

# RECORDING ARTISTS IN MOSCOW AND ST. PETERSBURG (1)

An Impression of Moscow and its People – The Artists including Cossacks and Sarts<sup>1</sup> – Life of the Artists in St. Petersburg – Other interesting Data.

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After a very tiring journey lasting four days from London through Paris, Berlin and Warsaw, I arrived in Moscow, where it was extremely cold, the thermometer registering 24 degrees of frost.

I had encountered one or two incidents so common and anticipatory, when entering or leaving Russian Territory. I will mention but one. At Warsaw I was compelled to wait twenty-two hours in a desolate ill-smelling and unsanitary room as there was a suspicion of a trivial kind on my passport.

In my excitement at such unmitigated impertinence, I went from asseverations to threats; both proved unavailing, the officials were inexorable, and what is the most amazing would not be bribed. (The first time in my experiences, and they are many, that a Russian official refused a bribe). On the following day I was released with many belated expressions of regret and apology, but unrequited as to the reason of my temporary arrest.

I eventually discovered the reason through the inevitable means, "A bribe surreptitiously given" to an under officer. It transpired a passport had been stolen in Berlin from an Englishman, and on my arrival at the frontier I had been suspected, being alone and not having a knowledge of the language (the Russians immediately suspected me of purposely not speaking the language with a view of passing myself off as an Englishman), together with the suspicious appearance of my recording outfit, which they believed to be parts of an infernal machine. The arrest of the culprit in Berlin I was informed saved me from the possibility of several days detention. Moscow has been written about to such an extent I will not worry you with my encomiums, but I should like to say a few words of Moscow from a talking machine recorder's point of view. I found the town wonderfully interesting, and when once settled down, I found myself living in and amongst customs and life of the early nineteenth century, for

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Sarts" mistakenly ended up in the subtitle, instead of the correct "Asenish". "Sart" was commonly employed by the Russians as a general term for all the settled natives of Turkestan, a region that Noble visited and wrote about extensively in one of his other articles.

comparatively ( with other great towns) speaking, Moscow remains in the same state of progress now as when Napoleon saw it. There are in 'Moscow sixteen hundred churches, or as the Muscovites say “forty times forty churches”. The famous historical building the Kremlin (Moscow's Acropolis) is there with its three tremendous old-time fortified walls, surrounding it, the size of which can be gauged when it is known that contained in its walls, is the city or business center of Moscow, also fifty churches and the Royal Palace. Outside the principal streets the shops are rudely constructed of wood, and appear to have stood just as they now stand for centuries.

On the sidewalks are to be observed - and many times felt - obstacles of various sizes which outside of Moscow would not be tolerated. Large ten-inch rain pipes protruding from the shop fronts on to the sidewalk, for any person to cut, break or bruise their shins. Gratings lifted out of the walk a good three inches for tripping over and inflicting Heaven knows what damage. Shop shades or blinds pulled down to within five feet of the walk. Holes, posts, and projections of all kinds are tolerated in a manner which is to other than Muscovites extraordinary.

Yet, strange as it will doubtless appear, after a very short time one becomes accustomed to this curious state of negligence and commences to enjoy and appreciate this association with an earlier period, the existence in an atmosphere which is not yet contaminated with the progress of mechanical life which is referred to in Europe and America as “civilization.”

Here there are no tubes, overhead trains, motor lorries, motor buses, taxicabs or motorcycles, no rush, wild-headed speculations or hustle. All is different, business proceeds in a leisurely form, and it is a proverbial fact, that you cannot succeed in making a Muscovite hurry. This must not be interpreted to mean that they are a lazy or lethargic populace—it is a state of, or an existence in an earlier period of civilization, a period which we have already passed and forgotten. Of the people, I find them interesting, philosophical, intellectual, and argumentative. In business (talkers <sup>2</sup>), careless, mercenary and a bad creditor.

### Hospitable Russians

Hospitality is such that its magnanimity is incomprehensible. Sympathetic, confidential and most sincere friend when once obtained. In trouble they display the same characteristics as most discontented souls—courage, bravery and daring. (I had many times witnessed this latter statement). Until one penetrates into the vast areas of police terrorism which crowd on the Russian people from every side, it is difficult to comprehend the great feeling of

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<sup>2</sup> Talkers = talking machines (gramophones or phonographs).

disgust and contempt which the people have against the Government in their tyrannous rule. Such is my opinion of the Russian people after having lived amongst them for over three years.

My recording room in Moscow was large and very satisfactory, and I was anxious to test it with my diaphragms, and make the necessary alterations to them for using in a new atmosphere. My first date was with a choir of eight men who had arrived from Kazan. I was not a little perturbed on observing them, for they were all big heavy fellows over six feet and must have averaged a weight of fifteen stone at least.

