



R E M E M B R A N C E

Dmitri Smirnov, 1948–2020

BY VERA SERDECHNAIA

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IT is hard to imagine that Dmitri Smirnov, an enthusiast and inspired man, a true connoisseur of William Blake, has left our world. He passed away in Watford Hospital from COVID-19 on 9 April 2020.

Throughout his life, Smirnov translated Blake into two languages: Russian and the language of music. He was born in Soviet Minsk into a family of opera singers, and chose the profession of composer. Together with his wife, Elena Firsova, he wrote diverse, sophisticated music, “not representative of the work of Soviet composers.”¹ As a result, they fell into the so-called “Khrennikov’s Seven,” a blacklist of seven composers that blocked their road in Soviet music. However, Smirnov diligently persevered with music, and it was Blake who stretched a new horizon for him. In 1989, his operas on Blake’s poems were staged abroad: *Tiriell* in Freiburg (Germany) and *Thel* in London. In 1991, he and his family moved to the UK. He set to music more than forty works of Blake, which were performed all around the world. Jason Whittaker wrote that the work of Smirnov

1. “Khrennikov’s Seven,” *Wikipedia*, quoting Gerard McBurney quoting Tikhon Khrennikov. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Khrennikov%27s_Seven&oldid=941172738>, accessed 4 May 2020.

“demonstrates one of the deepest and most impressive engagements with Blake among the works of any composer.”²

Smirnov began translating Blake into Russian in the 1970s. At that time he translated all the *Poetical Sketches* and made a handmade book. In the late 2010s he began issuing volumes with Amazon Publishing. By 2020, he had translated almost all of Blake’s lyrics and poems; only *Vala* remained unfinished.

I worked with some of his manuscripts, as an editor and as a proofreader. We had creative debates about the meanings of this or that phrase, about transferring Blakean concepts to Russian, about capital letters (I often insisted on lower-case in the Russian version). In these discussions, he showed himself a thoughtful and persistent person, attentive to other people’s opinions.

Smirnov took two crucial steps in translating Blake into Russian. First, he did not choose “the best” from Blake, as translators often do, but interpreted books sequentially and as a whole, recreating complex figurative and semantic connections. Secondly, as a musician, he was guided by the exact conveyance of the rhythms and melodies of the original; this allowed him to catch the musical component of Blake’s works.

He was a restless interpreter, always striving to improve. For example, he wrote five Russian versions of “The Tyger.” In his article “Five Tygers,” he notes: “The deep and ambiguous meaning of the poem here is in perfect harmony with its poetic embodiment, its incredibly vivid imagery, and special sound pattern: expressive verbal melody, clarity of the characteristic rhythm, sonorous roll calls of rhymes, and amazingly rich orchestration, which is immediately determined by the rolling *RRRR* in combination with solid *TTT* and *BB* of the first line.”³

Smirnov also wrote a biography of Blake. The first edition was published on Amazon (2016); the second at the Magreb publishing house in Russia (2017). This is the first monographic biography of Blake ever written in Russian, very detailed, with lots of references, composed by a true connoisseur of the subject. Translation experience gave Smirnov a strong grounding, and the biography grew out

of his deep knowledge of Blake’s texts and paintings, as well as the historical situation.

Despite the fact that he translated almost all of Blake and that his translations may be considered the best, he is not widely known among Russian readers. On the one hand, this is because of the authority of Soviet translations by Marshak, Sergeyev, and Toporov, and on the other because Smirnov wasn’t much published in Russia. His large publishing project in the last years of his life was on the Amazon platform and simply could not make its way into Russian bookstores. In the late 2010s, however, he published with Magreb a translation of *Jerusalem*, which is accurate, clear, musical, and accompanied by an extensive commentary, as well as a dictionary of concepts and names. Currently, Magreb is preparing to publish his *Milton* translation. These are the first complete translations of these prophetic books into Russian.

Blake occupied a key position in Smirnov’s life, but that wasn’t the only side of it. He wrote music and poetry, books and articles about music, taught young composers, translated other poets, raised children, and took care of his house in St. Albans, where the family had found a new home in the UK. He was talented, cheerful, hospitable, and enthusiastic. The loss is irreparable.

I will give a few phrases from his diaries, published in Russian, letting us hear his voice again:

When I was three years old, I used to go up to the piano, press the right pedal, and gently touch the keys in different places on the keyboard. At the same time, I imagined some fantastic pictures. Sometimes I repeated the same combination of notes for a long time. Mom and Dad called it “Dima’s Song.” Unfortunately, they did not bother to write it down or remember it, but I still wonder what it was.

Since April, my relationship with Lena Firsova has been developing so rapidly that I soon realized that I would not go anywhere, and that my place was next to her. From Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* (her favorite book) I chose the most beautiful passage of “Eternal Shelter,” wrote music on it (op. 10), and presented Lena with the dedication. ... Starting from this moment, almost everything that I did or wrote was connected with Lena and dedicated to her.

When I visited Lena and Dima in September 2019, I asked Lena if she was homesick. She replied that she was not homesick at all, and that the house in St. Albans reminded her of the eternal calm shelter that the Master and Margarita obtained at the end of Bulgakov’s novel.

2. “Blake and Music,” *The Reception of William Blake in Europe*, ed. Sibylle Erle and Morton D. Paley (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) 2: 674.

3. “Пять Тигров [Five Tygers],” *William Blake, Songs of Innocence and of Experience / Песни невинности и опыта*, trans. D. Smirnov-Sadovsky (St. Albans: Meladina Book Series, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016) 167 (in Russian).

I have long been convinced that creativity, creation, is almost the only thing that justifies our existence and gives it meaning. I establish my understanding of the essence of art and music on the simple idea that the destruction of the old and the abandonment of the achievements of the past carry little positive in themselves, and that the creator's task is to create something new based on the synthesis of all that is valuable in the past.

Creativity is ... a totally incomprehensible thing. Why is it so important for a person? Why is he ready to sacrifice everything for it? Why is he so happy, creating his tiny illusions, dying often as quickly as they arise? He is already blind, and nevertheless paints his landscapes; he is already deaf, and composes quartet after quartet. Why?

How to compose music? You need to set yourself up so that you enter a mystical space, listen, try to understand and accept its laws, and then, trying not to violate them, use your careful steps to find your own path in it. If this succeeds, the music makes itself, and if you take the

wrong step, the magic disappears and the music doesn't work.

Midlife, when is this? When are you 30 or 40? But another week, and I'm 57—not a middle, but vice versa. I am quite an old man, and cursed death is just around the corner; but where does this calmness, joy, a feeling of youth and happiness, come from? Everything is fine, and there is no need to persuade yourself—life goes on, music is being composed!

Editors' note: Dmitri Smirnov's articles for the journal are "My Blake Part 1: In Russia," vol. 51, no. 4 (spring 2018) and "My Blake Part 2: In England," vol. 52, no. 1 (summer 2018), from which the images here come.

