

Letters From Glazunov

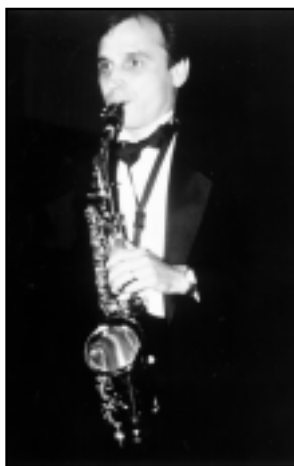
"The Saxophone Concerto Years"

by André Sobchenko

Sixty years ago in the spring of 1936, at the age of fifty-four, Russian composer Alexander Konstantinovich Glazunov died in his apartment near Paris. In Russia (at that time it was the Soviet Union) life continued in rapidly changing keys. Stalin's "Great Terror" kept

spreading its wings. In 1936 the newspaper *Pravda*, (the mouthpiece of the Communist Party) for the first time attacked Shostakovich and his music, using it as a lesson to other artists whose works did not support Communist dogma. New types of music loyal to the regime cultivated the "right mood." Names such as symphony *Airmotor* by Miaskovsky and symphony *Red Cavalry* by Knipper appeared together with eternal themes like *Romeo and Juliet* by Prokofiev and the innocent *Peter and the Wolf*.

The Soviet authorities dictated the composition of art for artists who were inside the then USSR, as well as for those who emigrated. Glazunov, who for the last eight years lived in France, kept the Soviet government in a difficult position. Because Alexander Konstantinovich distanced himself from any political stance, the authorities were sure that the composer would return to his homeland. The composer of Russian national music was perfectly suited for the category of the "Fathers" with the likes of Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, and Glinka. Also, it is well known that when the government organized a balalaika competition in the Hall of Petrograd



Conservatory, Glazunov, the professor of composition and instrumentation, provided full support and agreed to be a judge.

So over all those years Alexander

Konstantinovich's music continued to sound in the hall of Leningrad Conservatory named in his honor "Glazunov Concert Hall." The music was played by the members of the Glazunov String Quartet.

Glazunov's emigrant life started on June 15, 1928, when he accepted an invitation to be a judge at the Schubert competition in Vienna. He left Russia permanently. He traveled around Europe and finally settled in Paris. In that period, the city was a mecca for the arts and home to many Russians. The composer's series of illnesses, bronchitis, infection of the inner ear and others, followed immediately. Alexander Konstantinovich wrote petitions, one after another, to the Communist musical authorities citing these illnesses and asking them to extend his absence. Henceforth, conservatory level textbooks in the Soviet Union stated that the last period of Alexander Konstantinovich's life was very unproductive because of his illnesses and due to the fact that he was under the influence of Western Bourgeois culture. This influence was evidenced by the creation of composi-



tions for bourgeois instruments such as the saxophone.

In May of 1930, the Soviets officially closed the Iron Curtain, which meant the end to the trips abroad for citizens. Glazunov probably understood that he would not be an exception. In the spring of 1929, the newspaper *Leningradskaya Pravda* printed a notice by the musical council of Leningrad Conservatory stating that they were reconsidering Glazunov's continuation in the post of director. The officials carefully thought about Glazunov's musical contribution and decided to hold the current position until the composer's return. Glazunov was removed from the post much later.

Glazunov, in spite of his imputed "musical unproductiveness," was a very active correspondent. A review of the complete publication of the composer's documents from the Soviet



Alexander Glazunov, age seven

archives reveals records of original correspondence from Glazunov. Particularly intriguing are the contents of the letters related to his saxophone compositions. Apparently, Glazunov tried to share his new projects with many of his colleagues. Some of the letters were addressed to Maximilian Oseevich Shteinberg who was a professor of composition at St. Petersburg/ Leningrad Conservatory. Shteinberg (Rimsky-Korsakov's son-in-law) was taking special instrumentation courses under the professorship of Glazunov. Many of the letters were written by the composer to A.N. Rimsky-Korsakov (son of the famous composer) and to L.V. Nikolaiev with whom Shostakovich and Sofronitsky had been studying piano. A small part of the correspondence was recalled from memory by Nadezhda Nikolayevna Shteinberg and is presented in condensed form.

Besides piano, Alexander Konstantinovich was very familiar with many woodwind and brass instruments. In his childhood he studied clarinet, and later he learned to play trombone, trumpet, cello, viola, and French horn. Thirty-two years after

composing his *Leaf from an Album* (trumpet, French horn, two trombones), Glazunov again began to write music for wind instruments. He started composing a quartet for four saxophones.

