

Opinion

Recollections and Reflections About My Dad, Leo Mazel (1907–2000)

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Abstract: This first-hand memoir essay offers a reflective narrative on the life and legacy of professor Leo Mazel, a prominent Soviet musicologist. Recounted by his stepson, the text weaves together personal memories, anecdotes, and cultural insights into Mazel's professional contributions and personal life. As a pioneer in the field of music theory and analysis, Mazel's rigorous approach blended mathematical precision with a deep commitment to artistic integrity. His unique scholarship extended to stylistic studies of composers like Beethoven, Chopin, and Shostakovich, with an emphasis on "holistic analysis"—a method that integrates historical and aesthetic contexts. Through rich storytelling, the memoir also provides glimpses into Soviet academic life, artistic censorship, and Mazel's resilience against political pressures. Interactions with notable figures and intellectuals punctuate this account, painting a vivid picture of a life devoted to music, intellectual curiosity, and mentorship.

Keywords: Soviet musicology; Leo Mazel; holistic analysis; Soviet intellectual life; music and mathematics; cultural memory

1. Introducing the Subject

Not being my biological father, but, formally, my stepfather, he was the only real Dad I ever knew (Figure 1) (and I, in my turn, was the singular object of his fatherhood).



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Figure 1. Leo Mazel, 1930s.

My mother (Debora Rybakova, 1904–1954) studied with him at the Conservatory; he was friends with her and her husband, my biological father, Konstantin Zholkovsky, and when the latter drowned in 1938 (I was barely a year old), he was very supportive of my mother. They gradually grew closer, but only married when the war started, so as not to get lost in the impending chaos. (Figure 2). He intentionally did not adopt me to avoid defiling—with his Jewish “fifth point”—my officially perfectly pure Russian ethnicity.

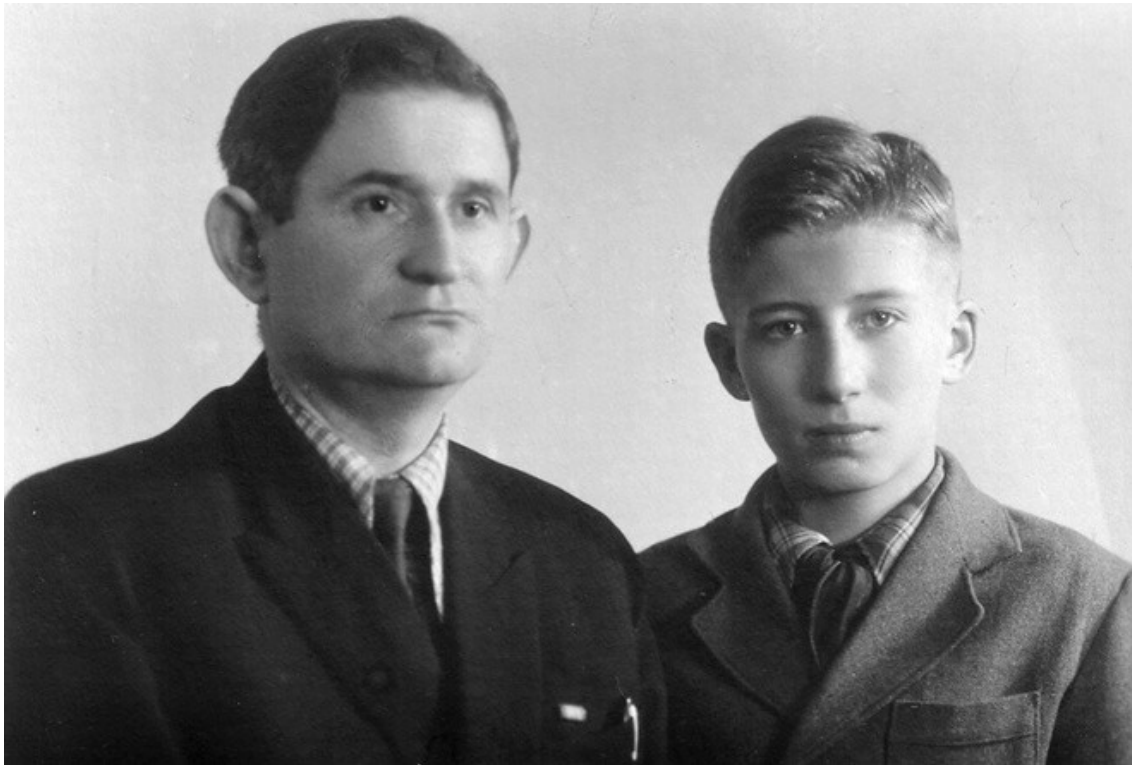


Figure 2. Leo Masel and [anonymous], late 1940s.

This deliberate combination of intimacy with detachment was characteristic. In a programmatically Pushkinian way, he consistently enjoyed engaging with algebra—after all, that was his profession, all the more so because, in addition to the Conservatory, he had simultaneously graduated from Moscow State University’s School of Math.

He was the epitome of correctness and punctuality, and, on these subjects, he could be unpleasantly boring, but more often inventive, as he used to cite the example of Sergei Prokofiev, who insisted on arriving at the door ten minutes early when visiting friends and circling the house with his wife, whatever the weather, until the appointed time, and only then ringing at the door on the dot.

Papa was in no way a nudnik. I remember echoes (in tea-table conversations during my childhood years) of the periodically renewed debate about Antonio Salieri’s alleged poisoning of Mozart. The most prominent participants in the discussion were Boris Shteinpress (1908–1986, the father of my evacuation buddy Tolya, the well-known collector of bardic songs, who recently died in Los Angeles) and Igor Belza (1904–1994, the father of the once-famous and also late TV-personality Svyatoslav (1942–2014)). I am not sure whether Dad took sides, but I remember well that he enjoyed dramatizing the conflict between Shteinpress, the editor of encyclopedic dictionaries, a thorough, solid, heavy man (“Just think about it”, Dad would say, “Stein, a stone, and a press”, showing the pressure of this imaginary stone press with his hands), hence a “representative of international Salierism”, and Belza, the would-be Mozartian who, even then (and much more so in the

1960s, as I remember him), dressed with European chic (I remember his dapper white bowtie), after being given permission by the Soviets to cross the Iron Curtain, was better informed about the state of the contemporary world scholarship and yet would not deviate from the officially approved accusatory version, according to Pushkin.

In this connection, I recall a much later meeting in Los Angeles with Nicholas (Nikolai Leonidovich) Slonimsky (1894–1995), the conductor, composer, and musical lexicographer who had lived almost his entire adult life in exile. He was over 90 at the time, but was quite vivacious, and he met me wearing shorts; we promptly finished the business that brought me there and talked about various topics.

