THE TANGO SONGS (SCHLAGERS) BY OSCAR STROK IN RIGA DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD. STYLISTIC SYNTHESIS OF VARIOUS MUSICAL TRADITIONS

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Oscar Strok (1893–1975) was a vivid personality in Latvian and European popular musical culture before and after World War II. One of Strok's most popular tango songs of all time has been *Black Eyes* (1929). According to data compiled by the author of this article, a tentative total of forty-four tangos by Strok, in both solo song (28) and instrumental (16) form, can presently be located. These tangos are composed in the period from 1927 until the early 1970s. However, most tango compositions were created in the 1930s.

What are the peculiarities of the Strok tango-songs musical stylistics (the "face" of the genre)? The Argentinian *tango-canción*, Russian urban romance and Jewish klezmer musicking style can be considered basics of Strok's 20th century interwar period tango songs (schlagers) musical stylistics. A synthesis of these various musical traditions and influences forms the special stylistic uniqueness and recognizability of the interwar tango songs created by Oscar Strok nowadays.

Keywords: Oscar Strok; 20th century interwar period, Riga (Latvia), tango songs (schlagers), North-Eastern and South-Western Europe popular music contexts, sources of musical stylistics, Argentinian *tango-canción*, Russian urban romance, Jewish klezmer tradition.

Introduction

Oscar Strok (1893, Daugavpils – 1975, Riga) was a legendary personality (pianist and composer) in Latvian and European popular musical culture before and after World War II. Strok was born into a Jewish family at the end of the 19th century in former Dinaburg (from German *Dünaburg*) / Dvinsk city, which from the end of 18th century up to the end of WWI was part of Tsarist Russia's Vitebsk Governorate. The two languages Strok primarily used in communication in his life were Yiddish (mainly in childhood and adolescence), and Russian (Gimmervert 2006, 17–26). After the establishment of the Republic of Latvia in 1918, the city became part of the new state. The city name officially was changed to Daugavpils in 1920 (Daugavpils History n. d.).

Oscar Strok's father, David Strok (*1838/40–1919*), played an important role in Oscar's development as a musician. David Strok, who was an accomplished flautist and also a proficient pianist and player of other woodwind and brass instruments, is presumed to have had a natural talent for music. David Strok was a musician in Jewish klezmer ensembles as well as worked in a professional orchestra in the former Dinaburg/Dvinsk first city theatre (Gimmervert 2006, 19–20; Kudiņš 2019, 16–17; 407–408).

From 1904 to 1922, Oscar Strok with his family (mother, father, brothers and sisters) resided in Saint Petersburg and studied piano at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory (studies were not finished). In 1922, Oscar Strok accepted Latvian citizenship and came to live in the capital of Latvia, Riga, where he, apart from a short break during the Second World War in Kazakhstan, lived to the end of his life. In the 20th century, specifically in the 1930s, Strok became one of the internationally best-known popular (schlager or hit) music composers (one of Strok's most popular tango-songs of all times has been the *Black Eyes*). After WWII, when Latvia was re-occupied by the former Soviet Union, Strok's music was officially banned as inconsistent with the guidelines of the totalitarian political ideology. The composer continued to work informally and only in the 20th century, in the early seventies, his music ban was partially lifted (Kudiņš 2019).

For the first time, almost at the same time in Riga and Moscow, Oscar Strok was titled the Tango King in public at the moment when the Soviet Union collapsed (Sokol'skij, *Sovetskaâ molodež'*, 08.03.1990; Mangušev, Kotlârčuk, *Muzykal'naâ žizn'*, 1990). In Latvia's cultural life, the active actualization of Strok's musical heritage[1] began in the early 21st century (Kudiņš 2019, 411–413). On January 6, 2013, a memorial plaque dedicated to Strok (with inscriptions in Latvian and English and the title Riga's Tango King[2]) was unveiled in Riga, at 50 Tērbatas street (its creator is the sculptor Jānis Strupulis).

One of the most intriguing questions is about the tango-songs, which Strok created in Riga in the 1930s.[3] The musical scores of Strok's tango-songs reflect a very simple notation. In turn, the arrangements and manner of performance of these songs, which is fixed in output of sound record companies at that time, highlights interesting creative interactions between musicians of different countries. Both musicians and traditions of musical performing can be perceived as tango stylistic adaptation actors and agents,

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1 The heritage of his musical compositions in total consists of 355 works. The number of Strok's musical works is summarised by comparing the information contained in three sources – the register of the National Library of Latvia (**the materials of the composer's private archive, donated by Stroka's descendants in 2014, can also be found there*), the Russian Authors' Society (**in the early 2000s, Strok's descendants transferred the authorship management of his musical works to this organization in Moscow, Russia, ase it was possible to get more royalty payments for performing Strok's music in Russia*) and the Saint Petersburg branch of the Russian State Library. Strok created the first composition – a romance for voice and piano – at 11, during his early life in former Dinaburg/Dvinsk city. The next 13 musical works (in the style of the Russian urban romance genre and some compositions for the piano) were composed during his life time in Saint Petersburg. The number of compositions created in the late 1920s and 1930s in Riga consists of 59 musical works for voice and piano, piano or an ensemble of different instruments (tangos, foxtrots, one-steps, waltzes, polkas and others). The number of compositions created in the 1940s and early 1950s consists of 87 compositions for voice and piano, piano or an ensemble of different instruments (some tangos, mainly wartime songs with patriotic themes, as well as Soviet-style marches). Even though after World War II Strok lost any opportunity to participate in official musical life and his music was banned on the radio and television, he continued to compose and distribute his music sheets privately to musicians and entertainment venue ensembles throughout the former Soviet Union. The number of compositions created in the late 1950s, 60s and early 70s consists of 195 compositions for voice and piano, piano or an ensemble of different instruments. Entertainment musical works, including tangos, waltzes and foxtrots, as well as echoes of the innovations in popular music culture (for example, blues, samba, shake or big-beat music) were created.

2 In Latvian: *Rīgas tango karalis*.

3 In the late 1920s and 30s 17 tangos (the solo songs or schlagers) were created. Overall, according to data compiled by the author of this article, a tentative total of forty-four tangos by Strok, in both solo song (28) and instrumental (16) form, can presently be located. These tangos were composed in the period from 1927 until the first half of the 1970s.

and together they represent a branched international network. How, in the context of this network, were the peculiarities of the Oscar Strok tango-song musical stylistics ("face" of genre) constructed?

The **purpose** of that research is to characterize the synthesizing of the various musical traditions – the Argentinian *tango-canción*, the Russian urban romance and Jewish klezmer musicking – in Strok's 20th-century interwar tango songs' musical stylistics.

The vibrant tango songs Strok composed in Riga in the late 1920s and 1930s became *schlagers* – hungrily awaited popular songs with sentimental lyrics and omnipresent "blows" and "beats" (from the German word *der Schlag*, a blow, strike, hit) resounding in the saturated stream of entertainment culture (Czerny & Hofmann 1968; Wicke 1998). It is no coincidence that the first title that the press in interwar Riga bestowed upon Strok before the Second World War was the "King of schlager"[4] (*Aizkulises*, Nr. 41, 09.10.1931; *Aizkulises*, Nr. 4, 22.01.1932; *Intīmā Rīga*, Nr.12, 09.03.1934; *Intīmā Rīga*, Nr. 20, 04.05.1934). Strok himself also actively offered his compositions under the title *schlager* on the sheet music market.

Of course, the term *schlager*, and its use in the analysis of popular music is broad and has undergone various changes in its definition until today. This article examines *schlager* in the context of various trends of European popular music culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Based on the findings expressed so far in the research about the representation of schlager in Riga (Latvia), it is defined as a genre created under the influence of various factors of the popular culture industry (musical theatre, cinema, radio, phonograph, etc.). It is formed by an orientation towards popular dance (the Charleston, tango, foxtrot, valse etc.) and the use of characteristic rhythms in the creation of vocal compositions mainly with sentimental text (Rokpelnis 2020; Rokpelnis 2021; Rokpelnis 2022).

It should be noted that for a long time, Strok's analysis of tango music has been reflected mainly in texts written in Russian. The two books about Strok were published in Russia in the first decade of the 21st century (Gimmervert 2006; Dragilev 2008a). Both books in Russian are based on memoirs of Strok, relatives and information from different sources. However, these books do not exhaustively analyse the question of the stylistic sources in Strok's tango songs. In turn, the author of this article wrote the first monographic study on Strok in Latvian that was published in 2019 (Kudiņš 2019). The analysis presented in the monograph has served as the basis for the solution of the topic in this article.

The first chapter of the article presents an analysis of Strok's best-known tango song (schlagers) scores and performance practices during the 20th century interwar time. The second chapter provides a comparison of Strok's tango songs with schlager music in the other countries of north-eastern and south-western Europe. The third chapter characterizes the influences of the Argentinian *tango-canción*, Russian urban romance, and Jewish klezmer musicking traditions in Strok's tango songs.

4 In Latvian *šlāgeru karals*.

1. Oscar Strok's best-known interwar tango songs (schlagers)

The interwar period in the 20th century was a time when the popularity of Strok as a composer of a popular song or hit, especially in the tango genre, flourished particularly loudly. In the exuberant, creative and successful decade before the Second World War, Strok wrote his name into the European history of the tango by composing such works (vocal compositions) as *Black Eyes* (*Černye glaza*), *Light-Blue Eyes* (*Golubye glaza*), *My Last Tango* (*Moë poslednee tango*), *Sleep, My Poor Heart* (*Spi, moë bednoe serdce*), *Don't Leave Me!* (*Ne pokidaj!*) and *Tell Me Why* (*Skažite, počemu?*). Poet Alexander Perfilyev (*Aleksandr Perfil'ev*, 1895–1973) wrote the lyrics originally (in Russian) for some of these Strok tango songs.[5] Of course, anyone interested in Strok's music may add other compositions to this list of compelling tangos at their own discretion.[6]

Strok indicated the year in which he composed ***Black Eyes*** (his second tango composition) on a later transcription of the score. In his rather calligraphic handwriting in Russian, the sentence reads:

"I composed these *Black Eyes* in 1929 in Riga."[7] (Gimmervert 2006, 101)

In turn, conductor Marek Weber (1888–1964) and his Dance Orchestra (Berlin) played an important role in the flourishing popularity of *Black Eyes*. According to a family memories recorded (albeit in slightly embellished form) by Anisim Gimervert in his biography of Strok and based on an account told by Strok's daughter[8] and son[9], Strok met Weber in the summer of 1929, when he headed to Berlin in search of a better life, being well aware that a collaboration with the popular band leader could help him considerably in fulfilling his ambition of becoming better known (Gimmervert 206,

5 Born in Chita in Russia's Far East, Perfilyev came from a family of cavalrymen in the Tsar's army going back several generations. He arrived in Latvia in 1921, having fled from Soviet Russia as a "white émigré". In Riga, he published (sometimes under the pseudonym Alexander Li */Aleksandr Li/)* several collections of poems in the Russian language: "Snowy Mass" (*Snežnaâ messa*, 1925), "Leaf-Fall" (*Listopad*, 1929) and "North Wind" (*Veter s severa*, 1927). In 1944, at the end of the Second World War, he left Latvia and later settled in Munich, West Germany, where he lived for the rest of his life. In the 1950s and 60s, Perfilyev worked at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Filej n. d.).

