Gabrielle Cornish 00:00
The most influential music in the everyday lives of Soviets around the country was — it wasn't Shostakovich. Or at the very least, it wasn't Shostakovich's symphonies. Everybody knew Shostakovich but they were listening to, you know, bards like Vladimir Vysotsky and Bulat Okudzhava and pop songs sung by Joseph Kobzon or a Edita Piekha — this was the music that was being played off of balconies with guitars or in living rooms on the record player, on the radio. And so we've just kind of missed this huge swath of listeners.

00:41
[Music]

Will Robin 01:02
So, when I used to teach the final semester of the traditional music history sequence, which went from 1800 to the present, I ended up making one very specific rule for the final paper for which students could really otherwise write about any topic in post 1900 music, no papers about Shostakovich and Stalin. Because before that I would get out of the 50 or so students in the class probably seven to 10 papers about Shostakovich his fifth symphony and how it was related to Stalin, or Shostakovich's cello concertos, and Stalin or Shostakovich is glockenspiel, writing and Stalin. At worst, these papers would regurgitate a lot of debunked myths, at best, they would simply retread the same ground. And despite this being a hugely important topic in musical history and scholarship, I was getting a little bit tired of reading about it over and over again. That's also because the Shostakovich and Stalin dynamic symbolizes the broader way we often understand 20th century music, and especially that of Soviet Russia, looking at big name composers and how their work reflected big political movements. And that's a really important way to study musical history. But it's not the only way to study musical history. And it's also not the only way especially to study Soviet musical history. And one of the ways that I've been learning and thinking differently about the history of music in the Soviet Union, which is obviously an important topic, especially given what's going on in the world right now, as a result of the post Soviet Union is through reading the work of Gabrielle Cornish, who is Assistant Professor of musicology at the University of Miami's Frost School of Music. Dr. Cornish's scholarship imagines a different kind of history of everyday Soviet citizens living their lives in engagement with sound and with music. And by sound and music, I don't mean the symphonies of Shostakovich, or Prokofiev. But instead navigating noise abatement policy, or the weird but fascinating government attempt to put synthesizers in everybody's home. Dr. Cornish is my guest today on Sound expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin, and this is a podcast in which I talk to other music scholars about their research, and why it matters. So I hope you really enjoy our conversation today.

03:28
[Music]
Will Robin 03:40
So this is kind of like a little bit of a long winded question to start off with, but, you know, it's kind of about your trajectory as a scholar, which is you work on music in the Soviet Union. And, you know, when I like think about the areas of research I want to work on, I kind of tend to look for areas that don't feel very crowded with like big names scholars and big debates. And I, you know, I want some freedom to kind of carve out territory. And that's definitely not the case with music in the Soviet Union. Like you have a lot of big names, including the late Richard Taruskin very active in this field, you have some, you know, very political viewpoints, you have a lot of established scholarship and a lot of new scholarship. And like you also have some significant cultural and language barriers around doing the research yourself. So I'm wondering if you could just talk a little bit about how you got into wanting to work in this area, broadly speaking, as a musicologist,

Gabrielle Cornish 04:32
Besides the fact that I might be a masochist? [Will laughs] The sort of long-winded origin story is that I didn't play an instrument in elementary school, we didn't have a program. And then in sixth grade, my grandparents dragged me, I think, pretty much kicking and screaming to the closest big metropolis which was Rochester, New York, to see the Philharmonic play, and they did Rachmaninoff's third piano concerto. And it was one of those moments where you can't really explain it, and to explain it would almost take away some of the magic of it. And the next concert in the program, they were playing Shosty five. Shosty is the very scholarly abbreviation for Shostakovich, of course, and the program notes, I'm sure now if I went back and read these, I would hate them because they were all about — Shostakovich was a secret dissident and hated Stalin! And this is his protest symphony! But as you know, an 11-year-old is like, Oh, that's really cool. And so I started playing, I'm a percussionist in a past life, signed up for middle school band, got to college, and was trying to figure things out. And my friends were in Russian 101, my freshman year, and I hadn't enrolled, but they were like, you've got to take it. This professor John Gibbons, who's still a dear mentor and friend, is just a ton of fun, and the language is immensely difficult, but it's worth it for him. And so the next year, you know, I drank the Kool Aid, I started taking Russian and ended up with a Russian studies and music history double major. So musicology comes into this when I studied abroad in St. Petersburg, my junior year. And I should say Taruskin is the specter who's haunted my entire career. And, he had never been anything but but pleasant and very supportive to me, and I do have dear friends who miss him very deeply. But we had used the five volume Oxford history in our undergrad sequence. And I just found his writing so engaging and fun and polemical. And still do even though I disagree with some of the points he makes, you know, fairly frequently…

Will Robin 07:05
How could you not?

