



GREGORY HAIMOVSKY  
A PIANIST'S  
ODYSSEY  
TO FREEDOM

MARISSA SILVERMAN

Gregory Haimovsky



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A PIANIST'S ODYSSEY TO FREEDOM

Marissa Silverman

 UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER PRESS

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This publication is printed on acid-free paper.  
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This book is dedicated to Gregory Haimovsky. Gregory gave me the gift of his life story and trusted me beyond borders. Now, as both the guardian and narrator of his biography, I hope this book celebrates his extraordinary life in the depth and breadth it deserves.

Inventons l'amour du monde  
Pour nous chercher, pour nous pleurer,  
Pour nous rêver, pour nous trouver.  
Du ciel, de l'eau, du temps, ton cœur qui bat,  
Mon fruit, ma part de ténèbres, tu es là, toi.  
L'amour, la joie!

[Let's invent the love of the world  
To look for each other, to weep for each other,  
To dream of each other.  
Of the sky, of water, of time, your beating heart,  
My fruit, my share of darkness, you are there, you.  
Love, joy!]

—Olivier Messiaen, “L’escalier redit, gestes du soleil” from *Harawi*

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1 A Pianist Is Born	11
2 A Concert Pianist in Exile	49
3 Spirituality, Love, and Color: Understanding Messiaen's Music	70
4 From Thaw to Frost: Neonationalism and the Messiaen Premieres in the USSR	101
5 Haimovsky and <i>Grazhdanstvennost'</i>	136
Appendix 1: Selected Performances of the Music of Olivier Messiaen by Gregory Haimovsky, 1964–72	165
Appendix 2: Selected Writing by Gregory Haimovsky on the Music of Olivier Messiaen	173
Notes	219
Index	243

*Illustrations follow p. 164.*



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First among them are the late Katerina Haimovsky, the late Janna Kavounovsky, the late Tamara Dalmat, Vladimir Nestyev, Mark Baranov, Marina Nestyeva, Luda Medova, Oleg Milman, Zoya Porotskaya, and the late Genady Shokhman.

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A very special acknowledgment goes to my colleague Adam Patrick Bell. Adam painstakingly transformed many old Melodiya LPs into “clean,” listenable recordings.

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It was while I was an undergraduate student at New York University that my flute teacher, Patricia Kaczmarczyk, introduced me to Gregory Haimovsky, his artistry, and his teaching. Were it not for her “push,” my current life would be very different. To Patty, the words “thank you” are not nearly enough!

But for the unconditional love and dedication of my family, especially my mother, Miriam Gaffney, this book would not exist. She listened closely to the stories and narratives that make up central parts of this book.

Extremely important and sincere appreciation goes to my husband, David Elliott. David loyally reinforced my devotion to this investigation. His readership and editorial suggestions fueled each and every revision. His commitment, hard work, love, and care are blessings.

Lastly, deep thanks to the publisher Ilya Levkov, who gave me permission to translate and rework selections from Haimovsky’s book of music criticism, *Olivier Messiaen in My Life* (*Oliv’è Messian v moè zhizni*).

To aid the reader, the titles of Haimovsky’s publications are given in English throughout, though they were published in Russian only.

# INTRODUCTION

## Prelude I

Every poet needs an audience.

—Aleksandr Pushkin, “The Captain’s Daughter”

Every so often, I think back to March 21, 1993. I was sitting in row K, seat 110, of Merkin Concert Hall in New York City. I was uncertain about what the evening would bring. I knew little about the performer, Gregory Haimovsky, and I was unfamiliar with the evening’s repertoire.

At the time, I was an undergraduate student at New York University (NYU), where Haimovsky was the chair of piano studies. He was rumored to be an exceptional concert pianist with a special interest in the music of Claude Debussy and Olivier Messiaen. Out of curiosity, I went to hear his performance, which he dedicated to the memory of Messiaen, who had died in 1992. In addition to two premieres,<sup>1</sup> Haimovsky performed two solo piano pieces by Messiaen—“Le baiser” from *Vingt regards sur l’Enfant Jésus* and “L’alouette lulu” from *Catalogue d’oiseaux*—as well as seven songs from *Harawi*.<sup>2</sup> After the concert, I met and talked with Haimovsky. Little did I know that our conversation would begin a lifelong journey of discoveries about and with Haimovsky and his devotion to Messiaen.

The second time I heard Haimovsky perform Messiaen’s music was April 2, 1995; the third time was February 13, 1996. On both occasions, he performed *Visions de l’Amen*.<sup>3</sup> While the precise sonorities of these now-distant concerts have dimmed in my mind’s ear, their significance has not. In these performances, Haimovsky “possessed and owned” *Harawi*, “Le baiser,” “L’alouette lulu,” and *Visions de l’Amen*. I kept the ticket stubs and programs from these concerts because they moved me far beyond any musical episodes I had experienced before.

The more I learned about the close connections between Haimovsky and the history of Olivier Messiaen’s music in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the more passionate I became about investigating the details of Haimovsky’s artistic and personal odyssey and his musical achievements.

My desire to share his experiences with a wider audience came later. Like a gradual crescendo, it emerged in deeply personal and musical ways as we talked more frequently during the ensuing years, and as we performed together while I was studying for my doctoral degree in flute performance and chamber music at NYU.

Looking back on those early days, more than twenty years ago now, I recall the remarkable event that set me on my path to write a book that would document Haimovsky's music making following the dark and dangerous decades of Stalin's evil regime. That remarkable event occurred during one of our early discussions, when Haimovsky showed me the letter, below (as well as the envelope), which he had received in 1971 from Olivier Messiaen.

