

## A SICK GENIUS? THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ALEXEI STANCHINSKY\*

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## БОЛЕСНИ ГЕНИЈЕ? КРИТИЧКА РЕЦЕПЦИЈА АЛЕКСЕЈА СТАНЧИЊСКОГ

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the critical reception of the Russian composer Alexei Stanchinsky (1888–1914). It focuses on the critical reviews published in Russian newspapers and musical periodicals during Stanchinsky's lifetime. Its findings are a result of original archival research conducted in Moscow in 2019. This study shows that Stanchinsky's work received a more mixed reception during his lifetime than previously claimed. As such, it provides a more nuanced insight into Stanchinsky's reception, as well as the views and prejudices of early 20th century Russian music critics.

KEYWORDS: Alexei Stanchinsky, criticism, reception, Imperial Russia, mental illness.

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## АПСТРАКТ

У овом чланку се испитује критичка рецепција руског композитора Алексеја Владимировича Станчињског (1888–1914). У средишту пажње су критички прикази објављени у руској штампи и музичкој периодици током композиторовог живота. Овде презентирани увиди представљају резултат архивског рада спроведеног у Москви 2019. године. Студија показује да је опус Станчињског током његовог живота доживео рецепцију у већој мери подељену него што се то раније тврдило. У том смислу, овај рад доноси нијансиранији увид у рецепцију Станчињског, као и у погледе и предрасуде руских музичких критичара на почетку XX века.

Кључне речи: Алексеј Станчињски, критика, рецепција, царска Русија, душевна болест.

Russian composer and critic Leonid Sabaneev began his reminiscences about pianist-composer Alexei Stanchinsky (1888–1914) writing: “Nobody now knows almost anything about the composer A. Stanchinsky. And meanwhile there were years when great hopes were pinned on him, even the word ‘genius’ was repeatedly pronounced [...] in his direction” (Sabaneev 2004: 62). While the name Alexei Stanchinsky remains obscure today, even among the most expert audiences, in the 1920s Stanchinsky was said to have been a highly celebrated composer during his lifetime. According to Sabaneev, Stanchinsky’s musical career was “extraordinarily brilliant, and early success and even the beginning of fame were during his lifetime” (Sabaneyeff 1927: 191). Sabaneev’s memoirs paint a vivid image of Stanchinsky’s dazzling career and fame, while at the same time accentuating Stanchinsky’s mental illness. Subsequent musicological literature eagerly picked up Sabaneev’s claims. All succeeding writings on Stanchinsky portray him as a mentally ill composer, while further reporting on the brilliance of his short-lived career. For example, Montagu-Nathan wrote in 1953 that “beneath [Stanchinsky’s] psychological disequilibrium there lay a quite outstanding creative talent” (Montagu-Nathan 1953: 23). Current *Grove Music Online* article about Stanchinsky describes him as an “incurable sufferer of [...] schizophrenia [...] who] became the rising star of Moscow musical circles and manuscript copies of his works were circulated by admirers” (Powell and Hepburn 2016). These claims are rooted in truth, but they are also exaggerated and oversimplified.

This article is the first to examine the critical reviews of Stanchinsky’s music published within the composer’s lifetime. It demonstrates that the focus on Stanchinsky’s mental illness, as well as all claims about Stanchinsky’s reportedly successful career stem from the same source. Sabaneev’s portrayal of Stanchinsky as a sick genius has shaped how the composer is perceived to the present day. However, primary sources examined in this article tell a more nuanced story about Stanchinsky’s contemporaneous reception.

At the forefront of this study are the views and opinions of music critics. As such, this work is positioned to reverse the usual historical narrative: instead of examining the views of the creator, it follows the perspectives of the receiver. This approach is consistent with the emerging field of music criticism studies.<sup>2</sup> The reviews examined in this chapter are subjective, and in some cases, demonstrably biased. They are representative only of the views of the critics who wrote them, and cannot be said to represent the Russian public. Nonetheless, these reviews supply a historical record of contemporaneous events, and give an insight into the musical views and opinions of specific critics. Dingle writes in the introduction to *The Cambridge History of Music Criticism* that “Far from a fatal flaw, its generally unguarded lack of consideration is often the prime value of music criticism” (Dingle 2019: 3). Personal relationships, prejudices and favouritisms are prominent in the reviews of Stanchinsky’s music. According to Emily Frey, music criticism in Imperial Russia is notorious for its “passionate polemics, its philosophical debates and its well-matched rivalries” (Frey 2019: 228). It is these intricacies and biases that make the reviews of Stanchinsky’s music particularly fascinating and noteworthy. Additionally, critical reviews are a fruitful source of information for style analysis. According to LaRue, “some of the best clues to original accomplishments in any period can be found by studying the works or procedures to which critics and theorists object” (LaRue 1970: 200). As such, with enough temporal perspective, all reviews of musical works become valuable historical sources.

