

MUSIC ON THE FRONTLINE

Nicolas Nabokov's struggle
against Communism and
Middlebrow Culture

IAN WELLENS

An **Ashgate** Book

MUSIC ON THE FRONTLINE

For Mary and Ronald Wellens

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Communism and Middlebrow Culture

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Preface

The roots of this book can be traced back to 1993 when, as a mature student at Dartington College of the Arts, I found myself needing a subject for a final-year dissertation. The idea of ‘Music and the Cold War’ was intriguing, irresistible. Part of the attraction was down to timing: the Cold War – always in the background as I grew up, dominating the political landscape – had just ended. I had even had a small part in it, as a foot soldier of the anti-nuclear movement – organising, demonstrating and cutting the wire at St Mawgan airbase – in the years leading up to the deployment of cruise missiles in 1983. Then, suddenly, it was over. Only ten years after the missiles arrived at Greenham Common, it was scarcely credible that monolithic communism, the log-jam of the Cold War, the spiralling arms race – that all of this could have come, so abruptly, to an end. Looking back at all this, I felt there must have been places where the worlds of art, music and Cold War politics crossed, and so set out to look for them, producing a study which considered dissident musicians in the East and West, institutional controls over composers and the changing Western reception of Shostakovich and his music. In the final section I suggested that perhaps the issue of contemporary musical language might have been pulled into the Cold War in some way – was it possible that the Western avant-garde’s contest with traditional musical language might have formed a parallel, yet connected, struggle with the Cold War? All of this was tentative, limited by the time and space available for an undergraduate project. At that time, I had no idea I would spend the next few years pursuing this idea, and I had never heard of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) or Nicolas Nabokov.

Having decided, encouraged by my tutor Max Paddison, to take this area of research on to doctoral level, I spent some time looking for a focus. Somewhere – I don’t recall where exactly – there was a brief reference to an émigré Russian composer, CIA money and music festivals in the Cold-War 1950s. Strange but true. Looking into the matter further, it seemed that no-one had bothered to study either Nabokov or his festivals. The decision was made for me: I had found my focus. However, the subsequent research process had some surprises in store. It is not unknown for researchers to set off with a hunch that they secretly hope to prove, and I had, by that time, discovered Eva Cockcroft and Max Kozloff’s articles linking Abstract Expressionism to the CIA. It was only a short hop sideways to suppose that the CIA could have had a hand in the Darmstadt-driven lurch towards the musical ‘difficulty’ of the early 1950s. In fact, given that this was happening when the temperature of the Cold War was somewhere near absolute zero, given Kozloff and Cockcroft’s work, given that there clearly was a Nabokov–CCF musical *something*

linked to the CIA, it seemed highly probable. It was an appealing, exciting idea – I am not the only person to have pursued it, and am unlikely to be the last. In time, however, as I dug into archives in Austin and Chicago, I was forced to conclude that the evidence pointed another way. Through Nabokov, the CIA *was* indeed promoting musical modernism, but in a loose, broad way. There is no evidence that they discriminated between serialism and neoclassicism, no evidence that they sought to push the most ‘advanced’ postwar trends. And if music had, at times, a high profile in the CCF’s events, this cannot be taken to suggest that the Agency accorded it special importance. This was merely the consequence of having a composer sitting at the top of the CCF’s structure. Why had that man been chosen? For a range of reasons: his qualities as communicator, showman, impresario, for his range of contacts, his knowledge of the arts and his language skills, because he was a friend of the main CIA agent involved, perhaps even for his status as a practising artist – but *not* as a composer *per se*.

The thesis that eventually emerged, in 1999, looked at Nabokov and the festivals he organised for the CCF, his writings on music and politics, and considered the whole undertaking in context. I had not, however, been the only person working in this area. In *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, Jules Verne’s hero follows the trail left by an earlier explorer, Arne Sackneusen, who has left the initials ‘AS’ scrawled on the cavern walls. Ploughing through the Nabokov papers in Austin, Texas, I came across my own trail – a paper trail of ‘SS’ bookmarks. This was Frances Stonor Saunders, who I had already met in London. Her book *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* appeared the same year. I had expected it to be a major study, and so it is: with her intellect, dogged perseverance and substantial detective skill, there is no doubt that Stonor Saunders is now *the* authority in this area, having given us not only the ‘big picture’ of US cultural intervention, but also tremendous detail, especially in the area of the key personalities and their relationships, and the underlying CIA connection. All this in spite of the total non-availability of relevant official documents.

