Daria Thomas, Pasadena City College

Russian Cultural Influence on American Culture

Russian influence on American culture began more than 150 years ago. During the last two centuries Russian culture has enriched, deepened, and even transformed American culture in important ways. It is impossible to think of modern American music, dance, theater, film, and literature without considering the enormous contributions of Rubenstein, Tchaikovsky, Balanchine, Stanislavsky, Mikhail Chekhov, Eisenstein, or Joseph Brodsky. The artistic legacies of these great artists from Russia and the Soviet Union are carried on in the arts of America to this day.

Russian cultural influence on American audiences began in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The history of Russian musical virtuosos in America began with Anton Rubinstein’s arrival in the United States in 1872. Rubinstein performed modern piano repertoire in large metropolitan cities as well as in small towns and regions where there was little opportunity for encounters with classical music. His tour concluded with the Boston premier of Tchaikovsky’s *First Piano Concerto* in 1875. This was the first time Americans had heard Tchaikovsky’s music. In 1891 the composer was invited to participate in the grand opening of Carnegie-Hall in New York. Following recitals in New York, Washington, Philadelphia and Baltimore, he wrote home excitedly:

В Америке я нашел свою публику... Я сам дирижировал своей Третьей сюитой и Торжественным маршем. Пятитысячная толпа, заполнившая в день открытия «Карнеги-холл» устроила настоящую овацию. [...] В Новом Свете живут гостеприимные, отзывчивые, добродушные люди. Главное –
The influence of Russian ballet in America was monumental, especially through the work of George Balanchine, one of the greatest choreographers of all time. He was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. As a child he studied ballet in the Imperial School (later Vaganova School) under Marius Petipa. Later he would say that his creative work was inspired by memories of his youth in St. Petersburg. After his arrival to the U.S. in 1933, Balanchine insisted that his first project would be to establish a ballet school.

The School of American Ballet, based on the Maryinsky model, opened its doors to students in January of 1934. The following year, Balanchine formed The American Ballet Company, which by 1948 became The New York City Ballet. Balanchine served as its ballet master and principal choreographer until his death in 1983. His students went on to lead similar companies and schools in Miami, San Francisco, the Pacific Northwest, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles,

1 Brown. Tchaikovsky, 328.
2 Volkov. Balanchine’s Tchaikovsky, 73.
3 Samoylova. Dzhorzh Balanchin From the video archives of Kanal “Kul’tura,” Russia, originally aired April, 1993.
and Chicago, including The African American Classical Company and School, as well as The Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Balanchine lived his entire life in admiration of music. A devout lover of Tchaikovsky’s music from early childhood, Balanchine choreographed many ballets to his works. In his notes Balanchine wrote:

Мне повезло. Я родился еще в том Петербурге, по которому ходил Чайковский… Во всем что я делал на музыку Чайковского, я ощущал его помощь. Я чувствовал—в музыке Чайковского есть что-то тайное, которое надо открыть на сцене.

[I was lucky to have been born in a St. Petersburg that had known Tchaikovsky…. I felt Tchaikovsky’s help in everything I done with his music. I sensed Tchaikovsky’s music to be an enigma that had to be revealed on stage.]4

Balanchine’s love for Tchaikovsky’s music culminated in his most famous contribution to American culture, The Nutcracker ballet. Balanchine had danced in The Nutcracker at the Maryinsky Theater in a variety of roles ranging from the Prince to the Mouse King. In 1954, building on his memories, Balanchine restored Petipa’s version of the ballet for American audiences. The Nutcracker has become a traditional part of the Christmas season in American culture.

Balanchine’s contributions were not limited to ballet. His collaboration with Ira Gershwin, Vernon Duke, Richard Rodgers and many others transformed American film and the Broadway stage. He worked with great African-American dancers like Harold and Fayard

4Ibid.
Nicholas, Josephine Baker, and Katherine Dunham. His combination of choreography and music helped create a unique fusion of ballet and American jazz dance, something truly considered an American art form.

Two other American art forms, the Broadway stage and American silver screen, were immensely influenced by Constantin Stanislavsky. In the early twentieth century Stanislavsky began developing a different kind of theater in opposition to the “clichéd acting” of the nineteenth century, where every emotion was associated with certain gestures and expressions, and staging was generic and interchangeable between productions. The acting style he developed emphasized the psychological internal life of the character, forcing the actor to “truly create a role.”

Mikhail Chekhov, nephew of Anton Chekhov and a student and colleague of Stanislavsky for thirty years, was a famous Russian actor who brought the true meaning and substance of Stanislavsky’s teachings to life. As one critic wrote of his performance:

Что можно сказать о гриме Чехова? Но грима у него собственно нет. Кажется, есть множество живых человеческих лиц, которые он одевает по желанию. Каждый раз перед вами новые черты лица, то измаженные то уголоватые и кажется, даже новая форма головы. Но на этом не кончается его метаморфоза. Не только его голова, но и все тело у него способно менять свою форму, сжиматься и выростать по желанию. Вы не знаете, какие у него в действительности руки, потому-что в каждой роли они у него меняются, становятся то костлявыми руками старика, то

---

5 Teachout. *All in the Dances*, 96.
potnymi руками пропоицы, то руками обывателя. Но что самое удивительное, то с внешним обликом меняется и его голос.