### ALEXEI STANCHINSKY (1888–1914)

Alexei Stanchinsky was a Russian pianist-composer whose short life has been largely forgotten. Despite only composing for ten years, Stanchinsky left over thirty works for piano, alongside a small number of chamber compositions. While a student at the Moscow Conservatoire, he studied composition with Nikolai Zhiliaev and Sergei Taneev. Stanchinsky suffered from *dementia praecox*, an early term for schizophrenia, and due to his illness was hospitalised for a year in 1910. After his release from the asylum, Stanchinsky resumed composition. His first opus was published in 1913, and by 1914 Stanchinsky had recovered enough to perform publicly again. However, on the night of 22 September 1914 (O.S.), Stanchinsky walked out in protest after an argument with his mother. The next day, local peasants found his dead body on the banks of the local river (Perlova n. d.: 39). Obituaries in the press speculated about a possible suicide.

Stanchinsky’s music was, in many ways, ahead of its time. The rapid evolution of his compositional style in 1904–1914 demonstrates a composer actively in search of his individual voice, and his compositions are an eclectic collection. Stanchinsky’s

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on the history of music criticism, see the Introduction to *The Cambridge History of Music Criticism* (Dingle 2019).

early style is rooted in late Romanticism but his final works foreshadow the atonal workings of Schoenberg and the neo-classical leanings of Stravinsky. Stanchinsky's earliest tendencies, which rely on lyrical melodic lines and chordal accompaniments, are soon replaced by largely textural considerations. Stanchinsky's harmonies juxtapose diatonicism and chromaticism. His rhythms are either highly complex or entirely static and by the end of his life, his textures become mostly contrapuntal. He treated the polyphony and strict forms of his compositions with flexibility and composed entire works from a single theme or idea. Stanchinsky reconciled numerous musical influences, including folk idioms and his classical training, to create a style that is unique and unmistakable.<sup>3</sup> Today, Stanchinsky remains a name that most people will be unfamiliar with, though a number of CDs of his music have been released over the last 30 years in Russia and abroad.

### THE TWELVE SKETCHES

Alexei Stanchinsky first introduced his works to the public in 1913 with the publication of his *Twelve Sketches*. Only nos. 1–4 were published at that time. It is unclear why the set was split for the publication, and it is not certain whether the following two fascicles (nos. 5–8 in 1915; and nos. 9–12 in 1917) were accepted for publication at the same time. The publication was largely made possible by Stanchinsky's unusual personal circumstances. Following the death of his father in 1910, and his hospitalisation in 1910–1911, Stanchinsky's financial situation was desperate and jeopardised his compositional training. Due to lack of funds, Stanchinsky had to relinquish his studies at the Moscow Conservatoire and return to his family's estate in the countryside. This made it possible for Stanchinsky to publish his compositions, as the rules of the Moscow Conservatoire forbade students from doing this (Grechaninov 1952: 31). Stanchinsky's coeval Anatoly Aleksandrov, who remained a student at the Moscow Conservatoire, for example, did not have his compositions published until 1916. Due to Stanchinsky's financial hardship, the decision to publish at this time may have also been financially motivated. While it is unlikely that Stanchinsky profited directly from the sales of his music (in 1913, his *Sketches* were being sold for 25 kopecks a copy), it is probable that he received a fee from the publishing house (S. Prokofiev 1913: 602). It is not known how much Jurgenson publishers would have paid Stanchinsky in 1913, but upon signing a contract with Sergey Prokofiev in 1911, Jurgenson offered him 100 roubles for his first sonata and twelve of the early pieces (Nice 2003: 75).

