



FEATURES & BLOGS

'Pasternak Could Not Imagine What Vladimir Vladimirovich Imagines'

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Giya Kancheli

The consequences of recent events in Georgia have been both political and economic. After the deaths of innocent people, perhaps the most serious long-term impact of the war will be the rupture of long-standing cultural ties and the dull pain in the hearts of those whom we have gotten used to regarding as symbols of a Russian-Georgian

culture.

RFE/RL Russian Service correspondent Sofia Kornienko spoke with Georgian composer Giya Kancheli in his home in Antwerp.

The following is a note the 73-year-old composer included in a dedication to Mariinsky Theater director Valery Gergiyev on his 50th birthday:

"Dear Valery,

"Our creative and personal relationship, which has endured many years, has filled me with hope that the powerful energy you possess will travel the globe and return, like a boomerang, to the symbolic circle Bertolt Brecht called 'the chalk circle of the Caucasus.' This piece, which I have dedicated to you, I named an Ossetian word, 'Ouarzon,' which means 'love.' When I transcribed this word in Latin letters it turned out, to my surprise, that it sounds like 'war zone.' Unfortunately, this transcription reflects the reality of events transpiring in the Caucasus. It is commonly known that the difference between love and the creation of a 'war zone' is just one poorly thought-out step. The way back, on the other hand, is long and difficult.

"I embrace you,

"Giya Kancheli"

That was in May 2003.

RFE/RL: Did you anticipate the recent events in Georgia?

Giya Kancheli: No, nothing of the sort. For me, what happened was equivalent to September 11 in New York. I couldn't have imagined anything like it. I could not imagine that my country would be occupied by the Russian Army.

I have two grandsons there, so I was very worried for them. I had tried to bring them back to their homeland several times. They live in Germany right now, and came to Georgia for vacation. When they arrived, it wasn't like this, and they decided to stay, because they felt good there.

RFE/RL: How old are they?

Kancheli: Seven and 13. My granddaughter is there now, too, but she is very little, and doesn't understand anything yet. The fact that they were there during the toughest

days makes me somehow proud; I like it. They were around Tbilisi, and as you know, a lot of forest land was burned down there.

RFE/RL: The Borzhomi?

Kancheli: Yes, this forest reserve has been almost destroyed. And not just the Borjomi, but many others. They did some sort of firebombing on the areas around Tbilisi. [My grandchildren] went to the city for a few days and then came up there.

You know what? The people who wanted to deal with President [Mikheil] Saakashvili once and for all miscalculated: even if he had faced some opposition earlier, and there had been some sort of discontent with him, now there is unity, and it's going to endure for some time. It cannot be otherwise at this point.

When they say that the railroad going into Abkhazia is being repaired so that they can move trains loaded with tanks, I don't want to believe it. On the other hand, I am witnessing it now, as I witnessed it then. Or rather, what I am witnessing now is completely different from what I observed earlier.

For 16 years, Russia's so-called "peacekeepers" were not there to resolve the conflict, but to take part in it. That was very tangible. I always thought we committed a grave mistake when Georgia's first popularly elected president [Zviad Gamsakhurdia] -- I don't even want to pronounce his name right now -- raised his fist and crushed the South Ossetian autonomous region. It ended in bloodshed, and I knew back then that it would lead to something awful in the future.

I never defended the decision by the Georgian leadership to send troops into Abkhazia, which resulted in 300,000 ethnic-Georgian refugees. It was then that the Abkhaz people started to feel hostile toward us. I'm not talking about the leaders, because leaders are always nationalists, to some degree, and they incite tragedies. And the events in South Ossetia -- I didn't understand what that was about. Because maybe we've had some conflicts in our past, but I'm convinced that today the closest people to us are the Ossetians.

When we start to prove who was right historically, it is almost impossible to find a common denominator. All we have are some sort of historical monuments; some sort of churches, monasteries built centuries ago, and to say that this or that was not Georgian land is strange to me, and I don't want to talk about it, because it won't lead to anything.

Speaking Truth, Not Ideals

RFE/RL: Unfortunately, it is used as an argument by people who support the conflict.

Kancheli: You know, you have to recall the words of [French author] Romain Rolland, I like this quote a lot: "Truth is the same for everyone, but every nation has its own special lie that it calls its ideal." The ideal of the Abkhaz leadership is that the land they're on isn't Georgian. And this I cannot deny because it's just silly.

RFE/RL: And now, when you are here, at home, watching the events from Antwerp, do you feel the desire to go back, or the opposite -- are you happy that you are not there, and that God saved you from witnessing everything firsthand?

Kancheli: You know, if I felt that my visit could change anything, I would definitely go. I don't remember when exactly -- 1993, I think, after the war in Abkhazia -- I wrote a piece that was performed for the first time in Saarbrücken, and I called it "Wingless." I dedicated it to those young Georgians and Abkhaz who died during the war.

And I don't see anything strange in the fact that my friend, Valery Gergiyev, came to Tskhinvali with his orchestra and had a concert there. The only thing that hurt me a little was the fact that Gergiyev, a personality and a musician of such proportions, and a friend of many Georgians, a man who has done so much for Georgia, didn't -- as he should have -- dedicate his performance of Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky to fallen Ossetians and Georgians as well. That stumped me somewhat... I actually have a very interesting concert coming up in Tsinandali, in Kakhetia. Gidon Kremer is coming with "Camerata Baltica."

RFE/RL: When will that be?

