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New book: Petrovskaia on Muscovite instrumental music

by Daniel Waugh

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I[ra] F[edorovna] Petrovskaia. *Drugoi vzgliad na russkuiu kul'turu XVII veka. Ob instrumental'noi muzyke i o skomorokhakh. Istoricheskii ocherk*. Sankt-Peterburg: Izd-vo. "Kompozitor", 2013. 288 pp. ISBN 978-5-7379-0640-5.

Too often, it seems, music escapes the purview of those who write about Muscovite culture. This book clearly is intended to rectify that situation, at least within the confines of its somewhat narrow focus. Petrovskaia argues that instrumental music in Muscovy was widespread amongst all social classes, a fact that she feels has not been adequately recognized. In particular, a focus on the decrees issued against the *skomorokhi* in the middle of the 17th century has led some to assume that those popular performers were then hounded out of existence. The strictures against popular musical entertainment and its associated, allegedly ungodly revels were but a manifestation of the concerns of the "Zealots of Piety" (here characterized as "hesychasts"), yet in fact were never enforced. Moreover, a close look at the sources provides plenty of evidence about the widespread possession of various musical instruments and the various situations in which music was played on them. The role of the *skomorokhi* in all this was, it seems, but a small part of the picture.

The book is valuable as a compendium of quotations from the primary sources, where in some cases excerpts rather than the extended text would have served nicely. There are chapters on Church attitudes toward instrumental music, on the *skomorokhi*, on folk instruments, on foreign musicians, on music in the military, and music in court, elite and lower-class urban and village settings. Wind instruments, drums, and both plucked and bowed strings were common; there are numerous references to keyboard instruments (analogous to cembalos) and organs. Of course since the music itself was not written down, little is said here about its substance. Since she assumes a general readership, the author offers brief descriptive characterizations to introduce the social classes or institutions and also includes a glossary of terms no longer used in modern Russian. Her subject index includes the names of the instruments but, with few exceptions does not really serve as a glossary—one must go back to her text to find her explanation as to what the instruments were.

Petrovskaia is critical of those who have mis-quoted or elided evidence in the sources, usually in an effort to downplay the importance of instrumental music in Muscovy. She deconstructs comments by foreign observers who denigrated Muscovite music. She makes a point that to understand what instruments are being described in the foreign sources, one must look at the original language.

Yet oddly, she has used no foreign scholarship, where some of the points she emphasizes have in fact already been stated clearly. Years ago in his book on the *skomorokhi* Russell Zguta

emphasized that the decrees of the mid-17th century seem not to have been enforced. Claudia Jensen's monograph on Muscovite musical culture published in 2009 has a good chapter on instrumental traditions at court and another on the court theater (whose history is now being re-written by her and Ingrid Maier). A virtue of Jensen's book is to contextualize instrumental music within a broader analysis of Muscovite musical culture and not treat it somewhat artificially in isolation from singing, as does Petrovskaja. Even if Jensen does not cite every source Petrovskaja does (many of them repetitive and better relegated to footnotes, as in Jensen's book), she does use a source one would think Petrovskaja *should* have explored but does not: several early glossaries or dictionaries compiled by foreigners who included in their vocabularies various musical instruments. Furthermore, if one has a choice nowadays, rather than rely on the original Russian edition, it would be preferable to use the new translation of Nikolai Findeizen's pioneering history of early Russian music, with its extensive, updated and corrected annotation (a project in which Jensen did a major portion of the work, and— for the record—I am credited with a role).