Gabrielle Cornish 07:06
How could you not, that's the point. And that was what was so exciting, I think as like a 19-year-old who didn't know anything about anything, was that you could write about any sort of historical moment and make it engaging and fun -- but also press buttons, and I think I have maybe a rebellious streak. And so I go to St. Petersburg to study for a semester. And there I'm reading Taruskin on Russian music, Defining Russia Musically, I read Simon Morrison's great biography of Prokofiev during the Soviet
years, I read Peter Smeltz’s Such Freedom If Only Musical, and at the same time, I’m going to concerts at the Mariinski. And I’m seeing the Mariinski Ballet do Firebird and Petrouchka and it was just this this really serendipitous confluence of interests and events and joy that led me to graduate study, which is not always the most joyful thing. But I think having that background that was both musical, music-historical, but also the cultural background of Russian studies and history that I had there, and the language proficiency, I was able to go back to Bashkortostan for a summer. And then I did a Fulbright year out in Siberia, to practice my language, and by the time I got to my PhD program, I was in too deep. Once you do a year in Siberia...

Will Robin  08:47
[Laughs] I was going to say... that's not usually the reason people go to Siberia. I don't know if there's a specific reason anyone goes to Siberia, but you would know more than I would.

Gabrielle Cornish  08:58
I had more than one Russian ask me if I had offended Obama [Will laughs], because they said, we thought it was only our government who sent people to Siberia. Yeah, so that led me to grad study and the fact that there were giants in the field, and that there were so many polemic and highly charged and highly emotional arguments, I think, also excited that maybe rebellious part of me. Fortunately, I kind of moved beyond the Stalin years as I was starting the dissertation process where there’s a lot more room to breathe. And one of the things that I had noticed when I was doing all of this reading for my directed study before I started writing, was that there were still... there was this really pronounced disconnect between what Soviet musicology was focusing on and what Soviet history was focusing on. So the musicologists writing amazing, amazing work were really focused on these composers and their compositional intents, and the politics of composition and music in the Soviet Union. Whereas Soviet historians were really focused on everyday life in the Soviet Union, in part because the archives opened up in the early 90s, and they were suddenly able to sort of really get at the sources. And to me, as simple as it sounds, I wanted to marry those two, I was a little bit sick and tired of the big-name composers, and really more focused on how everyday Soviets listened to the world around them. And I think maybe this came from having lived among so many ordinary Russians who just listen to the world around them.

Will Robin  10:39
It's clear that despite the fact that this is a crowded area, you're doing almost a fundamentally different kind of scholarship than Shostakovitch and Stalin studies, or Prokofiev and Stalin, or really any of these big-name composers. And I think that's probably signaled most clearly by the title of your book project, which is Socialist Noise, rather than socialist music. So can you talk a little bit about what that word means for you in your research, and how that has to do with this idea of everyday musical life versus these big heroic composers?