Their bulk was such that I could not record them as two horns I had were too short to allow bunching them round the machine and near enough to the horns to make a satisfactory record. I was therefore compelled to postpone the date in order to have two longer horns constructed. When they did sing, however, it was a revelation, the very building shook with the immense volume of tone, and although I had figured out the distance away from the horns they stood, I was inclined to believe that the strength would be too great for my diaphragm and that there would be a number of blasts in these "masters." I was accustomed to record loud records, but I certainly had never recorded such a volume of tone and such great power before. To my surprise the diaphragm held and had made a good record. I here surmised and afterwards proved that there is a certain quality in the language which assists the recording, there is an absence of the hard, guttural and blatant words so common in the English and German languages.

The expression, synchronizing, and harmony in each of the numbers was faultless and above criticism. The clearness of the tenors, the roundness of the baritones and the sonorous tone of the basses was a thing which I had never heard before. The rendering was so fine that it fascinated me and I was sorry when I had finished making their records.

### Records of Noted Artists

My next artist was the bass Cibieriakoff [*Sibiryakov*]<sup>3</sup>, another giant. In his case I was compelled to have a part of the floor opened to allow him to stand down ten inches. Otherwise the angle of the recording horn would have been such, that it would have entirely altered the tone of his voice and resulted in a bad record: unnatural, thin and weak. He made a number of very fine bass records of which no doubt there are many in America.

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<sup>3</sup> Lev Sibiriakov (1869-1942) bass.

My next artist was the baritone Kamionski <sup>4</sup> who had just returned from America where he had won success and was returning. It was here I first encountered a Russian, or I should say a Moscow Orchestra, whose playing was so bad that I was forced to dismiss the whole of them. They played in a nonchalant manner as though accompanying a third rate vaudeville turn and treated the whole process of recording as a big joke, which was, however, quickly dispelled through my summarily dismissing them. I was paying Kamionski a hundred dollars per song, and the orchestra a dollar an hour for three hours. The conductor three dollars the session.

I wasn't wasting any time with bad musicians. Apologizing to the artist I postponed the date for a week, determined in the interim to scour the town with the intention of acquiring sixteen reliable or musically intellectual men.

During the four following days I recorded four more artists, sopranos, tenors and a choir, all with excellent voices and a percipient knowledge of the intricacies in recording which was of great assistance. About this time I recorded, or attempted to record a military band. I noted the draggletailed slovenliness of the men, the dirty instruments which to my surprise were being carried as one would carry a piece of wood or rope, and prognosticated that all this omened bad playing.

I nevertheless decided to test them, and after having carefully focussed them, informed the conductor he could commence. To my horror they commenced to play without having first tuned up, and when it is remembered that outside it was freezing hard, the awful result can better be imagined than explained. I have never heard such an abominable conglomeration of music before in all my experience, they were not only out of tune, but were not blowing clearly and making the most horrible mistakes. After listening with great patience for ten minutes, I saw that it was hopeless and dismissed them, much to the astonishment of the conductor who was ignorant of even the first principle in music.

#### Difficult to Get Good Military Bands

After this debacle I was compelled to go round in an endeavor to discover a representative military band, but after a seven days' search and after hearing approximately twenty bands I was unable to obtain a really good one. However, military bands being a necessity for the catalogue I chose the best of a bad crowd. Eventually I was able to instil into their heads the necessity of playing without error, and I was able to make a number [of]—but certainly very few—good band records.

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<sup>4</sup> Oscar Kamionsky (1869-1917) baritone.

By this time I had formed a pretty bad opinion of Moscow orchestras and bands, for it must not be forgotten that I had been also trying to discover sixteen good musicians for accompanying, and in this I was experiencing incredible difficulty. At the opera where fifty men are playing and where there has been

several days' rehearsal of the opera by the men, the playing is irreprovable [= *irreproachable*]. To choose sixteen of their number for recording, however, is quite a different matter – they are useless after an hour. I eventually succeeded in obtaining fourteen fairly good men from the opera and the symphonic orchestras. Even these men to say the least were an uncouth, lethargic and disinterested group, who looked upon the recording from a monetary point of view only, a thing which surprised and disappointed me considerably, for the vocalists were such charming people. Several amusing incidents occurred which illustrates conclusively the blatant ignorance of the military band conductors who are a callous, mercenary, malignant and unscrupulous clique.

During the playing one day of the first selection I noticed the cornets were blowing a curious tone and remonstrated with the conductor who, without even testing it himself, replied, “*Oh, no, Monsieur, it is impossible.*” I immediately demanded through my interpreter for the cornet to tune to the clarinet, the result was that we found the instrument broken and blowing a tone similar to a two-cent whistle.

The man afterwards confessed that his conductor was aware of the broken instrument and had forbidden it to be mentioned to me.