Paris, December 22, 1971

Dear Sir, I cannot find the words necessary to express my immense gratitude to you. I received your beautiful letter, all the programs and posters, as well as the reviews and articles, most kindly translated into French by your cousin. I also received a beautiful medallion, which thrilled me to tears, and your remarkable recording of *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. Thank you also for the wonderful color reproductions of the frescoes and icons from the Cathedral of the Archangel in Moscow. I greatly thank you for your devotion to the cause of making my works known in Russia and Lithuania, as it is with my *Quatuor*, *Oiseaux exotiques*, and *Trois petites liturgies*, and for the fact that you are playing the piano in these works. Thank you for the piano recitals where you acquainted the public with my *Préludes*, *Études de rythme*, *Regards sur l'Infant-Jésus*, and *Catalogue d'oiseaux*.

I also see that for quite some time you have been explaining my works, commenting orally and in writing, and I joyfully learned that you have prepared a book about my music: for this I am doubly grateful!

Believe me, my dear sir, I give you my renewed thanks, great admiration, and expression of grateful friendship. Olivier Messiaen<sup>4</sup>

Needless to say, I was stunned. It was difficult to grasp the extraordinary historical weight of this accolade, let alone what it meant to Haimovsky, both personally and musically. When I expressed my amazement, Haimovsky began showing me dozens of programs and concert posters going back to the 1960s. They were yellowed with age and frayed at the edges from the wear and tear of the travels they had endured. Haimovsky had cared for and lovingly carried these documents during his travels in the USSR and, afterward, to Israel (where he emigrated in 1972), and then to the United States where he now lives. These items were more than official records of the concerts he had performed over several decades; they were vivid, "living" memories of having survived and, ultimately, triumphed personally and artistically in the Soviet Union.

Olivier Messiaen  
 230, RUE MARCADET  
 PARIS 16<sup>e</sup> - France -  
 ☎ 027-99-34

à M. Grigori Khaïmovsky Москва D 290  
 Менухинская Mad. 28 K 42

Paris, le 22 décembre  
 1971

Cher Monsieur,

Je n'arrive pas à trouver les mots qui seraient nécessaires pour vous dire mon immense gratitude. J'ai bien reçu votre lettre si belle, tous les programmes et toutes les affiches, ainsi que les revues et les articles, la plupart aimablement traduits en français par votre cousine. J'ai reçu aussi la belle médaille qui m'a ému aux larmes et votre beau disque du "Quatuor pour la fin du Temps". Merci encore pour les merveilleuses reproductions - couleur des fresques et des icônes de la cathédrale St Michel de Moscou. Merci surtout de vous être dévoué à faire connaître mes œuvres en Russie et en Lithuanie, notamment mon "Quatuor", mes "Oiseaux exotiques", et mes "Trois petites Liturgies", et d'avoir joué vous-même le piano dans toutes ces œuvres. Merci pour ces récitals de piano où vous avez fait connaître mes "Préludes", mes "Études de rythme", mes "Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus", et le "Catalogue d'Oiseaux."

Je vois aussi que vous avez longuement expliqué et commenté mes œuvres, en paroles et par écrit, et j'apprends avec joie que vous préparez un livre sur ma musique: tout cela double encore ma reconnaissance !

Croyez, je vous prie, cher Monsieur, à mes remerciements renouvelés, à ma grande admiration, et à l'expression de mon amitié reconnaissante.

*Olivier Messiaen*

Figure 1: Letter from Olivier Messiaen to Gregory Haimovsky, 1971

This evidence also is important because it suggests that the way Messiaen's music first "arrived" in the USSR has relatively few parallels with how other foreign composers' music originally appeared in other nations. More specifically, Haimovsky's performance of Messiaen's music in Gorky (now Nizhni Novgorod) and, later, in Moscow, preceded a serious dispute between two combative movements in Soviet cultural life: a progressive movement (i.e., those who accepted Western concepts of social, cultural, and political ways of being) and a reactionary movement that opposed modernist aesthetics. The

“invisible war” between these two antithetical factions was, in some ways, hidden from public view. But Haimovsky was not only aware of it—he embraced the progressive movement, which meant that he fought artistically, politically, and publically for cultural progress, innovation, and the rights of people in the USSR to experience Olivier Messiaen’s musical “spear of celestial joy” against Communist Russia.

Between 1964 and 1972, Haimovsky was at center stage for all Moscow premieres of Messiaen’s works and all Messiaen premieres beyond the capital. He was the first writer to publish extensive journal articles on Messiaen’s music. He wrote the first Russian monograph on Messiaen and his music, which was never published in the USSR due to objections by Soviet authorities. Moreover, he was the target of many vicious media attacks—by colleagues, members of the Ministry of Culture, and others—for each and every action he took to perform and publish discussions of Messiaen’s music.

Despite many efforts to silence him, Haimovsky continued to champion and advance Messiaen’s music in the USSR, and to ensure (to the extent he could) that Soviet/Russian audiences understood the reasons why Messiaen belonged among the greatest composers, past and present.

## Prelude II

*Gregory Haimovsky: A Pianist’s Odyssey to Freedom* is the story of why, how, and when Olivier Messiaen’s music arrived in and influenced the musical culture of the USSR. In this book I discuss a heretofore unexamined dimension of music making in the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1972, as explained in the words, writings, music making, and life experiences of the extraordinary Jewish-Russian concert pianist, Gregory Haimovsky (b. 1926).