Stanchinsky's decision to publish the *Twelve Sketches* as his first opus was a bold and daring choice. The miniatures were immediately mocked by critics, who felt that

3 Research on Stanchinsky's compositional style is decidedly limited. The few sources are: Larry Sitsky's *Music of the Repressed Russian Avant-Garde, 1900–1929* (1994); Jonathan Powell's *After Scriabin: Six Composers and the Development of Russian Music* (1999, unpublished PhD thesis); and Akvilė Šmotavičiūtė's *Alexei Stanchinsky (1888–1914): The Origins of Style* (2018, unpublished MA thesis).

the genre lacked substance. There was some mainstream contemporary precedent for composers to publish a large-scale work as their first opus: Prokofiev's was a piano sonata (1911), while Rachmaninov's was a piano concerto (first version, 1891). On the other hand, not all Russian composers began their careers with a substantial composition: Scriabin's first opus is a four-page waltz (composed in 1886), and Medtner debuted with *Eight Mood Pictures* (1903). Stanchinsky's *Twelve Sketches* were chosen for publication specifically because they were one of his most unique and mature compositions. In the letter of 17 May 1912, Zhiliaev wrote to Stanchinsky that the *Sketches* "seem excellent to me... they are quite unique, serious and significant, complete, in a word, excellent in all respects (form, style, melody, harmony, rhythm. [...] your 'exercises' seem to me to be true works of art – the most unique of all that you have written" (Zhiliaev 1912). By the time the *Sketches* were published under their new title in 1913, Stanchinsky already had three piano sonatas in his portfolio. As such, it is likely that Stanchinsky's decision to debut with the *Sketches* was influenced by Zhiliaev's high opinion of the works.

In response to the publication, reviews by Sergey Prokofiev, N. M. and Leonid Sabaneev were published in Moscow's and St Petersburg's periodicals and music magazines.<sup>4</sup> Prokofiev did not appreciate the momentary nature of the *Sketches* and mocked the genre in *Muzyka* on 21 September 1913:

A good name, "Sketch"! It will always be able to cover up any shortcomings of the work. For example: the listener finds that the piece is broken, unfinished, – "but this is a sketch," – the author replies. There is no substance in the work, no completeness, – "yes, but it's a sketch" – the author objects again. That is why it's a pity when the author makes his debut with sketches. Looking at them, you don't know if he wrote these sketches as a practice for a more solid opus, or if he always writes this way (S. Prokofiev 1913: 602).

We know from Prokofiev's diaries that his reviews were often motivated by personal and professional rivalry. In 1913, Prokofiev wrote two highly negative reviews about his peers (Stanchinsky and Sabaneev), which were driven by competition and personal dislike. Prokofiev was nearly the same age as Stanchinsky, and Stanchinsky was a potential competitor. In his diary Prokofiev complained: "Myaskovsky informed me that Leonid Sabaneyev had written an article in the Moscow Gazette about modern composers in which he threw in a good few brickbats, among them some in my direction, while praising Stanchinsky (!). Dear Stanchinsky, I imagine he will be greatly gladdened and comforted by this" (S. Prokofiev 2006: 525). However, Prokofiev was not alone in focusing his criticism on the brevity of the genre. It was also criticised by N. M. who wrote in *Russkaia muzykal'naia gazeta*:

4 The identity of N. M. is unknown, but it is likely this review was written by Nikolai Myaskovsky, who would at times sign his reviews as N. M. and not his usual penname, Misanthrope.

As the name itself shows, Stanchinsky's pieces are a series of sketches (4) that do not pretend to be integral and organic in form. Indeed, we have before us a semblance of pieces of paper from a notebook with hastily written down musical thoughts. Whether it is reasonable to start a musical career with the publication of draft notebooks is another question (N. M. 1914: 46).

We can see that both Prokofiev and N. M., publishing in Moscow (*Muzyka*) and St. Petersburg (*Russkaia muzykal'naiia gazeta*) respectively, thought that Stanchinsky's *Sketches* lacked substance. Nonetheless, the critics were cautious about making strong value judgements of Stanchinsky as a composer. They recognised that the *Sketches* were Stanchinsky's first opus and made clear that they held high expectations for his future works. N. M. finished their review with the words: "But let's not be too critical of the budding composer and await his further successes" (Ibid.).

