

Edison Denisov

- Biography -

Edison Denisov, born on 6 April 1929 in Tomsk, Siberia as the son of an engineer and a doctor, received music instruction in early youth, but decided to study mathematics (1946-51) at Tomsk University, receiving a diploma upon completion. During his studies he discovered his tendency towards the composer's calling and in 1949 sent his first works to Dmitri Shostakovich, who recognised the young colleague's talent and did everything in his power to pave the way for Denisov to study at the Moscow Conservatory. After a failed entrance examination, he finally studied composition in 1951-56 with Visarion Shebalin and piano with Viktor S. Belov, became an aspirant under Shebalin and taught analysis beginning in 1956 and instrumentation from 1961 onwards at the Moscow Conservatory.

Denisov's works made him well-known throughout the world as one of the leading representatives of the post-war Soviet avant-garde, but his independence and refusal to compromise caused him to be attacked and hindered for years in his homeland; the attacks included public defamation and performance bans. He could only travel freely beginning in the late 1980s; invitations to premieres in the West (including his opera *L'Écume des Jours* after Boris Vian in Paris 1986) and work sojourns (such as 1990/91 at IRCAM in Paris) followed and in 1990 he was able to assume a short-term yet decisive position in the Soviet Composers' Union (Deputy Secretary). The re-founding of the Association for Contemporary Music (ASM) dissolved in 1932 (coordinated in the Soviet Composers' Union) was due to his initiative. Within its framework, a highly qualified ensemble for new music, the "ASM-Ensemble," was formed; the ensemble made the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s and the present day known at home and abroad.

The consequences of an automobile accident forced Denisov to take advantage of the treatment possibilities offered by a Paris clinic in 1994. After that, he continued to live in Paris, where he died on 24 November 1996. The projects which he was unable to complete include a composition commissioned by the electronic studio of West German Radio.

Denisov's compositional origins were in the period of upheaval of the Soviet post-war avant-garde in the corset of socialist realism to the late 1950s, the bombastic untruth of which was contrasted with the model of a clear, logical and necessary music freed from all superfluous elements, as seen embodied in the work of Anton Webern. Denisov professed Bach and Webern as his models, similarly to his contemporaries Alfred Schnittke and Sofia Gubaidulina, when he spoke in a 1970 APN interview of the "beauty of thought as understood by mathematicians or by Bach and Webern."

Another inspiration for Denisov's personal style was his affinity for French culture, as shown in his self-taught mastery of the French language, his reverence for Pierre Boulez, to whom he dedicated his cantata *Sun of the Incas* (1964) and in his commitment to the jazz musician and existentialist poet Boris Vian – with his cycle *La Vie en rouge* (1973) and his opera *The Froth of the Days* (1981).

Ultimately in the Russian tradition, his predominantly dodecaphonically constructed musical language stands more in the sign of a "promise" in a generally religious sense than in that of a pessimistic analysis or accusation. In this, an idiosyncratic technique of chromatic restrictions and unusual voice-leading plays a role, lending his writing a floating quality. It simultaneously remains transparent and light in its instrumental colourings and combinations. Denisov's music avoids massed effects, allows for "space in the middle" and lets the listener follow melodic lines: it is horizontally conceived.

The initially strict organisation of his writing was relativised after 1970 through consideration of different compositional techniques. The bulk of his chamber music was written during the 1970s, and he also composed – usually for interpreter friends – instrumental concertos including one of his most important works, *Violin Concerto* (1977) for Gidon Kremer. Denisov achieved a noticeable compositional maturity in the 1980s, cultivating all conventional ensembles, creating more instrumental concertos – *Viola Concerto* (1986), *Oboe Concerto* (1986), *Clarinet Concerto* (1989), *Guitar Concerto* (1991), *Concerto for Flute, Clarinet and Orchestra* (1996) – and increasingly turning to existential and religious subjects, which found expression in two *Symphonies* (1987; 1996), the *Requiem* (1980) the oratorios *The History of Life and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christus* (1992) and *Morgentraum* (after poems of Rose Ausländer, 1993). His relationships to his compositional models Mozart (*Kyrie*, 1991), Schubert (completion of the fragment *Lazarus*, 1995) and Debussy (completion of the opera *Rodrigue et Chimène*, 1993) became clearer as well.