In the process of documenting Haimovsky’s life as an eminent Russian musician and writer, I attempt to reveal connections among several aspects of the musical, political, historical, psychological, and cultural wars that raged during and after Josef Stalin’s brutal regime. And because the primary repertoire under discussion—the music of Olivier Messiaen—symbolizes Haimovsky’s fierce opposition to Soviet political and cultural doctrines, this book explains why and how Haimovsky dedicated his life—at great personal risk—to championing Messiaen’s music in the USSR.

Documenting Haimovsky’s journey with Messiaen’s music in the USSR required me to develop a basic understanding of the ways in which the music of a composer can “travel” from its native country to another. More specific challenges included unearthing the strata of major and minor individuals involved in the “border crossings” of Messiaen’s works and Haimovsky’s ultimate success in “spreading the gifts” of Messiaen’s music amid the colliding

forces of Russia's and the Soviet Union's history, culture, religion(s), politics, ideology, and propaganda.

I have mentioned that when Haimovsky first performed Messiaen's music in the USSR, a progressive cultural force was fighting a reactionary force that was intent upon undercutting a modernist view of musical aesthetics. This musical-political battle remained hidden behind the Iron Curtain for many decades. During the period 1964–72, the Communist Party of the USSR fought to suppress the work of a group of resolute musicians, which included composers Edison Denisov, Sofia Gubaidulina, and Alfred Schnittke, and several stellar performers: Evgeny Svetlanov, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, the artists of the Academic State Symphony Orchestra, and the Radio and TV Orchestra of the USSR.

Gregory Haimovsky is an unsung hero of this war. He was one of a small minority of esteemed Russian musicians who publicly and continuously opposed the forces of the Communist Party through his numerous performances of "forbidden" works and through his publications. Chief among his farsighted efforts to propel and share progressive artistic values during the Soviet era were his premieres of Messiaen's so-called anti-Communist works. To Haimovsky (and, eventually, to many others), Messiaen's music represented a powerful antidote to the Soviet Union's oppressive cultural doctrine of Socialist Realism.

Three important performances in Moscow, all documented by reviews, correspond to specific junctures in the rise of Messiaen's stature among Soviet musicians, and to specific themes and innovations in Messiaen's musical oeuvre:<sup>5</sup>

1. Religious faith: *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, December 13, 1966
2. Bird songs: *Oiseaux exotiques*, November 12, 1968
3. Cosmic love: *Turangalila-Symphonie*, May 8, 1971

Haimovsky was responsible for all three official Soviet premieres in Moscow, as well as many other Soviet premieres of Messiaen's music outside the capital. Also, Haimovsky was the first Soviet writer to publish full-length articles on and analyses of Messiaen's music. In 1968, the publishing house Soviet Composer contracted Haimovsky to write the first Russian monograph about Messiaen and his music. The manuscript was completed in 1970. However, as I explain in detail later, the Soviet hierarchy and its censors blocked publication of the monograph. And members of the Cultural Committee of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Union of Soviet Composers used Soviet newspapers and journals to spread pernicious attacks on many of Haimovsky's articles.

This book provides a personal portrait of Gregory Haimovsky's life as an outstanding musician who struggled to survive and practice his art in the

brutal environment of the USSR. Additionally, I explain why Messiaen's music—and the philosophical principles of life, culture, and composition it embodied—was important to/for the Russian people during this period. As Haimovsky explains, Russian musicians, and the Russian musical public at large, were in desperate need of the sociopolitical ideals and the emotional-spiritual power that Messiaen's music embodied and could communicate to a population that had been starving in every way during the years of brutal Communist dictatorship.

In what follows, I detail Haimovsky's journey (a) in his own words, as recorded by me during many years of our conversations; (b) with specific facts from the oral history I reconstructed via numerous formal interviews with him from 2011 to 2016, and with several performers who worked with him during the period discussed in this book; and (c) with evidence from Haimovsky's personal archives of correspondence, and other historical documents (e.g., television programs, radio programs, newspaper and journal articles, and published books), which he has kept for many decades, and which he made available to me for this study.

Why attempt to develop a highly detailed account of musical-cultural events that occurred nearly fifty years ago under a bygone regime? Aside from documenting aspects of a significant period of musical/social/cultural history, there are many layers of meaning in the information and perspectives I have accumulated during twenty-four years of knowing and working with Haimovsky. The richness of these meanings is brought to life by his unique voice, and by the deep personal wisdom he has achieved by virtue of surviving and, eventually, rising above the events he describes.

In short, Haimovsky is a living historian of and sourcebook on the era I investigate here. But there is something else that deserves emphasis: at the age of ninety-two, after several decades of post-Soviet freedom in Israel and the United States, Haimovsky has had sufficient time to recover from and reflect deeply upon the traumas and triumphs of his life. As musicologist Neil Edmunds says, "attempts to seek explanations and solve problems can of course be a painful experience both for those searching for answers and for those reading the answers."<sup>6</sup>

The narrative of this book focuses on the period from the inception of the USSR until 1972. I have chosen this focus not only because it allows me to draw a social, political, and ideological portrait of the conditions in the USSR before, and long after, Haimovsky's birth, but because this span of time allows me to zoom in and out of the multitude of challenges he faced during his youth and middle age.

Only a small number of Russian scholars and critics—among them the Russian singer and writer Sergei Yakovenko, the composer and Messiaen researcher Viktor Yekimovsky, and the Moscow authors Marina Nestyeva,

Vladimir Nestyev, and Gennady Shokhman—acknowledge Haimovsky for “his gifting” of Olivier Messiaen’s music to the USSR.

