With his new book *Andrei Tarkovsky’s Sounding Cinema*, Tobias Pontara offers a welcome addition to studies on the most famous Russian director of the twentieth century, who, as Pontara notes, has attracted an enormous amount of critical attention in recent years from the likes of Russophiles, philosophers, literary critics, and film theorists. However, Pontara singles out, amidst this renaissance in Tarkovsky scholarship, a lack of attention from musicologists, a curious lacuna given the director’s wide-ranging use of music in his later films: everything from Beethoven and Bach to Swedish herding calls to bamboo flutes. Pontara intervenes as a music specialist not only to further texturize the scholarly consensus about Tarkovsky’s work through its soundtracks, but also to correct the record, which, as Pontara shows, is full of inaccuracies concerning what music Tarkovsky deploys and where he deploys it. Our understanding of Tarkovsky’s soundscape greatly benefits from the trained ear of an expert, whose careful findings demand an intimate knowledge of Tarkovsky’s films in a way that, in turn, likely limits this book’s appeal beyond Tarkovsky’s already devout fans, among whom Pontara proudly includes himself. He describes the ten years writing this book as his “personal Tarkovsky decade” (page 2).

The book’s first chapter, “Interpreting Tarkovsky’s Cinema through its Music,” argues for the necessity of accounting for Tarkovsky’s use of song in an interpretation of his filmography. Although this claim seems rather straightforward, verging on simplistic, Pontara demonstrates here not only how previous critics have failed to do this but, more importantly, how a more precise understanding of Tarkovsky’s soundtracks can help navigate the strange metaphysics of his cinematic worlds, which are always bouncing erratically between fantasy and reality, memory and dream, history and the afterlife. Offering a schematic narratological frame in which to situate film music, Pontara argues that music is most often encountered onscreen in several ways: diegetically (as part of the setting), nondiegetically (as part of the narration), and metadiegetically (as an auralization of a character’s invisible interiority heard by the character and the audience). Yet what makes Tarkovsky’s music so tricky and, therefore, so interesting is its uncertain diegetic relation to Tarkovsky’s worlds, which are themselves highly unstable. With a systematic approach to Tarkovsky’s music, Pontara contests, we can begin to pin down these interpretively slippery films.

The book then marches through a movie-by-movie analysis of Tarkovsky’s output, beginning with *Solaris* (*Solyaris*; 1972), a psychoanalytic sci-fi epic made as a retort to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and ending with *The Sacrifice* (Ofret; 1986), a film shot on a Swedish island immediately before Tarkovsky’s death and which follows a group of characters as they come to terms with the prospect of nuclear war. Pontara excludes from his analysis a potential chapter (or two), which this reviewer would have liked to see, on Tarkovsky’s earliest films: *Ivan’s Childhood* (*Ivanovo Detstvo*; 1962) and *Andrei Rublev* (1966). These films, Pontara argues, which were scored by the Russian composer Vyacheslav Ovchinnikov, are considerably more conventional in their handling of music than are Tarkovsky’s later
five movies. Together they demonstrate a more conventional use of music, as a classical Hollywood film might: mere background accompaniment. But, while these earlier films exhibit less musical variety, they do deploy song and sound in peculiar ways. One recalls, for example, the clinking hammers mixed with a peasant hymn in Andrei Rublev. The exclusion of these two films, moreover, makes Pontara’s analysis feel somewhat cut short. The advantage in analyzing a director who only made seven films is a critic’s ability to address them all.

A consistent theme—“refrain”—of Pontara’s monograph, is Tarkovsky’s use of metadiegetic music. In his chapters on Solaris and Mirror (Zerkalo, 1975)—the latter being Tarkovsky’s most personal film, the unconventional narrative of which recounts the memories of a dying poet through several critical moments in Soviet history—Pontara argues that Tarkovsky’s soundtracks initially strike us as nondiegetic: that is, as part of the larger narrative. Upon closer listening, however, it is reasonable to conclude that the classical music heard throughout these films—Bach, Pergolesi, Purcell—is, in fact, emerging from the inner worlds of Tarkovsky’s protagonists, focalizing their thoughts onscreen. The musical interludes in Mirror and Solaris are not complements to the story but auralizations of emotional interiority. Interestingly, though, the fragmented qualities of these films’ story-worlds, especially that of Solaris, complicates even that reading. Pontara contests, providing multiple counter-interpretations (an interesting move in a scholarly work), that Bach’s music in Solaris could just as easily be diegetic as nondiegetic or metadiegetic. The presence of tape recorders and stereos within Tarkovsky’s film-world suggests that those aboard the spacecraft are themselves listening to Bach. The uncertainty of the music’s origin, what Pontara calls its “hermeneutic pliability,” re-enacts the distortive properties of the planet Solaris, which confuse the coordinates of perceptual reality (page 22). Solaris, in other words, is an affront to the very notion of interpretability, emphasizing instead the unknowability of the world and our place in it.

Elsewhere, Pontara moves away from the metaphysics of Tarkovsky’s soundtracks and instead details their internal contradictions. He argues that Tarkovsky reserves classical music for scenes of deep attachment, experiences of intimacy, and heightened presence, whereas the recurrent electronic music heard in Tarkovsky’s films designed by the sound engineer Eduard Artemiev ([Mirror, Solaris, and Stalker [1979]]) is heard during episodes of unease and disaster. We hear examples of this synth music in Mirror when Tarkovsky’s maternal protagonist (played by Maria Terekhova) begins levitating, and during a sequence that uses footage of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. Artemiev’s electronic music stands in opposition to classical music, especially Bach, suggesting that Tarkovsky establishes an antagonistic relation between the two.

