

The Russian Experience

The Example of Filippo Balatri

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When in the fall of 1698 Prince Petr Alexeyevich Golitsyn, one of the chamberlains of Tsar Peter I who were sent to Venice to study navigation, left Florence for his Muscovite home, he was accompanied by the fourteen-year-old castrato Filippo Balatri. Balatri, called “Filippushka” by the Russians, stayed in Moscow until 1701 when Golitsyn was named ambassador of the tsar at the imperial court of Vienna.¹

Balatri has left a couple of writings giving a rich report of his experiences in Muscovy and elsewhere. While his original journal, kept by the order of Grand Duke Cosimo III of Tuscany, has been lost, his *Vita e viaggi*, written in Munich in 1725-1732, provides a detailed account of his life up to 1732. Finally he put his tales into verse in 1735. The 343 pages of the *Frutti del Mondo, sperimentati da F.B. nativo dell'Alfea in Toscana* contain the shortest and most distant summary of his Russian adventures. While Balatri for these “sacrificed [the] spontaneity and richness of detail while straining for rhyme, meter, and what he thought was the proper poetic tone”² the first part of the *Frutti del Mondo* contains the most thoroughly composed image of Moscow and Muscovia delivered by the Tuscan castrato. Written over more than thirty years when Balatri was in the service of the Prince-Bishop Johann Theodor of Freising and Regensburg, the *Frutti del Mondo* are an important source not as much for the “real” Russia of Peter the Great

- 1 For Filippo Balatri and his biography cf. ZAPPERI, 1963; SCHLAFLY, 1997; DI SALVO, 1999/2001.
- 2 SCHLAFLY, 1997, p. 183.

than for the image of Russia that persisted in Balatri and was recreated by him in the *Frutti del Mondo*. This is, of course, always the case with such sources we call ego-documents. But the writings of Balatri are special to all those who are studying Muscovy in the Early Petrine empire at the turn from the 17th to the 18th century with reference to encounter and cultural transfer.³

For historians, Balatri's texts are somehow unique. The castrato did not know all the "classical" writings hitherto on Russia, such as Sigismund von Herberstein, Adam Olearius or that of contemporaries such as Johann Georg Korb, the envoy of the Habsburg Emperor, when he wrote his memoirs, in which he did not follow any conventions of composition or style of the first half of the 18th century. He was in no way touched by the written traditions of perception that ruled diplomatic contact and transfer since the 16th century.⁴ It remains unclear to whom he actually appeals with his sketches.

And unlike professional foreign observers, he did not pay much attention to politics at all. Balatri saw the cruel punishment of those who were the losers of Tsar Peter's ground gaining reform program. They tried to take advantage of the Tsar's absence during his Great Ambassade and had started quarreling against the social decline. The turmoil was oppressed before Peter I returned.⁵ Thus, whereas Korb gives a detailed account of the shooting of the streltsy, those elite regiments who revolted against Peter I in 1698 (for the second time), Balatri believes that he witnessed the hanging of catholic heretics.⁶

What set him apart from other observers is his involvement in daily life of a family of the high aristocracy, the Golitsyns, who in persona underwent the change from old to new within the so called "petrine revolution".⁷ Thus, it is somewhat surprising how little historians turned to his writings as a persistently valuable source. There is still no full reliable and complete translation of his writings into Russian. The only two Western experts on Balatri, Maria di Salvo and Daniel Schlafly, did not manage to complete a critical edition of his writings in Italian either.⁸

3 KUSBER, 2010.

4 On that: SCHEIDEGGER, 1987; POE, 2000.

5 MOUTCHNIK, 2006.

6 BOECK/MARTIN/RUSSEL, 2012.

7 In depth discussed in: CRACRAFT, 2004.

8 Apart from the mentioned literature: DI SALVO, 2010.

The following paper also has a rather limited aim; it analyzes the image of Muscovia and its inhabitants as it is presented in *Frutti del Mondo*. It concentrates less on the specific adventures of Balatri than on the more general information given by him in his writing. There are two fields that shall be investigated in particular: the image of the tsar, of Moscow and the Muscovites, and the relations between Moscow and Western Europe. We are integrating in these two topics some remarks on Balatri's mentioning of music, because that is the reason he was brought to Russia: to entertain the aristocratic high society of Moscow, at least Petr Golitsyn, in a new fashion.