Gabrielle Cornish  11:15
For me, I always found it -- and this wasn't just in Soviet music scholarship, but in a lot of the scholarship that I was reading in grad school, I found it a little bit -- not disconcerting, but a little bit strange how we divorced our ears the moment we entered the concert hall from the ears that we had when we were out on the streets, if that makes sense. And so I wanted to think about how we bring
these listening contexts, midday traffic, noisy neighbors, into the concert hall, and vice versa. And so the word noise I think, is really interesting, especially in the Soviet context, because it's... in hearing it is a set of ethics. Think about the famous Pravda article, "Muddle Instead of Music," right? Where Shostakovich is denounced. Shostakovich isn't composing music, it's noise. It's cacophony. It's chaos. And so there are these ethical hierarchies that emerge in Soviet political ideology between music, sound -- which is sort of value neutral -- , and noise, which is bad, that continue to shape the Soviet government's policy around music, but also things like noise abatement, apartment construction, sound fidelity, throughout the 50s, 60s, and into the 70s. And so for me, the idea of a socialist noise. It's something that the Soviet government felt very strongly was unique from capitalist noise. And so in the book, I'm trying to trace these discussions that take place in the Soviet bureaucracy around how the country needed to sound different from capitalism, because socialism was a higher ethical and ideological system, a better system. At the same time, however, so many of these policies that were imagined and even begun to have been enacted at the governmental level, never really, to use a capitalist term, trickled down to the people. And so there's just this continued history of misfires and failures. They want to put a synthesizer in every home. Well, that doesn't happen. I don't know. I don't think you could do that. I think people probably would have protested if they're like, Okay, you've got your TV, your phone and your synthesizer. There's music that is composed to exalt the Soviet space program that never gets performed. There are all of these designs for noise abatement legislation, they want to build buildings with different insulation materials, they want to move every building so that it's 50 feet away from any major Boulevard, in the 50s and 60s, so that they're quieter. This doesn't happen. It's not cost effective. It's not practical, especially in the Soviet 70s When they're really hard hit from hard currency. And so as I follow these kinds of utopian aspirations, because that's what communism was, at its core. It was this utopian ideal that has yet to be fully realized, and certainly in the Soviet context, was never even close to realized. And I think we see that especially today when we look at the lasting effects of Soviet empire in countries like Ukraine, which are under attack. And so you've got these utopian aspirations, and then these very pragmatic and contoured and varied applications. And so I find that disconnect interesting, but also productive. These misfires are instructive, in many ways.

Will Robin 15:30
Let's talk about one specific case study, which you mentioned with this example of noise abatement in the Soviet Union and this emerging noise abatement policy in the 50s and 60s and 70s. What brought that about, this desire for the government to actually figure out a new solution to all the noise happening in the Soviet Union in this period?

Gabrielle Cornish 15:56
Well, the Soviet Union had always been noisy, just like everywhere is very noisy. Under Stalin, noise abatement legislation had really taken a backseat. Not even: it didn't really exist, it wasn't on the government's radar. And when Stalin dies in March 1953, and then Khrushchev after a period of infighting comes to power in '56. This is a period that we call The Thaw, Peter Smeltz writes really wonderful stuff on the Thaw especially, there's this moment where the entire Soviet state tries to recalibrate its ideology after Stalin. This is when Khrushchev's not-so-secret secret speech is given at the party congress and then leaked around the Soviet Union where he's denouncing Stalin's cult, a cult of personality, and they're really trying to recalibrate their values. And in doing so, they turn back to
Marxism-Leninism. This is true really across the board in the late 50s, in the Soviet Union is that as they're looking to reinvigorate the Soviet project, the Socialist project, they're turning to the past as a sort of uncompromised set of instructions. And so there are some ... not so much legislation around noise abatement, but there are practices around noise abatement in the 1910s and 1920s, for example, that revolve around the health of factory workers. Claire Shaw is a historian in the UK, who wrote an amazing book called Deaf in the USSR, where she talks about Deaf culture throughout the Soviet Union's history. And she pointed out to me that in the 1920s, they placed Deaf workers closest to the loudest machines.

Will Robin 17:51
Oh, that's interesting.

Gabrielle Cornish 17:52
Because the thought was, okay, well, under a socialist government, we need to care, not only about the bottom line, not only about productivity and output, like those horrible capitalists, but about the health of the worker. And so, in the 50s, there's very much this ... you've got this confluence of events, you've got the post war reconstruction period. So more people are in factories, there are more buildings that are being put up around the country, more apartments, more heavy machinery moving around. And you've got this return to -- well, what does it mean to be a socialist today. And so under Khrushchev, there are these doctors and health ministers and politicians and scientists and researchers, who realize that noise is deeply dangerous and harmful, at a certain level. They start by looking at this in factories, because again, a healthy worker is a productive worker. But then they expand to noise at home, on the streets, this sort of far reaching, all encompassing... because as one person points out, a worker only spends part of his day at work, the rest of it he spends at home, or sleeping. And if he's not able to sleep, if he's constantly annoyed by this barrage of noise, well, then he's not going to be a very good worker. And he's also not going to be very healthy, Unlike in, say, New York City where they don't care how loud they are, because to the capitalists, that's a sign of progress.

Will Robin 19:34
So this is a socialist idea versus what's happening in the US, or what they assume is happening in the US.