6 In the 1920s and 30s in Riga, the chronology of the origin of the tango compositions created by Oscar Strok is as follows: "A Night in Marseilles" (*Nacht-Marsel / La Nuit à Marseil*) for piano (1927); *Black Eyes* (*Černye glaza*) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Alexander Perfilyev (1929); *Light-Blue Eyes* (*Golubye glaza*) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Alexander Perfilyev (1930); *My Last Tango* (*Moë poslednee tango*) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Alexander Perfilyev (1932); *Don't Leave Me!* (*Ne pokidaj*) for voice and piano, text in Russian (1933); *Sleep, My Poor Heart* (*Spi, moë bednoe serdce*) for voice and piano, text in Russian (1934); *Tell Me Why* (*Skažite, počemu?*) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Oscar Strok; "Oh, How Sweet It Is" (*O, kak mne sladko*) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Oscar Strok (1935); "Forget Me Not" (*Farges mich nit*) for voice and piano, text in Yiddish of Isroel Sabeschinski (1936); "You Still Grieve for *Black Eyes*" (Response to *Black Eyes*)" (*Ty vse grustiš' o "Černyh glazah" (Otvet na "Černye glaza"*) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Oscar Strok (1936); "Natasha" (*Nataša*) for voice and piano, text in Russian (1937); "Sonya" (*Sonâ*) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Oscar Strok (1937); "When Spring Returns Again" (*Kogda vesna opât' pridët*) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Oscar Strok (1937); "Neapolitan Tango" (*Neapolitanskoe tango*) for voice and piano, text in Russian (1938); "No Need to Remember" (*Ne nado vspominat'*, in Russian) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Oscar Strok (1938); "Waiting" (*Ožidanie*) for voice and piano, text in Russian of Leonid Avdeev (1938). – Based on the data of the registers of the National Library of Latvia, Russian Authors' Society (please see references to these sources at the end of the article).

7 *"Èti "Černye glaza" â napisal v 1929 godu v Rige."*

8 Vera Shishkina (*Šiškina*, née Strok, born 1919 in Voronezh (*Voronež*, Russia), deceased 2012 in Moscow).

9 Yevgeniy Strok (*Evgenij Strok*, 1926–1989, Riga, Latvia).

100–105; Kudiņš 2019, 251–252). The fact that several recordings of *Black Eyes*, distributed in Berlin, appeared on German record labels already in 1929 provide indirect evidence of such a course of events. The vocal part on these recordings was sung by Mark Levin (under the pseudonym Marek Belorusov), a singer well known in Riga among the Russian so-called "white *émigrés*" (*Schwarze Augen, Electrola*, 1929; *Schwarze Augen, His Master's Voice*, 1929).[10] In 1930, simultaneously in Riga and Berlin, Strok first published an arrangement of *Black Eyes* for voice and piano with texts in Latvian, Russian and German, presenting it as a *Kazanova* (*Casanova*) edition released by his own publishing house (*Melnās acis*. *Čërnye glaza*, *Casanova*, 1930; *Zwei dunkle Augen schau'n mich an*, *Casanova*, 1930[11]).

Most likely, Weber appreciated Strok's talent for composing easily marketable popular dance music with catchy melodies, as evidenced by the very rapid rise of *Black Eyes* in the shellac record industry of the day. At the same time, it was probably thanks to Weber that *Black Eyes* has, from the very first recording of it up until the present day, been accompanied by a musical "quotation" that, judging by all available evidence, was not originally present in Strok's own score. This is the melodic line of the popular Russian urban romance titled *Black Eyes* (*Oči čërnye*)[12], which appears in the middle, or in some versions at the end, of Strok's song the 1930s shellac records (for example, *Čërnye glaza*, Ûrij Morfessi, *Odeon*, Berlin; *Čërnye glaza, Olga Kamieńska, Columbia*, London).

The score of Strok's famous tango song *Black Eyes* adheres to the assumption that musicians will invariably introduce various nuances of artistic interpretation during live performance that will enrich and complement the sound of the song. The basic outline of the song's musical structure is very elementary: seven introductory bars in the piano part, followed by an exposition of two strophes (one strophe consisting of two verses followed by a refrain). The musical structure of the two strophes – verse and refrain (binary form) – is based on the so-called classical quadratic structure (a 16-bar period divided into two musical phrases: 8 + 8).

In terms of harmony, the *Black Eyes* score is also based on the simplest, most typical of structures: chords and their inversions in the basic key of the song (G minor), the inclusion of individual seventh chords at different pitches, the emphasis of structures in the cadences of the sentences and periods that underline the instability of the dominant. The only deviation from the basic key is the C minor chord at the end of the verse and

10 All of the phonograph records listed in the article are also available on youtube.com, where they have been posted for public access by various users.

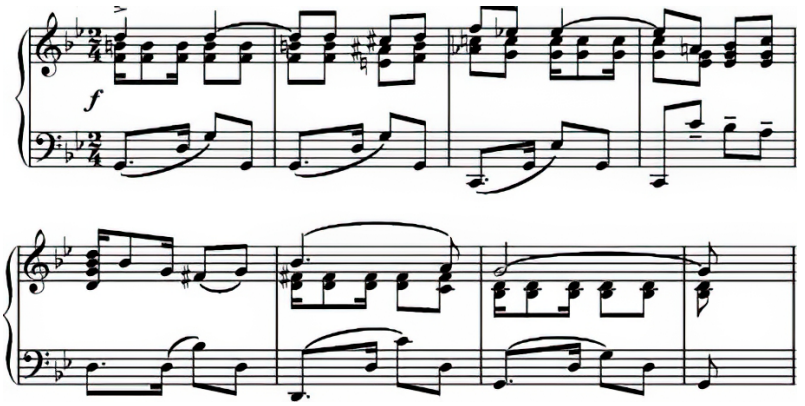
11 From the 1920s, Strok owned a sheet music publishing house in Riga. From 1930, its name was *Kazanova* (in Latvian), and for a short time it also operated in Berlin under the name *Casanova*. Strok released mainly sheet music for schlagers. With the beginning of the occupation of Latvia by the USSR (the first year of the occupation, 1940 - 1941), the publishing house of Strok's sheet music was closed.

12 The history of the Russian urban romance *Black Eyes*, or "Ochi Chorniy" (*Oči čërnye*), is quite interesting. Ukrainian poet Yevgeny Grebinka's (*Yevhen Hrebinka*, *Evgenij Grebinka*, 1812–1848) poem *Black Eyes* was published in 1843. Later, set to march-like music by the little-known amateur musician Florian Hermann (*Florian German*) of Lithuania, and arranged later yet in a waltz rhythm by Moscow musician Sergey Gerdel (*Sophus Gerdel/Gerdal*, *Sergej Gerdel'*), the romance gained phenomenal popularity worldwide in the early 20th century – thanks to a performance by the legendary Russian opera singer Fyodor Chalyapin (*Fëdor Šalâpin*, 1873–1938) – and has remained popular to the present day (Kravčinskij 2012).

the refrain, which, as the characteristic subdominant chord, helps to create a classically simple, quite (stereo)typical final cadence. The instrumental coda in the parallel key of G major introduces a decidedly peculiar accent in the first edition of the song's score – an echo of the typical Baroque-era technique of abruptly replacing the minor-key affect and evening it out with a closing cadence in a major key.

What in the melodic line and texture of *Black Eyes* suggests the tango genre? It is the metrical pattern. Its dotted rhythm and regular syncopations instantly allow us to recognise one of the basic forms of the Argentine tango, namely, the form based on the 2/4 time signature of the Cuban habanera and milonga.

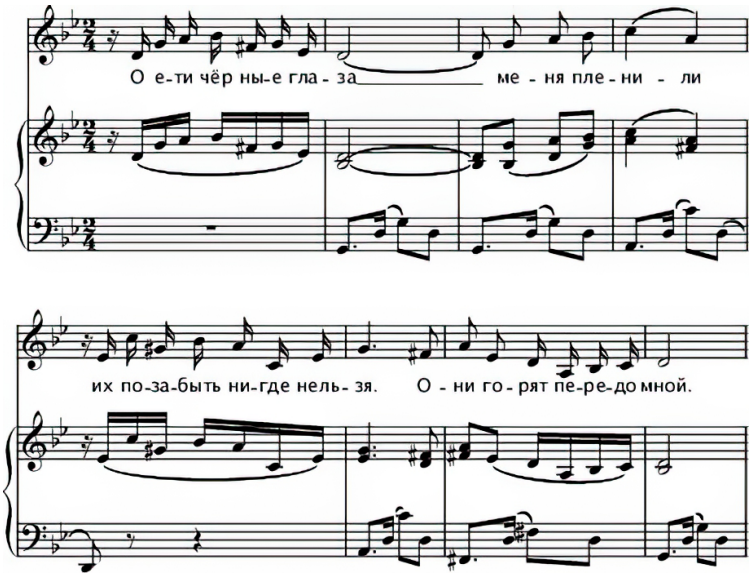
The habanera's characteristic dotted rhythm is already present in the piano's opening bars:



Example No. 1. Oscar Strok, *Black Eyes*.

The classic pulse of the tango is also present with almost mechanical regularity in the song's well-known refrain with lyrics:

O, èti čërnye glaza	Oh, those black eyes
Menâ plenili,	That captivated me,
Ih pozabyt' ne v silah â,	I can't forget them anywhere,
Oni gorât peredo mnoj.	They burn in front of me.
O, èti čërnye glaza	Oh, those black eyes
Menâ lûbili.	That once loved me,
Kuda že skrylis' vy teper',	Where have you fled to now?
Kto blizok vam drugoj?	Who is close to you now?



Example No. 2. Oscar Strok, *Black Eyes*.

If, in its original form (the score for voice and piano), *Black Eyes* is such a formally simple, restrained piece in terms of all means of musical expression, then one must wonder what was, and still is, the phenomenon behind the popularity of the song. When analysing the phenomenon of the popularity of Strok's tango song *Black Eyes*, the issues of notation, improvisational skills and the role of the performer naturally lead one to the song's various performance versions and the role of its performers in the 1930s and 1940s early. For instance, the interpreters of *Black Eyes* were internationally known singers Yuri Morfessi (*Ûrij Morfessi*, 1882–1949), Jerzy Siemionow (1898–1948, see *Czarne ochi*, *Syrena-Electro*, Warsaw), Olga Kamieńska (1905–1981), Seva Foullon (1908–1982, see *Tvoyi glaza* (*Your Eyes*), *Seva*, New York), and many others, all of whom sang in Russian, in addition to versions of the song in other languages by singers from different countries. These can be found in the numerous recordings made since the first recording of the song was released in Berlin in 1929 by *Electrola* and *His Master's Voice*.

It should be noted that it is virtually impossible to identify all of the interpretations of *Black Eyes* released on phonograph records. According to available information, it seems that dozens of interpretations of the song were released on many different record labels. Most of those recordings are now held mainly in the private collections of enthusiastic collectors of retro records. However, the variety of stylistically nuanced contexts heard in even just the publicly accessible recordings give a sense of how *Black Eyes* marched to victory in the international market for popular music recordings of the time. This victory depended in large part on the kind of singers who recorded the song. Moreover, one particular interpretation of the song on the shellac record remains to this day an almost unrivalled benchmark for those interested in popular retro music.

That interpretation is by the legendary singer of popular music of the 1930s and 1940s **Pyotr Leshchenko** (*Pëtr Leŝenko*, 1898–1954). Leshchenko was born in the village of

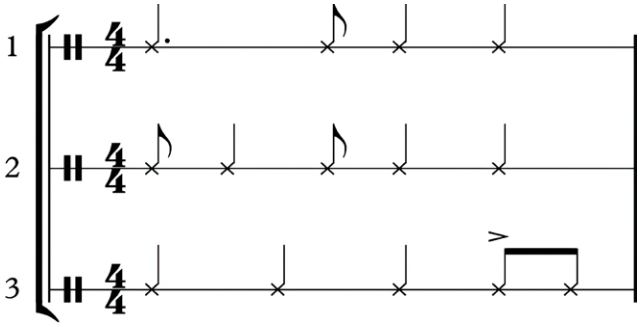
Isaevo in Kherson Governorate (nowadays, this place belongs to Odesa district), Ukraine, and grew up in Bessarabia (Kishinev), after WWI, he became a citizen of Romania. He had initially worked as a revue dancer. Having met and married his first wife, the Latvian dancer Zinaīda Zaķīte in Paris, Leshchenko arrived in Riga in 1930. In the early 1930s, Leshchenko and his family left Riga and moved to Romania, where he owned a restaurant in Bucharest. Leshchenko performed ceaselessly throughout Europe up until the Second World War and released countless recordings of songs with record labels in many different countries. He mainly sang in the Russian language and is therefore today considered a "European Russian singer", one of the most vivid symbols of a bygone era in the genre of popular song. After the divorce from the first marriage, during WWII, Leshchenko married for the second time with Vera Leshchenko (née Belousova, 1923–2009). The two met and married in 1942 in German-occupied Odesa (Ukraine). Pyotr and Vera Leshchenko lived in Romania after the Second World War, because the singer had become a citizen of that country before the war. In 1951, the security forces of Romania's Communist government, in collaboration with Soviet KGB agents, arrested Pyotr Leshchenko. Later, Vera was also arrested. She was incriminated for "betrayal of the homeland" due to the fact that she had obtained Romanian citizenship during the Second World War in order to marry Pyotr Leshchenko and leave German-occupied Ukraine. Pyotr, in turn, was suspected of being a politically unreliable *German agent* due to his regular performances in German-controlled areas during the war. Under circumstances that remain unclear – most likely as a result of torture – he died in prison in Romania in 1954 and was buried in a mass grave, the exact location of which is not known today (Skabard 1992; Bosdriesz 2008; Leŝenko 2013).