The critics broadly agreed that *Sketches* nos. 1 and 4 were more successful than *Sketches* nos. 2 and 3. N. M. wrote:

Fairness requires it to be noted that two sketches from this series (nos. 1 and 4) are of artistic value, especially the second of them. [...] This last sketch [is] the most complete in mood, which, by the way, sounds great on the piano. [...] the other two pieces (nos. 2 and 3) are of no interest, the first of them leaves an unpleasant impression of something deliberately fictitious (Ibid.).

Similarly, Sabaneev thought that the *Sketches* were:

Subtle in moods, interesting in piano style, [but] not all of equal merit. Elegiac-dramatic *Sketch* no. 4 – better than others and brighter in mood. Completely incomprehensible is the strangely jumpy sketch no. 3, in which, also, there is poor-sounding pianistic writing (Sabaneev 1913: 6).

Prokofiev seconded their thoughts:

Regarding each sketch individually, the first (Moderato) is not bad at all, and pleasant with its indeterminacy. The second (Presto) might interest the pianist with its finger technique, a math lover with its rhythmic fantasies, but it has nothing to interest a music lover. In the third sketch (Vivace), amusing is the author's desire for both hands to play the same thing on both ends of the keyboard; it's a pity that it sounds wretched. The fourth sketch (Lento cantabile) is based on a simple Rubinstein-style theme, but the three-part harmony and the dramatic character save the piece from vulgarity (S. Prokofiev 1913: 603).

Prokofiev highlighted *Sketch* no. 4 as one of the more successful pieces of the set. However, he associated the fourth piece's lyrical theme with "vulgarity" and suggested that its outline was lacking sophistication and taste. His evocation of Rubinstein further suggests that he viewed the melody as simplistic, old-fashioned and saturated

with German influences. Yet Sabaneev and N. M. both appraised the fourth *Sketch* as successful. They considered its conservative style superior to the more unusual nos. 2 and 3, stylistically closer to impressionist and neoclassical tendencies. These insights allow not only an awareness of how Stanchinsky's *Sketches* were received, but also illuminate the individual preferences and biases of the reviewers.

## THE CONCERT OF MOSCOW COMPOSERS

A greater number of reviewers responded to Stanchinsky's debut concert at the Moscow Conservatoire's *Malyi Zal* (Small Hall) on 2 March 1914. For the *Concert of Moscow Composers*, five young composers were invited to promote their works. However, on the day, only Stanchinsky, Sabaneev and Yevgeny Gunst performed (G. Prokofiev 1914: 302). The concert marked Stanchinsky's debut as a pianist-composer to Moscow's audiences and critics. During this concert, Stanchinsky performed both his published *Sketches* and some unpublished works, such as: Prelude in C major (two-part canon); Prelude in G major (three-part canon); and Allegro in F major (Martyn 1995: 107).

Stanchinsky's performance sparked a new wave of critical reviews in which he was widely praised as being highly promising. When talking about Stanchinsky's talent, the critics used either one of two Russian terms: *talant* or *darovanie*. While *darovanie* is more accurately translated as a gift (or possibly, endowment), the terms are similar in their meaning. Sabaneev, who rather unusually performed his own works at the concert and reviewed it in his own weekly newspaper column, wrote: "I feel the undoubted talent of this music" (Sabaneev 1914: 5). Grigory Prokofiev commented: "[...] of course, out of the three composers, he [Stanchinsky] is the most gifted. He does not need to stack large piles of sounds, for he has something to say. His *Sketches* are sweet and pleasant; they promise us a lot, and in the *Canons* of the same author, and in F-dur [F major] Allegro, there is a lot that is nice, and there is a need to work and create [more]" (G. Prokofiev 1914: 302). Grigory Prokofiev's comments align with his musical preferences. A pianist, teacher and frequent writer for *Russkaia muzykal'naia gazeta*, he was a supporter of Scriabin's compositional style (Ballard and Bengtson 2017: 306, 368). His lenience towards such music caused him to fall out of favour with the regime in the 1920s, when he was dismissed from his position at the Moscow Conservatoire on ideological grounds (Nelson 2004: 144).