Gabrielle Cornish 19:40
Yeah, exactly. Right. And so the Soviet Union is as far as I can tell, the first country to institute noise abatement legislation at the federal level, because they're so concerned with this. Now, does it always work? Absolutely not.

Will Robin 20:00
You have all these really great tiny examples of how this... it's called The War on noise? Right? It kind of plays out like there's -- milk deliveries bother people so they replace all the metal jugs with with plastic jugs so that the early morning milk jugs aren't knocking around and waking people up. How did people experience... How did the everyday person in let's say, Moscow or St. Petersburg experience the noise of this period? And how did they experience the abatement or participate in this policy, from a less top down and more bottom-up perspective?
Gabrielle Cornish 20:37
Yeah, I love that milk carton anecdote because it's just so immensely specific in the way that...

Will Robin 20:43
they can't be cartons, right, they gotta be.... Now I'm trying to imagine a metal milk carton,

Gabrielle Cornish 20:48
I guess not. A jug. [laughs] we can get into the polemics of milk...

Will Robin 20:54
Yeah, well, maybe that's a different book.

Gabrielle Cornish 20:58
Milk in the USSR ...

Will Robin 20:59
Socialist milk?

Gabrielle Cornish 21:03
I would not want to read that book, if I'm being completely honest. [both laugh] Yeah, I mean, there are all of these really great, entertaining anecdotes that I promise you are especially entertaining and great when you've been reading just page after page of the minutes from some bureaucratic meeting on noise abatement, and then suddenly, it's like, ah, milk jugs, they're the real problem.

Will Robin 21:25
The All Union Conference on the problem of noise abatement, I wrote that down, it's like so perfectly socialist or whatever.

Gabrielle Cornish 21:33
Truly, this is why I think anybody who writes about the Soviet Union should automatically get like an extra 1000 words for any journal article submission, because all of the agencies have these just bizarrely long names. For the ordinary Soviet in the 50s, the biggest change was a move from the communal apartment model, where you've got five, six families all sharing an apartment, which is a very different context when it comes to privacy, but also sound and noise -- I don't even like sharing an apartment with my dog, sometimes when she gets noisy -- to the separate apartment, the otdelnaya kvartira which is under Khrushchev this major project. The idea is, look, the communal apartment was great in the 20s, continued through the war, we've got to rebuild tons of cities in the Soviet Union because of Nazi bombardment. Let's take this opportunity to make life more comfortable, more ergonomic for your average Soviet by moving them out of the communal apartment, into a separate apartment. And so very quickly, tons of these prefabricated buildings that take on the name khrushchoba, which is a play on Khrushchev's name, and then the word for slum in Russian. These prefab buildings -- five stories -- go up around the entire country very, very quickly. And they're putting families into their separate apartments. And people are really happy at first. What the architects didn't
necessarily consider is that putting buildings up that quickly, you cut corners, and they cut corners on noise. So while there's this new sense of visual privacy, sonic privacy is at an all-time low, because at least with the communal apartments, these were very old buildings with very thick walls. Yeah, you could hear the people when they were in your kitchen or in your bathroom. But these were sturdy structures, by and large, the khrushchobas are flimsy. And so as people start focusing on their own lives, their own material lives, this coincides with a huge production in radios and televisions and record players. Because again, the idea is -- look socialism, this is the more comfortable way of living. People forget that they have neighbors. And so you see this pivot, where people start to realize that the separate apartment is great. But we need to retrain people how to be sonically polite, basically, when they can't see their neighbors. Because people were like, I've got my own apartment, I'm going to blast music until 2am. Or I've got my own apartment, I'm going to stand on the balcony and play the guitar. And the way that people, at least in this war on noise, which was waged both at the state level and through citizen advocates at the grassroots level, people kind of forgot what it meant to be part of a broader listening community. These are the accusations that are being leveled. And so for ordinary citizens then the war on noise becomes -- okay, how do I maintain a certain personal ethics around my own material possessions, that is respectful of others? I don't know if that answered your question.

Will Robin 25:12
Yeah, absolutely. That's fascinating.

Gabrielle Cornish 25:13
We started with milk jugs, then moved to ethics. [Will laughs] Story of my life.