Forgotten, too, are many facts about the protracted fight to bring Messiaen’s music to Russian culture, including the circumstances of the “bloody breakthrough” that was accomplished by the concentrated efforts (1964–72) of Haimovsky and a few other “artistic citizens” who were Haimovsky’s musical “co-conspirators” at the time—Evgeny Svetlanov, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, Alexander Korneev, and Saulius Sondeckis. These artists openly and bravely resisted every attack that was mustered against them by the Ministry of Culture of the USSR, the Cultural Panel of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR, and the Union of Soviet Composers. Due to the resolve and courage of these musicians, they ultimately won, which meant that Soviet audiences were finally able to experience Messiaen’s music.

The following excerpt from a dialogue with Viktor Yekimovsky highlights some of the important concerns this book intends to examine:<sup>7</sup>

YEKIMOVSKY: At that time [1978] I ended my work on my book.

SHULGIN: You mean a book you wrote under contract or one you wrote just for yourself?

YEKIMOVSKY: To explain this, I have to recount some pre-history. . . . The first one in our country who was courageous enough to start seriously studying Messiaen was Gregory Haimovsky, a well-known pianist with musicological inclinations. In the 1960s, he published a few interesting articles in the journal *Soviet Music* [*Sovetskaya muzyka*]<sup>8</sup> and soon after wrote a large book. It was on its way to publication in [the] publishing house Soviet Composer when Haimovsky suddenly decided to change his permanent residence for another country. Of course, the publishing house started its search to find a replacement author and after their search, they finally found my candidacy, because by that time I had finished my dissertation on Messiaen.

But Yekimovsky’s account is not entirely true. As I explain in chapters 4 and 5, the reason that the publishing house Soviet Composer did not publish Haimovsky’s monograph on Olivier Messiaen’s music was not that he left the USSR. Soviet Composer had the complete and finished manuscript of Haimovsky’s book; the reason they did not publish it is that Haimovsky refused Soviet censors’ demands to change or delete specific details of the book (e.g., Haimovsky’s discussions of the relationships between Catholicism and Messiaen’s works). Haimovsky left the USSR because Soviet authorities blocked the publication of his book and, therefore, sabotaged his effort to achieve national recognition of Messiaen’s music and to explain why it deserved a legitimate place in the musical culture of the Soviet Union.

On one hand, Yekimovsky was the only member of the Organizing Panel of the 100th Anniversary of Messiaen Festival in Moscow (hosted by the

Tchaikovsky Conservatory of Music, 2008) who acknowledged Haimovsky's longstanding efforts on behalf of Messiaen's oeuvre in the USSR. On the other hand, this recognition was not officially recorded in print, only mentioned during Yekimovsky's speech. It did not find its way into the festival's published documents. When recounting the history of Messiaen's music in Russia, the writers of the festival's "brochure"—a large-scale document, nearly eighty pages in length—failed to mention Haimovsky and all of the musicians I referred to earlier. Thus, either deliberately or accidentally, they disavowed the treacherous terrain that Haimovsky and his colleagues had traveled to create a public audience for Messiaen's music in the USSR.

Instead, this brochure claims falsely that Messiaen's music first reached Russian listeners via an "underground" route, after which it was deemed legal. Also, it states that Moscow audiences first heard Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, and *Visions de l'Amen* in 1970, which my documented calendar of Haimovsky's performances of Messiaen's works, listed in appendix 1, disproves. Furthermore, the brochure asserts, wrongly (see my calendar), that Charles Munch performed the Soviet premiere of *Turangalîla-Symphonie* in Leningrad in 1975.

Although the festival's brochure affirms that Russian musicians and musicologists recognize (in 2008) that Olivier Messiaen was among the finest composers in the world, there is only passing mention that "we" (i.e., Russians) must rightly credit those who fought for this recognition during troubling times in the USSR.

In chapter 1, I explain the personal, political, and social circumstances of Haimovsky's musical development from his childhood through his years at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory of Music in Moscow. This background material lays the groundwork for explaining (in succeeding chapters) why and how important shifts in Soviet cultural policies had devastating consequences for the lives and careers of many Soviet artists, including Haimovsky.

After Haimovsky graduated in 1950 as one of the finest pianists at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory—according to the testimonies of his professors, which I evidence later—the Soviet government forced him to spend sixteen years working outside the capital: first in a Musical-Pedagogical School in Kalinin, and then at the Gorky Conservatory. Chapter 2 discusses Haimovsky's exile from Moscow, describes his life and work in Kalinin and Gorky, and details the relationships he developed with other banished artists who would make important differences in his life after his exile. Chapter 2 also discusses Haimovsky's discovery of the scores of Olivier Messiaen's music, and the affect those scores had upon him.

In chapter 3, I contrast Haimovsky's reaction to the emotional and political content of Dmitri Shostakovich's music with his responses to the deeply personal and spiritual values of Olivier Messiaen's music.

Chapter 4 focuses on Haimovsky's premieres of Olivier Messiaen's music in the USSR. Here I include Haimovsky's memories of and reflections on these concerts, and his colleagues' assessments of the significance of these premieres in the musical history of the USSR. I suggest that the significance of these premieres becomes much clearer and more nuanced when viewed through the lenses of Russian and Soviet nationalism.

Chapter 5 focuses primarily on the nature of what I (and other writers in many artistic domains) call "artistic citizenship." Haimovsky is a prime example of an artist who chose a path of musical-civic virtue—of *grazhdanstvennost'*<sup>2</sup>—which meant confronting and resisting the Soviet regime and fighting for the right of all Soviet citizens to hear and interpret "the Truths" of music, both grand and "apocalyptic." Rather than reiterate musically the atrocities of war, famine, exile, and despair—the realities that Haimovsky and Messiaen experienced and battled in their own ways and in their own contexts—Haimovsky strove to expand the musical horizons of Russian citizens and liberate their imaginations.