Postcard to Maximilian Oseevich Shteinberg
(Paris), 21 March 1932

I have an idea to write a quartet for saxophones. These instruments are distinctively audible; in the orchestra they even cover regular woodwinds by their sound. There are great saxophone soloists in the band of the National Guard. Movement I is coming to an end, I have an idea for II-*Canzona*.

To I. A. Wolfman
(Paris), 9, rue Lemoine,
Boulogne sur Seine
11 May 1932

Dear Ian Ansovich!

Thank you for your kind holiday greetings. I am sorry I have not written for so long. I was busy composing, and I have almost completed a quartet for (?) four saxophones. The novelty of this work really thrills me, because I was formerly writing only string quartets. I don't know how it will sound.

To Shteinberg
2 June 1932

Dear Maximilian Oseevich!

I received a letter from your sister who is worried about my health. I am guilty of being quite behind on my correspondence;- too much composing. My health continues to be poor. My swelling on the right foot does not leave me; the skin splits; sometimes it hurts. I walk most of the time wearing light shoes because I cannot wear boots. In damp weather, my gout pain increases.

I completed a composition for four saxophones (2 movements already scored and the third is in sketches). Movement I, *Allegro B-dur* in 3/4 with rhythm: a bit of American!

Movement II, *Canzona Variee*. The theme is built only on harmony; the

first two variations are strict classical medieval style. Next follows a variation with trills à la Schumann (akin to his symphonic etudes), variation à la Chopin and Scherzo. The *Finale* is in a fairly playful style. I am afraid that this composition will fatigue performers due to its length. I talked to one of them, and he assured me.

To I. A. Wolfman
(Paris) 9, rue Lemoine, Boulogne s (ur)
S (eine)
21 June 1932

Pain became unbearable; I am starting to lose my strength. I do not go anywhere, and I do not even put on clothes. I cannot even think to leave Paris in such a condition as early as July. I have not touched the piano for a long time. Thank God I sent the score (for printing) of the saxophone quartet before my condition became worse, but when will I hear my creation?

To Shteinberg
9 December 1932

It seems I shall finally hear my quartet next week. I still worry about how matters will stand with "breathing," because the number of rests are few, and I wish to achieve full consonance. Although one of the variation has three voices that are built on organ point.

To A. N. Rimsky-Korsakov
9 January 1933

If more gentle instruments like the clarinet family with its bassets and bass clarinets were substituted for saxophones, it "just would not sound right" as Stasov used to say.

To L. V Nikolayev
(Paris) 32, Avenue J B. Clemént,
escalier 14, Boulogne s (ur) S (eine),
8 March 1933

I heard my quartet of saxophones finally with real sound. The separated parts sound good. I am afraid the (musical) color will be monotone; I can't do anything about that the whole range is: and you cannot get more than four notes at the same time.

To M. O. Shteinberg
32 Avenue, J. B. Clemént, escalier 14,
Boulogne s/S. France
15 March 1933

One day a Frenchman, meloman



Alexander Glazunov & M. Scriabina, the widow of composer A. Scriabin

asked me, whether Mussorgsky himself orchestrated *Night on Bald Mountain*, or whether it was done by Rimsky-Korsakov? All that made me write short memoirs about Nikolai Andreevich, in which I especially devoted attention to the question of my French friend... About Tushmalov, you have to be a little cautious. After the first rehearsal, Rimsky-Korsakov re-orchestrated *Limoges*, the middle section of *Baba-Yaga* (e-moll) and the bells in *Gates*. Twice I heard Ravel's orchestration which I consider a masterpiece, but I do not share your excitement, perhaps because I am not satisfied with this music at all. On the contrary, I did not like at all the "mumbling" of the muted trumpet in *Two Jews*. That reminded me of the chicken cackle. Nor did I like the tense tuba solo in *Bydlo*. About the saxophone solo, thanks to a wonderful performer (he played the first saxophone in my quartet), I liked it from the second time I heard it. The instrument, with its rich timbre, stood out brightly from the accompaniment of the strings. Can the clumsy *Promenade* be made to sound

here in Paris for location (for rent, French) approximately 400 Francs for one use. How did it go with you?