It started off with Pushkin. Slonimsky remembered that his brother had once told him that some completely unprintable poem by Pushkin had been discovered, and so he now wondered if I had any information about its fate. His brother was, of course, the renowned Soviet Pushkinist Alexander Leonidovich Slonimsky (1881–1964), and the scandalously obscene poem, “*Barkov’s Shadow*”, was eventually published in 2002.

The conversation then naturally turned to Mozart and Salieri and the recent film *Amadeus* (1984), and Slonimsky boasted of his contribution to Mozart studies. “It was believed that Mozart’s funeral was particularly sparsely attended because they buried him in the rain. But I have established that it did not rain.”

- How?
- Well, I went through all the newspapers published in December 1791, and it turns out that it did not rain anywhere in Europe at the time, including in Vienna.

Shortly before that meeting, in the summer of 1984, Dad and I had a somewhat similar experience. I had already been living in emigration for five years, and we were communicating only by phone, but then Dad decided to come to France to see me, not at my invitation—he made a point of hiding such a direct connection with me from the Soviet authorities—but rather at the invitation of his acquaintances, the daughters of the famous publisher Zinovy Grzhebin, who lived in Paris. We spent a month together in France, in an apartment I rented in Paris and on a trip around the country by rental car. One of the purposes of the entire undertaking was to find the grave of his great-uncle, the famous mathematician Pavel Uryson (1898–1924), who had drowned as a young man in the Bay of Biscay. When we finally arrived in the small town of Batz-sur-Mer and spoke about our search with the patrons of a café on the town’s main square; they asked if he was buried in the old cemetery or the new one. And once they realized he was Jewish, they worried about the fate of the grave, since the town had been occupied by the Germans during WWII. They directed us to the town hall.

The working day was ending, but it was still open. The archive was situated in a small bright room with bookshelves along the back wall. A young lady archivist asked about the date of death, which Daddy remembered exactly and immediately named (17 August 1924). She pulled down a large volume from the shelf, found the record of death and burial, gave us the address of the cemetery and its map, and provided the number of the grave. We managed to get there just before closing time and photographed the tombstone with the inscription in Hebrew. The occupation (in its mild, Vichy version) had not affected the condition of the grave and the archives. I immediately recalled watching—together with my parents, 40 years earlier in Moscow, on Victory Day, 9 May 1945—the documentary film “*The Liberated France*” (1944) by Sergei Yutkevich and how I was struck by the limited destruction, as compared with the horrible images in our Eastern front newsreels.

Within the family and among acquaintances, Mom was considered strict and Dad, kind. Back then, everyone was reading John Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga*, and Dad readily accepted comparison with the tolerant Jolyon Senior.

Mom was strict not only with me, but with just about everyone. She did not tolerate falsity and permanently unfriended some longtime girlfriends after they misbehaved during the anti-Formalist and anti-Cosmopolitan (i.e., anti-Semitic) campaigns of 1948–1949. Dad was gentler (and lived almost twice as long as a result). Although he never recanted his Formalist so-called “mistakes”, demonstrative harshness was not part of his repertoire. He was well-mannered and pointedly correct, perhaps overly so—as the echelon defense of a lone Jewish intellectual against surrounding boorishness. He responded to letters accurately and in detail, received and supported provincial colleagues who sought his enlightened attention, congratulated acquaintances and relatives on their birthdays and wedding anniversaries, expressed condolences on deaths, remembered all the relevant dates and names, and was attentive both to colleagues and all kinds of helping hands and service personnel.

His ears were one of the motifs that swirled around him in Moscow Conservatory’s folklore, not so much because of his very bad hearing but for their conspicuous size. The expression “Mazelesque ears” was popular in musical circles. And among his own personal yarns was one about him traveling as a youth (I believe, in the late 1920s) with a friend in the Caucasus and making acquaintance in a mountain village with a likeable local teacher. They spent the whole day together, and eventually the man boldly asked my Dad—quite good-naturedly—a Goebbels-like question that apparently had been on his mind the whole time:

- “I wonder, what kind of nationality puts up ears like that?”

Moving to the *dacha* was an annual ordeal—ordering a van was a problem; it arrived late and took a long time to load, for which special helpers were summoned (in the early post-war years, a certain Vasily Vasilievich, known in the extended family of Dad’s aging relatives as *chelovek, kotoryi*, “the man who”). In the first half of the 1950s, the *dacha* was rented (from the daughter of a prominent Communist revolutionary Julian Markhlevsky) in the village of Cheliuskinskaya, and, on one occasion, the move was additionally complicated by the blocking, for some official reason, of the corresponding highway. The driver started thinking of possible detours, while Dad entered into negotiations with the police, explaining that he was simply en route, as always, to his *dacha* and to the Village of the Old Bolsheviks. But this was not helping; the policeman demanded to see his passport—and suddenly brightened up: “Ah, you’re one of us, Kaliningraders!”—and waved us on. My papa, a Kaliningrader?! In 1938, the small town of Podlipki (since 1996, the city of Korolev), located in the Moscow region, had been renamed Kaliningrad, after the then-head of the USSR, Mikhail Kalinin (1875–1946), whereas Dad was born in the celebrated German city of Königsberg, victoriously annexed and renamed Kaliningrad in 1946, and accordingly listed in my Dad’s passport in the proper column: “place of birth”. This was probably the first and only time the orgy of Soviet renamings benefited somebody.

Dad recalled Stalin’s times constantly, his tragic stories alternating with comedic ones.

One night in 1937 (the time of the Great Stalinist Purges), there was a knock at the door of the apartment where he lived with his maternal uncle Isaac Uryson (1877–1938), a respected Moscow lawyer, and the uncle instantly realized that “they” were coming for him. He woke up Dad and told him to grab his typewriter and move it to his own room. The uncle was arrested (and perished), his belongings sealed (and confiscated), but the typewriter remained with Dad.

In 1946, the Chairman of the Committee for the Arts Mikhail Khrapchenko (1894–1984), who would be removed a couple years later from that ministerial post during the party’s war on the formalism of Shostakovich and Prokofiev, was running for the Supreme Soviet, the would-be Soviet parliament. He represented the constituency of the Ivanovo region, where one of the members of the Houses of Composers’ Creativity (where my stepfather,

my mother, and I stayed many times) was located. Dad had no choice but to go to the pre-election meeting and make a campaign speech for Khrapchenko (who was, of course, the only candidate running). From there, Khrapchenko arrived at the House of Creativity to be solemnly welcomed by the director of either the House itself, or perhaps the entire Musical Fund (I am not sure which)—a big Soviet-style businessman (for some reason, I remember his name as Lempert, but I could be mistaken). The director escorted Khrapchenko towards the House's restaurant along a magnificent coniferous alley. This alley had been created only the day before, in a miracle of instant shock-work before the eyes of the amazed public, by means of sticking mighty spruce trees, cut down in the neighboring forest, into no-less-powerful February snowdrifts. After letting Khrapchenko admire the spectacular Kremlin-style sight, Lempert defiantly kicked one of the fir trees and, as it was falling flat on the ground, turned to Khrapchenko and announced the following:

- “These are my Potemkin Christmas trees! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Nice job sucking up to you, huh?!”