The appendix of this book provides authorized translations of Gregory Haimovsky's censored writings (i.e., censored by Soviet authorities) on some early works by Olivier Messiaen. Specifically, I include Haimovsky's investigations of Messiaen's religious music in *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, *Trois petites liturgies de la présence divine*, *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, and *Visions de l'Amen*; bird songs in *Réveil des oiseaux*, *Oiseaux exotiques*, and *Catalogue d'oiseaux*; cosmic love in the *Turangalila-Symphonie* and *Harawi*; and coloring time in *Quatre études de rythme* and *Chronochromie*.

To deepen readers' understanding of and interest in the issues raised in this book, I have constructed a website for this book, which can be viewed at [www.odysseytofreedom.com](http://www.odysseytofreedom.com).

Among other things, the website provides readers with: (a) Haimovsky's original recording on the Melodiya label—the first Soviet recording—of Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, 1969; (b) pertinent, Soviet-era photographs; (c) Soviet concert programs and Haimovsky's program notes from those concerts; and (d) a glossary of all persons' names, cultural artifacts, and central concepts in this book, with selected links to additional online resources.

One of the key themes of this book is artistic and spiritual freedom. Haimovsky sought solace and personal freedom in and through Messiaen's artistic expressions of "the Truth," which relates to something Solzhenitsyn says in his Nobel Prize speech (1970) about two kinds of artists:

One artist sees himself as the creator of an independent spiritual world; he hoists onto his shoulders the task of creating this world, of peopling it and of bearing the all-embracing responsibility for it; but he crumples beneath it, for a mortal genius is not capable of bearing such a burden. Just as man in general, having declared himself the centre of existence, has not succeeded in

creating a balanced spiritual system. And if misfortune overtakes him, he casts the blame upon the age-long disharmony of the world, upon the complexity of today's ruptured soul, or upon the stupidity of the public.

Another artist, recognizing a higher power above, gladly works as a humble apprentice beneath God's heaven; then, however, his responsibility for everything that is written or drawn, for the souls which perceive his work, is more exacting than ever. But, in return, it is not he who has created this world, not he who directs it, there is no doubt as to its foundations; the artist has merely to be more keenly aware than others of the harmony of the world, of the beauty and ugliness of the human contribution to it, and to communicate this acutely to his fellow-men. And in misfortune, and even at the depths of existence—in destitution, in prison, in sickness—his sense of stable harmony never deserts him.<sup>9</sup>

Solzhenitsyn continues: "One day Dostoevsky threw out the enigmatic remark: '*Beauty will save the world.*'<sup>10</sup> What sort of a statement is that? For a long time I considered it mere words. How could that be possible? When in bloodthirsty history did beauty ever save anyone from anything? Ennobled, uplifted, yes—but whom has it saved?"

I will demonstrate that the beauty of Olivier Messiaen's music saved Gregory Haimovsky in many ways. I will also argue that Haimovsky's longstanding musical and scholarly advocacy for Messiaen's music in the USSR provided his fellow Russians with powerful opportunities to perceive and feel musical expressions of "truth" that transcended—if only for a few moments—Soviet brutalities and aesthetic dogma.

# Chapter One

## A PIANIST IS BORN

A magic day—sunshine and frost—  
But you, in dreamland still are lost . . .  
Come, open your enchanting eyes

—Aleksandr Pushkin, “Winter Morning”

Born February 13, 1926, Gregory Haimovsky lived in Russia until 1972. Thus, he endured and survived decades of his country’s most ghastly times. Remarkably, however, his optimism, resilience, and thirst for joy remained intact throughout his life, because Haimovsky cherished and pursued art that meant to uplift—especially that which incorporated the spirit of Pushkin’s lyricism as expressed, for example, in “Winter Morning.” Indeed, Pushkin has always been Haimovsky’s favorite poet, and his dreamy reveries—and, later, the music of Claude Debussy and Olivier Messiaen—inspired and sustained the long-term growth of Haimovsky’s poetic and artistic ambitions and visions.

This chapter discusses specific historical events during the first decades of the Soviet Union. This background material provides the foundation for a discussion of Haimovsky’s childhood years and his early development as “a poet through music.”

### Introduction

Under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, The Bolshevik (October) Revolution began in 1917. Lenin died in 1924. During this seven-year period, Russian life was chaotic. The nation experienced mass starvation and disease; a bloody civil war between “Red” Bolsheviks, “White” anti-socialists, and other insurgents; atrocities by the Cheka (the Bolshevik state security force), which arrested, tortured, and executed dissenters; and armed conflicts with Germany.

Despite these horrors, the socialist policies that Lenin established, developed, and refined led eventually to some positive developments. For

example, his 1921 “New Economic Policy” (NEP)—a relatively modest form of capitalism—succeeded in resuscitating the weak Russian economy (which had been seriously damaged during the October Revolution) by facilitating particular kinds of international investment. These investments sparked major business initiatives among Russian entrepreneurs and gradually increased food and industrial production.

More broadly, Lenin declared that the NEP was created to substitute “a tax for the requisitioning of food” that would allow “peasants to trade freely in their surplus agricultural produce whatever is left over after the tax is collected,” and the tax would only take “a small share of that produce. The peasants constitute a huge section of our population and of our entire economy, and that is why capitalism must grow out of this soil of free trading.”<sup>1</sup> However, Lenin employed capitalism just long enough to reestablish the security of the Russian economy and safely restore Russian socialism.