1. Tsar Peter I, Moscow and the Muscovites

Peter I became Tsar in 1682 as a boy, together with his elder ill-minded half-brother Ivan V, one too young, the other incapable to govern. So, up to 1689, a half-sister of Tsar Peter, Sophia Alekseyevna, was the leader of state affairs trying to ascend the Muscovite throne herself. However, in 1689, Peter, at the age of 17 took over power and forced Sophia to retire from the public and retreat to a monastery. Taking a deep interest in western technique and military warfare, cultural practices, especially in the Nemetskaya Sloboda in Moscow, Peter gradually implemented sweeping reforms aimed at modernizing Russia. Heavily influenced by his advisors from Western Europe, Peter reorganized the Russian army along modern lines and dreamed of making Russia a maritime power. He faced much opposition to these policies at home, but brutally suppressed any rebellion against his authority: the streltsy mentioned above, Bashkirs, Astrakhan, and the greatest civil uprising of his reign, the Bulavin Rebellion. Peter implemented social modernization in an absolute manner by requiring courtiers, state officials, and the military to shave their beards and adopt modern clothing styles. One means of achieving this end was the introduction of taxes for long beards and robes in September 1698.⁹ During this time, Balatri had his first encounters with Peter.

Tsar Peter is described in favorable, even emotional terms when Balatri claims to have been called “son” by the monarch.¹⁰ He is affable and

9 KUSBER, 2012.

10 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 14.

makes friendly jokes about the castrato.¹¹ Peter is not depicted as tyrant, but as legitimate monarch (“monarca”) with the title “Zar” or even “Gran Zar”.¹² Although Balatri writes in the 1730s, he never attributes the title “Emperor” to Peter. His reign is classified as “Regno” (kingdom).¹³ It is most likely, that the young Italian, when he came to Moscow, was fully unaware of the diplomatic struggles over precedence rivalries between the Habsburg Emperors and the tsars at least since the times of Ivan III (reg. 1462-1505), when Emperor Maximilian I offered the Muscovite Grand Duke the title “King”. Ivan III refused based on his own dignity, as did Ivan IV (reg. 1547-1584), the first ruler to be crowned tsar of all Russia.¹⁴ Whether he became familiar with these ever worsening disputes when Peter I assumed the title “Emperor” in 1722 after the treaty of Nystad, is not known.

The Muscovite court is called “grand”¹⁵ by Balatri and, according to him, the tsar at least tries to keep it in good order.¹⁶ He is described as severe with a heart like Caesar. On the other hand he is pious and Balatri is hopeful he will prove to be merciful, too.¹⁷ Obviously, Peter was very generous towards him.¹⁸

Balatri also acknowledges the tsar’s openness for the inhabitants of the above mentioned *sloboda*,¹⁹ the foreign quarter of the capital founded about three decades before by Peter’s father Aleksei, and praises him as a very learned monarch who managed to turn the Russian plums into roses.²⁰ Right at the beginning of the *Frutti del Mondo*, Balatri praises Tsar Peter for his efforts to fertilize Muscovy with sciences and arts by sending his nobles to Western Europe.²¹ Balatri had the opportunity to

11 IBID., fol. 55r.

12 IBID., fol. 58r.

13 IBID., fol. 57r.

14 NITSCHKE, 1991.

15 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 16r.

16 This stands in some contradiction to his critical assumptions of the other pages and chamberlains (“spálnicchi”) of the court. See below.

17 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 86v-87r.

18 IBID., fol. 184v.

19 IBID., fol. 96v-97v.

20 IBID., fol. 185r-186v. Obviously, this characterization of Peter is influenced by the knowledge of later events.

21 “Pietro gran’Zar, che regna sullo Scita/la Moscovia s’invoglia fecondare/di Scienze e di bell’Arti, e fa cercare/Gente ch’in quelle bene sij instruita.” IBID., fol. 8v.

meet Peter in the informal way the Tsar liked so much: Not only during assemblies and other occasions in the palace of the Golitsyns at the Tverskaya street near the Kremlin, one of the first buildings in a western style, but, more important, in the *sloboda*. Here, as a nice exception from the usual, Balatri gained access to the house of Anna Mons, the daughter of a wine-entrepreneur and influential mistress of the tsar. It was in the wealthy houses of the *sloboda* that Russian nobles and the tsar himself came in contact with western European music and it was here and in the Golitsyn-palace, where Balatri performed his singing, Italian Arias, but also Russian (folk) songs in an Italian style.²² The most striking characteristic of Russia being expressed in the *Frutti del Mondo* is the vastness of the country. Balatri seldom uses the term “Russia”/“Russian” but obviously prefers “Moscovia”. While Balatri does not describe his way to Moscow in a detailed manner,²³ he catches up later when he gives an account of his journey to the Kalmyk Chan in 1699. On his disastrous way (“viaggio disastroso”) he describes a desert without churches and houses and suffers much from the heat first, while he is confronted with the effects of the Russian winter on his way back to Moscow.²⁴ Of course, it is the icy cold that shocks the young Italian most.²⁵ Moscow itself is described as a huge city, but very vulnerable to fires because of the wooden construction of the houses. Furthermore, there are hardly any outstanding buildings.²⁶

Near to the tsar, Prince Petr Alekseyevich Golitsyn²⁷ and his wife are depicted most favorably in Balatri’s writing. The nobles (“i Grandi”) in general appreciated him. Much more hostile was the attitude of the common people (“Popol’ subalterno”)²⁸ – predominately because of religious reasons.