Will Robin 25:18
So there's another chapter in the book that overlaps with a really fascinating article you have recently out in the Journal of the American Musicological Society that deals with how the Soviet state sponsored electronic music in this period, and the electronic music that the Soviet state is sponsoring is not the high art Stockhausen, Babbitt academic long-tone scientific stuff, it's state sponsored synthesizers playing this middlebrow pop music. Can you talk a little bit -- I mean, you mentioned this idea of the synthesizer in every home; can you talk a little bit about how this came to be? Why the government was interested in doing this?

Gabrielle Cornish 26:01
Yeah, middlebrow is a very kind way of putting it because a lot of the music that ended up being produced by the All Union Radio Ensemble of Electro musical instruments again, another name. It's glorified elevator music.

Will Robin 26:18
Yeah, I listened to some of it, it kind of sounds like the worst kind of video game music,

Gabrielle Cornish 26:22
The worst kind of video game music, though I love it. This is the thing is that I'm more intellectually fascinated by what I might call bad music than I am by good music. Maybe I should work that out in therapy, I don't know. [Will laughs] It really coincided with the space race. So Sputnik orbits the Earth in
In fairly quick succession, the Soviet Union sends a couple of dogs including the first dog Laika, my dog is named after this Laika, into space. And then Yuri Gagarin becomes the first man to orbit the Earth in 1961. The Soviets also put Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman to orbit the Earth in 63, beating the US by 20 years. So the first woman the US sent out was, I think, Sally Ride in 83. And they were so clueless they sent her -- it was a five-day trip, they sent her with 300 tampons, because they're like, that should be enough. So for the Soviets, the space program was culturally so significant. It was the triumph of Soviet socialism. We put a man into space before the capitalists did through our own hard work and ingenuity. And it was one of those moments where the sort of ... a rare moment frankly, in Soviet history, where the political ideology, the utopian aspirations actually aligned with the lived experience, by and large, of millions of Soviets, this was a truly triumphant and joyful moment. The flip side of this, of course, is that whoever achieves superiority in space also achieves military superiority. We're in the Atomic Age, satellites are starting to be launched, this era of communications is approaching. And so to the Soviet government, this is important on a cultural and a political level. The question then become, how do we prove that we are the country that was worthy of producing Sputnik, worthy of sending Gagarin into orbit in more realms of ordinary, everyday life. And so in music, it was synthesized music that really came to emblemize the space age in the Soviet Union. And this is not uncommon, we can look at like, the electronic score of Forbidden Planet, for example, in the US, but the idea was, if we're beginning this new era in human history, we need a music to fit. So they turned to synthesizers. And there is this long history of electronic music in Soviet and Russian history. The Theremin was invented by, we always anglicized him as Leon Theremin. But Lev Termen was the Soviet Russian inventor of the Theremin. And so there's also the sense that -- we invented electronic music, which is not true, but we invented electronic music. How do we return to that again, it's another one of these flashbacks to the 1910s and 1920s that happened in the 50s. How do we return to that and become the world's leader in electronic music again, and their answer is just the worst most anodyne electronic Muzak you can imagine, and yet it was ubiquitous. People didn't really pay attention to it. But it was piped into speakers and public squares in parks in malls, even as far as I can tell from one source into libraries from time to time, I think maybe not into the reading rooms, but maybe in the cafeteria of these libraries. And everybody knew this music. They didn't know who wrote it, they didn't really know anything about it. It predates Brian Eno's ambient music by like 20 years. And so it was ubiquitous in the Soviet soundscape, or sonic landscape. And there was this idea that this music, again, as simple as it was, was a mark of care for the citizenry, of comfort. We don't need great symphonies anymore. We can just ... of course, they're still writing, maybe not great, but very big symphonies. But we don't need all of the struggle and intellectual turmoil of the past. The new Soviet Union in the 50s and 60s is an easygoing, ergonomically oriented, happy carefree Soviet Union. And so this music really comes to embody that. Now, there are a couple of attempts at a sort of Stockhausen-esque electronic music. Schnittke has this piece poem about space, which he thinks, you know, it's exalting the Soviet space program. He thinks it's going to be great, but it's decried as sort of modernist and formalist and it's never been performed. The Soviets go to Brussels in 58, for the World's Fair, they bring their synthesizers there, just show them off to the world.

**Will Robin** 32:04
This is the new model of the Ekvodin or whatever, that's what it's called?

**Gabrielle Cornish** 32:05
Yeah, the Ekvodin. They bring the Ekvodin to the World's Fair in Brussels in 58. What's also at the Brussels World's Fair, Le Corbusier's Philips pavilion with Varèse's score, and they hate it. They hate it. I mean, the responses are amazing.