Khrapchenko, a future academician (1979) and even, in a sense, a semiotician, laughed approvingly and followed Lempert to the banquet in his honor.

My life at home with Dad was an invaluable school for intellectual training. And for many of my colleagues, he served as the model of a true scholar. He taught me and Yuri Shcheglov not only rigor in thinking about art, but also sound principles of academic pragmatics, such as, for instance, that new methods should preferably be tested on classical material, while new material should be introduced using traditional methods—to avoid shocking the inevitably conservative audience. (Figure 3). He spoke from his own experience as a musicologist who had taken a beating for formalism and love of Shostakovich's then new music, but we of course did not listen. As it turned out, he was right, of course.

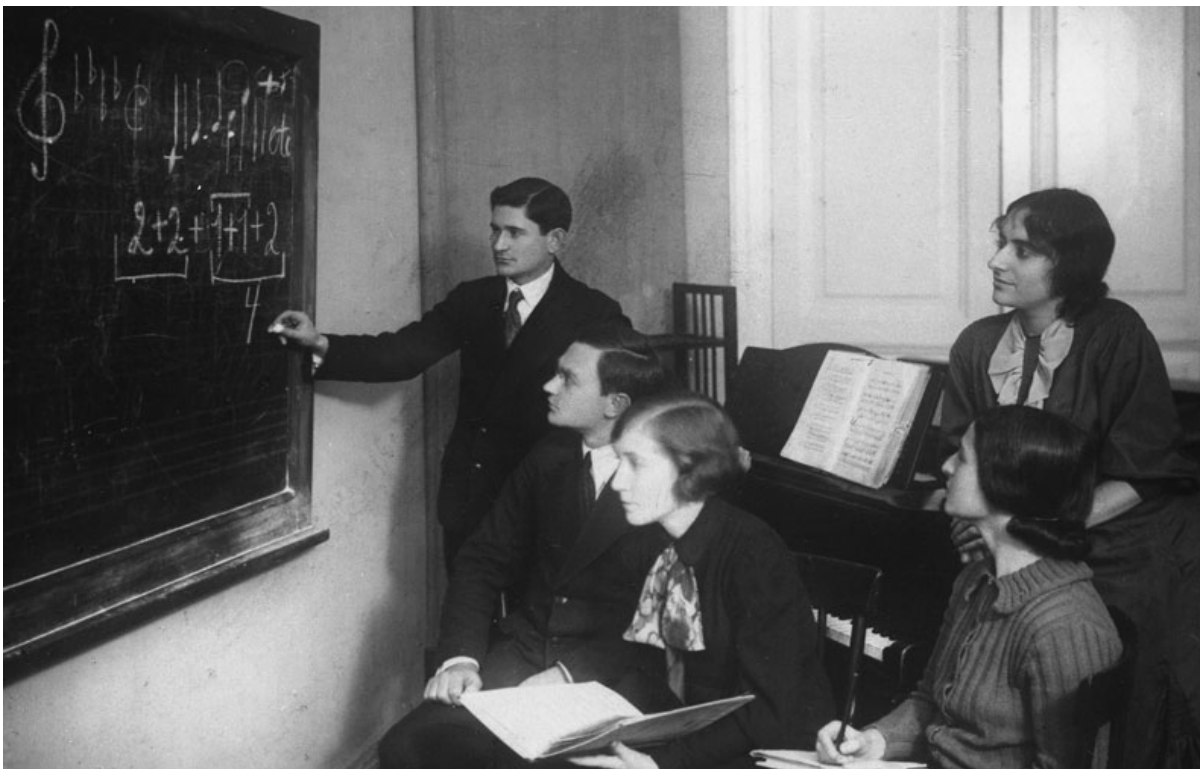


Figure 3. Academic studies in the musical form class with Leo Mazel, 1930s.

Having personally met one of the leaders of our budding structural linguistics, he surprised me and my then-wife Irina, also a linguist, with his unenthusiastic response. We kept repeating what an outstanding scholar the man was and insisted my Dad tell us what it was that he did not like about him.

- “It seems to me he has an inflexible mind.”

A storm of protests ensued, but Dad would not budge. His formulation proved memorable and the longer I lived, the more impressed I was by his penetrating insight. As we know, in the eyes of children, parents become smarter over the years.

In the second half of the 1960s, during the era of “Prague Spring”, when it seemed to me and my friends that our drive for “protest signing” was not in vain and “that something was about to happen”, as in a Bulat Okudzhava song, Dad granted me freedom of civic choice and tried not to discourage me, but kept a very skeptical view of the prospects of the dissident campaign and was eventually proven right. Remarkably, when the question of my emigration arose a dozen years later, not only did he not oppose it, but in fact fully supported me—with the reservation that for himself that was not an option, because it would lead to banning and completely withdrawing everything he had published in the USSR from circulation. In subsequent decades, he would time and again reconfirm the correctness of the choice we had both made, stating that both from behind the Iron Curtain and, after the *perestroika*, in person, as I started visiting Russia on a regular basis.

- “Good, good”, he would say. “Now that I am old and impoverished, you can support me.”

Dad had long planned to retire at 60, in order to devote his remaining years to writing the books he still had in him—and he successfully implemented this plan. Having preferred musicology to mathematics in his youth, he had devoted himself entirely to the chosen field, which he enriched with his mathematically precise approach, but would no longer be distracted by proper mathematics. He was married only once—to my mother (and perceived my matrimonial experiments with bewilderment: “I don’t understand you, Alya. We, Jews, don’t divorce.”). But she died early, and he outlived her by 46 years—the entire second half of his life. There were many who wished to take her place, but he skillfully neutralized these attempts, accepting them as tokens of friendship. Contenders for his hand, heart, and apartment included his telephone interlocutors, advisors, confidantes, assistants, and providers of a wide range professional services (including doctors of various profiles, physiotherapy instructors, housekeepers, typists, hairdressers, pedicurists, etc.). This is another example of his “safety” strategies—and another manifestation of his constancy.

The same dialectic of security-come-fear underpinned his relationship with all his private housekeepers. On the one hand, they provided comfort and protection; on the other, they tended to turn into bossy tormentors on whom he increasingly depended in his practical helplessness. This was aggravated by the general Soviet sense of dependence on any number of petty superiors, starting with concierges, locksmiths, and mailmen. (One of his former students, M. A. Yakubov, took a disproportionately important place in his life by taking care of his newspaper subscriptions!) I remember the wicked pleasure with which Dad finally fired a snooty housekeeper, who would come to help less and less often while asking for more and more money. He insisted on announcing this to her personally.

- “What if I agree to your terms?”, she asked, shocked by the failure of her blackmail.
- “I’m not offering you any terms”, he said.