Sources describing the creative collaboration between Strok and Leshchenko indicate that it was Strok who, by a stroke of fate, was destined to shape the career of the future world-renowned singer of popular music. In short, the story went like this: in early 1931, Leshchenko was left alone on stage at Riga's entertainment venues without his first wife and dance partner, who was unable to perform following the recent birth of their son, Igor. Leshchenko tried singing schlagers in Russian, and on one such occasion he was approached by Strok, who offered a musical collaboration. Leshchenko had not been professionally trained as a singer, and, based on surviving recordings, his natural voice was also quite modest, although he did possess a particularly velvety, honey-like timbre (Bosdriesz 2008; Gimmervert 2006; Leŝenko 2013; Skabard 1992).

It is possible that precisely this vocal quality attracted Strok, hearing in it an interpreter of the popular songs he was composing – a voice that could at times perfectly reflect the peculiar grit and musical exaltation characteristic of the compositions by Riga's Tango King. According to various sources, Strok and Leshchenko became friendly companions on the popular music scene and performed together quite frequently in Riga and other Latvian cities. Moreover, Leshchenko's rapidly rising popularity among listeners of shellac records soon opened up frequent opportunities for him to perform in various places abroad (he did not hide the fact that the BBC in London paid him high fees for singing and taking part in radio broadcasts).

It was probably Leshchenko's unique, inimitable tenor voice with its distinctly tender and sweet timbre that proved to be so suited to the general musical character of Strok's tango songs. While not blessed with a particularly powerful voice capable of filling a large concert hall, Leshchenko proved invaluable in the recording studio, where even the microphones of that era were able to capture the varied subtleties of his nuanced performance, which was so well suited to the message encoded in the lyrics and score.

Leshchenko first recorded *Black Eyes* at the Columbia studio with Viennese dance orchestra and conductor Frank Fox (1902–1965) in Vienna, in 1933. All previous recordings of Strok's famous tango described above preserved the dotted rhythmic pattern of the Cuban habanera. Fox and Leshchenko, however, took the liberty of slightly altering it. In their version, the presence of the tango genre is more evident in its march-like 4/4 rhythm accenting the last quarter note, forming a discrete syncopation within the measure (the third pattern of example No. 3).



Example No. 3. Three typical tango rhythm patterns (Evans 1988, 10; Béhague 2001; Link & Wendland 2016, 28–31).

Such a solution gives Strok's tango a certain emotional harshness – the steady pulse of the quarter notes evokes a feeling of constant motion and fateful ticking, as if of a clock – as well as a new, unprecedented dimension of expressiveness. And, above the ensemble's musical framework and its new tempo-rhythmic pattern, the irresistible allure of the singer's voice (*Čërnye glaza*, Petr' Leŝenko, *Columbia*, Vienna).

This interpretation became an instant hit, as evidenced by regular repeated releases of the recording in various different countries. In fact, the widespread recognition of Leshchenko's interpretation of *Black Eyes* ensured him a healthy enough income that he did not need to bother with making many new recordings up until the Second World War, so successful were the re-releases and sales of his rendition of the song in Europe and the United States.

Next to *Black Eyes*, other musically vivid tango songs from the 1930s by Strok are, for instance, ***Light-Blue Eyes***, ***My Last Tango***, ***Sleep, My Poor Heart***, ***Don't Leave Me!***, ***Tell Me Why*** (*Russkij džass! Russian jazz!*, Kazanova, 1937) and ***My Last Tango*** (*Moë poslednee tango*. *Mon dernier tango*, K. Reinhold, *Casanova*, 1932).

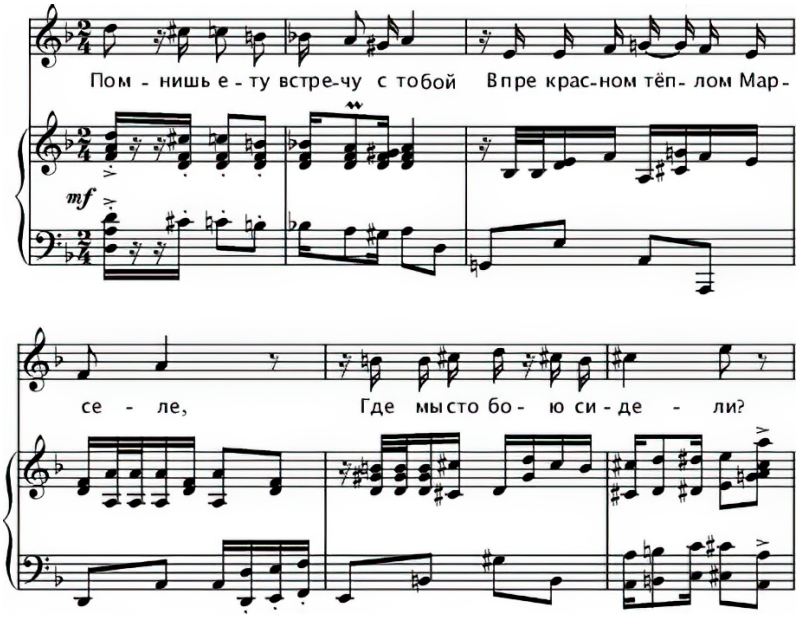
It is interesting that the five tango songs that followed *Black Eyes* contain a greater variety in terms of musical expression. For example, while *Light-Blue Eyes* still adheres quite explicitly to the metrical pattern of the Cuban habanera (*Golubye glaza, Petr' Leŝenko, Columbia, Vienna)*, in *My Last Tango*, this pattern has already been woven into the texture of the composition in a much more discreet, less emphatic way (*Moë poslednee tango*, Petr' Leŝenko, *Columbia*, Vienna). In *Sleep, My Poor Heart* (*Spi, moë bednoe serdce. Tango* (*Spi moe bednoe serdze*, P. Lescenko, *Columbia*, London), *Don't Leave Me!* (*Ne pokidaj!* Tango. (*Nye pokidai!*, Peter Lescenco, *Columbia*, Bucharest) and *Tell Me Why* (*Skažite, počemu?*, Peter Lescenco, *Columbia*, Bucharest), the habanera rhythm has been replaced by the march-like pulse of the tango dance (eighth notes in 2/4 time or quarter notes in 4/4 time).

In terms of musical structure, these four tangos by Strok retain the basic, classic strophic form consisting of an exposition (verse) and a refrain, albeit with some deviations. *Tell Me Why* features the most typical musical structure: both the exposition section (a) and the refrain section (b) are divided into two musical phrases of 8 bars + 8 bars. The compositional structure of *Light-Blue Eyes* consists of an exposition section (a) with two musical phrases of 8 bars + 16 (8+8) bars and a refrain (b) with two musical phrases of 8 bars + 8 bars. The exposition section (a) in *Sleep, My Poor Heart* consists of two musical phrases of 8 bars + 8 bars and a refrain (b) of two musical phrases of 16 (8+8) bars + 16 (8+8) bars. The exposition section (a) in *Don't Leave Me!* is formed by two musical phrases of 8 bars + 8 bars, while the refrain (b) is broken into four symmetrical musical phrases of 4 bars each.

The compositional plan (the structure of the musical strophe) of *My Last Tango*, on the other hand, obviously deviates from the "square" forms of the verse (exposition) and refrain. The exposition (a) of the musical strophe consists of two musical phrases, each constructed as a complete section – 10 (6 + 4) bars + 8 (4 developing the musical material + 4 repeating the main motive of the first phrase) bars – thus creating a so-called binary reprise form, which consists of two independent musical structures and a repetition of the original musical material at the end. The refrain (b), however, is composed in a symmetrical two-phrase construction of 8 bars + 8 bars, followed by an additional bar concluding the composition with an emphatic harmonic resolution in the main tonality of the song. It is quite clear that the musical structure of *My Last Tango*, which is so atypical for Strok, was determined by the flow of the text, which is in turn dominated by the free-form development of a brief story with a certain escalation of drama at the moment of parting that seems to ease slightly in the narrator's concluding statement ("I will never forget the meeting when you left me") at the end of the verse. This is followed by the refrain, both musical sentences of which conclude with words "I am sending to you my last tango".

Moreover, it is not only the structuring of the musical material in *My Last Tango* that is uncharacteristic of the "classic squareness" found in Strok's music. The development of the musical phrases in the exposition section (a) stands out with its descending chromatic melodic line in the vocal part, which discreetly accents the interval of the

diminished fifth, or tritone (for example, the D–G# in the development of the first phrase):

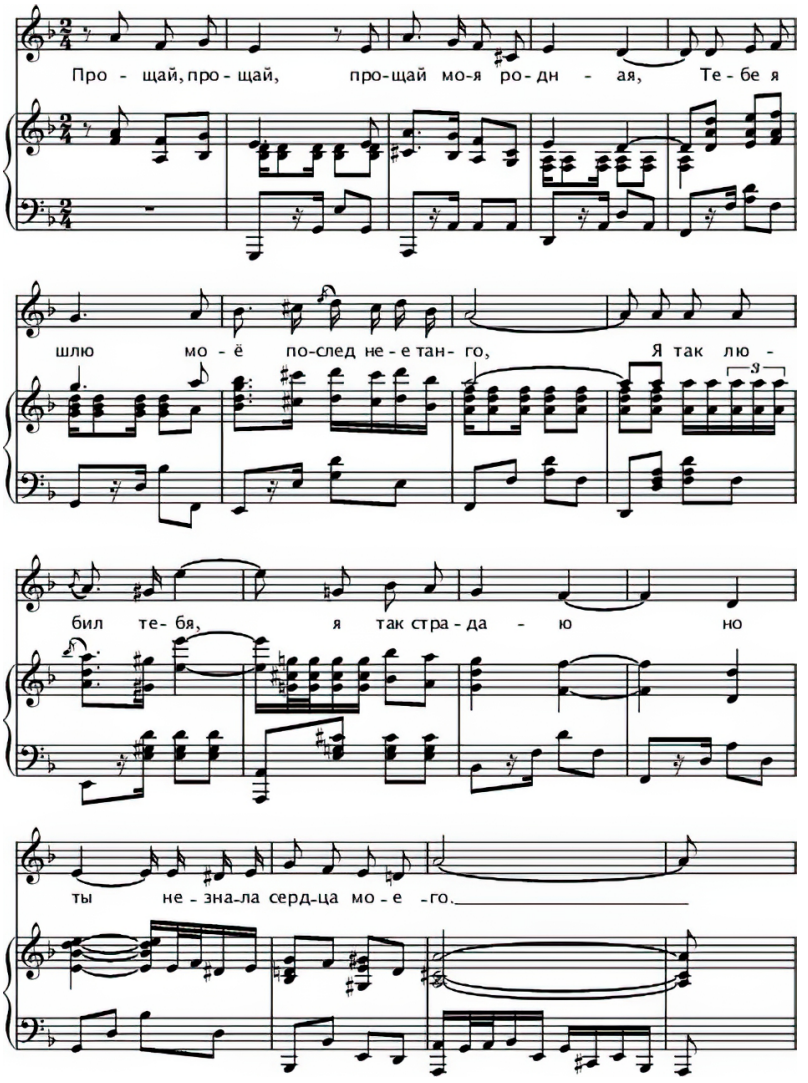


Example No. 4. Oscar Strok, *My Last Tango*.

