

War and Peace — КЛАВИКОРДЫ and фортепиано

Since retiring from recording I've had more time to devote to less onerous pursuits. A recent BBC mini-series of Tolstoy's "War and Peace" had irritated me so profoundly that I wanted to re-read the book for the first time in decades, so I took my old Modern Library edition off the shelf. The translation by Constance Garnett (1904), who had known Tolstoy but needed a dictionary for most of the task, seemed rather clunky. I persevered until the repeated references to clavichords became intriguing. Songs, in one instance a trio, being sung to a clavichord in a Russian ballroom in 1805? A description of a drunken soldier lying on top of the instrument during a performance convinced me that something was wrong. Was Tolstoy, writing 50 years after the events of the Napoleonic era, using an archaic word he didn't understand for period color? Could he have meant the harpsichord, which probably persisted in Russia even longer than elsewhere, but might have been referred to there as "clavichord", just as "clavicordio" used to mean "harpsichord" in Iberia? Could he have used the Russian cognate of *Clavier*, whereupon the translator, thinking of *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier*, employed its misnomer, which she knew from "The Well-Tempered Clavichord"?

I wanted another translation. The one which seemed to have the best academic credentials was published by Oxford University Press. It turned out to be a reworking by Amy Mandelker (2010) of the translation approved by Tolstoy himself: that of Louise and Aylmer Maude, which eventually appeared in 1922. I liked the fact that the editor had restored the long passages in French, and the foreword says she corrected some inaccuracies as well. But the clavichords remained clavichords throughout the book (with one exception, which didn't register at first reading; see below).

I googled "Russian clavichords", and a CD by Alexei Lubimov with exactly that title came up. There were even two versions, Russian and English; I can't read Cyrillic, but КЛАВИКОРДЫ was clear enough. There were two reviews on Amazon. A 1-star complained that the title was false; the instrument used was a bad piano, badly played. A 5-star reply said no, it was a clavichord, marvelously played by the distinguished Mr. Lubimov. When the disc arrived, it turned out to be a re-release of a 1986 LP on the suspiciously-named label Facsimile. The puzzle about nomenclature only became more obscure. Mr. Lubimov was playing fortepianos — whether antique or copies I couldn't determine. One was referred to in the liner as a "hammered clavichord"; another was a "broad-deck piano". I was clearly dealing with a far worse translation than the ones I had of Tolstoy. (I wrote a 3-star compromise review: 5 for Mr. Lubimov, 1 for the CD presentation.)

There was nothing to do but invoke the aid of my two Russian friends, colleague Ivan Rosanoff of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and former student Ekaterina Likhina. Katya checked her Russian "War and Peace" and reported that Tolstoy used either КЛАВИКОРД or the plural КЛАВИКОРДЫ (the latter for a single instrument) in all but two instances, where he used "fortepiano". In both those cases (Book 1, Part 3, Chapter 4 and Book 3, Part 2, Chapter 3) he is talking about the same instrument at Bald Hills, the country estate of the old Prince Bolkonsky, which is otherwise always a КЛАВИКОРД; and in the first case he uses both words in the same sentence. This seemed to indicate that КЛАВИКОРД(Ы) had a similar generic meaning ("keyboard") in Russian, at least before and during Tolstoy's lifetime, as *Clavier* has in modern German — and as it had in the 18th century when German writers were not confusing us by using it to refer specifically to the clavichord. But it also indicated that the translations of the cognate as "clavichord" were wrong, and that "fortepiano" was intended. And indeed, the translation widely said to be the most readable (Pevear/Volokhonsky, 2007) finally uses "fortepiano" in all cases where КЛАВИКОРД(Ы) occurs.

Confirmation of the former generic use of КЛАВИКОРД came later from Prof. Rosanoff, who also pointed out the parallel use of the plural for a single instrument in the old English word “virginals”, and from an article by Dorothea Demel (in *De Clavicordio VIII*, 2008). Confirmation that КЛАВИКОРД(Ы) continues to be misused for various instruments when more specific terms have long been available comes from the Lubimov CD and its positive reviewer, and from other references I came across. This is not surprising, given the ignorance about correct terminology often found even among Western professionals.

In the sentence where Tolstoy first calls Prince Bolkonsky’s keyboard instrument КЛАВИКОРД and a few words later фортепиано, p. 242 of the Oxford University Press version changes “fortepiano” to “clavichord” — whether intentionally (either by the original translators or the editor), in order to avoid a perceived inconsistency in the same sentence, or in accordance with one of the different versions made by Tolstoy himself, I know not. Tolstoy was not being inconsistent, as we have seen — just being more precise at the second mention.

Harpsichordists *do* know — or at least they should — that Wanda Landowska visited the elderly Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana, bringing her Pleyel along with her through the snow in a sleigh. Few know that she and her loquacious husband overstayed their welcome, and that when they finally left, the great author danced around his study singing, “They’re gone, they’re gone!” (cf. Martin Elste, *Die Dame mit dem Cembalo*, 2010.)