**Will Robin** 32:27
Soviets hate the Western modernist electronic music.

**Gabrielle Cornish** 32:32
Yeah. And they're talking about Varèse's score as if it's like the gurgling of some unsightly monstrous stomach, and they hate it. Because for them, that music and that pavilion doesn't serve any purpose for the people. So again, here we get back to one of these core tenants of socialist realism is that the timbres can be new and electronic. But the music still needs to be intelligible, and it needs to serve a purpose. And so for them, Western electronic music, especially taking place in Germany and France and in the United States, it's just music for the sake of music, it's decadent, it's not something that you would actually want to listen to. So what good is it doing in society?

**Will Robin** 33:20
You mentioned that this kind of music was in some way, some kind of alternative path for socialist music making to the big socialist realism symphony. I'm wondering, in your course of working on all of these different areas of the relationship between music and everyday life and the Soviet Union, whether it's noise or weird state sponsored electronic music, how that then relates back to the classic Shostakovich and Stalin thing ... Do you feel like what you're carving out has something to say to the study also of the big composers and their big political agendas and their denunciations and their proclamations and all that stuff?

**Gabrielle Cornish** 34:02
I mean, I hope so, that's everybody's dream with their book is to speak to those sorts of historiographical and methodological discussions. For me, it's really about -- and this is not to diminish the very important role that "classical music," Western art music, symphonic music, whatever you want to call it, played in the Soviet Union, the levels of music literacy in the Soviet Union were much higher than they were even in the United States. And people really did go to the symphony. I don't know if it was actually factory workers were going to the symphony after a long shift. Certainly the government portrays them that way. But people went. Yet, the majority of the music that people heard was not Shostakovich or Prokofiev or Tchaikovsky or Rimsky-Korsakov. It was this awful elevator music or light music, they would call it legkaya muzyka, light music that was just meant to sort of entertain, and it's a far cry from the 1930s mass songs of Stalinism, where it's like, we're gonna get a whole children's choir to sing about how wonderful Papa Stalin is. It's pop music, it's variety music, and it's really meant to just sort of like, this is enjoyable music. You know, I don't even know. The highbrow middlebrow lowbrow distinction in the Soviet Union is messy. And I think Pauline Faircloth does a very good job tackling that, with say Shostakovich's symphonies. The idea wasn't that they were dividing between the highbrow symphonies of Shostakovich and the lowbrow popular music. The idea was, it's all middlebrow, because ideally, any Soviet citizen can understand a pop tune just as well as they can understand Shostakovich's 11th Symphony. And so ... what was the question?
Will Robin 36:09
How this kind of relates back to the studies of ... What's your answer?

Gabrielle Cornish 36:14
Yeah. So, the thing is, is that I don't want to just take like a majoritarian approach to history. But the most influential music in the everyday lives of Soviets around the country was — it wasn't Shostakovich. Or at the very least, it wasn't Shostakovich's symphonies. Everybody knew Shostakovich but they were listening to, you know, bards like Vladimir Vysotsky and Bulat Okudzhava and pop songs sung by Joseph Kobzon or a Edita Piekha — this was the music that was being played off of balconies with guitars or in living rooms on the record player, on the radio. And so we've just kind of missed this huge swath of listeners as Soviet music scholars, I think. I don't want to say that everybody has missed it. But attention has certainly been focused away from that. I think that's in part because if you want to write an intellectual history of Soviet music, you're going to get a lot more traction writing intellectual history of the composers who wrote plenty of essays about their music, and why they compose it in that way, and all of these big wig critics and musicologists who are intervening in these discussions. But I think a cultural history of Soviet music really needs to take into account what people were actually listening to, especially people outside of the intelligentsia, because a lot of the Soviet scholars who are read in Western Europe and in the United States, or have emigrated to Western Europe and the United States, are now teaching in universities, were members of the intelligentsia. And I say that as a proud member of the American intelligentsia, who has a cushy tenure track job. And so these are the stories that they were telling. I had a Russian professor in grad school, Ana Alexandrovna. She was like the mean, but caring grandmother I always wanted. She was like, well, your project sounds fascinating. But I never listened to this music because it wasn't cultured. We didn't go to rock shows. We went to the symphony. So there's this sort of, I don't want to say elitism, but...