On another occasion I had a similar dispute as to the band being out of tune, but in this instance a conductor ordered the men to tune, which they did. Still, the fault was there, but this time the conductor pretended, or actually did not notice it until the men tuned their instruments singly, when it was discovered that the basses had brought, and were actually playing on flat, instead of sharp-pitch instruments. I was in the habit of paying the band (the conductor) sixty-five dollars for a session of three hours, with twenty-four men. I was not a little surprised and disgusted when I learned that conductors were paying their men but 75 kopecs (35 cents) for the three hours' work, whilst pocketing over fifty-six dollars themselves. One no longer is amazed at the slovenliness of the poorer fellows. They are treated as dogs by their conductors and it is little wonder that there is such a painful absence of good military bands for recording purposes.

My next artist was a contralto, Mme. Vasskevitch <sup>5</sup>. She possesses a voice of exceptional range and was a pleasure to record, she so quickly grasped how to record that I was able to record a dozen different songs in three hours. This

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<sup>5</sup> E.I. Vashkevich (18\*\*-19\*\*) contralto.

artist I may add spoke perfect English having been educated in England; she also spoke fluent French, German and Italian. She is visiting America in 1913<sup>6</sup> and should prove a big success both on the stage and on records.

It was about this time that I recorded the finest selections I have ever recorded in my experience—a mixed choir from the Opera House. If these records were on sale in America, I have no hesitation in saying they would prove a revelation, not so much for the actual recording, but for the magnificent, incomparable and glorious rendering of the “Savitzky Choir”. This choir consisting of twelve women and twelve men, sang selections of such varying styles that were extraordinary. One selection would be Faust, the next a Russian peasant's wedding feast; it made no difference to their rendering, which was at all times superb. To make a record of such a choir with an accompanying orchestra consisting of twenty men is an extremely difficult undertaking for a recorder at any time, but especially in a foreign country.

The placing of forty-four musicians and vocalists around four horns, all in focuses, is an operation that obviously requires a certain amount of cogitation, and I have no hesitation in saying that, had I not received the co-operation and assistance of the artists, I should never have succeeded in making the record. They entered into the recording with a contagious enthusiasm and vital interest, which was amazing and of incalculable help to me.

During the progress of these selections the recorder has to be in and among the artists, for in one part he may have to draw four men away from the horns and at the same time place five others nearer, while in another part the sopranos may have a few bars to themselves, necessitating the men to withdraw from the horns and the ladies to approach nearer. In the next few bars it will be “ensemble”, and then all have to bunch around the horns and in such a position to insure a good balance, and so on through the record.

All these movements have to be surreptitiously carried out, without the slightest noise. The manner in which the Russian ladies entered into the recording was beyond praise. I remember in a particular record the ladies were not required for the last half minute of the selection; they did not merely bend or lean away from the horns, but voluntarily stooped and almost sat on the floor to enable all the men to approach nearer the horns. Imagine getting some of our dear ladies to assist in recording to that extent—Caesar!

The hilarious selections with singing, yelling, balalaika, harmonium, tambourines, whistling and all other forms of sound were difficult to record, but were nevertheless delightful selections and gave an excellent insight into the Russian national character in their amusements. A number of these records are among my most prized collection in my home, and their piquancy and

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<sup>6</sup> Has that ever materialized?

irresistible jocundity are often the cause of much amusement and appreciation. The singing of the Cossacks was a great disappointment, for their singing can only be likened to a lot of overgrown children yelling and crying, each making an earnest endeavor to cry louder than another, resulting in an awful hulla-balloo. They were in most cases accompanied by one of their women playing on an old—very old—harmonium, which produced a tone similar to a pig who objects to being kicked. I afterward recorded many records of the Cossacks in their own territory, “The Beautiful Caucasus”, but with similar results—very disappointing.

During my sojourn in Moscow I had recorded a little over two hundred titles, including the best and the worst of Moscow and other Russian artists, whose fees ranged from 5 roubles to 600 roubles per song. The latter price was paid to the most popular artist in Russia, a lady who received the equivalent to \$6,000 for twenty titles (600 roubles per song). The Cossacks, on the other hand, received their railroad fare from Vladikavkaz and back, and the large sum of 500 roubles for forty titles (eight men). I recorded but a few important artists in Moscow, for the best were, I was informed, in St. Petersburg. After receiving the necessary permission from the police to leave Moscow, I left for “Peterburg”. Before leaving Moscow I should like to say once again that the recording was a success and the array of talent was unexcelled throughout the world. The people were charming and hospitable to a degree and I was treated with the utmost respect by the employees of the company. It was here, too, that I met and enjoyed the company of that inveterate globe-trotting American recorder, Fred Gaisberg, of the Victor Co..

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