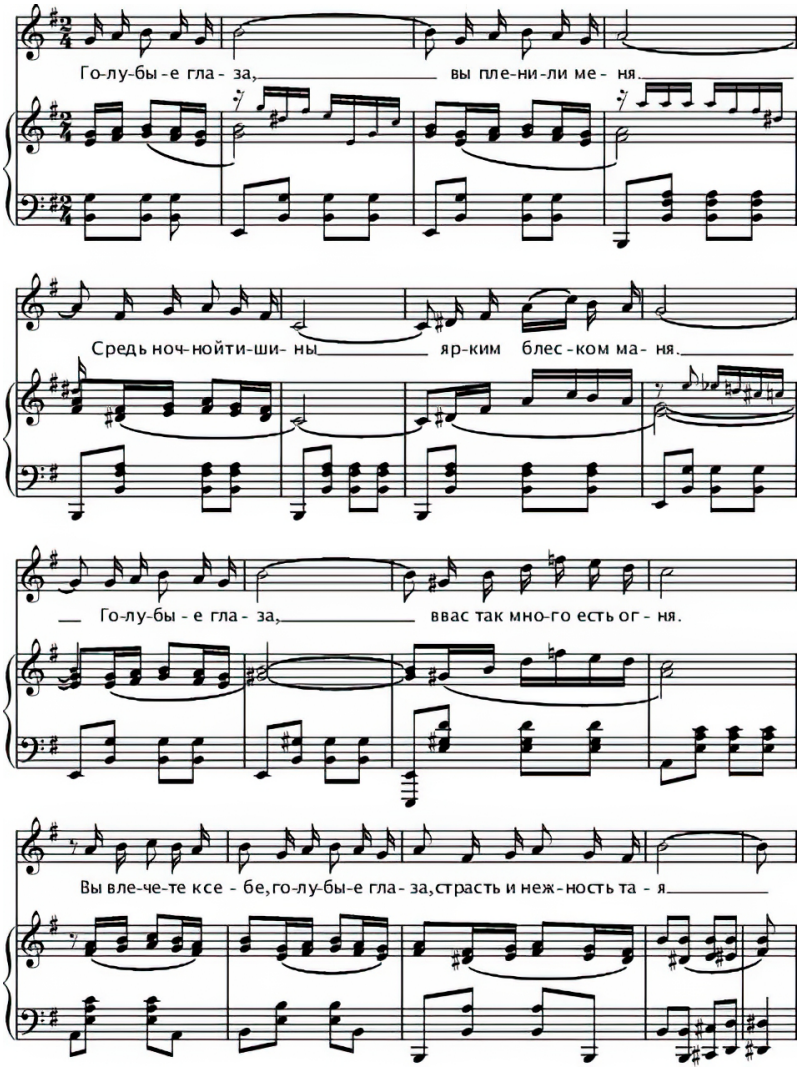
Thus, a subtle allusion is made to other well-known prototypes in the history of various musical genres. For example, the lightly sketched Cuban habanera metrical formula and the short, abruptly ending motifs in the phrase structure of *My Last Tango* seem to allude to Carmen's famous *Habanera* in Georges Bizet's immortal romantic opera. The allusion to the figure of the femme fatale in the text of Strok's tango also suggests a link with the legendary opera heroine's passionate, tragic drama of love. In his essays on Strok, Dmitri Dragilew has stated that this tango also contains a musical reminiscence of Danish popular music composer Jacob Gade's iconic tango *Jealousy* (*Jalousie*) (Dragilev 2008a, 141–142). As a result, whether consciously or not, Strok succeeded in creating, in terms of musical expression, a minor masterpiece in the contextual interpretation and reception of this popular dance.

It is noteworthy that, as in *Black Eyes*, the musical charm of these other five tango songs by Strok from the 1930s is most clearly expressed in the refrain. In fact, it is precisely the refrains that provide the "meat", or core, of the musical expression in his best-known compositions; it is in them that the ache and resignation of the underlying musical mood is most directly concentrated. This is probably why, in the recordings made before the Second World War, Strok's tangos were often recorded in a reduced form, often shortening the musical structure of a strophic verse or having only the instruments play it, in order that the singer's performance could bring out the magical expression of the refrain.

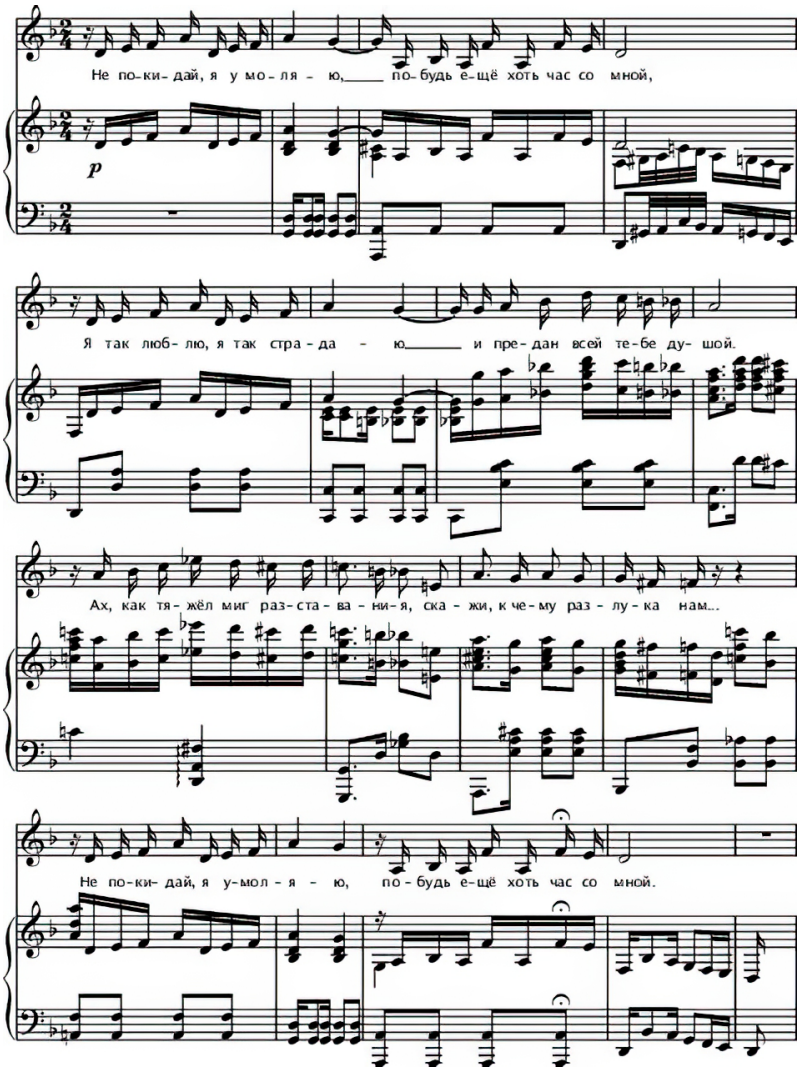
The musical refraines in *My Last Tango, Light-Blue Eyes* and *Don't Leave Me!* are shaped as a sinuously flowing melodic line with gradual progress towards the climax and a certain slackening afterwards, as if rounding it off:



Example No. 5. Oscar Strok, *My Last Tango.*

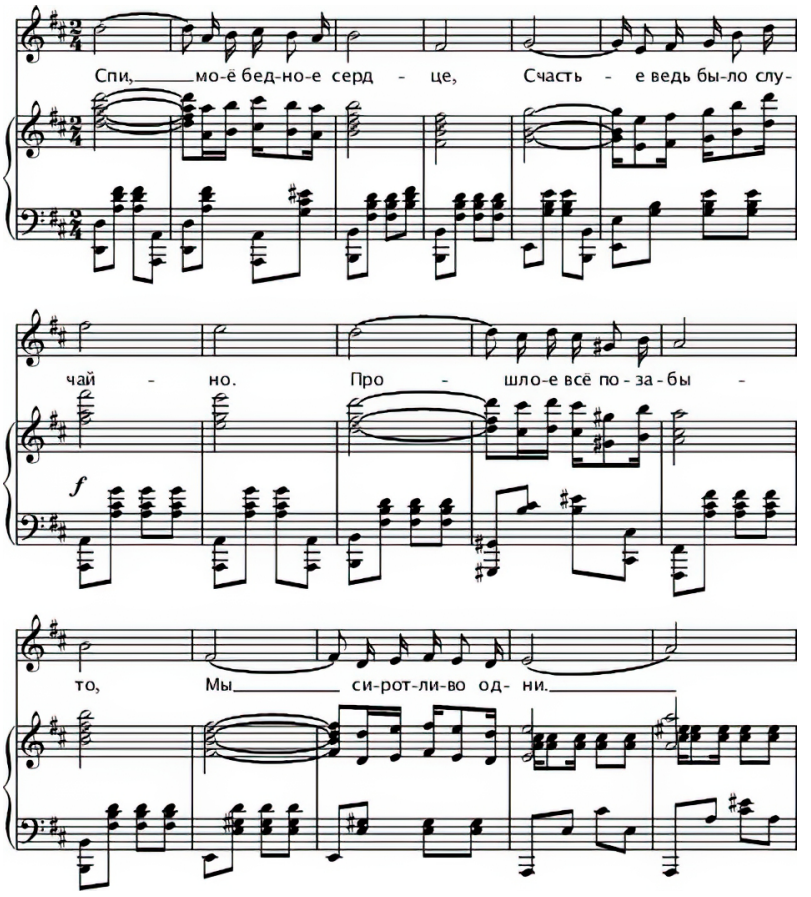


Example No. 6. Oscar Strok, *Light-Blue Eyes*.



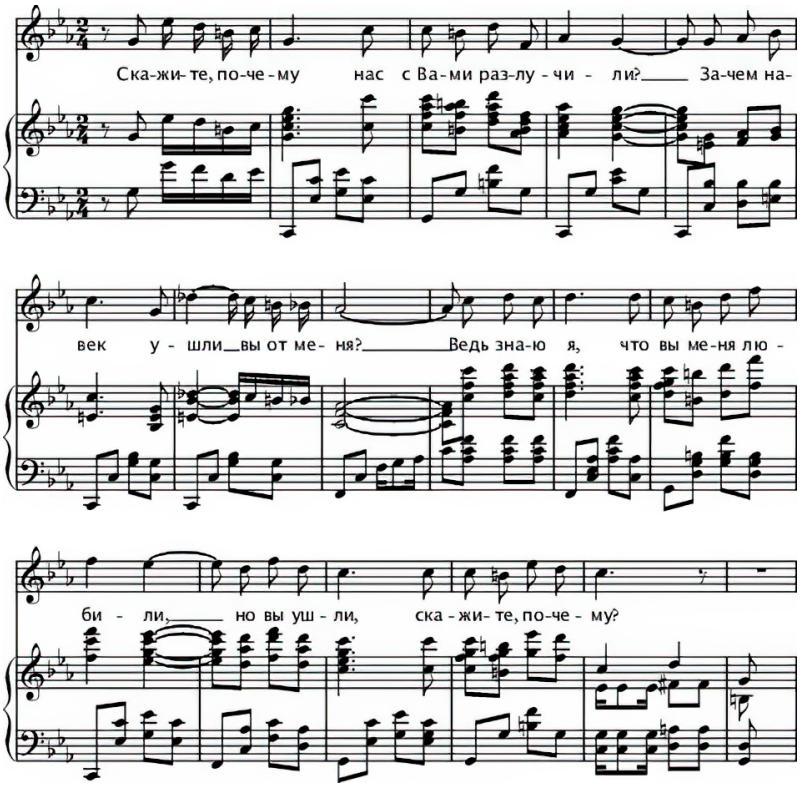
Example No. 7. Oscar Strok, *Don't Leave Me!*.