Gradually he became decrepit, suffering from depression and other illnesses, and lost interest in his surroundings, all the while retaining a rare clarity of mind and memory, which amazed his acquaintances. *Perestroika* restored his interest in life, but again on a limited, clearly defined scale.

- “Now I have to stay alive until the privatization of the apartment, pass it on to you, after which I can die in peace.”

Having fulfilled his life plans and duties to me and history by the age of eighty, he started speaking about death regularly and without fear—in a Socratic way.

- “I am not afraid of death. I fear pain, hospitalization, helplessness. My dream is to die when you are around. You’ll come to visit—and, while you are at it, will bury me. You won’t have to bother to get an emergency visa.”

He marveled at his longevity and even began to feel burdened by it. With his usual sense of humor, he would savor any signs of the approaching end.

When replacing the housekeeper, we arranged to interview several candidates, and Dad, having explained the conditions, would always add another remark as a kind of second thought:

- “Well, the job, as you can see, is a temporary one.”

In the 90s, when the toilet in his apartment was not working, the plumber showed up happily drunk, fixed it somehow, but instructed Dad to be careful with the lavatory tank—not to lean on it with his back. Dad got worried and asked whether the tank should be replaced.

- “Nope, no problem”, said the plumber, swaying on the way to the exit door. “It will keep for a while.”
- “For how long?”, asked Dad, who loved precision. “A year? A month? A week?”
- The plumber swayed the other way, looked at Dad dimly, and waved his hand.
- “F-for you. . . l-long enough. . .”.

Dad loved the formula. When some of his teeth started aching again, he refused to have them treated. “Just pull those out. Enough for me.”

Even when life smiled on him, he never forgot to stipulate the limits of his optimism. When he came to Paris at my invitation in 1984, he was quite cheerful—despite a hefty dose of sub-Soviet paranoia—and we spent a happy month riding around France. But when asked where he would like to go next time, perhaps Germany (the country he had stayed in as a child and whose language he spoke fluently), he said “thank you, no, this is enough. See Paris and die.”.

Conversations about death were becoming more frequent. During his last illness, I kept anxiously calling from Los Angeles, asking questions and organizing tests, doctors, and hospitalizations. He said the following:

- “Alya, why are you so worried? At sixty-three, you can full well handle being orphaned.”

At one point, I tried to get him to sit down and write his memoirs; he had seen so much, had known so many people, remembered everything so well, and was such a brilliant storyteller! But he flatly refused:

- “Memoirists lie. I don’t want to lie!”

Memoirists indeed lie (I know from experience), but I think that in his case, the issue was not just inevitable forgetfulness and more importantly writer’s bias, but rather the impossibility of reconciling sad personal experience that needed telling, with his innate and cultivated diplomacy toward other people.

And, of course, his professional sense of integrity had a part in it. “I don’t want to be a buffoon!”, he said in response to the argument that his memoirs could be based on his orally performed stories about some celebrated musicians he had known, which were always a success with the audience. In the long run, however, he did not write his

memoirs, depriving us, I am sure, of a fine book and himself of a productive occupation in his declining years.

Apparently, towards the end, he had lost that will to live, which Goethe considered key to longevity. Well, he had after all outlived Goethe by 11 years and died in a sense right on time—in a relatively peaceful era at the very end of the twentieth century, not living to witness the horrors of the new century (which would hardly have surprised him).

I owe my love of vignettes to Dad, a master of oral novellas. Those are best received in sound and videotape recordings,¹ but much is preserved in written form as well. In what follows, I recount some of those as I remember them.

2. Pontryagin's Theorem

While studying at the Moscow Conservatory, my Dad was also a student of Moscow State University's (MGU) School of Mechanics and Mathematics (MechMath). He successfully graduated from it and even hesitated for some time while choosing his profession. Musicology won out—and benefited from his mathematical sophistication.

One of his fellow students at the MechMath was Lev Pontryagin (1908–1988), who would become a prominent mathematician but also an influential anti-Semite, particularly during the late 1940s, making life so difficult for Soviet Jews; Dad broke all ties with him as a result. But he kept recalling with pleasure the distant youth they had shared. He liked to cite a mock theorem devised by Pontryagin in 1937: “Every Soviet Man [human being] will be arrested unless he dies before that.”

The main clause, “Every Soviet Man will be arrested”, sounded especially impressive, but the subsequent conditional one was not very comforting either.

In fact, the theorem is true, but trivially so, for it is true of every human being in general, Soviet, or otherwise. The point is that for *a man* in general, that is, for the extremely depersonalized Caius, known exclusively for his inevitable mortality, the problem of arrestability was not as critical as for his Soviet counterpart. The theorem, deliberately formulated in purely logical, qualitative terms, was designed to be perceived in the spirit of the quantitative branches of mathematics: statistics, probability theory, and so on.

Thus, it captured the essence of many a later discussion of the comparative merits of the Soviet and Western ways of life, in particular, the would-be judicious arguments like: “Over there, they, too, steal, bribe, underpay, fire, ban, persecute, imprison, kill . . .”. Indeed, over there, they do, too, but somehow less so, quantitatively speaking. This is, after all, important for *a man*, especially a Russian one, given the depressing data relevant to the latter's life—starting with life expectancy.

3. How Russia Is Done

In the 1930s, my Dad happened to take a vacation cruise down the Volga river. Among the passengers were some American tourists. Dad could speak English, but his pronunciation was rather poor. Toward the end of the cruise, an American woman shared her impressions of the trip with him:

- “Russia is badly done”, she said.

Dad, famous for his impersonations, used to deliver this in a low, pointedly masculine voice, articulating every syllable separately. As he struggled with the alien phonetics, his mouth seemed to be filled with huge American teeth. The verdict sounded repulsive, but not subject to appeal.

4. “We Know It All. . .”

Expelled from the Moscow Conservatory for so-called “Cosmopolitanism”, Dad obtained, despite being Jewish, the position of professor at the Institute of Military Conductors

(1949–1954). The institute was administratively within the Ministry of Defense (not Higher Education), and its strong-willed commander-in-chief, General Ivan Vasilyevich Petrov, took the opportunity to decorate his staff with a select group of “persons of Jewish nationality”. (In the same years, in my secondary school No. 50, history was being taught by a certain Zinovy Mikhailovich, nicknamed, naturally, Ziama, a habilitated PhD holder and an eminent scholar, who, in the course of the same anti-Semitic campaign, had been fired from the prestigious Institute of State and Law, thus experiencing the interaction of these two legal categories first-hand.) Less fortunate Jewish outcasts were employed in provincial conservatories, which they visited in teaching tours so they would not have to abandon their valuable Moscow residence and registration. But this story is not so much about these minor and medium Jewish diasporas as about the Mongolian counter-migration.

