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**Extract of a letter from Ambassador of Singapore Mr. Michael Tay  
to Professor Vladimir Martynov**

August 31, 2005

In undertaking the project to write a composition on Singapore, you have transformed a faint idea into reality, an improbable dream into certainty. Your visit to Singapore on 28 February to 6 March 2005 was an important first step to understanding the Singapore story – where we came from, where we are now, and perhaps, a glimpse of where we are going. When you returned, you spoke of Singapore as an 'ideal' and global city; that it had changed the way you thought of yourself as a 'traditionalist' working to rediscover and sometimes recreating the essence and nature of music past. You felt that Singapore was no longer an accidental cluster of ethnic groups but had moved beyond that to achieve something different and greater than the parts. You also wanted to know about the 'shadows' that must exist in Singapore, and I told you that perhaps, Singapore's 'shadows' would always be in the future because we could never take our existence for granted. Tatiana sensed the 'energy everywhere' and felt that for Singapore, the concept of time and history was not relevant, as we had shortened history and would always operate to confound evolution and time. I am happy that the visit enabled you to crystallise your thoughts and intuitions about Singapore.

My first encounter with your music was the premiere of the New Life opera at the Moscow International House of Music on 3 May 2003, my fifth month in Moscow. I remember sitting in the theatre, entranced and moved by the sounds and sonorities enveloping the hall. It seemed like you had carved out a sacred space for the music to evolve. It must have triggered something elemental in me, as I believed it was then that I began this musical sojourn into Russia.

In my mind, the composition that you will write on Singapore will help us to define and understand our own 'sacred space'. As a young nation, we are still searching for our own emblems that reflect and represent our musical life and heritage. Having a significant composer from a great musical civilisation to interpret and illuminate Singapore for Singaporeans will be an event that will bring us closer to our goal. Your composition will also represent a historic milestone, as your music will endure in both our musical histories. As you pointed out to me, it may also be the first time that

a foreign composer is being asked to compose a piece of music on another country.

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### **Why Martynov? Why Singapore?**

To change mental maps. In Russian eyes, Singapore is exotic and far away. 1930s' Russian cabaret singer Vertinsky sings of 'banana-lemon Singapore, distant and foggy, where the oceans howl and rage'. To Singaporeans observing modern Russia, it is the great unknown, a 'mystery wrapped in an enigma'. The Martynov composition will be key to developing a greater sense of awareness of Russia in Singapore and conversely, Singapore in Russia. It will bring the Singapore heart closer to the Russian soul and diminish the vast distance between the largest country and one of the smallest island-city states in the world.

Vladimir Martynov's *SINGAPORE. A Geopolitical Utopia* represents many milestones. First, it may be the first time that a composer from a great musical civilisation has been commissioned to compose a symphonic-scale work on another country. Second, the symphony will live on in the musical annals of both Russia and Singapore. It will bind both peoples in a musical web and over time, it will also be woven into the broader canvas of serious classical music. Finally, it is a poignant moment for Singapore, as we are still a young country imbibing the greatness of a civilisation, and through that, evolving our own future as a creative cultural nation.

Martynov, a musical icon in Russia, represents the generation of Soviet composers who splintered to the states of the former USSR. He ranks with those who have left for their national lands Arvo Pärt to Estonia, Giya Kancheli to Georgia, and Valentin Silvestrov to Ukraine. However, Martynov is less known to the West partly because these new nations have leaned Westward. As a group, however, all have suffered the long stagnation, the final upheavals of the Soviet Union and then, the birth pangs of the new Russia. Hence, time has stood still for Russian composers as the world remembers only Prokofiev and Shostakovich as the last musical giants of Russia. Compounding this is the dearth of information about Russian music and composers, as much of what is written is still in the Russian language. Fortunately for Martynov, there are still music festivals of his music in Russia. And an important part of the Martynov Project — the commission — is to re-discover some of that lost musical tradition.

