

Russia: Music and Locomotives

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On a warm sunny day last week in Pavlovsk, the former Russian imperial residence, an orchestra was playing Strauss waltzes in front of the former imperial palace. The event commemorated the inauguration of a concert hall, the vokzal, in 1838. This new Russian word is a phonetic derivative of Vauxhall, a London public garden where people could enjoy themselves and listen to music. The concert hall was attached to the Pavlovsk station of the first Russian railway linking the capital St Petersburg to the imperial summer residence.

The concert hall was conceived as an integral part of the station, and the new word came to designate any railway station. Few Russians remember the musical association of this common word. The idea was to attract customers to the new means of transportation. The Prague engineer Franz Anton Ritter von Gerstner (1796-1840) proposed “building a new Tivoli at the terminus. A beautiful vokzal would serve as a gathering place for the capital’s inhabitants, in summer and winter alike; games and dances, fresh air and a sumptuous dining room would attract everyone”. Indeed, the establishment included a gourmet restaurant, spacious guest rooms and, of course, a vast concert hall with panoramic windows.

A few decades later, a theatre was added, which hosted up to 30 opera and ballet performances during the summer season. In 1880, the vokzal acquired an orchestra of eighty musicians. During its first 75 years of existence, the vokzal hosted over a thousand performances, including 600 symphonic concerts. The repertoire was extremely varied, ranging from classical music to popular dances, from gypsy songs to folk music. In 1841, for example, the vokzal welcomed a troupe of forty dancers from the Basque country dressed in traditional costumes.

This summer’s commemorative concert, directed by an Italian, maestro Fabio Mastrangelo, embodied the organic links between Russian culture and Europe. I recently wrote about the [reorientation of the country’s economic and political ties towards Asia](#). But this change, forced by the application of Western sanctions since 2014, has not yet affected culture. It is true that the West has attempted to ‘cancel’ Russian music and literature. Russian music has been withdrawn from the programme, and famous Russian orchestra directors and opera singers have had their contracts terminated by their Western impresarios. The epochal struggle of “good” versus “Evil” has been extended to culture. But no mirrored measures have been taken in Russia to end its membership of European culture.



In the more than a century of its existence, the Pavlovsk vokzal has attracted famous artists from Russia and the rest of Europe, including Johann Strauss junior (1825-1899), who was the vokzal's musical director for more than ten years. The famous Russian dancer Anna Pavlova (1881-1931) performed at Pavlovsk on the eve of her emigration in 1914. The first concert after the socialist revolution took place in 1918. The tradition continued, but with one change: from then on, Russians of all classes were welcome to attend.

The Pavlovsk vokzal was destroyed during the Nazi occupation in 1941-1944. Volunteers from the Spanish División Azul made up the bulk of the European troops stationed in Pavlovsk. German units went in only for special tasks, such as the massacre of the local Jewish population (a stele has been erected in the park at the site of this execution).

This summer's concert was to mark the beginning of a renaissance. The Russian Railways (RZhD) sponsored the concert to announce the reconstruction of the Pavlovsk vokzal, due to open in 2027 to mark the 250th anniversary of the founding of Pavlovsk. The village was a gift from Catherine II to her son, who was to become Emperor Paul (Pavel in Russian). Hence the name Pavlovsk.

Not far from the park where the concert took place stands a bronze statue of Johann Strauss playing the violin. At the entrance to the St. Petersburg terminal, one notices the elegant figure of von Gerstner holding a model of the first locomotive to take passengers to the Pavlovsk vokzal. Hence the seemingly incongruous association of music and locomotives.

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