Combined with the positive outcomes of the NEP, Lenin’s maturing concept of socialism provided limited degrees of public freedom, initiated a social and cultural Renaissance, and breathed new life into longstanding Russian traditions in the arts and literature. “Certainly,” writes Dmitri Volkonogov, “there were many good reasons for calling Lenin a genius.”<sup>2</sup> Volkonogov’s assessment applies equally to Lenin’s shrewd handling of many aspects of State life and to his temporary “non-interventional” attitude toward the arts and literature.

But during Lenin’s administration, his longstanding relationships with former comrades-in-arms were beginning to break down. Before his illness, no one openly challenged Lenin’s power. But as his illness progressed, some high-ranking party officials—especially Josef Stalin—became more and more intractable. Contrary to Lenin’s intentions, Stalin was appointed in 1922 as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Afterward, Stalin illegally gathered the personal data of all party members, which made everyone dependent on Stalin’s mercy.

As Lenin’s health declined, longstanding tensions between Stalin and members of Lenin’s party, including Leon Trotsky, worsened significantly. Distressed, Lenin wrote his “Testament,” which emphasized his misgivings about Stalin, and urged party officials to prevent Stalin from attaining a commanding position in the State. Meanwhile, Stalin was methodically preparing to seize power immediately after Lenin’s death, which he did in 1924.

Until Stalin’s death in 1953, Russian life was an endless dance macabre. Stalin quickly liquidated everyone who had disagreed with or criticized his activities during Lenin’s rule. Additionally, he developed and operationalized a complex plan to “cleanse” the Bolshevik party’s apparatus and eliminate everyone who had participated in the October Revolution. In a sense, then, Stalin created his own “guillotine”—a large force of henchman who carried out his orders to wreak havoc and mayhem throughout the USSR.

This force included members of Stalin's innermost circle. As Stalin had planned from the outset, his accomplices were eventually executed, as were their "comrade-executioners," many of whom committed suicide.

Bolsheviks Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev were shot in 1936. Nikolai Bukharin was executed in 1938. And Trotsky, whom Stalin had expelled from the USSR in 1929, was murdered with an icepick while living in Mexico in 1940. As historian Simon Sebag Montefiore writes: "During 1937–38, [Stalin] had approximately 1.5 million people shot."<sup>3</sup> Stalin signed death warrants for almost 39,000 people, thousands of whom he "knew well."<sup>4</sup>

To launch the enormous task of replacing the Bolshevik government, Stalin sought to dissolve its apparatus and "remove" (in one way or another) its members, starting with Lenin's closest co-workers. First among them was Trotsky. But because Trotsky was such an eminent Russian personage and had been a high-ranking leader in Lenin's party, Stalin decided to begin by eliminating Trotsky's outstanding and highly respected assistant, Efraim Sklyansky.

## Efraim Sklyansky

For several reasons, including his connection to Haimovsky's father, Sklyansky has a special place in this book. Sklyansky was a medical doctor who served during the war in 1914. He participated in the Bolshevik-Leninist October revolt against enemies of the Revolution, and he led detachments of revolutionary fighters against military cadets who were faithful to the previous Russian government in Petrograd. In accordance with Trotsky's wishes, Sklyansky served from 1918 to 1924 as Deputy of the Ministry of Defense. In his autobiography, *My Life*, Trotsky wrote:

Among the party workers at the War commissariat I found the army doctor Sklyansky. In spite of his youth (in 1918 he was barely 26) he was conspicuous for his businesslike methods, his industry, and his talent for appraising people and circumstances. . . . In my absence, Sklyansky presided over the Revolutionary War Council, directed all the current work of the commissariat, which consisted chiefly of attending to the needs of the front, and finally represented the War commissariat on the Council of Defenses, of which Lenin was chairman.<sup>5</sup>

Like Lazare Carnot, Napoleon's Minister of War in the French Revolution,<sup>6</sup> Sklyansky was brilliant, exacting, "indefatigable," and "well-informed."<sup>7</sup>

Throughout 1918–23, several parts of Russia were under attack by counter-revolutionary forces that received support from many neighboring countries. Tsarist generals Lavr Kornilov, Anton Denikin, and Pyotr Wrangel, to name a few, engaged in endless battles with the newly created, inadequately armed, and inexperienced Red Army. At the same time, Germany occupied

nearly half of the European part of Russia, because the old tsarist military had been obliterated during World War I, and because Russia's army was in its infancy.

Trotsky and Sklyansky played major roles in reconstructing and strengthening the Red Army. Trotsky discusses this in detail:

Most of the orders from the War commissariat were issued over [Sklyansky's] signature. And since these orders were published in the central organs and local publications, Sklyansky's name became widely known. Like every serious and rigorous administrator, he had many enemies. . . . Stalin stirred them up behind the scene. Attacks against Sklyansky were made surreptitiously. . . . [Of course] Lenin knew Sklyansky well, through the Council of Defense, and always defended him with great zeal: "Splendid worker," he would invariably say, "a remarkable worker."<sup>8</sup>

For many reasons, Stalin hated Sklyansky. Most of all, he could not forget or forgive the fact that Sklyansky knew about Stalin's strategic failures during the battle for Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad; now Volgograd).<sup>9</sup> What failures? As Robert Conquest notes, Kliment Voroshilov and Stalin formed a bond and had a strong following at Tsaritsyn. However, Voroshilov and Stalin consistently "disobeyed and stood out against the orders of Trotsky."<sup>10</sup>

Donald Rayfield writes:

In 1918 Trotsky countered Stalin's interventions around Tsaritsyn with a threat: "I order Stalin to form immediately a Revolutionary Council for the Southern Front on the basis of non-interference by commissars in operational business. Failure to carry out this order within twenty-four hours will force me to take severe measures." On the same day, Stalin complained at length to Lenin: "Trotsky, generally, can't refrain from histrionic gestures. . . . I ask now, before it is too late, for Trotsky to be put in place, given limits, for I fear that Trotsky's crazy commands . . . handing the whole front to so-called bourgeois military specialists who inspire no confidence . . . will create discord between the army and the command."<sup>11</sup>

In a related event, Lenin sent Stalin (as a political commissar) to supervise the tactical decisions of local generals of the Red Army. Because his efforts failed, Stalin made certain that this shameful episode was erased from his war record as soon as Lenin died. Notably, contemporary historiography—as recorded by such authors as Dmitri Volkonogov, Arkadi Vaksberg, and Yuri Felshtinsky—provides valuable details about Stalin's secret activities before and immediately following Lenin's death, including the poisoning of Lenin and the murder of his party comrades.