[What can be said about Chekhov’s stage makeup? Actually there is really no makeup. It seems there is a myriad of live human faces that he puts on at will. Each time before you there are new features, at times exhausted, at times angular, Even his head seems to assume a new shape. But Chekhov’s metamorphosis is not complete. Not only his head, but his whole body is capable of changing form, compressing or growing at will. You do not know his real hands; in each role they change by turning into the bony hands of an old man, the sweaty hands of a drunkard, or those of a philistine. But the most surprising is how his voice changes along with his appearance.)

Chekhov was forced to emigrate from Soviet Russia in 1928 when his productions became politically unacceptable. After performing and teaching for ten years in Europe, he moved to the United States where he went on to influence many actors. He left them and future actors a priceless textbook, *On Theatre and the Art of Acting*, first published in 1945.8 Yul Brynner, Gregory Peck, Marilyn Monroe, Anthony Quinn, Clint Eastwood, Gary Cooper, Al Pacino, and many other world famous actors credit their success to Chekhov’s book. In his diaries, Chekhov wrote about his American students:

С первой же встречи со своими учениками я почувствовал к ним нежность… Я препадовал им то что сам пережил от общения со Станиславским, что передали мне Суле́ржи́цкий и Вахтангов—что

---

7 From the video archives of Gostelradio, USSR.
8 Chekhov. *On the Technique.*
истиному произведению искусства должны быть присущи четыре качества: легкость, форма, целостность и красота.

[From the first meeting with my students, I felt a tenderness toward them… I taught them what I learned from my work with Stanislavsky, and what was passed on to me by [Leopold] Sulerzhitsky and [Evgeny] Vakhtangov—that for a genuine work of art, four qualities should be present: ease, form, integrity and beauty.]

Chekhov’s American career included a 1954 Academy Award nomination for his performance in Alfred Hitchcock’s Spellbound.9

Stanislavsky’s work also had a tremendous influence on actor, director, and teacher Lee Strasberg. Strasberg traveled to Moscow to see Stanislavsky’s work in the Moscow Art Theater. He went on to form his own school, which placed great emphasis on personal experience and improvisation based on the “Stanislavsky system,” also known as “method acting.” Initially developed for the stage, the system would prove to be especially effective in films, where non-textual communication was more important.

Russian influences on American film are not limited to the theatrical legacies of Balanchine, Stanislavsky, and Mikhail Chekhov. Early Soviet cinema led the world and laid much of the groundwork for the practice and theory of film for the twentieth century. Most notable in America is the influence of Sergei Eisenstein, one of the Soviet Union’s best known and most innovative directors, famed for his editing techniques and use of montage sequences. Eisenstein’s influence is visible in well-known scenes such as the shower sequence in Alfred

---

9 From the video archives of Kanal “Kul'tura” Russia.
Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. His epic masterpiece, *Ivan the Terrible*, made an impact on Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*.

Russian literature has also immensely influenced American culture. Many Americans list Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy among their favorite writers. However, there is another writer who deserves recognition, if only for his Nobel Prize for Literature, which he received when already a citizen of the United States. Joseph Brodsky began to write poetry and work on literary translations at the height of the Soviet regime. He believed that the primary role of literature and poetry was to affirm the freedom of the human spirit.\(^\text{10}\) Though his work was not political in nature and was rarely published; he was arrested and sentenced to five years in a labor camp.\(^\text{11}\)

In 1972 Brodsky was expelled from the Soviet Union. He settled in America, where he was naturalized in 1977. And like Tchaikovsky and Balanchine before him, he too found his audience in America. Two of his poem collections, *A Part of Speech* and *To Urania*, were published for the first time in America. He was a Poet-in-Residence and a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, Queens College, Smith College, Columbia University, and Cambridge University. In 1978, he was awarded an honorary degree, Doctor of Letters from Yale University, and on May 23, 1979, he was inducted as a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1981, Brodsky was a recipient of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation “genius” award. In 1987, he joined John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner as an American winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1992 he was chosen by the Library of Congress to serve as Poet Laureate of the United States.

\(^{10}\) McFadden, “Joseph Brodsky.”
\(^{11}\) From the video archives of Gostelradio, USSR.
It is impossible to quantify the impact Russian culture and Russians have had on the development of American culture and arts. Contributions to the American performing arts made by people discussed in this presentation deserve a lifetime study. Each one of them has added to the 200 years of cultural interchange between Russia and America, which has had a lasting effect not just on these two countries but the entire world.

Works Cited


Video archives of Gostelradio, USSR, used with permission.

Video archives of Kanal “Kul'tura,” Russia, used with permission.