Will Robin 38:40
Cultural stratification?

Gabrielle Cornish 38:41
Yeah. Cultural stratification and selection bias, frankly.

Will Robin 38:46
That's interesting. What did the archival research for this work look like? Where are you going to find information about state sponsored synthesizers or noise abatement policy? What does it look like to go through that material?

Gabrielle Cornish 39:03
[Laughs] This all comes back to how I might actually be a masochist. It was difficult in many ways. In large part, just because I did most of my archival work in Russia: in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and then Kazan, which is the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, which is the semi-autonomous republic within Russia. Russian archives are notoriously unfriendly. I know that may come as a shock for people who are accustomed to the stereotype of the unfriendly Russian, but you're not allowed to photograph things. It takes three days for your materials to get delivered. There were some archives where there were outlets everywhere, but you weren't allowed to actually use the outlets to charge your computer.
because they're so underfunded that they couldn't spare the money to pay for that electricity. So I say they're kind of unfriendly, but also, the archivists in Russia are working incredibly hard for basically no money. And so I would be cranky too -- I am cranky. Just the logistics were difficult. When you get into Soviet bureaucracy, and the structure of the Soviet government, it's this labyrinthine... it's just there's so many silos and divisions and ministries of different things. And it's, I swear to God, the Soviet government was designed by MC Escher, because you'll go down a rabbit hole, and then suddenly, you're back at the Ministry of Culture, you don't know how you got there. So navigating that was a challenge in itself, because -- and this is part of, I think, the model of cultural production that I'm talking about in this book, The All Union Radio and Television, who were hosting this ensemble of electro musical instruments, were not talking to the composers' union, they didn't start talking to each other until the very late 60s, when the composers' union was like, Wait a second, those TV guys have been putting out a lot of music that we haven't had any say in, maybe we should do something about that. And so these divisions mean that you have to do a lot of extra legwork to try to get, I wouldn't say the whole story, because we never have the whole story, but at least as much of the story as you can. But they're also really revealing in the mechanisms of cultural production in the Soviet Union. Now to try to temper these state archives, I also turned to oral history interviews, and private home archives, basically. So it's funny, I always joke the Soviet state... the Russian state archives, they're very specific, you've got your fund, you've got your box, you've got your folder, you've got your page, it's all very set out, clear cut. And then I would go to this widow's house, and she would bring me into her bedroom and show me in her closet three grocery bags filled with papers. And she was -- these were my husband's, you can look through them. Which is always ... I don't know how I cite that in a footnote, the third IKEA bag in Svetlana's closet...

Will Robin  42:27
[laughs] Bag two!

Gabrielle Cornish  42:29
But these personal archives as kind of chaotic as they can be are also super revealing. So I was able to look at the Theremin Center's personal archives, which are run by Andre Smirnoff, who writes about electronic music in the 20s and 30s. And then combine that with some of these oral history interviews, which I would certainly not say was my specialty, nor necessarily my strength, in part, just because I'm kind of naturally a shy person, but also a lot of .... what do I want to say here? Honestly, as a young woman, and I've talked with friends about this before, I felt much less comfortable going into an older Russian man's apartment by myself, to have coffee or wine and talk about his experience with this electronic music studio in the 60s, than I think some of my male colleagues do. And maybe that's just my own insecurities and fears. But I think also there's a very real difference in which we move through these spaces, I as a cisgender woman move through these spaces. So oral history is there. But you know, it's really more to be read against the archival material.