To I.A. Wolfman,
14, rue de la Franke Mutualiste,
Boulogne s/S.
11 April 1933

The quartet of saxophones was played for me in rehearsal at Salle Paveau. They played excellently, and it sounded full and original. I am glad that I heard this work.

To M. O. Shteinberg
10 December 1933

The performers are such virtuosi that it is impossible to imagine that they play the same instruments as we hear in jazzes (Glazunov's misspelling). What really strikes me is their breathing and indefatigability, light sound, and clear intonation.

To Shteinberg
26 December 1933

The whole composition with stops takes approximately 35 min. From this moment the chronological link of the



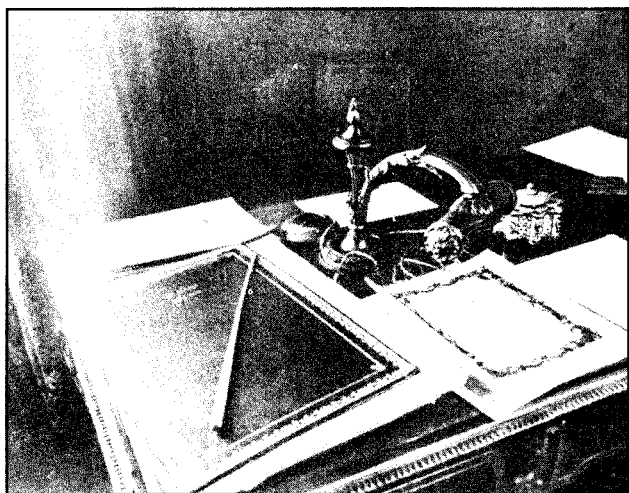
Alexander Glazunov's practice room in 1920. also report to be the room in which he was born

letters is interrupted. The following information is based on Shteinberg's sketches of the missing letters. The words in quotation marks are the exact words of Glazunov.

1934 began with Glazunov's illness, flu and bronchitis. In March the composer started work on his concerto "under the influences of attacks rather than requests from the Danish saxophonist Sigurd Rascher." Glazunov mentioned this situation in a letter dated March 17th. The work went very fast and successfully, and in a letter dated April 4th, the work was completed.

To Shteinberg
4 June 1934

I completed the *Concerto* for saxophone, both the score and clavier, and most likely I will hear performances within days by the Frenchman Mule and the Danish saxophonist Rascher. The concerto is written in Es-dur and goes non-stop. First goes exposition, *Allegro Moderato*, 4/4 and ends in g-moll. After a short development followed by singing *Andante* in Ces-dur (sometimes H-dur), 3/4 is the transitory into a little cadenza. The conclusion begins after the cadenza with a condensed *Fugato* 12/8 in c-moll. All



Alexander Glazunov's work desk in Paris,
his last apartment

the previous elements appear again which bring this to Coda in Es-dur. The form is very condensed, and the total time is no more than 18 min. The accompaniment is built on strings with much divisi, which, in some point, will substitute missing wind section. I use this technique very often; strings in octave divisi and an upper voice in unison with two cellos. Infote, I use double notes a lot. I did show my *Concerto* to Metner, brothers Konus (George, Yuli, Leo) and Tcherepnine (Nilolai Nikolaievich), and they approved of my work. I am afraid of the double notes effect. I will ask Yuli Konus who was working with my violin concerto. He is a big expert on such subtleties, and he prescribed the articulation to Tchaikovsky.

To Shteinberg
13 July 1934

Saxophone Concerto completed, the score and the clavier as well I am just waiting for the moment I hear it in concert; that is why I registered it for the concert season with my *Symphonic Poem* (Poème Epique).

To Shteinberg
21 November 1934

Saxophone Concerto will be a part of the season concerts in England and Scandinavia. The Danish saxophonist Rascher, very good and tremendous technique, will perform it. In Paris, Mr. Mule, first class saxophonist and best soloist of "Garde Republicaine" wants to play my *Concerto*.

To
Shteinberg
5 December
1934

The *Saxophone Concerto* was premiered twice by Sigurd

Rascher in the two largest cities of Sweden. Next year I will hear it in Paris.

On March 21 of 1936 Glazunov died. Unfortunately there is no further information indicating if the composer ever heard his work performed. The perfection of the *Saxophone Concerto* and other compositions always took precedence over his ego. He readily requested ideas and integrated the musical conceptions of colleagues and actual performers.