On both occasions – the publication and the concert – the reviewers observed the originality of Stanchinsky's works, but not all critics perceived originality as a positive attribute. Nikolai Kurov wrote in *Ranee Utro* that Stanchinsky "has undoubted originality in creativity, refinement" (Kurov 1914: 6). Sabaneev wrote that "the works of Stanchinsky, performed by himself, are undoubtedly original. [...] I feel the undoubted talent of this music, the bright and undeniable distinctive originality of the sources in his work, in which the trends of modernism are strangely mixed with classical echoes" (Sabaneev 1914: 5). Yet N. M. thought that "the metric tricks are unnatural, artistically unconvincing, and speak only about the author's desire to be original at all costs" (N. M. 1914: 46). The originality of Stanchinsky's

music proved to be divisive. This divergence of opinions was driven by the relentless dispute in Russian music between those who supported new and innovative trends in music, and those who held more conservative views, believing that music should be protected from the “dissolute trends of modern life, musically expressed in the works of Max Reger, Richard Strauss, and Scriabin” (Mitchell 2015: 110).

Stanchinsky’s distinctive style puzzled critics, who were uncertain about how to best describe his compositional style to the public. Some opted for Scriabin’s compositional style as the closest comparison point, whilst others argued that Stanchinsky escaped Scriabinist influences. For example, in *Rul’* on the 5 March 1914, Zhiliaev discussed Stanchinsky’s “bright individuality (originating from Mussorgsky, Debussy and Scriabin)” (Zhiliaev 1914: 8). N. M. further claimed that the fourth of the *Sketches* was written “however, under the undoubted influence of Scriabin” (N. M. 1914: 46). Grigory Prokofiev disagreed. On 16 March 1914 he wrote: “the main thing to take away from the works of the authors included in the programme [Gunst, Sabaneev and Stanchinsky], was the worship of Scriabin and his recognition as the supreme leader. Least of all deserving the title of ‘Scriabinist’ is Mr. Stanchinsky” (G. Prokofiev 1914: 302). These references highlight Scriabin’s prominence and high position in Russia’s musical circles at the time. A comparison to Scriabin provided the critics with a familiar reference point, but it had also become short-hand for describing any modern-sounding music. A comparison to Scriabin is in itself rather uninformative: it could signal a celebration of style, if coming from proponents of musical innovation; but it could also be a blow, coming from those who disapproved of music which was abandoning its historical roots. In both cases, such comparisons can be reductionist. The works which Stanchinsky presented to the public at this time had long abandoned Scriabinesque influences. Grigory Prokofiev’s familiarity with Scriabin’s works (which he reviewed frequently in the press) allowed him the most accurate assessment. Grigory Prokofiev appears to be the only critic who appreciated Stanchinsky’s music on its own merit, without resorting to clichéd analogies.

The reviews all convey a sense of confusion about Stanchinsky. The critics were not quite sure what to make of his music. In 1914, Sabaneev wrote: “Things are sometimes very perfect, sometimes very imperfect [...] But to say that I fully sympathise with this creativity – I would not risk it” (Sabaneev 1914: 5). Sabaneev’s uncertainty about Stanchinsky’s music is unexpected, considering Sabaneev’s reputation as an “ardent follower of contemporary trends” who, due to his scientific training, appreciated the mathematical aspects of music (McAllister and Rayskin 2001). His remark that he “would not risk” sympathising with such creativity can be explained by Sabaneev’s preoccupation with Stanchinsky’s mental illness.<sup>5</sup> Sabaneev was careful to distance himself from Stanchinsky’s music, as in his view Stanchinsky’s music and illness were inextricably linked. For Sabaneev, all music came from within, as he was convinced that “one must experience [*perezhit*] the idea that gives life to a creative work” (Sabaneev in Mitchell 2015: 21).

5 Stanchinsky spent a year hospitalised in a mental asylum in 1910, and because of this had to suspend his studies at Moscow Conservatoire. As such, by the time he started publicly performing and publishing his works (1913–1914), his mental illness is likely to have been a known fact.