This more critical function of music, Pontara continues, plays an outsized role in two of Tarkovsky’s later works, Stalker and Nostalghia (1983). In Stalker, a film about a mysterious, wish-granting room at the center of a paranormal biosphere, Tarkovsky deploys Beethoven—juxtaposed against bamboo flute music which enters viewers and characters alike—to provide a staging ground for Tarkovsky’s messianic critique of the modern world. Mixing with the sound of an oncoming train, Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” is heard during the film’s final episode of a young girl moving glassware with her mind. Pontara argues that Tarkovsky disavows Beethoven’s triumphalist pathos, its exuberant faith in human history, by pairing it with inexplicable act of telekinesis. Stalker yields an aural-visual counterpoint that pits modernity (Beethoven, trains, cinema itself) against small acts of defiance that challenge the legibility of our shared life-world.

Then, in Nostalghia, Tarkovsky’s first film shot abroad during the earliest days of his exile from the Soviet Union, Tarkovsky again links Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” to a fierce critic of the modern world: Domenico, an Italian madman heralding the apocalypse. Yearning for a bygone world of elemental harmony before the Fall of Man, Domenico suffers from a temporal form of nostalgia, whereas Tarkovsky’s other protagonist, Andrei Gorchakov (an exiled Russian musicologist), suffers from a spatial form of nostalgia, i.e. a longing for his abandoned homeland, and is sonically affiliated with Russian folk hymns and Verdi’s Requiem. Astutely pointing out that many of Nostalghia’s shots take on the perspectives of space itself, Pontara concludes his chapter on Nostalghia, the book’s best, with a fascinating discussion of the “film-mind,” a kind of organic intelligence that self-reflexively (and musically) thinks about its own subjects onscreen.

The shortcoming of Pontara’s conclusions is, strangely, its interpretive modesty. Pontara raises a series of points about Tarkovsky’s soundtracks with which no scholar would disagree, nor even could disagree. That Tarkovsky uses Bach or Verdi to

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intensify the spiritual resonance of his movies, or uses dissonant synth music to heighten their inscrutability, or sonically critiques Beethoven’s triumphalist symphonies, is all rather self-evident. In his own writings on matters of art, spirituality, and the apocalypse, Tarkovsky himself forwards, implicitly and explicitly, many of the conclusions that Pontara arrives at. Thus, Pontara’s monograph at times reads more as a clarification of, rather than an intervention into, Tarkovsky’s soundtracks, offering the untrained ear useful facts and details that help us further texturize Tarkovsky’s cinema but not reimagine it.

This study would have been enhanced had it provided a more conceptual engagement with Tarkovsky’s use of music in its specifically Soviet context. The fraught introduction of sound technology into Soviet cinema, coinciding with Stalin’s rise to power in the 1930s, and Sergei Eisenstein’s theories of counterpoint and sonic color—topics that have attracted interest among recent scholars—would have yielded more rigorous insights into Tarkovsky’s music. Eisenstein was also a lover of Sergei Prokofiev and used his music in his work. How Tarkovsky engaged music differently than did his creative nemesis Eisenstein would have made for gripping reading and broken new ground. Yet perhaps that is a project for the Soviet film specialist and not the musicologist? Pontara, then, raises an interesting, if unexpected, analytical question: to what extent can—or should—context and aesthetics be disentangled in the study of Tarkovsky’s filmography?

Finally, Pontara’s last chapter, “Music, Meaning, and Troubled Utopias,” explores the neo-Romantic undertow of Tarkovsky’s work in its utopian longing for a fullness of being. For Tarkovsky, though, these utopias are always stymied by countervailing forces that ask us to reckon with our deeply flawed world. The shadow of utopia is most sensed in The Sacrifice, conveyed by what Pontara calls “transcendental diegetic music.” The recurrent “music” of a shepherd’s herding call enlarges the film’s diegesis, pointing beyond itself to an invisible, perhaps redemptive, realm. This refrain discloses a spiritual space existing on the periphery of Tarkovsky’s diegesis, thereby shaking our faith in the solidity of The Sacrifice’s world. Tarkovsky asks us to make the same leap of faith into the unknown that his characters must make to save themselves. He also re-enlists Bach during The Sacrifice’s opening and closing credits, suggesting that it aspires to the same level of spiritual profundity. Pontara’s view of Tarkovsky as a twentieth-century Romantic is a persuasive one in line with a revival of Romantic thought among late Soviet artists like the bard Vladimir Vysotskii, who also longed for a sense of transcendence outside his stagnated life-world.

In sum, Pontara offers a useful, “sound” volume into the growing cottage industry of Tarkovsky studies, benefiting especially from his incisive formal analyses, that anyone working on Tarkovsky’s filmography would do well to consult. The pleasure of Tarkovsky’s elusive cinema, Pontara demonstrates, comes not only from watching it but listening to it—listening to it in a way that helps reveal its secrets. We hear these strange movies better with Pontara as our audio guide.

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