The letter to A. Y. Shtrimer:

"Dear Alexander Yakovlevich, I'm mailing you my latest correction of (cello) concerto. I do not know when the clavier will be ready in print. Pablo Casals is coming to Paris today, and I will have a rendezvous with him. He wrote me about his concerns regarding the articulations, and he wants to suggest some small changes. If I find them reasonable, I will be happy. Casals assures me that he plays the *Concerto* already from memory."

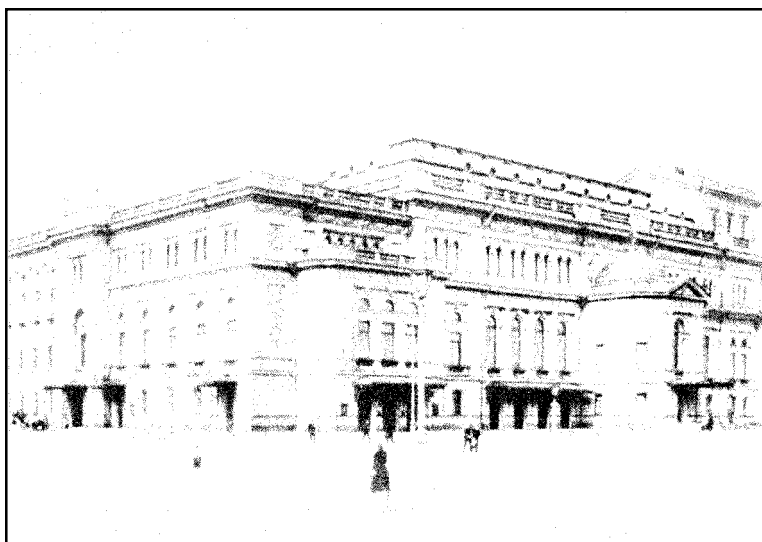
Some additional facts regarding the *Concerto for Saxophone and String Orchestra* deserve note. During the Soviet



Alexander Glazunov's room while he was director of
St. Petersburg Conservatory

Era, this composition was not a standard part of the repertoire of Russian orchestras. The most famous orchestra, the USSR State Symphony under E. Svetlanov, which had a mission to play mostly Russian and Soviet music, made a series of recordings called *Anthology of Russian Symphonic Music*. Sadly, Glazunov's *Saxophone Concerto* was omitted. In 1936, the French publisher Alphonse Leduc made a most unusual addition to the piano reduction. The publisher printed the name of A. Petiot as a second composer. Interestingly enough, in all the archival letters recorded, Alexander Konstantiovich Glazunov never mentioned that fact he worked with a companion!

Thirty-six years after Glazunov's death, on October 14, 1972, the Soviet authorities decided to officially acknowledge him as a Great Russian composer of the Soviet period. Glazunov's ashes were returned to the Motherland. They were reburied at the Necropolis for Masters of Art in Alexander Nevsky Lavra, Leningrad. In the mid-70s the Ministry of Culture made the decision to offer saxophone classes for the first time to students of



St. Petersburg Conservatory

higher education. The first conservatory level saxophone class in the USSR was opened at the Gnessin Institute of Music in Moscow. One of the dominant factors in this decision was simply to perpetuate and honor the music written by a Russian composer.

The letters presented are derived from two Soviet publications: *Glazunov. Issledovaniya. Materialy. Publikatsii. Pis'ma. V dvuh tomah. Leningrad, 1960* and *Glazunov. Pis'ma, Stat'i, vospominaniya. Izbrannoye. Moskva, 1958*, and the translations from the Russian originals are my own.

Andrei Sobchenko

Andrei Sobchenko, a native of Russia, is currently Instructor of Woodwinds at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. He has appeared as a soloist and orchestral musician in Russia, France, Germany, and the USA. In Russia he played with most of the major orchestras including the Moscow Philharmonic (*Rhapsody in Russia*, Sheffield Lab, Inc., 1988), the USSR State Symphony, and the Bolshoi Theater Concert Band. He was Principle Saxophonisi with the Russian Federation Concert Band. As a soloist in the USA, he appeared on National Public Radio to premier a newly commissioned saxophone sonata from Worldwide Concurrent Premier & Commissioning Fund, Inc.

Mr. Sobchenko completed his first degree at the Gnessin Institute of Music, Moscow. Later, he received the

Master of Music degree with Kenneth Radnofsky at Boston University. Andrei Sobchenko resides in Silver Spring, Maryland and is an Irish citizen. §

Editor's Note:
In Russia Glazounov's name is spelled "Glazunov."



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