Mongolia, which had lost its dominant position among the countries of the socialist camp since the time of Genghis Khan, was not, however, exempt from contributing its modest share to the camp’s collective military might, and so its armed forces needed musical support. The job of mediating between East and West, which had intrigued Rudyard Kipling and Aleksandr Blok, fell to the Jewish refugees from the Moscow Conservatory. Mutual understanding was hampered by cultural and linguistic barriers, but on occasion, it materialized.

- “In the final years of his life, Ludwig van Beethoven became deaf, withdrew into himself, was lonely. . .”, lectures the professor.

The Mongolian group follows this sad tale in bewildered silence. Apparently, hearing loss does not strike them as an existential catastrophe.

- “He went deaf”, the professor repeats, “withdrew into himself, had few friends left, had no loving woman-partner, was very lonely. . .”.

The audience is tensely silent, but then suddenly one of the students lights up with a smile of recognition. He put his finger on a logical thread clear to any nomad.

- “Lonely—one-legged” is an untranslatable pun in Russian, especially if pronounced with an accent: *odinokii*, “lonely”; *odnonogii*, is mispronounced as *odinogii*, “one-legged”! “One leg—no one to love you!!”

On another occasion, the plot of Georges Bizet’s opera “*Carmen*” is outlined by the instructor and also falls on deaf ears. The audience’s diligent attention remains alert but ever-wary, showing no signs of grasping even the premise of the plot, let alone its denouement. For some reason, the drama of love, jealousy, and death does not appeal to the Mongols. But then again, there comes the moment of truth:

- “Comrade Professor! I got it! He was a woman!”

In the Mongolian language, the grammatical category of gender is absent not only in verbs, as, say, in English, but also in personal pronouns, with “he” and “she” being one and the same word. In light of that, the intellectual breakthrough of the unknown nomad was no less remarkable than the future Western insights into the subtleties of gender politics. In fact, nowadays, an American freshman would not be stumped by a male Carmen. But, in terms of sexual color-blindness, those Mongolian military conductors-to-be found themselves in the honorable company of Leo Tolstoy, who excised the tender touching of the heroine by men from his mass edition of Chekhov’s famous “*The Darling*”, but not by women.

The perceived dimwittedness of Mongolian students was also the subject of mean jokes at the MGU’s School of Philology, where I studied a few years later. But in the early 1990s, during a flight from Los Angeles to Moscow, I had a long conversation with the man in the next seat, who turned out to be an American geologist on a business trip to the

East. He told me that, in his experience, Mongols, with their dynamism and organizational talents, were way ahead of any Russians he had ever dealt with, so that the Genghis Khan phenomenon was no mystery to him. What remains mysterious is the phenomenon of the enigmatic Russian soul and Communist Party dictatorship, tirelessly engaged in personnel selection, which is consistently negative.

Dad's stories about the Institute of Military Conductors were similar to those about his teaching at the *rabfak* ["School for Workers"] in the early 1930s. One perky listener decided to refute a point in Dad's lecture by referring to Marxist methodology.

- "Do you know, Professor, what Friedrich Engels said on this subject in his eulogy at Karl Marx's grave?", he said before producing the quote.

Dad responded with the following:

- "That's right, but do you know how Marx countered that in his response speech at his friend Engels' grave?!".

The young Marxist opened his notebook, ready to take it down.

Dad and his longtime colleague and co-author Victor Abramovich Zuckerman liked to recall a note the latter once received from a female *rabfak* listener: "How come you are so pensEve and tender?". The word for "pensive" was misspelled, and they kept emphasizing the E- in the misspelling as an expressive accompaniment to the emotions of the *rabfak* girl.

Another episode was about telling the *rabfak* students the story of Chopin's life. When Dad started discussing the young composer's undeclared and unrequited love for Konstancja Gładkowska, he mentioned that she most likely did not know about his feelings for her.

- "Well, who's going to believe she didn't?!"
- "Of course she didn't, because he never told her."
- "Well, he may not have told *her*, but he must have told the other gals, and those sure told her!."

5. It's Not Me Writing

In the 1950s, Dad's conversations over tea and his oral stories started featuring a graphomaniac musicologist with a memorable surname that sometimes seemed fabricated: Ogolevets². A former police officer, he behaved in a bossy way, published huge volumes with pretensions to a complete disruption of musicology, and brazenly demanded recognition of his greatness. During this campaign for the immortalization of his fame, he did not hesitate to ask for a positive evaluation of his work from no less a figure than Dmitrii Shostakovich himself, who then related the story to his friends, including Dad. Here is what happened.

Sweeping aside the composer's objections, Ogolevets secured an interview and, once in, proceeded to ask Shostakovich for a signed statement acknowledging the enduring value of his, Ogolevets's, work. Shostakovich, known for his inability to refuse anyone anything directly, nervously drummed his fingers on his cheek (Dad loved imitating this quirk of Shostakovich's as he told stories about him), as he tried to explain why he could not. He had not read any of Ogolevets's books, had no time at the time to familiarize himself with them, was not a musicologist, and was not in the habit of writing scholarly reviews.

- "THERE'S NO NEED TO WORRY ABOUT ANYTHING", Ogolevets proclaimed, looming over Shostakovich and speaking in a threateningly articulate manner. "I have prepared everything. Here is the review." He opened his briefcase and handed Shostakovich a printed text with a gaping space for his signature.

Shostakovich started reading:

“The brilliant works of the outstanding musicologist A. S. Ogolevets open a new page in the history of Soviet and world musicology. Their historical significance. . .”.

- “How can you write something like this about yourself?”, asked the astonished Shostakovich, although it would seem that, after what he had experienced in his life, hardly anything should surprise him.
- “It’s not me writing”—with his left hand, Dad drew a large arc in the air and ended pressing its forefinger into his own chest. “It’s you who are writing this!!”—Dad pointed his right index at the imaginary Shostakovich.

Shostakovich desperately wanted only one thing—that this horrible man would leave him in peace as soon as possible. He tore his hand away from his cheek, grabbed a pen, and signed the review.

Dad said that the origin of many of Shostakovich’s texts was similar, if not in every detail.

By the way, when *The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov* was published in the West in 1979 and then translated into many languages, and their authenticity was fiercely disputed by the world’s Shostakovich specialists, Dad immediately read them in German and, in a carefully coded telephone conversation with me across the ocean, expressed his firm conviction that Shostakovich’s testimony sounded genuine.

6. A Ticket to Paradise

Dad told me that Shostakovich made a point of arriving at train stations well in advance, so that as soon as the train was ready for boarding, he would enter the carriage, take his seat, make his bed, undress, lie down, and cover himself with a blanket.

- Why?
- Because should it turn out that two tickets had been sold for that seat and another passenger appear, Shostakovich would be deemed the proper occupant as the one already in bed.

In response to the perplexed reactions, like being the famous Dmitri Shostakovich, composer laureate, member of the Supreme Soviet, etc., and given that he felt sure about keeping his seat anyway, my Dad would tell another ticket story about Shostakovich.