Sabaneev committed large parts of his reviews to discussing the perceived paradox of Stanchinsky's talent and his mental illness. He thought that Stanchinsky was "exceptionally talented" but emphasised that his music bore "the stamp of diseased sophistication" (Sabaneev 1913: 6). Sabaneev would often turn to pathological vocabulary to describe Stanchinsky's music. Particularly common throughout his reviews are words *bolezn'* (disease, illness, sickness) or *boleznennoi* (diseased, painful, morbid, sore). Commenting on Stanchinsky's *Sketches*, he wrote: "in them one can feel some kind of illness [*boleznennost'*] of inspiration and not even refinement [*utonchennost'*] of the [lived] experience, but the purification [*istonchennost'*] of the [lived] experience" (Sabaneev 1914: 5). To an extent, Sabaneev is invoking an approach to music criticism advocated by Stasov in 1844, who thought that "every real work of art [...] bears within itself its *meaning* [...] The duty [of criticism] is to extract from the work of art itself its vital idea, by *which* [...] the whole work exists" (Stasov in Abraham 1968: 10). For Sabaneev, the meaning of Stanchinsky's music was inextricably linked to his mental health: Stanchinsky's music was a manifestation of his illness.

Writing for an anglophone audience in 1927, Sabaneev portrayed Stanchinsky's music in a more positive light but maintained a strong focus on his illness. Sabaneev's five-page article dedicates two of them to discussing Stanchinsky's mental illness and its relation to his music. "His sprit, abnormally delicate, could not withstand the too hard and harsh contacts with life [...] At first his delirious ideas involved only the musical realm, but soon they spread into other spheres as well. He could not withstand the pressure of his own creative forces" (Sabaneyeff 1927: 191). Perhaps involuntarily, Sabaneev reduced Stanchinsky's creative work to a transcription of his experiences, which were both alien and incomprehensible to Sabaneev.<sup>6</sup> These views eventually became the deciding factor of how Stanchinsky continues to be perceived to this day. This development was influenced by Sabaneev's high professional standing, as well as the fact that his book was published in English and in New York, allowing anglophone critics and musicologists easy access to an authentic, authoritative source.

Stanchinsky's dearest associate, Nikolai Zhiliaev, took it upon himself to defend and protect Stanchinsky in the press. Two days after Sabaneev's 1914 review was printed, Zhiliaev published the most positive account of Stanchinsky's music written within his lifetime. There are no doubts that the review is biased, due to Zhiliaev's and Stanchinsky's close relationship. Indeed, it lays bare Zhiliaev's tender care and concern for Stanchinsky:

As for the youngest of yesterday's composers – Mr. Stanchinsky, who for the first time demonstrated his compositions (and, indeed, [was for the first time] on stage), he draws the most serious attention to himself and makes us expect very, very much

6 A decade previously Sabaneev wrote that Stanchinsky's works are "alien to me for the most part. Closer than others, I feel his *Sketches*, in which there are moments of very great beauty, although there are also incomprehensible moods for me" (Sabaneev 1914: 5).

from him; by God's mercy he has undoubtedly been gifted with the most real talent, with a bright unique style (originating from Mussorgsky, Debussy and Scriabin), and, moreover, his talent is very harmonious; all elements [of his music] are in full harmony, not one develops to the detriment of another, and, being united by a rare sense of form, they are at the same time strongly and distinctively developed. Stanchinsky's technique has already reached the virtuosic limits which are necessary to create one's own style, and he already has his own harmonic style, his own unique piano style, not lacking extravagance, and his own melodic contours, in addition to his brilliant control of counterpoint techniques. The appearance of such a composer is a true event (Zhiliaev 1914: 8).

Zhiliaev's review goes to extreme lengths to portray Stanchinsky as one of the most promising young composers in the country. The language Zhiliaev employs affords Stanchinsky almost a messianic role in Russian music ("by God's mercy he has undoubtedly been gifted with the most real talent"). This evocation of God is particularly provocative when coming from Zhiliaev, who was an atheist and often made disparaging remarks about Christianity (Komarov 2008: 128). By eliciting God, Zhiliaev is creating an image of Stanchinsky's talent as supernatural, gifted to him by forces not of this Earth. Like the messiah, Stanchinsky's appearance is significant and not to be missed ("the appearance of such a composer is a true event"). A similar transcendental perception was espoused by Petr Suvchinskii who contended that the appearance of a genius-composer "becomes a 'stop' in historical evolution [...] determined by the intensity of the divine Will that instigated it" (Levidou 2011: 618). Such metaphysical undertones were not uncommon at the time: late Imperial Russians came to frequently interpret the impact of music and composers as "essentially spiritual" (Mitchell 2015: 31). Composers considered to be geniuses were given particular attention in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, as they were believed to transcend the division between music's aristocratic background and its future connection with the *narod* (for example, many Scriabin's followers considered him to be such a unifying prophet) (ibid.: 45–46).