Kancheli: It will be on October 8. Besides this, the Rustaveli theater is celebrating Sturua, who turned 70 on July 31. I hope that someone from Russia comes, because Robert Sturua, whom I have helped stage several performances, has many friends in Russia. I don't know if anyone called him, but my friends didn't call me. For me it was very, very.... I took it badly.

RFE/RL: From Russia?

Kancheli: Yes, it appears just as in my youth they were loyal Leninists, now they are loyal Putinists. What can you do? I don't know. You know, I often remember the words of a man I love and respect, [Russian writer] Andrei Bitov, that the nation that gave the

world the greatest culture failed to become a civilized nation itself.

RFE/RL: Well, since you mention Andrei Bitov, let's mention his involvement in the notorious letter, also signed by Gergiyev, where Georgia was called a pawn in the United States' game.



Valery Gergiyev

Kancheli: Of course, I was happy to hear Andrei Bitov denounce the letter and confirm that he didn't know about the text. I'll tell you more: I believe to this day that Gergiyev didn't read that hogwash he signed. And [conductor and violist Yury] Bashmet didn't read it.

RFE/RL: Have you tried asking Gergiyev? Have you been in touch since?

Kancheli: No, I haven't been in touch with him lately. I spoke over the phone with Bashmet, who called me right after these events started happening. But the letter came much later, and I haven't spoken to him since.

RFE/RL: You don't want to just call him and ask directly? Gergiyev, I mean.

Kancheli: You know, I always thought that Valery Gergiyev was someone who could calm down what was happening in Tskhinvali. I even asked him to come there with his orchestra, and invited his friend, the wonderful Georgian pianist Lekso Toradze, to come and perform. I even suggested that he and composer Jansug Kakhidze hold a joint concert in Tskhinvali. But all this would have a positive effect only if the puppet masters needed it. When the puppet masters didn't need it, maybe Gergiyev was right to refuse.

Why don't I have any desire to call Gergiyev right now? Because we will not be able to find a common denominator. Some time has to pass. If only he knew what happened here day by day at the beginning of August! He doesn't. And even if I tried to explain it to him, he will think I'm being influenced by Georgian propaganda. You know, when a tragedy like this takes place, when there are casualties on both sides, it's rather difficult to talk about it until some time passes.

Some committees will start working; some aerial shots will be taken. Maybe, it will be possible to determine exactly why the Georgians started firing at the Roki pass. This needs to be determined. I am absolutely convinced that Russia will try to cover up all the evidence. But it will be known nonetheless. I am absolutely convinced that the Ossetians who return to Tskhinvali won't be happy to see that there are no more Georgian villages or homes, because they used to live with these Georgians!

An End To Russian-Georgian Culture

RFE/RL: You say it's necessary to wait. But some people had the feeling throughout these events that we were on the brink of a conflict that would involve far more nations and grow into something like World War III, so that it seemed like it was extremely important for people with a mass audience to get involved, to perform, to say something from the stage of a concert hall, write something somewhere -- in other words, not to wait.

Kancheli: It would be wonderful if you could ask Gergiyev the same question. I thought of him quite often in those days, and I'm sure he remembered me, and thought of me; and not just of me, but of all his Georgian friends, of whom he has many. The greatest tragedy, for me, is happening right now.... I'm not even thinking, I cannot even imagine how much time will have to pass before the people of Russia and Georgia trust each other again. Despite all the calamities that have happened in recent years, there was a love between us. Now, after this has happened, it is difficult to imagine any sort of coming-together.

RFE/RL: Do you get the desire to travel to Russia, where you are very famous, and appeal to the Russian people?

Kancheli: No, I have no such desire. You know that I am an elderly man, and I have accepted the fact that in my lifetime I will not travel to Russia.

RFE/RL: Really? Specifically because of recent events?

Kancheli: I will not go to the country I loved being in more than any other. My life has been filled with happy moments spent in Russia. I will not list all the major conductors.... All my premieres, the premieres of all my symphonies, and so on and so forth.... But I cannot go back there now.

RFE/RL: But there are many people there who feel shame at Russia's actions, and I think they would very much like to see you.

Kancheli: You know, I cannot bring myself to do it. I've told you already: to me this is like September 11. I could never have imagined it.

I cannot go there because people who were very close to me have believed this propaganda, and it's very unpleasant for me. But my attitude toward these people has remained the same, because they are innocent! I repeat this over and over: if these people had had the power to decide, then everything would have been all right.

I can see before my eyes scenes of Georgians being expelled from Moscow, transported out like cattle. I saw that giant military plane land and open its rear entrance, and people walked out, after having stood for two hours because there were no seats. Just like they transport cows, so they deported the Georgians from Moscow.

And in spite of all this, relations between ordinary people remained normal. They are still normal, and they will continue to be. They definitely will be! But some time has to pass, that's all. Some time has to pass, and I think something will change in Russia. Won't there be a time when Russia will go down the path of civilized life?

RFE/RL: Did Tbilisi play a special role for composers during the Soviet period? Wasn't it a bit freer?

Kancheli: You know, since Pushkin's time it has been a bit freer in Tbilisi for all the great men who have come there, and lived there. I won't list them. I would only like to recall the surnames of recent geniuses who could not live without Tbilisi, like

Pasternak.

RFE/RL: What do you think he would say right now?

Kancheli: You know, when I saw what happened, when I felt it, I thought, "How lucky are those who did not live to see this and left life before it happened...." Boris Leonidovich Pasternak is among those fortunate ones. I don't think any of them could have imagined it. But it's normal: Pasternak could not imagine what Vladimir Vladimirovich imagines.

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