The musical expression in the refrain of *Sleep, My Poor Heart* is slightly different. After the intensity of lost happiness in the verse (exposition), Strok conveyed a feeling of "soaring sighs" in the melodic line of the refrain, this effect being achieved via broad "leaps" and the light, seemingly halting presentation of the sung phrases.



Example No. 8. Oscar Strok, *Sleep, My Poor Heart*.

In *Tell Me Why*, in its turn, the refrain and the interval of a sixth in its first phrase, which symbolises romantic longing, give an especially exalted expression to Strok's tango music of the 1930s:



Example No. 9. Oscar Strok, *Tell Me Why?*.

In the second half of the 1930s, the undisputed best-sellers among the recordings of *Light-Blue Eyes*, *My Last Tango*, *Sleep, My Poor Heart*, *Don't Leave Me!* and *Tell Me Why* were those performed by Pyotr Leshchenko. After his first successes in Riga, he soon found his way to the recording studios established by the internationally influential American company *Columbia* in various European capitals. His interpretations of Strok's well-known tangos perfectly illustrate the instrumental accompaniment techniques typical of the popular dance-song genre of the time.

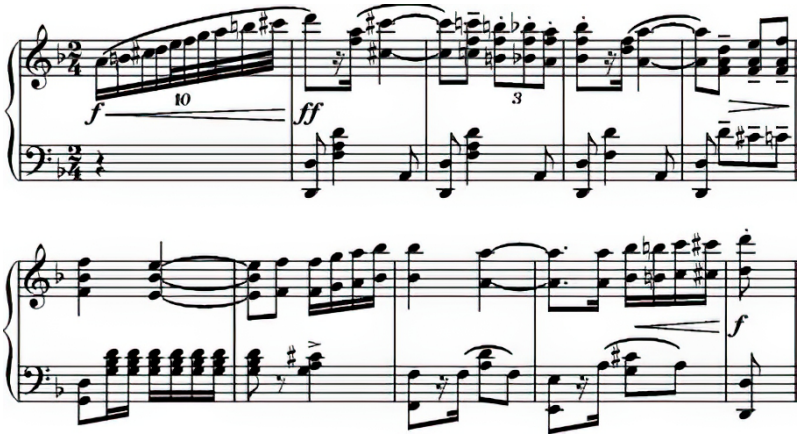
2. Strok's Tango Songs from the Angles of the European Northeastern and Southwestern Cultural Areas

In order to outline the international context of Strok's tango songs, the work of a few contemporaries of Riga's King of Tango who made their mark in the history of European popular music will be considered here for purposes of comparison. Strok's contemporaries in the neighbouring countries will be described in more detail, aiming to identify an Eastern- and Northern European "axis" in tango music that differed in some respects from its counterpart in the western part of the continent.

By the first half of the 1930s, when Strok was gaining international recognition with the first recordings of his tango songs, the Danish musician **Jacob Gade** (1879–1963) had already resoundingly appeared on the scene about a decade earlier. At a cinema in Copenhagen in September 1925, he premiered his Gypsy Tango *Jealousy* (*Jalousie*) as an overture to the Hollywood silent film *Don Q Son of Zorro* starring the famous Douglas Fairbanks (1883–1939), and this composition instantly made Gade famous (Bjarnhof 1969). Gade's tango quickly swept across Europe and the world, was recorded and was sold in countless shellac records, and became an iconic example of European tango (*Jalousie*. *Jealousy*. *Tango Tzigane*, *Victor*, New York). The composition soon also took the form of the tango song "Jealousy", with lyrics by Vera Bloom. To this day, the song has been used, both as a concert piece and background music, in countless films, theatre performances and other cultural events (*Jalousie*, Bloom-Gade, *Musicrafts Records*, New York).

Gade was also active as a composer of popular dance and song music in Denmark before and after the Second World War. He wrote a few popular compositions (waltzes, tangos and foxtrots, such as *El Matador*, *Tango Charmeuse*, *Lille Mary Anne*, *Laila* and *Tango Glamour*) still known in Denmark today for their retro charm but became world famous for only one piece, the Gypsy Tango *Jealousy* (Bjarnhof 1969; Christensen 1996; Røllum-Larsen 2002).

This tango, in which Gade managed to capture the Argentine tango style of 1920s American film music with extraordinary finesse, continues to fascinate listeners today as one composer's unsurpassed lifetime opus, with its brilliant sonic fantasia on the South American dance. An uncommonly southern ardour resounds in its melodic lines and the metro-rhythmic pulse of the accompanying voices, like a precisely captured echo of the dance's native land across the Atlantic. Dramatic tension and stark contrasts – these elements in Gade's "Jealousy" are very much akin to Strok's tangos, and they stylistically link the two northern European musicians:



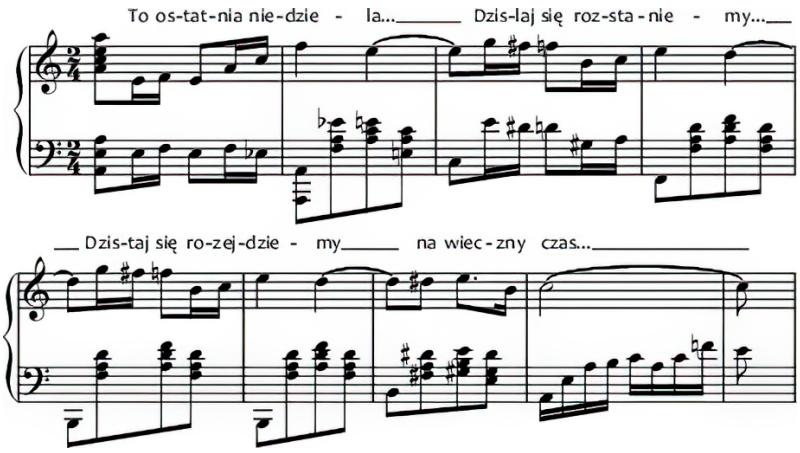
Example No. 10. Jacob Gade, *Jealousy* (Rīga, Kazanova).

As previously pointed out, it is quite possible that Strok was influenced in the creation of his tango songs by Gade's earlier and widely known masterpiece of a tango, which appeared in Riga soon after its appearance in Copenhagen in the form of sheet music, shellac records and cinema music. Another contemporary of Riga's emerging King of Tango, and also a comparatively influential figure for Strok, was **Jerzy Petersburski** (1895–1979), one of the most famous Polish composers of popular music in the 1930s.

Petersburski's life and creative work followed a somewhat similar path to that of Strok, occasionally meeting musicians who proved important to both composers at certain points in their lives. Petersburski was born in Warsaw into a Jewish family that included, on his mother's side, several well-known klezmer musicians with the surname Melodysta. Unlike Strok, he graduated from a conservatoire (in Warsaw) and continued his studies at the Vienna Music Academy. During and immediately after the First World War, Petersburski became acquainted in Vienna with Imre (Emmerich) Kálmán (1882–1953), the famous early-20th-century master of the operetta, and he dedicated his first songs to the famous Russian singer of popular music Alexander Vertinskiy. In the late1920s, after Petersburski had returned to the newly independent state of Poland, he and his cousin Henryk Gold (1902–1977) formed the Petersburski & Gold dance music band in Warsaw, which by the Second World War had become one of the most internationally renowned musical ensembles. It was in this band that Petersburski's talent as a composer of popular schlager music blossomed (Jerzy Petersburski n. d.).

One of Petersburski's best-known tango songs was *Tango Milonga* (*Tango Milonga*, *Syrena-Electro*, Warsaw), composed in 1928 and known with texts in German and English by the name of *Oh, Donna Clara!* (*Oh, Donna Clara!*, *Odeon*, Berlin). With its fun cabaret-style musical atmosphere, the song quickly became popular all over the world. Another Petersburski tango became a kind of symbol of 20th-century interwar Polish entertainment culture and popular music and remains so to this day. Like Strok's tangos, this composition was also one of the most musically expressive adaptations of the Argentine *tango-canción* genre in eastern Europe at the time.[13] It is Petersburski's *The Last Sunday* (*To Ostatnia Niedziela*), first performed in 1936 and recorded by famous prewar schlager singer Mieczysław Fogg (1901–1990) (*To Ostatnia Niedziela, Syrena-Electro*, Warsaw). With its melancholic and slightly pessimistic lyrics by poet Ludwig Zenon Friedwald (1906–1976), the song was at the time informally called *The Suicide Tango*. This is because its protagonist, a young man, pleads to his beloved, who has left him, to meet one last time on a Sunday; after that, "let happen what may". The solace and accentuation of resigned sadness in the tango's metro-rhythmic pulse and the song's very infectious refrain brought instant global fame to *The Last Sunday*:

13 In general, the tango is nowadays often divided into three types: the *tango-milonga* as purely instrumental music, the *tango-romanza* as vocal-instrumental or instrumental music with a lyrical character, and the *tango-canción* as a vocal-instrumental composition with lyrics of a highly sentimental nature and corresponding musical expression. (Bethell 2004, 361). This classification, however, mostly corresponds to the characteristic forms of tango-like musical expression that emerged in the mid-20th century, which, of course, reflect endless interactions and the emergence of ever new intermediary artistic forms.



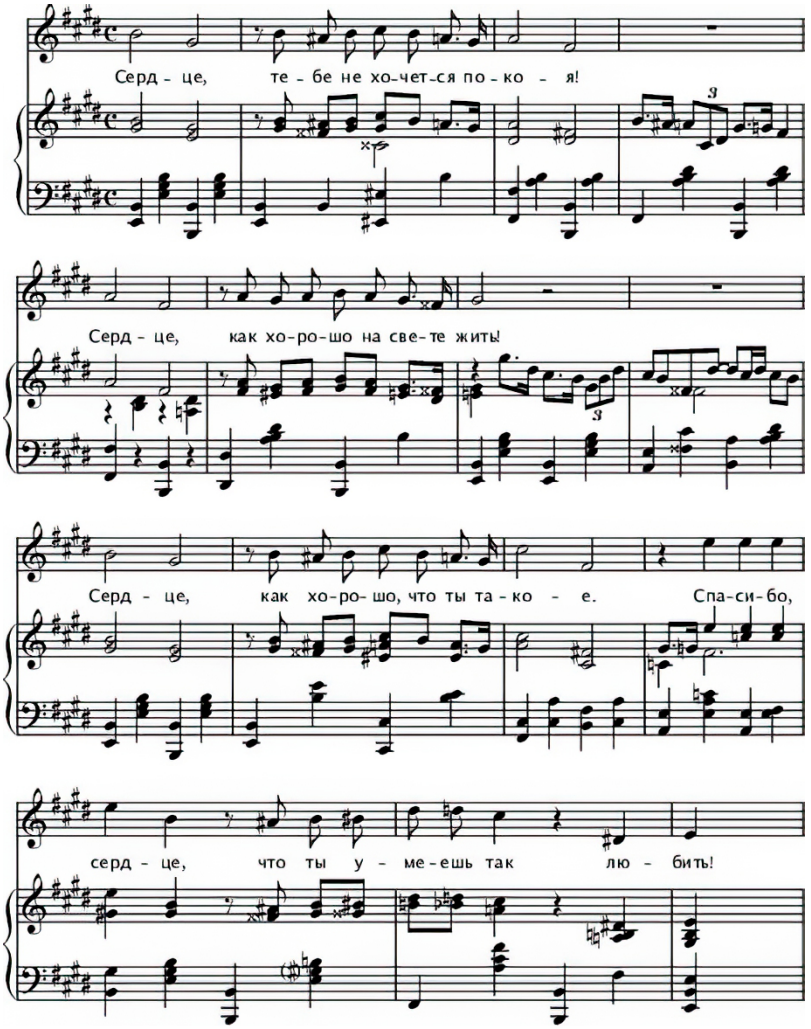
Example No. 11. Jerzy Petersburski, *The Last Sunday* (*Pie radio aparāta*, Rīga, Kazanova).