The reviews tell us little about how Stanchinsky's music was received by the Russian public. Sabaneev wrote that the concert had attracted a "decently-sized" audience, but as one of the performers, he had a vested interest in reporting it positively in the press (Sabaneev 1914: 5). Nikolai Kurov, probably a less biased eye-witness, painted a highly dissatisfied audience: "Can we talk about the success of this nightmare concert? The audience at first listened and was perplexed, then started reading the programme's appendix, and then began to diverge" (Kurov 1914: 6). It is possible that Kurov was exaggerating the dissatisfaction of the audience for a scandalous effect. If reported accurately, such response from the audience intimates that the listeners were confused by this new music. Indeed, reflecting upon Stanchinsky's music many years later, Sabaneev pondered that "among his compositions [...] there was not a single one which could gain popularity with a wide public" (Sabaneyeff 1927: 190). From this, we may derive that Stanchinsky's unconventional rhythms, novel harmonies and brevity of form were too forward-thinking and incomprehensible to the Russian audiences.

These reviews provide only a limited picture of how Stanchinsky's music was received during his lifetime. However, further assumptions about Stanchinsky's renown can be made by supplementing the content of the reviews with information about their publication. Dingle writes that "for at least two centuries, most people have received the majority of their knowledge about practical music-making, performers, current trends, new developments and significant new works not from the long-considered arguments posited in books and scholarly articles, but from the almost instantaneous response of music critics in newspapers, from the columns of *The Times*, rather than *The Musical Times*" (Dingle 2019: 2–3). Similarly, in Russia, we can assume that the general population would have had easier access to Sabaneev's weekly column in the *Moskovskaia gazeta*, than to reviews in *Muzyka* or *Russkaia muzykal'naiia gazeta*. Due to the content of reviews published in each publication, it is most likely that Stanchinsky was predominately associated with his mental illness in Moscow, while the reviews published in St. Petersburg were more music oriented. Nonetheless, St. Petersburg reviews were very conflicting in their portrayal of Stanchinsky's style. The specialist nature of the St. Petersburg publications also suggests that the city's wider audiences were unlikely to have formed opinions about Stanchinsky's music; however, the existence of these reviews hints at a significant and wide-spread interest.

### "SICK" OR "GENIUS"?

The reviews which Stanchinsky received during his lifetime have been more diverse in their praises and critiques than previously claimed. Such a conclusion could have been anticipated – in any young composer's career, one can expect to find a mixture of positive and negative reviews. Some critics praised Stanchinsky's talent and originality, while others appeared more puzzled by Stanchinsky's daring musical choices. Sabaneev's reviews were fixated on Stanchinsky's illness, shedding light on the stigma surrounding mental health in early twentieth-century Russia. Everything Sabaneev wrote on Stanchinsky fetishized the "sickness" with which he thought Stanchinsky's music was saturated. Emphasising such extramusical qualities based on the lived experiences and philosophies of the composer was characteristic to Sabaneev. When writing about Scriabin's *Prometheus* in 1910, he argued that Scriabin's "transcendence of traditional harmonic relations embodied not just musical but universal human progress" (Sabaneev in Mitchell 2015: 85). For him music represented not only itself (art for art's sake), but was seen to have a deeper, ideological and philosophical meaning. In the case of Stanchinsky, this extramusical quality of his work was perceived to be connected with his schizophrenia, singling out Stanchinsky's compositions as the works of a "sick" composer.