Reading her book, I realised with some relief that this substantial work still left a space for my own. It would be misleading to say now – as I did in the Introduction to this work in its doctoral incarnation – that there are ‘no existing studies of Nabokov himself or the musical activities of the CCF’, because both feature in Stonor Saunders’ story (and, where necessary, I have revised my story to take account of her discoveries). In some respects, however, I believe that my work, whilst admittedly on a less ambitious scale than hers, stands alone. I have been less interested in creating an inventory of all that was done – every composer featured, every work performed, every conference paper delivered – than in looking closely at the terms in which this work was justified by Nabokov. The further I went on, the *less* it seemed to be an anomaly, a peculiar footnote to music history, a mildly diverting cul-de-sac, and the *more* it seemed utterly connected to important processes driving postwar art music. So, here you will find, examined for the first time, the ideas on music and politics which Nabokov spread across a large number of texts – ideas which, together, formed the rationale for his CCF festivals. On this foundation, I then look for links with other important currents in mid-twentieth-century cultural life, reaching the conclusion that this anti-communist struggle was closely linked to fears for a high culture which many felt to be threatened by the increasing cultural influence of the

middle classes. Nabokov, I believe, was fighting both communism *and* ‘middlebrow’ culture.

This book is fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature, having stubbornly refused to remain within subject boundaries. I have attempted to accommodate the varied backgrounds of my potential readership, by giving potted histories and background as necessary: where this seems to be over- or underdone, I can only apologise (if anything, I have leaned towards the assumption that readers, whilst familiar with the basic contours of twentieth-century music, may welcome assistance in other areas – the New York Intellectuals, ‘mass’ and ‘middlebrow’ culture, Adorno and so on). I must recognise that, for some, there may be a disappointing lack of musical detail and even, perhaps, a specific frustration that Nabokov’s own output as a composer is not examined. Whilst, as a musician myself, I sympathise, my defence would be that I have been led by the material, and by a desire to make sense of it. This book is the result, and it is what it is: a story of the *politics* of culture, of how culture – in this case, music – was used for political ends. It is also a story of the *sociology* of culture: about the interest groups that form around culture, about their ideology and how they function. It is not about culture – about music – itself, simply because there seemed to be nothing of value along that route. And as for Nabokov: it is Nabokov the Secretary-General of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Nabokov the impresario that interests us here. His life as a composer was a quite separate thing (and very much put on hold during the Congress period). To be sure, it would have been possible to locate a few dusty, neglected scores, but I make no apology for not having done so: I am convinced that what we need to know we can learn from the writings.

The book divides into two halves, the first half being broadly chronological, starting with relevant aspects of Nabokov’s life and career in the 1940s, then moving on to consider the writings, most of which appeared in the 1940s and very early 1950s. All of this forms the foundation for Chapter 4, on the CCF’s Paris festival of 1952 (‘Masterpieces of the XXth Century’). From this point on we move to context, with a chapter each on the idea of the CCF as an American ‘Ministry of Culture’, and on the split Nabokov’s policy produced between the CCF in Paris and its New York-based American affiliate. Finally, Chapters 7 and 8 – very much the core of the book – draw out connections between this project and the growing concerns of many intellectuals for the health – even the survival – of high culture in general and art music in particular.



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Finally, I must thank three people slightly more detached from the research, but crucial nonetheless. The pre-history of this work involved an undergraduate dissertation, and I owe a tremendous debt to Max Paddison not only academically but also for his belief in both the subject and in my capacity to do it justice. Max saw the further potential in that work before I did, suggesting that there might be a thesis in it; later, I again drew on his advice when seeking publication. Dartington's loss is Durham's gain. Further back still, John Railton's inspirational piano lessons proved to be a turning point for a thirty-something furniture-maker seeking a new direction, beginning a process which has, with this book, borne an unlikely fruit! Finally, thanks are due to my wife, Susie Honnor, for providing the solid foundation which made the work possible.



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List of Abbreviations

ACCF	American Congress for Cultural Freedom
AIF	Americans for Intellectual Freedom
CCF	Congress for Cultural Freedom
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DP	displaced person
EAG	Europe–America Groups
HICOG	High Command in Germany (US)
IACF	International Association for Cultural Freedom In Bibliography denotes the archives of the IACF, held in the Special Collection of the Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago
ILGWU	International Ladies Garment Workers Union
IOD	International Operations Division
IRCAM	Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique
MJ	In Bibliography denotes the Michael Josselson papers held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin
NCL	‘Non-communist Left’
NMC	National Music Council
NN	In Bibliography denotes the Nicolas Nabokov papers held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin
OMGUS	Occupation Military Government of the United States
PCF	Parti Communiste de la France
PR	<i>Partisan Review</i>
PSB	Psychological Strategy Board
SW	In Bibliography denotes the Secker and Warburg papers held at the University of Reading
USIE	United States Information and Education