This song quickly acquired not only a second name but also a second life and a second history in the cultural space of the former Soviet Union. In the late 1930s, the talented musician Alexander Tsfasman (*Aleksandr Cfasman*, 1906–1971) and his jazz orchestra created and recorded a Russian version of it called *The Parting* (*Rasstavanie*), with lyrics by Josef Alvek (*Iosif Al'vek*) (*Rasstavanie*, *Aprelevskij zavod pamâti 1905* goda, *Moscow)*. The song also circulated widely under the title *The Weary Sun* (*Utomlënnoe solnce*), after the first line of the song. It was this version of Petersburski's tango that won the hearts of millions across the Soviet empire, which was at the time trying to build a virtual reinforced-concrete wall to shield its totalitarian ideology from the harmful influence of the rest of the world. But Petersburski's tangos, like Strok's schlager music, felt like a breath of fresh air from the outside world for Soviet society at the time – expressive, sincerely direct songs about human feelings and experiences that everyone could relate to. It seems that this tango song is one of the most striking examples of retro Polish popular music, for which Petersburski deserves the title of Warsaw's King of Tango.

In terms of musical expression, Petersburski and Strok are linked by their sometimes very similar (and most likely mutually influenced) perception of the stylistic schlager characteristics of the tango song. The shellac recordings of Petersburski's *The Last Sunday* as well as Strok's best-known tangos from the 1930s clearly show a similar approach to the instrumental arrangement of the vocal melody, with their smooth, supple, wistful "sighs" in the violins and trumpets, piano and accordion passages, and the familiar metro-rhythmic pulse of the passionate South American dance. We shall return to this issue a little later, after a brief description of the international context of European tango music at the time, which also includes Strok.

In one of his publications, Dmitri Dragilew has pointed out the connection that, chronologically, a number of tango songs in Russia emerged as a direct echo of the triumphal march of Strok's compositions among the people of the Soviet empire before the Second World War (Dragilev 2008b). In this respect, it is indeed possible to highlight several tango songs that are still well known today and were written in the mid to late 1930s by various composers active in Moscow and Leningrad at the time.

One of the first composers of *Soviet tangos* seems to have been **Isaak Dunayevskiy** (*Isaak Dunaevskij*, 1900–1955), whose song *So Many Beautiful Girls* (*Kak mnogo devušek horoših*, also known by the title *Heart*, *Serdce*) first came to the attention of a wider audience in Grigoriy Aleksandrov's (*Grigorij Aleksandrov*, 1903–1983) legendary film *Jolly Fellows* (*Vesëlye rebâta*), a Soviet version, or parody in fact, of the musical genre.[14] Sung by the equally legendary actor, singer and musician Leonid Utyosov (*Leonid Utësov*, 1895–1982), the song is a musically striking counterpart to the best examples of the genre by Strok, Gade, Petersburski (*Serdce, Gramplasttrest Kolomenskij zavod, Moscow)*. With its infectious refrain set to a "Western" orchestral arrangement of the day, it is one of the most enduring examples of the tango as schlager:

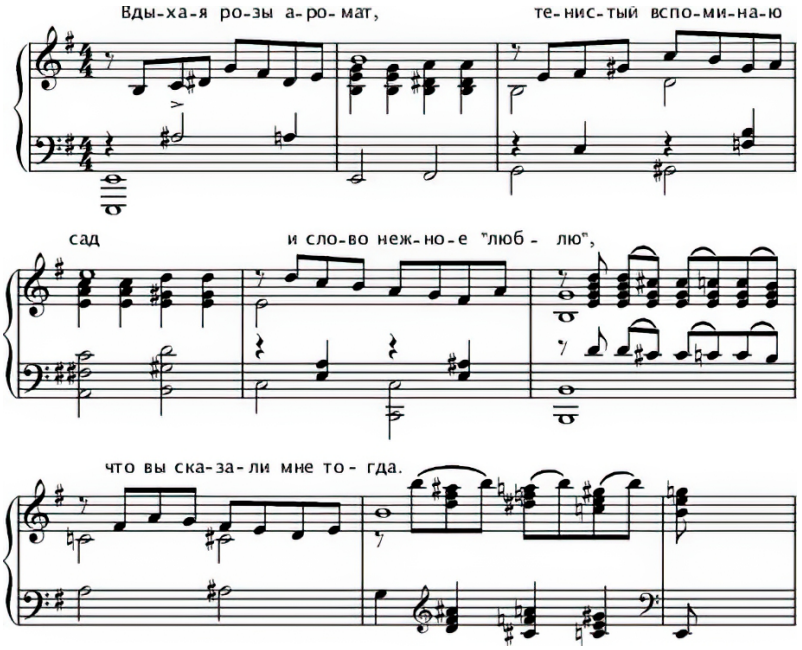


Example No. 12. Isaak Dunayevskiy, *So Many Beautiful Girls* (*Fokstroty i tango. Šedevry tanceval'noj muzyki*, Moskva, 2006).

14 *Mosfilm*, 1934. Director Grigoriy Aleksandrov, with Lyubov Orlova (*Lûbov' Orlova*, 1902–1975) and Leonid Utyosov in the leading roles.

Other examples of tango songs also emerged in the Soviet Union and have survived to the present day as recordings – indelible, timeless, often one-hit expressions of the genre by entertainment or stage (*Estrada*) musicians of the day. Among these, the following examples can be highlighted.

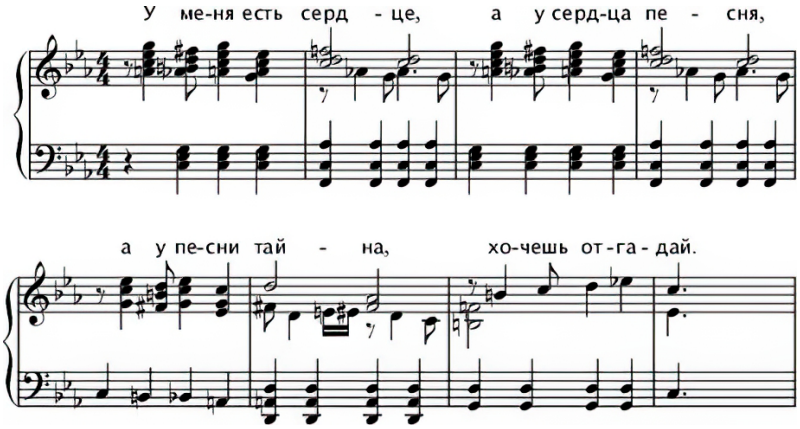
Born in Ukraine into a Jewish family, **Yefim Rozenfelyd** (*Efim Rozenfel'd*, 1894–1964) worked as a musician in Moscow from the early 1920s onwards. In the late 1930s, he formed the Jazz Accordion Ensemble, for which he also composed his own songs. Among them was the tango schlager *I Love* (*Lûblû*), released on shellac record in 1939 and known by the famous line from its refrain: "I am returning your portrait to you" (*Vam vozvraŝaû vaš portret*). The version sung by tenor Georgiy Vinogradov (*Georgij Vinogradov*, 1908–1980) is particularly memorable for his exalted expression in the refrain (*Lûblû, Aprelevskij zavod pamâti 1905 goda, Moscow)*:



Example No. 13. Yefim Rozenfelyd, *I Love* (*Ot melodii k melodii*, Moskva, Muzyka, 1990).

Another enduring example of "Soviet tango" appeared in 1939 in Moscow and Leningrad, namely, **Vladimir Sidorov's** (*Vladimir Sidorov*, exact life dates unknown) tango song *A Secret* (*Tajna*). There is little information about this composer available today, mainly hints that he worked as a pianist-accompanist in Moscow and composed songs in the 1930s. The emphatically sentimental, melancholy, resigned character of his best-known song, with music that perfectly spotlights the simple text, was best captured in Utyosov's instrumental arrangement with a lush ensemble sound in which the violin part and the accordion's pulsating South American dance rhythm particularly stand out (*Tajna*, *Aprelevskij zavod*, Moscow). Thus, it is likely the ache in the refrain – a tango dressed in the stylised sound of a rural country band – that in subsequent

decades brought *A Secret* to the fore in various films and plays when it was necessary to musically evoke this colourful bygone era of the Soviet empire:

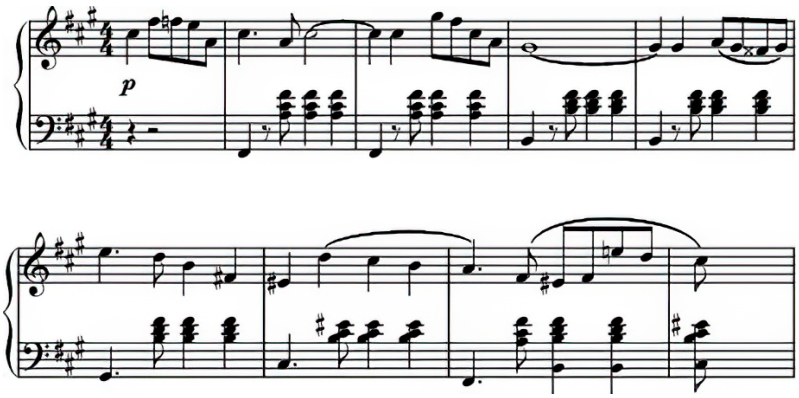


Example No. 14. Vladimir Sidorov, *A Secret* (*Ot melodii k melodii*, Moskva, 1988).

And another timeless tango song and its composer can be singled out as a counterpart to Strok's creative output in the Soviet empire: *Tango of the Nightingale* by **Yuriy Bogoslovskiy** (*Ûrij Bogoslovskij*, exact life dates unknown). In the history of Russian popular music, however, Bogoslovskiy's surname is more closely associated with another composer, named Nikolay[15]. In the mid-1960s, the *Melodiya* label in Moscow even released a phonograph record that erroneously lists Nikolay Bogoslovsky rather than Yuriy Bogoslovskiy as the composer of the *Tango of the Nightingale* (*Tango solov'â*). This perhaps happened because Yuriy Bogoslovskiy was not a professional musician and, judging by some indirect present-day references in certain sources, had been a victim of Stalinist (communist) repressions in the late 1930s or early 1940s.

It impossible to know how exactly this masterpiece of the tango came to be. Contained in the characteristic metrical formula of the accompanying parts in a Cuban habanera, the melodic line in *Tango of the Nightingale* is to be whistled rather than sung. In the first half of the 20th century, "artistic whistling" (called *hudožestvennyj svist* in Russian) was a real artistic speciality in the Moscow Philharmonic and other national musical ensembles. Taisia Savva (*Taisiâ Savva*, real name *Taisa Savenko*, 1907–1973) was clearly a high-calibre professional in this intonationally precise technique of whistling, and her performance of *Tango of the Nightingale* with a dance orchestra conducted by Ferdinand Krish (*Ferdinand Kriš*, 1878–1948) was recorded and released on shellac record in 1941 (*Tango solov'â*, *Aprelevskij zavod*, Moscow).