Stanchinsky's case tells an illuminating story of how music is received during a composer's lifetime, and how subsequent perceptions are moulded and created. This article demonstrates that there is a significant difference between posthumous and contemporaneous reception. Public perceptions of Stanchinsky began to be reviewed almost immediately after his death, and Sabaneev's comments made in the 1920s set seeds for future perceptions of the composer. As such, myths surrounding

Stanchinsky's reception were instigated by a single authoritative source. In this aspect, Sabaneev's role in the perception of Stanchinsky can be paralleled with the role Vladimir Stasov played in the perception of Russian composers in the anglophone world, since anglophone critics relied on his accounts to write histories of Russian music. Many early foreign champions of Russian music, such as Camille Bellaigue in France and Rosa Newmarch in England, and their successors by extension, were "indoctrinated" by influential figures like Stasov (Taruskin 2000: xiv).

In many cases, the stories of contemporaneous reception of composers are told by the composers themselves.<sup>7</sup> Stanchinsky did not live long enough to tell his own story. How would he have portrayed his reception? It is possible that public discussions about Stanchinsky's mental illness would have been detrimental to his confidence. While we do not know how Stanchinsky reacted to each of these reviews (there are no surviving Stanchinsky's diaries for the years 1913–1914), it is likely that any criticisms of him or his music would have been highly distressing for Stanchinsky. His artefacts show that his sensitivity was greater than most people's, and he was tormented by the slightest negativity or criticism. As such, it seems reasonable to speculate that these reviews may have had a detrimental impact on his already fragile mental wellbeing.

Finally, this study raises the issue of how, why and when we apply the label of a "genius" to a composer. Contrary to Sabaneev's claims made in the 1920s, this study could not identify any sources in which the word "genius" was used to describe Stanchinsky within his lifetime. This particular *canard* came to exist after Stanchinsky's death and was enthusiastically picked up and carried by future musicologists (See Montagu-Nathan 1953). Does categorising a composer as a "genius" require temporal separation? There is little possibility of contextualising this issue, as music criticism studies is still a relatively unexplored field. For the same reason, it is unfeasible to make comparisons between the reception of Stanchinsky and his contemporaries. Further studies are needed to determine whether the case of Stanchinsky was common or exceptional.

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7 Notable examples, in very different ways, include but are not limited to Stravinsky, Messiaen, Berlioz, Schoenberg, Boulez and Cage, all of whom had a profound effect on how their music and reception was viewed through their own writings and interviews.

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## АКВИЛЕ СТУАРТ

## БОЛЕСНИ ГЕНИЈЕ?

## КРИТИЧКА РЕЦЕПЦИЈА АЛЕКСЕЈА СТАНЧИЊСКОГ

## (РЕЗИМЕ)

У овом чланку се испитује критичка рецепција руског композитора Алексеја Владимировича Станчињског (1888–1914). У средишту пажње су критички прикази објављени у руској штампи и музичкој периодици током његовог живота. Преиспитује се доминантно виђење у музикологији XX и XXI века, према којем је музика Станчињског, штампана и извођена 1913–1914, била примана искључиво позитивно. Кроз подробну анализу примарних извора, овде је понуђен нијансиранији увид у каријеру Станчињског, као и портрет композитора чија је музика често производила поделе међу критичарима. Музика Станчињског оцењивана је различито: често је била довођена у везу с композиторовом душевном болешћу и стога описивана као „болесна“. Одиста, реч „геније“, редовно присутна у савременим описима Станчињског, не кореспондира с критикама објављеним током композиторовог живота.

Заједно с првим прецизним проучавањем критичке рецепције Станчињског, у овом чланку је отворено питање: како се у историји формира перцепција композитора? Указује се на постојање значајне разлике између постхумне рецепције Станчињског и оне код његових савременика. Недуго после његове смрти, започела је ревизија критичког суда о Станчињском, па су се тако отвориле могућности за креирање митова. Један ауторитативни извор из двадесетих година XX века одговоран је за подстицање погрешне перцепције рецепције Станчињског, која се одржала до данашњег времена.

Ова студија по интенцији представља искорак у новом пољу студија музичке критике, с мњењима музичких критичара у првом плану. Наиме, студија је обрнула уобичајени историјски наратив: наместо испитивања погледа самог ствараоца, она прати перспективу примаоца, упућујући на разноврсније и нијансираније погледе на руску музичку критику с почетка XX века.

Кључне речи: Алексеј Станчињски, критика, рецепција, царска Русија, душевна болест.