In the 1930s, his lady friend suddenly expressed her wish to go to the theater they were walking by. But it turned out that the performance was sold out—no tickets were available at the box office. Shostakovich was ready to retreat, but the lady kept insisting that he was a celebrity, everyone knew him, he just had to identify himself, and that they’d find tickets for him.

He kept trying to avoid doing so but she would not take no for an answer, so he finally gave in and addressed the administrator, invisible behind his little glass window, with the message that he was Shostakovich. With a heavy Yiddish accent, the following retort came out:

- “You be a Sostakowitz, I be a Rabinowitz, you don’t know me, I don’t know you. . .”

7. Equation with Three Unknowns

Dad also liked recounting Shostakovich’s story about how in the spring of 1957, shortly after the so-called Hungarian events, he gave an exam on Marxism–Leninism. Actually, it was given by a professor of Marxism, but Shostakovich presided over it all as the Chair of the State Examination Commission of the Moscow Conservatory. Dad imitated the way Shostakovich used to tell it:

- It is a young girl's turn to answer. She is pretty, and preoccupied, thinking about something, well, about what all girls think about. She has addressed the question on the ticket she drew, but that's not enough for the Marxist, so he asks: "Forgetting WHAT". Shostakovich raises a left-hand index. "Caused events. . . WHERE?", and with his right index finger, he nails a mysterious something to the table. The girl, young and pretty, keeps thinking about what all girls think about and is completely lost. And the Marxist drudge stares at her and waits. And she doesn't say a word. "Well, the Marxist, he's human, too. . .". Shostakovich smiles and drums with his fingers the usual staccato on his cheek. "He's human too, he's human too, and he has to go to the bathroom, so he runs off to the bathroom. And I, well, I'm the Chair of the Commission, I'm Commission Chair, I'm Chair. He runs to the bathroom, and I give her an A,³ give her an A, give her an A". Shostakovich triumphantly scrawls three A's in the air. "After all, I am Chair!"⁴

8. Technical Flaws

Tales of successfully standing up to power are not as implausible as we fear. An attack usually presumes a victim's passivity is planned only one step ahead and, as a result, is not prepared to withstand a counterstrike. Dad used to tell of one such episode from the life of Soviet composers.

Shostakovich's Piano Quintet (in G minor, Op. 57) was first performed in 1940, in the Small Hall of the Conservatory, by the composer himself and the Beethoven Quartet. The dress rehearsal was attended by the musical elite, including Aram Khachaturian, who already held the rank of Deputy Chairman of the Organizing Committee of the Composers' Union. The Quintet was a success, and Khachaturian was one of the first to come to the stage and congratulate the author. But he could not help adding a note of envious reservation to his praise:

- "Beautiful music, Dmitri Dmitrievich. Everything is splendid, except, perhaps, for . . . some very minor, purely technical flaws."

For Khachaturian, who was rumored to have had his compositions ghost-orchestrated by anonymous slaves, trying to find technicality faults in the work of Shostakovich, the undisputed master of the symphonic form, was a careless misstep.

- "Right, right, sure, technical flaws, technical flaws, they must be eliminated by all means, eliminated, eliminated immediately!". Gesticulating vibrantly, Shostakovich started summoning the performers. "Dmitrii Mikhailovich, Vasilii Petrovich, Sergei Petrovich, Vadim Vasilievich, we have been informed that technical flaws have regrettably crept into the Quintet's score! Aram Ilyich was able to identify unfortunate technical flaws, technical flaws. He's ready to point out to us where they are. Dear Aram Ilyich, please, please kindly proceed to the instrument. We can't let an imperfect composition, an imperfect composition to see the light of day, can we?!"

Khachaturian tried desperately to sneak away, but Shostakovich kept dragging him to the piano, herding the members of the quartet around them, until Khachaturian finally managed to break out of the encirclement and flee.

He might have gotten away with the dubious compliment if had he paid more attention to its technical side—the choice of words.

9. A Frame Structure

When Dad heard people say that some new Soviet absurdity could not last, he would recall how, in 1918, his classmate (at the time, both were eleven years old), whom he happened to meet at a streetcar stop, declared the following from the footboard:

- “Well, this can’t go on much longer!”

He was also fond of quoting Shostakovich, who on similar occasions would say the following:

- “There were the Middle Ages. Can’t you see?! AGES!!”

Nevertheless, my Dad, who was born ten years before the Soviet regime, managed to outlive it by the same number of years. He loved symmetry. And, as is well known, in Russia, you need to live long.

Shostakovich (1906–1975), on the contrary, fell short by at least a dozen years. In a mathematical sense, there is also symmetry, not of the mirroring sort, but in a less prestigious, translational sort of way.

10. Allegro Mafioso

In the musical life of the USSR and its national republics, the main professional squabbles took place at the annual plenums of the respective Composers’ Unions, where works written during the year were auditioned and awarded. It was a life-or-death struggle.

At one plenum in the Socialist Republic of Georgia, two composers had reached the finals—Gia Kancheli (1935–2019) and his then-rival, whose surname I do not remember, although my Georgian friends, who told the story, had certainly mentioned it. Alas, history is written by the winners.

The two competing symphonies, who seemed to be of equal value, were going toe-to-toe, but Kancheli had a secret weapon. The orchestra was conducted by a friend of his, who agreed to subtly fix the performance in his favor.

How? By playing the rival’s symphony a tad slower.

That did it. In musical combat, as in any other, every second counts.

Lev Mazel (1907, Königsberg, East Prussia, now Kaliningrad—2000, Moscow) was a musicologist, Doctor of Fine Arts (1941), professor at the Moscow State Conservatory, member of the Soviet Composers’ Union, and Honored Art Worker of the RSFSR (1966).

In 1930, he graduated from the Mathematics Department of the Physics and Mathematics School of Moscow State University and, at the same time, from the Department (MUNAIS) of the Scientific Composition Faculty of the Moscow Conservatory (class of Prof. Anton Alexandrov). In 1932, he completed postgraduate studies (with Prof. Ivanov-Boretsky).

From 1931 to 1967, he taught at the Moscow Conservatory (since 1939 Professor, in 1936–1941 Head of the Musical Theory Department). He also taught at the Musical Rabfak (1932–1933), at the Musical College (1932–1934), at the Central Musical School (1941–1942), at the Moscow Conservatory, at the Ural Conservatory (1942–1943), at the Gnesin Musical and Pedagogical Institute (1945–1949), and at the Gnesin Institute of Music and Pedagogy (1945–1949). From 1945 to 1949, he attended the Gnessin Institute of Military Conductors, and from 1949 to 1956, he became the head of the Department of Music Analysis and History. From 1933 to 1936, he was a researcher at the Research Institute of Music, and from 1943 to 1948, he was a researcher at the Research Cabinet at the Moscow Conservatory. From 1966 to 1972, he was a member of the editorial board of the journal “*Soviet Music*”.