Will Robin  43:57
What has it meant to be... your research preceded last year, but what has it meant to be working on this project, given the current state of politics within Russia, around Russia? How Russia is affecting Ukraine... I should say attacking, not affecting.
I still struggle to put this into words, because it's still unfolding. And every day I wake up, I look at the news and I see that some other apartment in Ukraine has been bombed by the Russian military. It's really put a lot of my own work into relief for me, in the sense that when I say... when I've said Soviet in the past, really, I'm coming at this from a predominantly Russian definition of what it meant to be Soviet. And I can find the cracks in that with, say, the noise abatement practices in Tashkent, or in Lviv in Ukraine, for example, they said, Well, we're a very cultured sonic city. And so they had quiet zones throughout the city and things like that. But for too long, when I said Soviet I was really saying Soviet Russian, without ever thinking about it, because that's just the sort of thing's the privilege of studying the prevailing or hegemonic culture in that era. I was in Siberia in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea illegally annexed Crimea, I should say. And it was very tense. It didn't make sense. But it felt kind of just like, Okay, well, if it stops there, and people aren't dying, I guess, you know, the Russian Imperial culture has been there. That was an imperialist move, that I just was able brush off because it was not all Russians and Russian say, Oh, that's not people, that's politics, they divorce themselves from that. So it's made me really reevaluate my own biases and prejudices. In terms of logistics, I haven't been able to go back. I'm supposed to go... I had been planning actually to go to Kiev over spring break in March, that did not happen. And I was hoping to go back to Russia to just check up on some sources over the summer. Obviously, that did not happen. And with good reason, the last thing I want is for my US dollars to be entering the Russian economy these days. So just logistically, it's presented something of a challenge. I got some funding for a research assistant in Russia to go check on some sources. But because Russia has been cut off from the global banking system, I can't wire the money. So I have to figure out Bitcoin, cryptocurrency, which I've tried so hard, Will, to avoid figuring out -- and I don't know how I'm supposed to go to my University and say, could you reimburse me for 0.1 Bitcoin, please.

Oh my god, that's wild, wow!

So just on a logistical level, but none of that compares to what's happening every single day and every single night in Ukraine because of Russia's illegal and immoral war of aggression. It's put some of my public work, I think... it's given a certain salience to some of my public work, because for the first month or two after the invasion, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't write, I could barely teach. I was just constantly following all these channels on telegram and checking in with dear friends of mine in both Ukraine and Russia, all of whom, thank goodness are safe. Most of my Russian friends have fled Russia, because it's not like I was hanging out with Russian nationalists if I could help it. But writing and trying to not even recapture, because people have been telling this story of Ukrainian music. It just took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that I needed to tell that story too. So writing for the public has been one of the ways that I've tried to cope, frankly, with the horrors of what is actually going on. Putting on events, we did a teach-in for Ukraine, and just honestly, material support, so, you know, I know that with podcasts, you're supposed to give ads for like, BetterHelp or something. HelloFresh. But I would say that anybody who's financially able to should send money to Ukrainian relief organizations. I really like RAZOM, they're based in New York, but they're run by Ukrainians. They've got partnerships in Ukraine. None of it makes sense, because war is so incomprehensible and dehumanizing. And there
are amazing scholars in the field, Maria Sonevystsky, Adriana Helbig, who have been writing about Ukrainian music, and now, for better and for worse are being put into the spotlight, where it's sort of like, oh, you know, we finally have noticed you, can you do all of this work for us? So it's a really complex politics, and I'm still trying to figure out what my role is and can and should be in all of it. That was a very long answer, but it's also just ... it's really horrific, what is going on. And for me, at least, it's been a moment of personal reckoning and historiographical methodological recalibration.

Will Robin  50:00
Wow. Well, on that note, thank you so much. [both laugh]

Gabrielle Cornish  50:06
With that bummer, yeah.

Will Robin  50:08
Thanks so much for speaking with me. This is a really, really fascinating interview and I appreciate it.

Gabrielle Cornish  50:13
Thank you so much for having me -- long time listener, first time caller. So,

Will Robin  50:18
All right, thanks.

Gabrielle Cornish  50:19
Thanks, Will.

50:20
[music]

Will Robin  50:28
thank you to Gabrielle Cornish, who is currently assistant professor of musicology at the University of Miami's Frost School of Music, and will be joining the University of Wisconsin faculty in the fall. You can read more of her work at our website, soundexpertise.org. Big shout out to D. Edward Davis for his production work, you can check out his music on SoundCloud at warmsilence, thanks to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing all our episodes to make them more accessible. And this episode of sound expertise was recorded at the National Foreign Language Center with support from the University of Maryland School of Music. Next on sound expertise, what it means to write about a musical culture when it is actively under attack.

Unidentified Speaker  51:15
I gave a public lecture on how to understand the narratives about this war through music that hundreds of people attended, way more than have ever attended anything I've ever done. And so it felt like just trying to educate especially a North American or Anglophone population whose knowledge about Ukraine is so pathetically small, in part due to the very dynamics that we see playing out in this war.
Will Robin  51:45
See you then.