When he came to power, Stalin immediately demoted Sklyansky from all positions in the war commissariat and Revolutionary war council. A few

months later, he sent Sklyansky and another official to the United States on the pretext of broadening the USSR's contacts with the American textile industry. A few days after their arrival, a Soviet embassy worker took Sklyansky to northern New York State for a so-called leisurely side trip, whereupon agents of the NKVD<sup>12</sup> (the predecessor of the KGB) drowned both Sklyansky and Isaiah Yakovlevich Khurgin (see below), and sent their ashes back to the USSR.<sup>13</sup>

As Vaksberg details, after Lenin's death,

Stalin hurried to remove Sklyansky from military affairs and dispatched him to manufacture and trade in cloth, an absurd assignment for a military man. Even worse, fearing Sklyansky as a hardworking and influential individual, Stalin ordered him even farther from the battlefield to study cloth manufacturing abroad. But even with Sklyansky far from home Stalin had no use for him alive. In the summer of 1925, Sklyansky was in the United States procuring equipment for factories manufacturing high-quality cloth. On August 26 he traveled 350 miles outside New York to a summer cottage on the shores of Long Lake for a meeting with Isaiah Khurgin. . . . the chairman of Amtorg trading Corporation. . . . Sklyansky was accompanied by a Soviet adviser, based in New York, whose real function is not known for certain. They organized a boat trip on the lake during which the boat capsized and Sklyansky and Khurgin, both excellent swimmers, drowned close to the shore. No one else was hurt. Vladimir Mayakovsky, who was in the United States at the time on a visa arranged for him by Khurgin, was one of the first to become suspicious about the incongruous death, and he felt serious fore-bodings. He knew immediately that it was no accident. But the first person to divulge the truth was Boris Bashanov, an aide to Stalin, who fled to the West [and] testified that the murder was organized on Stalin's orders by his close aides, Grigory Kanner and Grigory Yagoda. Khurgin's death was unnecessary; he was merely a dangerous witness to the accident.<sup>14</sup>

Related to this, Felshinsky writes:

Beginning in 1922, Lenin was gradually ousted from power by Stalin and Dzerzhinsky [Head of GPU],<sup>15</sup> and as a result of this power struggle within the party he was murdered by them; and after which Trotsky was shunted aside, while Dzerzhinsky, Sklyansky, and Frunze [Red Army Commander] . . . were eliminated. The leadership of the Bolshevik party bore a striking resemblance to an organized crime group. Almost none of its members dies of natural causes. And almost all the Soviet leaders of Stalin's generation, including Stalin himself, were done away with, in one way or another.<sup>16</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, Sklyansky has an important place in this narrative that goes beyond his ties to Trotsky and Stalin: specifically, Sklyansky and Haimovsky's father, Samuil, knew each other very well. The story of

their relationship begins with the fact that Sklyansky was a military doctor during World War I and, coincidentally, Samuil was assigned to Sklyansky's medical team.

One day, Samuil was the duty officer of the medical detachment that Sklyansky commanded. The detachment was located close to the battlefield. It was a sunny Sunday, and most of the army staff went to a neighboring village. Sklyansky, by then twenty-four years old, lay down for a nap. He trusted Samuil, so he told him that if a colonel or other officer called him, Samuil should tell him, or wake him up. Samuil did not notice that his commander had consumed a half bottle of vodka; still, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Sklyansky slept peacefully; Samuil sat next to the phone. Time passed. Suddenly, the phone rang. Samuil answered it and heard a colonel speak nervously: "Give me Sklyansky, immediately!" Taken aback, and stalling for time, Samuil simply said: "He's in the latrine." The colonel howled: "Tell him to bring everything to order. Superior officers are coming to check your detachment. You have 10–15 minutes." The colonel hung up.

Samuil shouted at the top of his voice: "Commander: Get up! Get up, sir!" Sklyansky did not respond. He continued to sleep. Not knowing what else to do, Samuil threw himself on top of Sklyansky. But Sklyansky kept sleeping. Feeling miserable and confused, Samuil flew to the bathroom and filled a bucket with cold water. He rushed to Sklyansky's bed and poured the bucket on his commander's head. Sklyansky still failed to comprehend the situation, so Samuil screamed: "Hurry, fast, go to the bathroom . . . a panel of generals are coming for revision!" Sklyansky eventually grasped the urgency of the situation because even in his stupor, he knew that if any officer in the Russian Tsar's army was found heavily intoxicated during the war, he could be executed. Sklyansky ran to the bathroom and put his head under a heavy stream of ice-cold water.

Within minutes, a cohort of generals entered the room. Sklyansky gave his report as if nothing was wrong. They left without any inkling of what had just happened. When they were gone, Sklyansky looked Samuil in the eyes and said: "I'll never forget what you did for me today."