Mazel has authored numerous studies on different musical styles (Beethoven, Chopin, Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, and Shostakovich), musical syntax and forms, melody, harmony, musical aesthetics, and methodologies of music analysis. See: (Mazel 1952, 1959, [1947] 1960, 1960a, 1960b, 1962, 1965, 1971, 1972, 1978, 1983; Mazel and Zuckerman 1967).

Mazel’s scholarship combines a detailed analysis of the means of musical expression with a holistic coverage of the structure and a broad historical and stylistic approach to the studied phenomena (the method of ‘holistic analysis’). In them, many properties and regularities of musical language and musical forms, as well as general principles of artistic

impact in their application to music, received rigorous scientific disclosure. Mazel is the author of the 'theory of expressive possibilities'; he introduced the concepts of 'artistic discovery' and 'themes of the first and second kind' into musicology. The corresponding subjects were also researched by other scholars: (Asaf'ev 1971; Berkov 2015; Blacerna 2023; Boatwright 1956; Bobrovskij 2024; Hanninen 2012; Kholopov 2006; Kholopova 2010; Naumenko 2005; Olejnikov 2024; Schüler 2005; Sokolov 2004; Viljanen 2020; as well as my own several studies and memoirs: Zholkovsky 1984, 2016, 2024).

Through his methodological reflection, Mazel achieved a rapprochement between musical theory and aesthetics, thus enriching musicology with new philosophical approaches and discoveries. Figures 4–8.



Figure 4. Leo Mazel, *Frédéric Chopin*, 1947.

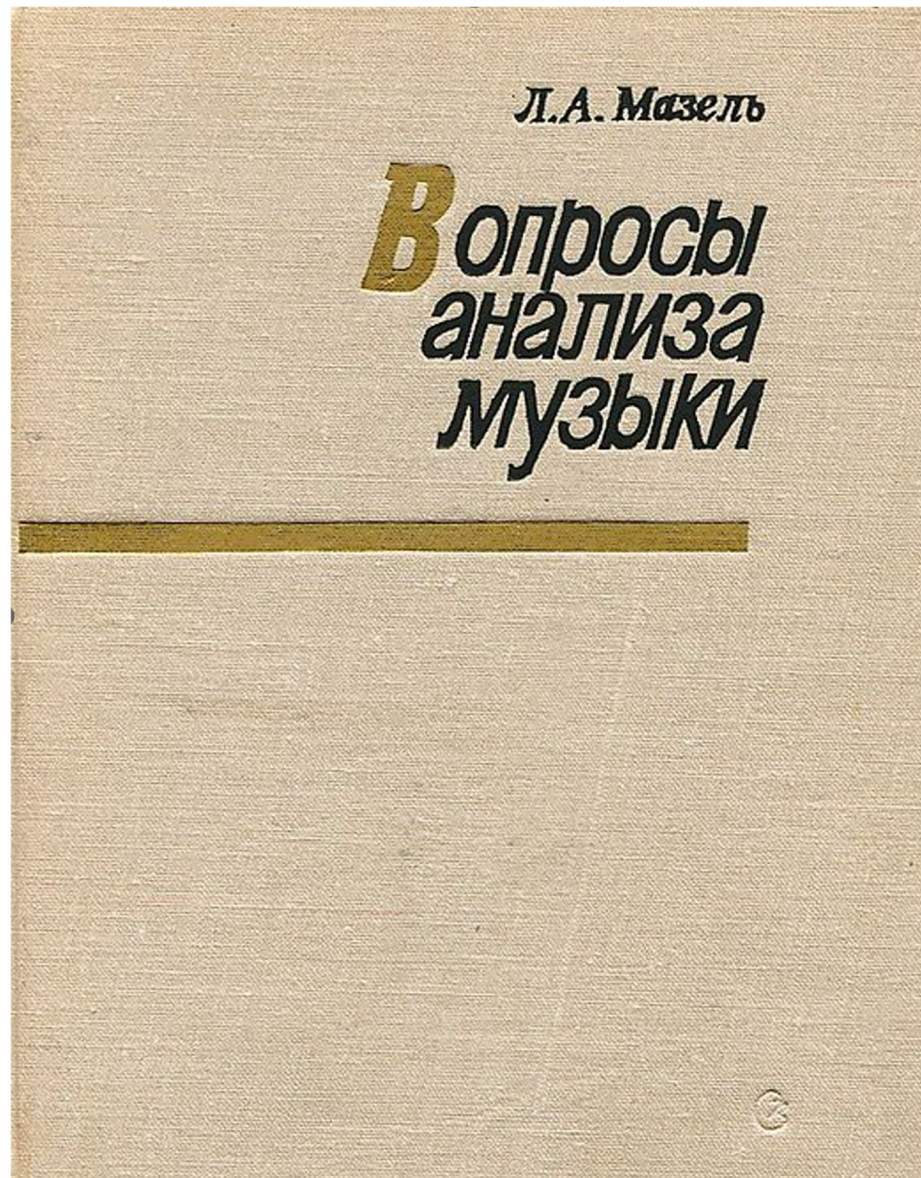


Figure 5. Leo Mazel, *Problems of Musical Analysis*.