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Chapter 1

Great Books and Wise Men: Nabokov's Road to the 1950 Berlin Congress

Nicolas Nabokov was born at Lubcza, Belorussia (now Belarus) on 4 April 1903 into a wealthy family with liberal inclinations. His early years – comfortable and unremarkable – included musical studies with Rebikov in St Petersburg and Yalta. All of this ended in 1919 with the family's decision to flee the advancing Red Army. Making his way via Greece to Germany, where he arrived the following year, he studied at the Stuttgart Conservatory (1920–22) and then at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin with Juon and Busoni (1922–23). Whilst in Berlin he also worked as a music critic for the Russian émigré daily *Rul*, edited by his uncle Vladimir Nabokov (whose son – also Vladimir – would go on to become the author of *Lolita*). Moving to Paris, he studied at the Sorbonne in 1926 and became friends with many of the leading composers, including Prokofiev and Stravinsky; having received a commission from Diaghilev his ballet-oratorio, *Ode*, was presented in Paris (and subsequently in London and Berlin) by the Ballets Russes in 1928. A *Symphonie Lyrique* followed in 1930, and two more ballets, *La Vie de Polichinelle* and *Union Pacific*, were produced in 1934 in Philadelphia and Paris respectively. After lecturing in the United States on European music, at the invitation of Alfred C. Barnes, Nabokov took a teaching post at Wells College, Aurora, where he stayed from 1936 to 1941, opting for American citizenship in 1939.

In 1941 he moved to St John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, later to the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, where he taught intermittently until 1951. The war years also found him translating for the Department of Justice in Washington, before enlisting in 1945 and leaving for occupied Germany, where he became engaged in the re-establishment of Berlin's cultural life as part of the American Sector's Information Control Division. Returning to the USA, the years 1947–49 saw the completion of his *Second Symphony* ('Biblical'), two commissions for Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra (a cantata, *The Return of Pushkin*, and a 'vocal concerto', *La Vita Nuovo*) and one for the Philadelphia under Ormandy (*Studies in Solitude*). At this time he also worked on Voice of America's Russian Broadcast Service, becoming its first chief.

In 1951, when he became secretary-general of the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), Nabokov became involved with the work which will form the central focus of this study. In this role he produced four music festivals (alongside many non-musical events): 'L'Oeuvre du XXème Siècle' (Paris, 1952); 'Music in the XXth Century' (Rome, 1954); 'Tradition and Change in Music' (Venice, 1958) and

the 'East-West Music Encounter' (Tokyo, 1961). This led on to the Directorship of the Berlin Festival (1963–66), during which period his involvement with the CCF became rather more distant (ending completely in 1967). He continued to compose – although with some difficulty as a result of the demands of the heavy workload in both Paris and Berlin – producing two operas: *Rasputin's End*, written with the poet Stephen Spender, came first, in 1959, with a Köln premiere followed by performances in Paris and Catania. In 1973 *Love's Labour's Lost*, with a libretto by W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman, was produced by the Deutsche Oper in Brussels. In the late 1960s he taught at the City University of New York, then from 1970–73 was composer-in-residence at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies in Colorado. Married five times, he was survived by his wife, the photographer Dominique Cibiel, when he died in New York on 6 April, 1978.¹

In the following pages there will be little more to say of Nabokov the composer – a neglect which only mirrors the indifference of the musical world at large. Our interests lie elsewhere, for Nicolas Nabokov was that rare thing, a composer actively engaged in politics. In the 1940s he began to seek ways of working politically within the world of music or, more specifically, marrying his musical interests to his anti-communism. This led in 1951 to his CCF post.² The CCF, which lasted until 1967, was a body of anti-communist intellectuals owing its existence to a perception – in the early Cold War years – that the Soviets were winning the battle of ideas. In his broadly sympathetic account of the organisation, Peter Coleman summarised it as follows:

It lasted for seventeen years and at its height had offices or representatives in thirty-five countries ... it thought of itself as 'a movement' leading a liberal offensive against the Communists and their fellow-travelers ... It sponsored a network of magazines ... It conducted large and small international seminars ... It orchestrated international protests against oppression of intellectuals. ... It organized festivals and helped refugee writers. ... Above all, the Congress helped to shatter the illusions of the Stalinist fellow-travelers ... (Coleman, 1989, p. 9).

The appearance of independence was crucial in pursuit of the CCF's primary purpose – winning the allegiance of intellectuals. It presented itself as a body of autonomous individuals partisan only in their unswerving support for freedom; beholden to no-one. Predictably then, the revelation, in a celebrated scandal of 1966, that it had been secretly funded by the CIA proved terminal.³ Although reconstituted

1 All biographical details have been taken from Nabokov (1975) and Glanville-Hicks and Carr (1980).

2 Hereafter described as 'Congress', 'the Congress', or the 'CCF'.

3 In April 1966 the *New York Times* ran a major five-part series on the CIA, attributed jointly to 'Tom Wicker, John W. Finney, Max Frankel, E.W. Kenworthy and other Times staff members'. In the third part, a brief but – as it turned out – devastating passage runs:

Through similar channels [bogus foundations] the CIA has supported ... liberal organisations of intellectuals such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and some of their newspapers and magazines. *Encounter* magazine, a well-known anti-Communist intellectual monthly ... was for a long time ... one of the indirect beneficiaries of CIA funds. (Wicker *et al.*, 1966, p. 28)