More than most Russian composers, Martynov has the tempe-

rament to understand Singapore as a node of migrants from different civilisations – Chinese, Indian, Malay – which are in turn mutating and morphing into a modern global city. He possesses a profound sense of spirituality and with his eclectic compositional style, is very much attuned to unearthing the essence of a society through its underlying musical threads. His works are often described as spiritual and mystical, but his musical development has spanned different genres – rock, folk, serial music, minimalism, and Russian Orthodox religious music.

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### **Vladimir Martynov: Thoughts about a Country**

A country is not just the country that one visits and experiences at that moment. It is also the country that has already been and is yet to be, because the past and the future weigh on every fibre of its being. This is evident. But more than that, a country is also not merely that country which exists now, or existed before, or is yet to become.

It is at the same time, the country that does not exist, has never existed and will never exist. Ultimately, the presence of this non-existent country that has never been and will never be can be sensed at every moment of the existence of the country that we experience now. And it shapes our immediate perception and image of the country that exists.

As Lao Tze said, mystery and reality emerge from the same source. This source is called darkness. Darkness born from darkness. The beginning of all understanding. This is true. Every country is merely the gate, beyond which is darkness – the beginning of all understanding. Yet the gate may open slightly once, allowing us to see what is beyond.

The gate to Singapore was opened for me by Mr. Michael Tay, Ambassador of Singapore to Russia. His love of Singapore on the one hand, and of Russian culture on the other, created a singular opportunity for me to gaze, through the gate, slightly ajar. I do not know whether I have seen what Mr Michael Tay wanted to show me. I do not know whether my humble effort to see through it matches his generous gesture. All I know

is that suddenly I saw Singapore as an ideal state, a utopia for humanity (which I know has never existed and will never, ever exist). And the fragrant memories of what I saw fills me with happiness.

Vladimir Martynov  
August 2005

## PRESS REVIEWS

### **Praise for the World Premiere of *SINGAPORE. A Geopolitical Utopia***

Tchaikovsky Concert Hall October 5, 2005

Big Country Bowed to a Small Country... Vladimir Martynov, having united in his composition depictions of the actual country and descriptions of Utopia from the *Tao De Jing*, expressed his own thoughts about Singapore being an ideal state. The composer, obviously, set himself not an artistic but an ideological task. With the help of the great Russian and European cultural heritage, he showed how a big country could bow to a small one, saying that it is better to 'let your community be small, with only a few people'.

Grigory Durnovo, *Gazeta Daily*, 7 October 2005

Vladimir Martynov's music inevitably creates an uncanny feeling: as if you were a child watching a hocus-pocus act for a thousand times and desperately trying to understand the trick behind it. This piece is like a chest with a secret drawer, a false bottom, a fine puzzle. To appreciate this music, one has to relax. There is no point trying to figure out how the puzzle works. Martynov is simply a tale-teller, a trickster, a wizard, if you like.

Varya Turova, *Kommersant Daily*, 7 October 2005

It is wrong to be where we are now — when a composer has to write music for TV serials in order to earn a living, while during his free time, he composes real music for free. Serious music commissioning is rare in Russia, and even now, it has been done by Singapore, but happily still written by a great Russian composer. Singapore's image may not be 'utopian' after all — it is a young country that appears to be very attractive. And we, Russians, are flattered.

Pyotr Pospelov, *Vedomosti Business Daily*, 11 October 2005

What seems to be official propaganda in the beginning turns out to be a dream, sewn together into a harmonious, funny and sad composition. The use of Hollywood-like musical fragments, mixed with high European style as well as oriental texts, injecting shades of playfulness with the profound — how else could one imagine a 'utopian' sound world that could make you both happy and sad? The composer achieved the unexpected — instead of the conventional use of ethnic music, he went beyond to create an emotionally-charged encounter with something more beautiful.

Yulia Bederova, *Vremya Novostey*, 7 October 2005