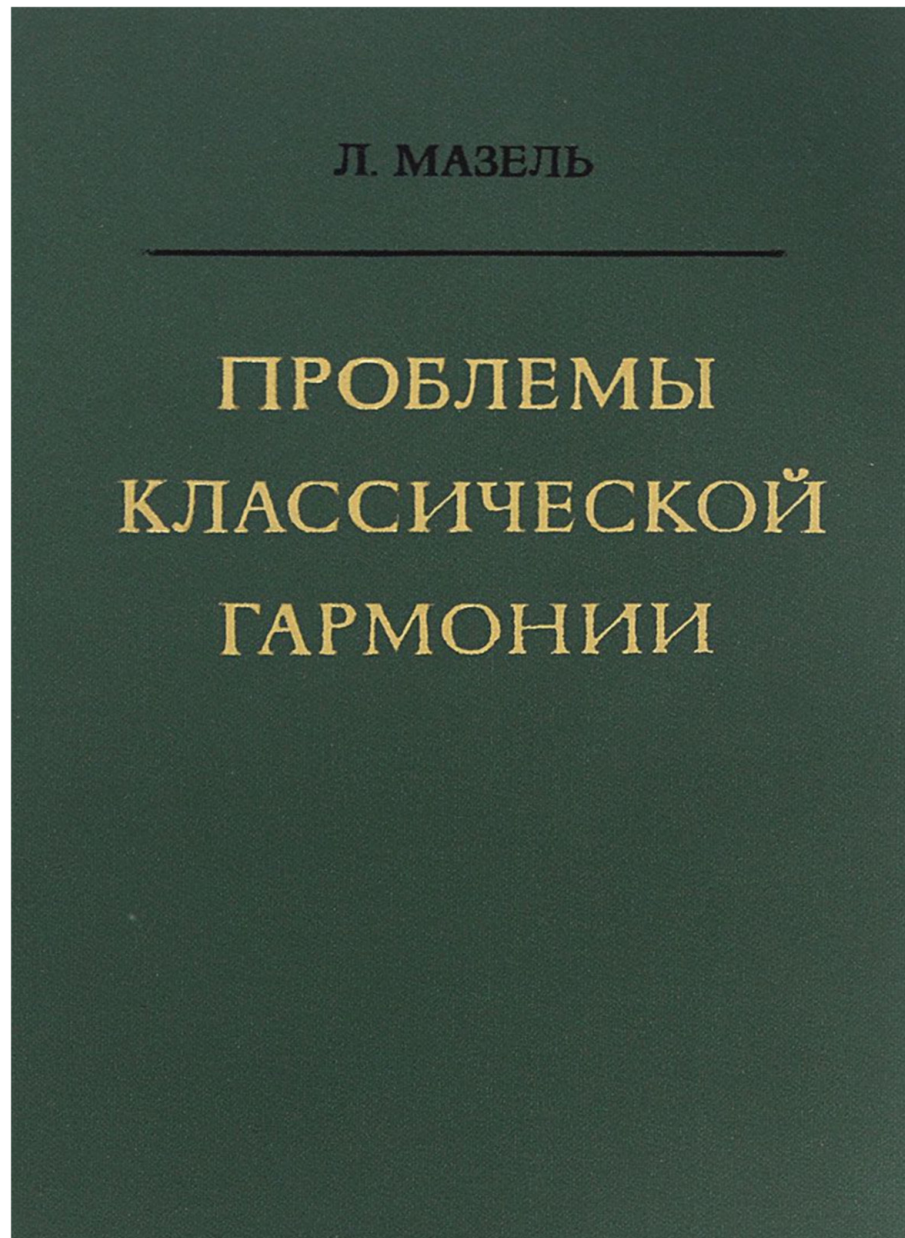


Figure 6. Leo Mazel, *Issues of Classical Harmony*.

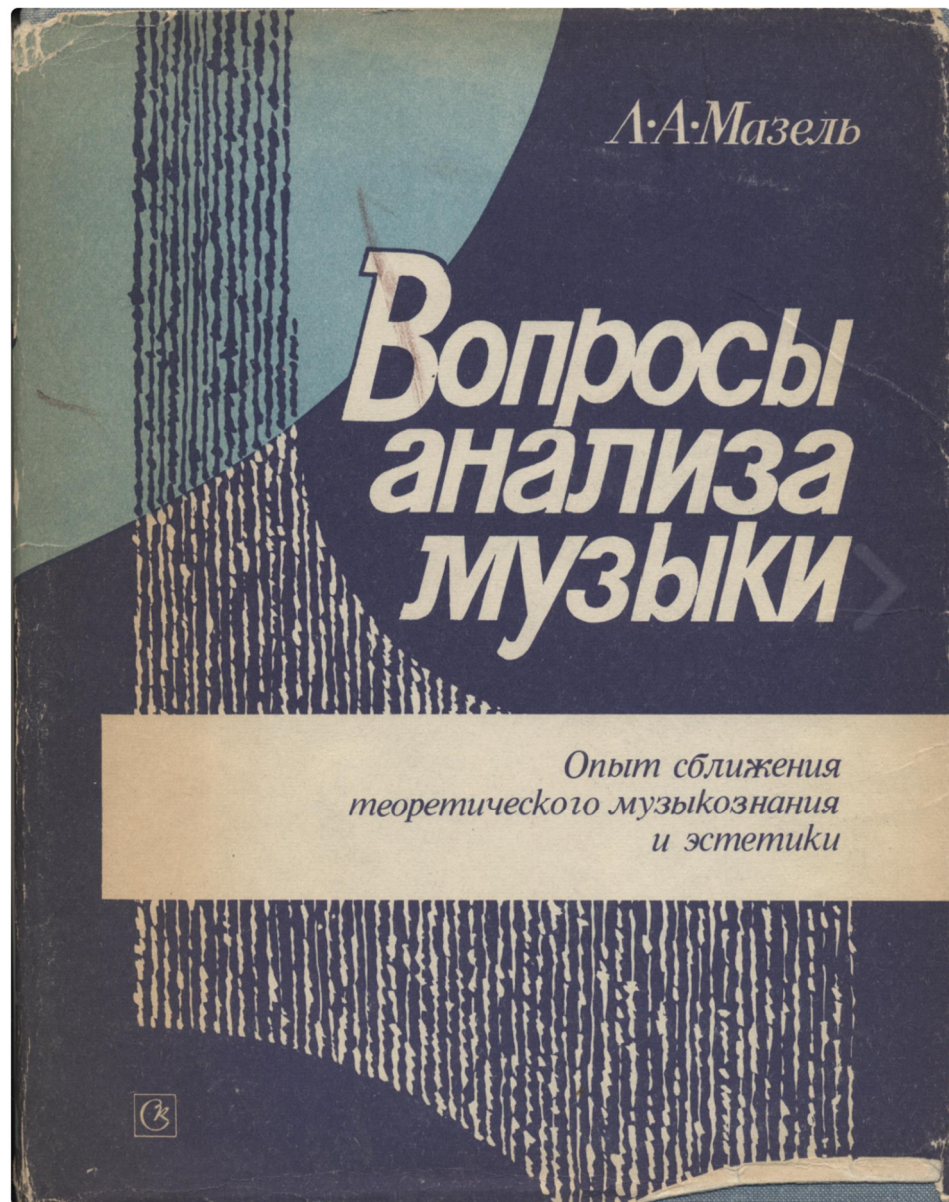


Figure 7. Leo Masel, *Issues in musical analysis: Theory of music and aesthetics*.



Figure 8. Leo Masel, 1990s.

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Notes

- ¹ Some of the recordings, taped and uploaded by Mikhail Arkadiev, can be accessed here: <https://youtu.be/jhH2kGTdyWM>; https://youtu.be/JfOK5j_nVQ. (accessed on 10 December 2024).
- ² Aleksei Stepanovich Ogolevets (1894–1967).
- ³ The actual top grade in the Russian system of grading is not A, but 5.
- ⁴ The story goes back almost seventy years now and the today's reader might need some prompting as far as the three implied variables are concerned. WHAT the pretty girl is, according to Shostakovich, thinking about takes no Sigmund Freud to figure out. WHERE the recent dramatic events had taken place was no mystery at the time—in Hungary. The crux of the trick question was ignoring WHAT made the anti-Soviet uprising possible. And the sacramental formula read something like: “ignoring the necessity of class-struggle vigilance”.

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