## Stalin, Efraim Sklyansky, and Samuil Haimovsky

Gregory Haimovsky was born in 1926. His father, Samuil Haimovsky, died in 1929. Because Haimovsky was only three years old at the time, he is not positive about the exact cause of his father's death. However, it is reasonable to suggest that, because Stalin had murdered Sklyansky in 1925, and because Sklyansky and Samuil Haimovsky knew each other very well, and because Stalin systematically executed anyone with links to his rivals and former compatriots, it is more than likely that Samuil was "just" another victim

of Stalin's bloody purge. No doubt the true facts are buried deep within the thick historical records of Stalin's crimes.

Nevertheless, when Haimovsky was older, his sister Katerina and mother Maria told him about the circumstances of his father's death. One of Haimovsky's memoirs, *In Search of the Isle of Joy*, explores Samuil's death, which I will detail momentarily. Suffice it say now that the circumstances surrounding Samuil's demise are highly suspicious because they duplicate the events surrounding Sklyansky's murder. In short, it is extremely likely that both deaths were "staged" to look like swimming "accidents" during both men's leisure time. At this point, I turn to the events immediately preceding Samuil's fatal "accident."

Katerina was nine years old in 1929.<sup>17</sup> When Haimovsky was a baby, the family moved suddenly to the distant Ukrainian town of Yenakievo, which lies 600 miles south of Moscow. They left all their possessions behind. Samuil, who was a pharmacist, obtained a job in a Yenakievo pharmacy, which was well below his important position in the pharmacological department of Narkomsdrav (Commissariat of Health) in Moscow. Maria Haimovsky knew that Sklyansky had repaid his promised debt to Samuil Haimovsky, because Sklyansky had played a major role in getting her husband appointed to the pharmacological department. Clearly, the family's sudden move to Yenakievo was a radical life change. Approximately two years later, Samuil disappeared. Katerina explains the details.

In a peasant village near Yenakievo one bright morning in July 1929, when we had barely opened our eyes, our beaming Papa appeared. He kissed us all and announced that he had a surprise for us. He introduced Anatoly, a handsome, athletic fellow who, he said, was "sent from Moscow to help me with my work." At once, we decided that we would all go for a swim in the river Donets, which flowed a few kilometers away.<sup>18</sup>

Many years later, Katerina (or Katyusha, as her closest friends and family called her) wrote to her brother about this day.

Before going to the river, Mama and Papa left us for a while. You were with the nanny, and I was left with a stranger, Anatoly. And in that short amount of time, something symbolic happened. It was a beautiful, silent morning. Suddenly, from the cemetery—which was located not too far away from our dacha—I heard the lonely, single cry of a bird: "cuckoo." I don't know who planted in my childish mind the folk superstition that the sound of a cuckoo in the morning's silence is a symbol for great misfortune. I looked at Anatoly and uttered: "Today, someone will die. . . ." He answered, "Stupidity." I responded: "You will see." But then our parents returned, and I forgot this episode. The morning was so beautiful.<sup>19</sup>

Samuil quickly hired a peasant with a horse and a cart. It was loaded with various provisions. Everyone climbed happily into the cart, and it took off at a brisk pace. Katerina continues:

There we were at the river. Everyone sat down on the grass for breakfast, in a festive mood. Papa kept hugging you and me, and saying that soon we would all go back to Moscow, and then, God willing, abroad. As was the custom in Russia back then, men bathed on a separate beach nearby. Papa and Anatoly went off. The four of us—Mama, the nanny, you, and me—stayed on the shore of the Donets, waiting for the return of Papa and Anatoly. The peasant hire found his place not far from us, and there he stayed next to the horse and cart. We were there, somewhat isolated, with no other people in sight. In this early morning hour, we enjoyed the fresh breeze and the peaceful lapping of the water as we sat alongside the shore of the lofty river. But this calm lasted only a few minutes. Soon, Anatoly ran towards us, holding something in his hands, crazily screaming: “Maria, Samuil is missing . . . He disappeared . . . Here are his things.” I remember very well, even now, that Anatoly screamed the word “missing.” He did not say Papa drowned. But at that time, all I heard were horrifying screams: “Help! Help! Rescue!” Who screamed this? Was it Mama? Someone else trying to help us? . . . We saw many men, one after another, plunge into the water, trying to help find Papa. Mama stood still, maddened as if at any moment she, too, would hurl herself from the steep bank. In horror, I thought she wanted to drown herself, so I rushed toward her and screamed, “Don’t leave us!” . . . She looked at me with unseeing eyes and just kept standing, stupefied, indifferent to everything. Local swimmers searched the whole shore of the river, but to no avail. Papa’s body was never found.<sup>20</sup>

This terrible ordeal, and the search for Samuil Haimovsky, lasted for hours, but no one recalled exactly how long. For the family, time stood still, and, for them, an impenetrable thickness hung in the air. The sun had set. Gradually it became clear that the peasant whom the Haimovsky’s hired had disappeared, and so had Anatoly.

One can only imagine how the anguished family managed to reach their dacha after walking several miles from the river, and, subsequently, how they arrived at the railroad station to go to Yenakievo. The journey to the railroad station took the devastated family a couple of hours to complete. They walked in silence during the evening hours, weighed down by each other’s inconsolable grief, and their emotional and physical exhaustion.

In speaking about this trek, Katerina remembers a sky full of stars that acted as beacons of light. She looked toward the stars and saw the beautiful moon hanging in silence. In the distance she heard the faint sounds of a violin, an accordion, and people singing. The road they walked was adjacent to a large meadow, and as Katerina strained her eyes to see where the music was coming from, she noticed a gypsy camp. She says: