate predecessor of *Son of the Sun* can be considered as *The Mandarin’s Son* by César Cui, the first work in Russian opera to feature a plot based in China. Compared to this work, however, Vasilenko went much further in his efforts to portray the world of the Celestial Empire.

From the first steps of work on the opera, it had become clear that the process would involve a certain amount of creative compromise. An analysis of surviving printed interviews and statements by the authors of the premiere performance shows that the intentions of the composer, librettist and director were quite different.

Vasilenko was primarily interested in the exotic atmosphere of the setting and the opportunity to work with Chinese national folklore. He specifically emphasised this in newspaper articles and interviews: “*Son of the Sun* was [...] the fruit of my long-term study of the music of the Far East. The songs of the peoples inhabiting China, Japan and India have long attracted my attention with their fresh and original construction of melody, as well as their unresolved structure of harmonisation.”²¹ The composer emphasised: “The Chinese element has been written by me with more love and care than the European; it represents

²¹ “*Sin Solntsa*” (k postanovke v GOTOB 2). Muzyka (iz besedy s S. N. Vasilenko) [*Son of the Sun* (for Production in GOTOB 2). Music (from a Conversation with S. N. Vasilenko)]. (1929). *Zhizn’ iskusstva* [*Life of Art*], (20), 13.

the brightest spot in the entire opera.”²² The basis of the folk scenes, as he later recalled, were quotations from genuine folklore material that he had received from the famous traveller and geographer Pyotr Kozlov, as well as from Russian musicians.²³ The music of the crowd scenes in Chinatown, the Temple of the Sun, and the opium den (we may refer to this line of development as *ethnographic*) became one of the most artistically significant components of the score. As well as drawing on the traditions of Russian operatic exoticism (Glinka, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov), Vasilenko also seeks new and unusual harmonic and timbral solutions that touch upon the musical style of the artistic movements of the early 20th century — impressionism and modernism.

Among the striking examples is the orchestral *Procession to the Temple of the Sun* from Scene 2 of Act I. A series of colourfully developed and timbrally diverse themes and quotations organically intertwine European and Chinese musical and linguistic techniques. On the one hand, there is the “modern” ornamentation of the introduction, the “live” and quivering impressionistic texture and chains of harmonic parallelisms in the culminating section (*Example 1*²⁴); on the other hand,

Example 1. Sergei Vasilenko. *Son of the Sun*.
Act I, Scene 2. No. 11 *Procession to the Temple of the Sun*, Fragment 1

²² Vasilenko, S. N. (1929). “Sin Solntsa” v GOTOBe II [*Son of the Sun* in GOTOB II]. *Novyj zritel'* [*New Viewer*], (20), 16.

²³ Vasilenko, S. N. (1954, December 28). Yarkie vpechatleniya. Zametki o kitajskoj muzyke [Vivid Impressions. Notes on Chinese Music]. *Sovetskaya kul'tura* [*Soviet Culture*], 3.

²⁴ From here on, musical examples are given from the publication: Vasilenko, S. (1930). *Son of the Sun*. Opera in 4 acts and 10 scenes. Libretto by M. Galperin, German translation by D. S. Usov. Arranged for singing and piano in 2 hands by the author. State Publishing House, Musical Sector.



Example 2. Sergei Vasilenko. *Son of the Sun*.
Act I, Scene 2. No. 11 *Procession to the Temple
of the Sun*, Fragment 2

who fell in love with each other”²⁶ — this is how he describes the main idea of what is happening in an interview (*Illustration 3*). Hence the librettist’s appeal to romantic and sometimes melodramatic clichés: “I wander alone in the power of tender thoughts, I wander alone in the ancient park” (No. 2 Romance of Edith Salier), “you and I will sail away to the blue silver lakes, we will dream together under the cover of bashful branches” (No. 15 Duet of Aurora and Lao-Sin), “I will drink all the sweetness of sorrow, I will know all the bitterness of dreams” (No. 20 Aurora’s Aria), etc.

Despite Vasilenko’s primary interest in the opportunity to work with Eastern musical material in the plot about the *Son of the Sun*, he responded willingly to the librettist’s aspirations in his music. The *lyrical layer* of the musical dramaturgy of the opera is written very convincingly, finding a vivid expression in the romantic vein.

there are pentatonic themes with Chinese-style decorations, harmonised with a clear understanding of the nature of this music (instead of European functional harmony, there are “empty” fifths and linear movement of voices) (*Example 2*).

Librettist Mikhail Galperin sought to advance the “lyrical expression of romanticism,”²⁵ emphasising that “...the struggle between two worlds — East and West — removes without a trace the phantom happiness of two people



Illustration 3. *Son of the Sun*. Scene from Act 2. Aurora — E. A. Stepanova; Lao-Xing — A. S. Pirogov. Photo from the cover of the weekly *Sovremenny Teatr* [*Modern Theatre*], 1929. No. 22–23

²⁵ “Sin Solntsa” (k postanovke v GOTOB 2). Tekst (iz besedy s M. P. Gal’perinym) [*Son of the Sun* (for Production in GOTOB 2). Text (from a Conversation with M. P. Galperin)]. (1929). *Zhizn’ iskusstva* [*Life of Art*], (20), 13.

²⁶ Ibid.

In love duets and solos of the main characters, the supple romance melody frequently involves intervallic movements of sixths, sevenths and ninths. One of the most impressive scenes in the opera is the psychologically multi-layered deathbed monologue of Lao-Xing, which is saturated with mournful chromaticism (*Example 3*).

The image displays a musical score for a vocal solo. It consists of three systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The first system is marked 'Sostenuto.' and includes the Russian lyrics 'про-щаю, мо-я же-на...' and German lyrics 'Nicht lan-ge hat die Lie-be mich er-'. The second system continues the monologue with Russian lyrics '-то как же Га-ля, как со-мне жде-ла...' and German lyrics 'Meinhol-der Freund, mein Mor-gen-sterne, du warst der'. The third system concludes with Russian lyrics 'на про-щаю...' and German lyrics 'Ge-lieb-te, du er-'. Performance markings include 'Sostenuto.', 'dolce', and 'dim. assai'. Measure numbers 105 and 110 are indicated. The number '10399' appears at the bottom of the piano part.

Example 3. Sergei Vasilenko. *Son of the Sun*. Act 4, Scene 4.
No. 37 Lao-Sin's dying monologue, Section 2

Director Titsian Sharashidze saw the task in his own way: “to make the performance politically consonant” and “reveal the social essence of the movement.”²⁷ The lyrical line developed in the libretto appears to him only as “a love episode between an American and a Chinese man”,²⁸ which “emphasises the tragedy of the oppressed masses of the people.”²⁹ Vasilenko noted that he and the librettist had to “make some alterations” so that “the opera would be significantly strengthened in an ideological sense.”³⁰ Thus, a *revolutionary ideological line* emerged in the dramaturgy.

²⁷ “Sin Solntsa” (k postanovke v GOTOB 2). Oformlenie (iz besedy s rezh. Sharashidze) [Son of the Sun (for Production in GOTOB 2). Design (from a Conversation with Director Sharashidze)]. (1929). Zhizn' iskusstva [Life of Art], (20), 13.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Chto pishut kompozitory. Interv'yu s S. N. Vasilenko [What Composers Write. Interview with S. N. Vasilenko]. (1929). *Rabis*, (9), 6.

The scenes of the uprising became the culmination of *Son of the Sun*: the opera ends with Chorus No. 43 “Stand up against the enemy, people” with the words “the native land will throw off the yoke once and for all” and the final call “wake up, China!” However, the musical solution of the scene sounds rather dry and formal. Vasilenko once again happily quotes Chinese folklore, but there is no dramatic intensity or musical discoveries in the uprising scene. Moreover, taken apart from the text, the carefree patter of musical phrases could rather be perceived as a simple and cheerful song (*Example 4*):

С.С. *ff* 235

А. *ff*

Т. *ff*

В. *ff*

счастья дни. Сно- жом всту- же На вра- га
Him-mal Klor Das Jun- ge Volk reißt zum Kampf,—

Дви-нем-ся мы мстите-ля-ми и полет-ся кровь. На-сра-нет день
Rächt sich an den Fein-den und vergießt ihr schwarzes Blut! Es Kommt ein Tag

На про-сла-то- го вра-га. На-сра-нет день
Un- - ser Land to- wird bef- reit. Es Kommt ein Tag
martellato

fff

Example 4. Sergei Vasilenko. *Son of the Sun*. Act 4, Scene 2.
No. 43 Choir “Stand up against the enemy, people”, fragment

In addition to the key layers of musical dramaturgy noted above, there is the other *world of the European Quarter*, proudly indulging itself in thoughts of racial and cultural superiority and immersed in a whirlpool of pleasures. However, judging by their statements in the press, none of the directors single out this layer as the main one or even mentioned it. Nevertheless, from the libretto and music it is clear that the “European” scenes occupy almost half of the opera (four scenes out of ten): they open and close it (Scene 1 of Act I and Scene 2 of Act IV), as well as forming the centre (Scenes 2 and 3 of Act III). Obviously, this layer of content was very important to the authors, although they were wary of formulating this idea verbally.

An analysis of the scenes in the European Quarter shows that in their solution the authors are at the forefront of musical and theatrical research of the 1920s, coming into contact with the newest phenomenon of Western European opera music of that time — “opera on contemporary topics” (*Zeitoper*).³¹ The domestic audience was already familiar with one of the most famous works of this kind — *Jonny spielt auf* [Jonny Strikes Up] by Ernst Krenek. Shortly before the premiere of *Son of the Sun*, this opera was staged in Leningrad (1928), and then in Moscow (1929). Having noticed innovative features in *Son of the Sun*, the author of the weekly *Sovremenny Teatr* noted after the premiere: “by its nature, the opera can easily be considered topical.”³² While the generic profile of *Son of the Sun* is certainly not reducible to *Zeitoper*, the scenes of the European quarter do indeed contain many of its characteristic features as discussed by Alexandra Monchick [16, pp. 214–215]:

- the contemporary nature of the events shown (the time of action is 1900, the year of the premiere is 1929);
- a socially significant plot, portraying social conflicts (the focus is on the uprising against European expansion in China);
- the involvement of the characters in everyday modern city life (in Scene 1 of Act I, “the company has gathered for a five o’clock drink,” the action of Scene 2 of Act III takes place in a billiard room, Scene 3 of the same act — in a dance hall, and Scene 2 of Act IV — in the lobby of Hamilton’s house);
- “a combination of modern high and lowbrow music” (the latter type is associated with the leitmotif of pleasures from Scene 1 of Act I, Edith Salier’s romance, Lieutenant Watter’s song, and the dances from Scene 3 of Act III);

³¹ As well as Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf* (1927), among the most famous examples of *Zeitoper* that appeared almost simultaneously with *Son of the Sun*, *Hin und zurück* (1927) and *Neues vom Tage* (1929) by Paul Hindemith, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*) by Kurt Weill (1928), and *Maschinist Hopkins* by Max Brand (1929).

³² Worker Correspondent Viktorov. (1929). *Chuvstvuetsya revolyucionnyj ehntuziazm* [One Can Feel the Revolutionary Enthusiasm]. *Sovremenny Teatr* [*Modern Theatre*], (26–27), 383.

- the use of film projections (although this is not reflected in the printed edition of the score, in the responses to the premiere we read: “just before the end... the action is transferred to the movie screen. Some grandiose clashes, explosions, war are shown there”³³);
- the inclusion of jazz and dance numbers in the opera (the themes of the foxtrot, maxixe, and galop in Scene 1 of Act I and Scene 3 of Act III, Lieutenant Watter’s ragtime leitmotif; the choice of many of these dances is a clear anachronism in relation to 1900, but they were widely used in “topical operas”).

It is interesting that in the responses of contemporaries to the classic example of *Zeitoper* — Brand’s *Maschinist Hopkins* [17, p. 321] — and in the words of critics about *Son of the Sun*, despite all the intellectual and ideological dissimilarity of the attitudes of their authors, a surprising closeness is revealed: in both cases, pandering to the tastes of the contemporary public is noted.

Conclusion

Thus, despite all the unevenness and diversity of the whole, Vasilenko’s *Son of the Sun* remains an interesting and innovative opera. However, the ideological bias of critical reviews, which were dictated by the events that affected Soviet-Chinese relations in 1929, played a fatal role in the fate of the opera. The behaviour of Vasilenko in the face criticism turned out to be completely different from that of Glière when he found himself in a similar situation: he did not want or did not dare to enter into polemics. Even without this, Vasilenko’s successful creative life was almost a miracle in those years due to his noble family roots. Always acutely aware of the danger, he considered it best not to enter into disputes, but, on the contrary, to demonstrate his readiness to serve the authorities on their terms. Soon Vasilenko won the competition to create the March of the Red Army and wrote the first ever Concerto for Balalaika and Orchestra, which immediately became famous. In terms of his interests in the musical East, the composer switched from the beginning of the 1930s to the more ideologically “safe” folklore of the Asian republics of the USSR.

As a result, *Son of the Sun* was firmly forgotten. Due to its religious and mystical basis, the Boxer Rebellion was dubbed reactionary by Soviet historiography; thus, there could be no talk of resuming the opera. Not only was it never performed again, but it has not yet been recorded in either audio or video format, placing a severe limit on researchers’ access to it.

Now, as the centenary of the premiere of *Son of the Sun* approaches, the presented study of the musical and literary text bolstered by reviews of contemporaries and surviving photographs of the production shows that

³³ Vygotsky, N. (1929). “Sin Solntsa” (k postanovke v GOTOBe) [*Son of the Sun* (for Production at GOTOB)]. *Proletarskij muzykant* [*Proletarian Musician*], (4), 30.

this opera is not simply interesting as an example of “Russian musical China” but contains much that is valuable and artistically significant – and therefore deserves a better fate.

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