15 Nikolay Bogoslovskiy (*Nikolaj Bogoslovskij*, 1904–1961), a composer of popular songs.

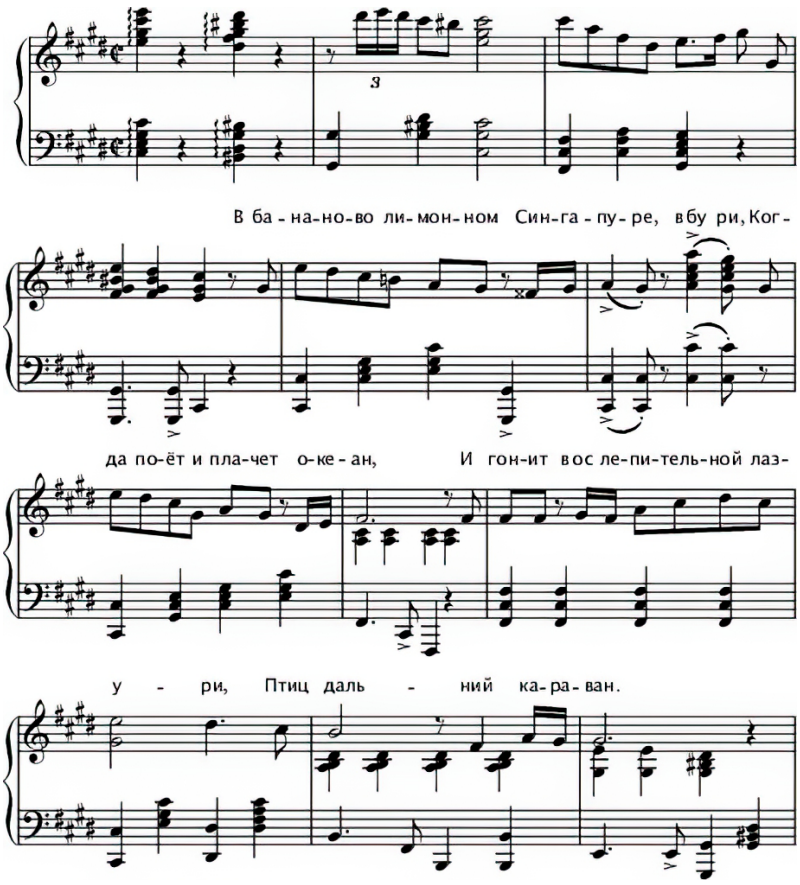


Example No. 15. Yuriy Bogoslovskiy, *Tango of the Nightingale* (*Val's, tango, fokstrot dlâ akkordeona ili baâna*, Moskva, 1981).

Another important figure in the genre of tango song linked to the Russian cultural space in the first half of the 20th century was the famous singer and actor **Alexander Vertinskiy** (*Aleksandr Vertinskij*, 1889–1957). Born in Kiev, Vertinskiy made an early name for himself on the concert stage in cafés and revues in that city before the First World War. In 1913, he moved to Moscow, and it was there that he first performed tango music. It was also in those years that he developed his striking, self-invented stage persona in a black-and-white Pierrot outfit. Influenced by the trends and aesthetics of poet Alexander Blok (*Aleksandr Blok*, 1880–1921) and the Russian Silver Age (*Serebrânyj vek*), Pierrot expressed the slightly decadent aura of urban culture and served as a kind of ironic, poetically reflective metaphor for representatives of modern society.

Vertinskiy left Soviet Russia following the historic events of 1917. He first moved to Poland and Germany, and later to France. In 1933, he headed to Lebanon and Palestine and from there to the United States. He also lived for a longer time in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. In 1943, Vertinskiy appealed to the government of the Soviet Union (in the person of Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov) to return to his homeland with his family. He was granted permission to return and also permission to give concerts. However, until the end of his life, the Communist regime was ambivalent in its attitude towards Vertinskiy: information about the famous musician appeared very rarely in the press and radio, and he was allowed to perform mainly in the provinces. Vertinskiy died in 1957 in Leningrad (Makarov 2009).

A prolific actor and singer, Vertinskiy also worked as a songwriter throughout his career. Today, more than 150 compositions by him are known, including several tango songs. With a precise grasp of the genre's basic style and expression, he composed a few pieces that continue to fascinate and enthral listeners to this day with their striking musical address. An example is *Magnolia* (*Magnoliâ*), a tango song he composed in Paris in 1930, and which was also released on phonograph record, featuring a performance by Vertinskiy himself (Tango *Magnoliâ*, *Columbia*, London). It was a very popular song in the informal entertainment culture of the Soviet Union and other European countries:



Example No. 16. Alexander Vertinskiy, *Magnolia* (*Pesni i romansy A. Vertinskogo*, Leningrad, 1991).

Of course, it is probably interesting to ask whether the popular tango-song music by Oscar Strok and other northern and eastern European countries in the 1920s and 30s differs in any significant way from the cultural space of Europe's "old south and west". Did, for example, the composers of popular music in Berlin, London, Rome and Paris have different priorities and stylistic expressions in their work? It must be admitted at the outset that it is impossible to attempt a detailed description within the scope of this article of the dominant trends in general entertainment culture in the cultural capitals of western Europe and the place of the tango therein. This is also because this immensely vast layer of cultural tradition and heritage has not yet really been studied or developed from a comparative perspective. However, the available sources that shed even a bit of light on popular music in interwar Europe in the 20th century indicate that, of course, tango dance and song were also popular in the southern and western parts of the Old World. Moreover, various local conditions influenced the genre's representation.

For example, Latin American and especially Argentinian musicians had a strong presence in Paris from the beginning of the 20th century up until the Second World War. They gave the various new forms of the tango a halo of real or imagined stylistic

authenticity, which was complemented by the sounds of the music on the Parisian streets and in the cafés added by French, Italian and Spanish composers of entertainment music living and performing in the French capital at that time (such as **Vincent Scotto** (1874–1952), **Tiarko Richepin** (1884–1973), **Jean Lenoir** (1891–1976), **Jean Lumière** (1895–1979), **Cesare Andrea Bixio** (1896–1978), **Henry Himmel** (1900–1970), etc.) (Bible Tango, n. d.). Tango songwriters from Southern Italian culture also gave their music the slightly fiery rhythmic pulse and lyrical ache of Italian dance, as evidenced, for example, in the compositions by the famous musician **Dino Olivieri** (1905–1963) (Musiker and Musiker 2013). **Franz Grothe** (1908–1982), one of the Berlin-based greats of popular dance-song, successfully synthesised layers of German cabaret and folk music (German, Jewish, pseudo-Slavic and "Gypsy") in his tangos, thus creating many enduring tango schlagers (Klee 2007).

Tango songs could be heard throughout Europe, and, in the absence of precise, dry statistics, the presence of this tenacious, intense genre is nevertheless a testament to the overall high demand for it in society. However, even just a slightly closer look at – or a simple aural comparison of the above-mentioned stratum of tango music in France, Italy and Germany can reveal some nuanced differences between it and the popular music of Strok and the northern and eastern European countries. There is no lack of sentimental expression in the music created by tango composers from western European countries. However, it seems that the tango songs from composers based in, for example, Paris and Berlin do not place so great an accent on minor tonalities in their expressive exaltation (in fact, the basic tonality of tango music by southern and western European composers is usually in a major key) or dramatic heightening and its particular musical "flavour" (with a striking climax in the dramatic curve of the composition's, especially in the refrain). But this exaltedly heightened moment of expression is almost like a stylistic trademark of Oscar Strok and other (Polish, Romanian, Danish, Finnish, Soviet) composers of the time. Latvian musicologist Ingrīda Zemzare once commented aptly on this nuance:

> "[..] The melodies of I. Dunayevskiy were very popular at that time (*also in Riga, Latvia*), but Oscar Strok's maddening tangos continued to reign next to them in the 1950s."[16] (Zemzare, *Māksla*, 01.02.1986)

Why and from where did this tendency towards a particular dramatic heightening and "maddening" (in Latvian *tracinoši*) exaltation in musical expression develop in Strok's tangos, their scores and instrumental arrangements in the 1930s? In his case and that of other composers geographically closer to him, was it related to a conscious or unconscious immersion in and cultivation of a particular cultural stratum?

16 *"Liela bija tolaik skanējušo I. Dunajevska melodiju popularitāte, bet tām blakus piecdesmitajos gados turpina valdīt Oskara Stroka tracinošie tango."*

3. Sources of Musical Stylistics of Strok's Tango Songs: Argentinian *Tango-Canción*, Russian Urban Romance, Jewish Klezmer Musicking

One source of inspiration for Strok could have been the poetics and stylistics of the Argentine *tango-canción* genre and influences from the dominant trends in popular music on stage, radio and cinema[17]. Another source of influence was the 19th-century Russian urban traditional music (urban folklore), the so-called "urban romance" ("urban romance" / *gorodskoj romans*, "cruel-hearted romance" / *žestokij romans*), and the classical Russian romance genre in general (Gudošnikov 1990; Âgubov 2013). It should also be noted that Strok himself openly stated in his only major interview, published in the Moscow newspaper *Nedelya* (*Nedelâ*) in 1973:

> "Yes, the tango – my favourite genre… But it's nothing more than a genre of romance, only in a different rhythm. Came to us in Russia, the exotic South American tango has embodied the best characteristics of the Russian romance: a certain nobleness in musical intonation, depth of feeling, all-embracing lyricism. The tango also attracts with its intimacy of the soul's experience and simplicity in its means of expression. Even the rather primitive lyrics that unfortunately accompany tango melodies do not diminish the interest of listeners in this genre."[18] (Marjanovkisj, *Nedelâ, 1973, No. 38, 13)*

It should be noted, that in Stok's speech attention can be drawn to the phrase: "Came to us in Russia". It should be briefly added, that Strok identified himself with Russian culture. His native Dinaburg/Dvinsk city had been strongly russified at the end of the 19th century, and 18 years of living in Saint Petersburg also contributed to ties with the Russian language and culture. Strok did not like the Soviet totalitarian regime, so he chose to leave Soviet Russia in 1922. The fact that he was born in the territory of the new country, until the end of the First World War this allowed him to become a citizen of Latvia, and he took the opportunity to get citizenship. However, the previously established connection with Russian culture remained. After World War II, when the Soviet totalitarian regime condemned Strok's music (during the 1948 political campaign – *the struggle with formalism in music*), it happened in Riga. For a while, this suggested the idea of trying to move to live in Moscow (after WWII, Strok regularly visited Moscow; he had a wide circle of acquaintances there - musicians of popular and classical music, representatives of the intelligentsia). Due to various circumstances, this could not happen. However, on the other hand, Strok also felt a connection with Riga, Latvia. That is evidenced by what he said in separate sound interviews recorded in private archives (*Govorit i igraet Oskar Strok, čast'-1* 2020). Therefore, Strok's cultural identity is a complex issue. This aspect is also characterized by the tendency that since

17 See the description of this type of genre above, footnote No.13.

18 *"Da, tango - moj lûbimyj žanr... Èto ved' ne čto inoe, kak romans, tol'ko v opredelennom ritme. Popav k nam v Rossiû, èkzotičeskoe ûžnoamerikanskoe tango vpitalo v sebe lučšie čerty russkogo romansa: blagorodstvo muzykal'nyh intonacij, glubinu čuvstv, bol'šuû liričnost'. Privlekaet k tango i vyražennaâ v nih intimnaâ duševnost' perežìvanij, prostota vyrazitel'nyh sredstv. I daže dovol'no primitivnye teksty, kotorye, k sožaleniû, soprovoždaût melodii tango, ne snižaût interesa slušatelej k ètomu žanru."*

the 1990s, Strok has been considered "our king of tango" both in Latvia and Russia. However, each country has different arguments for this.

Of course, the influence of 19th-century Russian urban traditional music (urban folklore) is nevertheless quite clear in the melodic lines of Strok's tango and foxtrot songs and in their dramatically poignant expression and character. However, it is possible to identify one more source of stylistic influence in the tango songs composed by Strok in the 1930s (including their performance traditions in shellac sound recordings at that time). It is the potential influence of the Eastern European Jew's klezmer instrumental musical tradition.

It is possible that the Ashkenazi communities of southern and eastern Europe at the turn of the 20th century not only actively pursued the klezmer tradition themselves but also had a significant stylistic influence before the First World War as well as in the 1920s and 30s on the emergence and rise of modern European popular music based on recordings and radio. And perhaps it was from the klezmer tradition that the foxtrot and tango songs by several Jewish musicians and composers were infused with a particular spicy humour and an irresistible feeling of musical ache.

What evidence could there be for such a hypothesis? Let us try to find an answer by recalling what is known today about the klezmer tradition and whether the known manifestations of this tradition provide clues to the characteristics of popular music trends in the first half of the 20th century in Europe, especially in the eastern and northern countries.

The term *klezmer* is derived from the Hebrew word *klezmorim*, which means musical instruments (Feldman 2001; Slepovič 2003b). The Yiddish word *klezmer* is a compound word made up of *kli* ('an instrument, tool') and *zemer* ('to make melody, song') (Slepovič 2003a; Slobin 2008). Over the course of many centuries, klezmer tradition has developed into a form of music-making that accumulates the traditions of various different peoples, which also corresponds to the long experience of European Jews in establishing roots in and building relationships and friendships with the existing ethnic groups in various countries. It was precisely from southeastern Europe that klezmer tradition, having absorbed elements of both Jewish and various nations (Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian, etc.) as well as Roma (formerly known as Gypsy) culture, reached eastern and northern Europe, namely, present-day Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and, to a relatively lesser extent, Scandinavia (Strom 2002; Slepovič 2003b; Feldman 2016a). An awareness of this process also allows us to better understand from where, for example, unexpected "Oriental" motifs suddenly appear in Latvian or Lithuanian folk music. They travelled along with the Jewish community and its klezmer traditions to various countries and were deposited in the musical traditions of other nations.

Oscar Strok was born in the border town of Dinaburg/Dvinsk in Vitebsk Governorate of the Russian Empire, a city that has naturally had a long cultural connection with the historical experience of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Jewish communities that (along with the lands of present-day Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus and

Poland) came under Tsarist Russian rule in the 18th century also became the main targets of the anti-Semitic policy of this imperial power and unwilling hostages of artificially created Jewish settlement zones (Stanislawski 1983; Klier 1995).[19] When attempting to specify the manifestations of the Jewish klezmer tradition, the research literature rightly points out that there are very few records of it in present-day Belarus, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. However, even these scanty records allow us to conclude at least the following facts.

Various studies of the klezmer tradition indicate that Jewish musicians (mostly amateurs, but also professionally trained musicians), especially from the late 18th century onwards, formed ensembles and earned a living by playing their own music as well as dances and songs of other ethnic groups at various social events (weddings, celebrations, funerals) mainly in rural areas and small towns. Such klezmer ensembles in southeastern (the present-day Balkan countries, Romania, southern Russia) and northeastern Europe (Belarus, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia) typically included violins (usually two: main and background), viola, cimbalom, clarinet, accordion, trombone, trumpet and double bass. Of course, the types and number of instruments varied greatly, depending on the number of musicians playing in the ensemble. Direct and indirect evidence in various sources also indicates the existence of musical ensembles consisting of only two or three musicians (Braun 2002; Slepovič 2003b; Rubin 2015). Studies also point to special semantics of two instruments in the Jewish culture of eastern and northern Europe.

The first instrument is the violin, or klezmer fiddle. Its specific connotation in eastern European Jewish, or Ashkenazi, culture points to the instrument's ancient origins in Palestine (present-day Israel) as early as the time of King David, with its archetype being the ancient harp and *kinnôr* (an ancient Hebrew instrument remotely similar to the modern violin) associated with the music of ancient Jewish rituals and customs. Preserving archaic notions of the sound of the harp and the kinnôr, the Ashkenazi bestowed upon the violin a meaning similar to that of the ancient instruments. One of the Jewish sacred texts in the Jerusalem Talmud states:

> "Kinneret is Ginosar. Why is it named Kinneret? Because the fruits on its shores are as sweet as the sounds from a kinnôr!"[20] (Slepovič 2004)

As pointed out in various sources, the exceptional sensitivity perceived in the violin's silky timbre and the instrument's capability of expressing a range of emotional moods is a particular stylistic aspect of the Ashkenazi musical tradition. It is no coincidence that one of the best-known eastern European Jewish writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Solomon Rabinovich; 1859, Poltava – 1916, New York), once wrote the following lines:

19 According to archival documents, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (until the First World War), in the former city of Dinaburg/Dvinsk, almost half of the population was Jewish (Kudiņš 2021, 152–153, 198).

20 *"Kineret èto Genesar. Počemu imâ emu – Kineret? Potomu čto frukty, rastuŝie na beregah ego, sladki, kak zvuk kinora."*

> "The songs resound with the sounds made by the fiddler, and the heart melts like wax. All you hear is teh-teh-teh!… All you see is the hand sliding up and down, up and down… But it produces all-enchanting sounds, enthralling chants entwining, sad, sorrowful – they go directly to the heart, touching it and clenching the soul."[21] (Šolom-Alejhem 1971, 266)

So, the violin – one of the instruments and timbres expressing the diverse range of emotions and moods that are so essential to the character of the Ashkenazi klezmer traditional tradition. And next to it, another instrument – the clarinet. Ancient Hebrew religious texts also contain references to a reed instrument called the halil, for example, "And therefore my heart wails like a halil."[22] (Slepovič 2004)

As one of the ancient predecessors of the clarinet (one of its variants being pitched in C), the ancient halil, like the violin/kinnôr, forms the stylistic backbone of klezmer ensemble music. However, the clarinet's widespread presence in the klezmer tradition has only been recorded mainly from the mid-19th century onward. It is possible that imaginative literary trends linked with the interpretation of folk traditions – such as those widely represented in various countries throughout Europe and characteristic of the 19th-century Romantic era – gave both the violin and the clarinet their special halo of antiquity. Yet this interpretation itself was at least partly rooted in the experience of older cultural layers and its adaptation to new conditions.

In some studies, the use of the clarinet in C (and also in B-flat) in klezmer ensembles in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries was associated with demonstrating a particular sonic expression. The clarinet seemed even "sweeter" than the violin in expressing the ache of sorrow, but it was also perfect for expressing "piercing cries" and imitating moans and laments. An interesting aspect in the clarinet's spectrum of musical expressiveness for klezmer traditions has been pointed out in a study:

> "Clarinet players sometimes used a technique that transformed an ordinary sound into something like a high-pitched scream or allowed them to imitate a kiss-like sound."[23] (Beregovskij 1987, 45)

These and other examples and evidence analysed in the literature on the klezmer tradition lead to the conclusion that the basic features of klezmer ensembles were free improvisatory interplay between players of a variety of instruments as well as a particular emphasis on the minor key and a rich gamut of sorrowful and aching moods achieved mainly with the timbres of the first (solo) violin and clarinet. These features were common in traditional Ashkenazi dance music (the *freilach* and *horah* wedding dances, the *sher* couples dance, etc.) and in stylistic adaptations of popular dances from other ethnic groups (*Ländler*, waltz, polka, mazurka, etc.) (Feldman 2016b).

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21 *"Stempenû zalivaetsâ na svoej skripke, i serdce taet, kak vosk. Tol'ko i slyšno: teh-teh-teh!.. Tol'ko i vidno: ruka letaet vverh i vniz, vverh i vniz… I razdaûtsâ čaruûšie zvuki, struâtsâ divnye napevy, pečal'nye, tosklivye – prâmo za serdce berut, dušu vymatyvaût…"*

22 *"I potomu stonet serdce moe, kak halil'."*

23 *"Klarnetisty neredko primenâli priem, prevraŝavšij obyčnyj zvuk v vysokom registre v vykrik ili nečto pohožee na pričmokivanie pri pocelue."*

Strok's descendants have emphasised that David Strok, the father of Riga's King of Tango, was a talented and intelligent klezmer ensemble leader in former Dinaburg/ Dvinsk city. He mainly played the woodwind instruments – the flute and clarinet (Gimmervert 2006: 18–20). It can thus be assumed that Oscar Strok, as the youngest child in the family, was, from an early age, very familiar with his father's klezmer ensembles and that they formed his first solid ideas about music. These ideas were indelibly imprinted in his memory and later actualised in his creative pursuits as an adult as he fitted into the broader culture of popular music in North-Eastern Europe between the two world wars.

Conclusions

Today, studies of music culture in different European countries do not provide precise statistical data on what "set the tone" in the field of entertainment. However, a number of facts, including those presented earlier in this article, lead to the conclusion that musicians from Jewish backgrounds made up a significant proportion of the musicians in the popular-music genre. In many European capitals, Jewish musicians played an integral role in creating the music played in dance halls, restaurants and other entertainment venues. Jewish musicians were also common in the ensembles (bands) at radio studios and record companies that recorded and distributed the most popular schlagers of the day; in fact, talented Jewish musicians often also led these ensembles as conductors and arrangers of compositions. For example, Marek Weber, the conductor of the famous Berlin-based dance orchestra who played such an important role in Strok's rise to international fame as a composer of tangos; Sergey Aldyanov (pseudonym, real name Jasha Levenson, 1902–1941), a well-known Jewish musician and leader of several popular music ensembles who made many recordings of songs and dances in Riga for the shellac record company *Bellaccord-Electro* label; Jerzy Petersburski's cousin Henryk Gold (1902–1977) and the ensemble he led in Warsaw in collaboration with the Polish record company *Syrena-Electro*; etc. It should be noted that Jewish musicians also represented and developed the genre of tango song in the Yiddish language, as is evident today from recordings and other information (Czackis 2009; Esptein 2015). Seen from this perspective, the obvious conclusion is that, as they entered and became active in the popular music scene, many Jewish musicians in various countries, whether consciously or not, to some extent continued in this new environment the klezmer traditions they were already familiar with and which had been handed down to them from previous generations of musicians.

These traditions could hardly remain pure and "authentically untouched" while working with radio or record-label ensembles, not least because the klezmer style of music-making was by definition influenced by the interaction of various musical and stylistic layers, thus leading to the development of the main trends of the international, cosmopolitan popular music at that time. This music's influences ranged from elements of various local ethnic traditions to European (German, French) and American

(Hollywood) film music, which offered stylistic fusions of South American, North American and European music in a great variety of combinations. However, it was in the eastern European countries before the Second World War that the klezmer tradition seems to have been most deeply rooted. This may explain the special sense of exaltation mentioned above, which also permeates the musical expression in Strok's best-known tango recordings. In most of the recordings of his best-known tangos from the 1930s discussed above, the special emphasis on violin, sometimes clarinet, trumpet, accordion and Hawaiian guitar (as allusion of cimbalom) timbres and virtuoso improvisatory passages in creating a wistful-sorrowful mood is clearly discernible. It is precisely the interpretations of tangos developed and recorded at the time that provide the main evidence for us today of the stylistic originality and artistic vividness of this music.

Thus, a closer study of Strok's tangos and songs in other genres quite clearly shows that Russian urban and classical romance was only one inspiration source in his oeuvre. The possible echoes of the Jewish klezmer musicking traditions also can be hypothetically identified in his tango songs performance practice in the 1930s. As well as poetics and stylistics of the Argentine *tango-canción* genre and influences from the dominant trends in popular music on stage, radio and cinema. Assumedly, all these influencing factors have inspired Stroka's tango songs (schlagers) and the style (touch) of their performance in the sound recordings made immediately after creating the compositions.

Not only Strok but also composers of tango songs in Poland (Petersburski), Russia (Dunayevskiy, Rozenfelyd, Bogoslovskiy and others), Lithuania, Romania, the Czech Republic and potentially elsewhere were clearly similarly influenced, as can be heard in the wide range of recordings of their compositions released in 20th century interwar period. However, only a few composers managed to create songs that, in certain recorded versions, still resonate to this day and are perceived as indelibly expressive testimonies of the popular music of their time. Composed in the late 1920s and 1930s, Strok's tangos are still capable of evoking both musical empathy and admiration for how such simple musical language can conjure such a vivid musical wonder. Strok, in collaboration with the interpreters of his music, managed to find his own distinctive and therefore also inimitable form of musical-dramatic exaltation. This has been and remains imprinted in the history of European popular music as the mark of Strok's unique style, which can tell the attentive and interested contemporary listener the fascinating story of the many facets and manifestations in the creative interpretation of the tango song as schlager.

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