For Filippo Balatri, who entered the Cistercian monastery of Fürstfeldbruck about four years after the writing of the *Frutti del Mondo*, it seems to be very important that he had not only the possibility to practice his Cath-

22 DI SALVO, 2010, p. 104.

23 He only speaks of “un viaggio lungo e disastroso”. BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 12v.

24 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 19v-44r, quotation at fol. 19v.

25 “Li freddi in quel’ Paese san’ far sassi / quegl’Uomini ch’à lor’ troppo s’espongono”. IBID., fol. 101r.

26 IBID., fol. 138v-139r.

27 On his position at the court: BUSHKOVITCH, 2002, pp. 115, 118.

28 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 15r, 139r.

olic faith in Moscow but was also encouraged by the Tsar to do so.²⁹ This should not be misunderstood as a general “tolerance”, because the Catholic clergies are not allowed to wear their habits, and Filippo Balatri himself is insulted several times because of his Catholic faith.³⁰ When he uses the term “tollerati” in this respect, the most appropriate translation seems to be “toleration” rather than “tolerance” in the sense Benjamin Kaplan has pointed out recently.³¹ Religion seems to have been a most important field of conflict. Balatri could not have been aware of the fierce struggle on “foreign” influences on orthodoxy, which went on until the abolition of the Patriarchy of Muscovy. Not only clergymen were suspicious of Protestant influences of foreigners and foreign advisors and of “Catholic” intrusions through the Ukraine.³² That Balatri evoked the impression that most Muscovites regarded the western churches with enmity was his own experience. For Russians, Balatri wrote, the Catholic castrato is not a Christian, but a pagan, a Muslim or an idolizer of the Golden Calf, and he is called “dog” several times. A lot of people do not even want to touch him, at all.³³ It is merely of religious reasons that a lot of Muscovites show a mere animosity against strangers.³⁴ Balatri, for his part, is naturally confident to confess the true faith also and accuses the Muscovites of being superstitious.³⁵ Nevertheless, he appreciates the extraordinary fear of God in Muscovia.³⁶

There is a certain group of people, the “Spálnicchi” (*spalniki*), pages at Muscovite court, who seem to have developed a marked hatred against Balatri for religious reasons, too, but also because of the arrogant attitude developed by the young castrato when he was favored by the tsar and his nobles, as he admits himself. The hostility went so far that Tsar Peter decided to remove Balatri from the court to avoid further quarrels.³⁷ Arriving in Moscow, Balatri had to stay with the *spalniki* without any privacy before he changed to the Golitsyn-palace in Moscow.

29 IBID., fol. 13v.

30 IBID.

31 KAPLAN, 2007.

32 On this in detail CRACRAFT, 1972.

33 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 14v, 53r-53v.

34 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 138v.

35 IBID., fol. 139v.

36 IBID., fol. 137v-138r. His approval of the Muscovite piety might be a censure of the increasing irreligion Balatri had to observe in Western Europe.

37 IBID., fol. 16v-18r, 57r-57v.

Another hostile and perhaps even more perilous group was the “Baàrina”, old women who looked after the young virgins in the palace and, according to Balatri, masked their predator-like attitudes with an enormous zeal against sin. They, too, reject him because of his Roman faith, but also because he was (almost) a young man.³⁸ Actually, this term was a misunderstanding for the word “boyarin”, the female form of “Boyar”. But these “old women” had to protect the young noble girls from boyar or even tsarist families living in the secluded *terem*, the closed quarter for women in the Kremlin, and were generally suspicious of every foreigner and especially those who frequented the *sloboda*.³⁹ A time of transition began for Russian noble women. One of Balatri’s first impressions when he entered Russia in Smolensk was that women did not appear in the same room as men. In Moscow, segregation of sexes was not that strongly observed and Balatri, as a chamberlain, had the opportunity of switching between the spheres of men and women in the Kremlin palaces. Peter approached the problem in a characteristic manner. Balatri remembers how some Muscovite ladies were invited to a ball in the house of François Lefort, a Suisse favorite of Peter. There, the ladies were greeted by the Tsar and he tried to dance with them. Guards were posted at the doors to stop the guests from leaving early. But there were also court events, concerts and plays for example where the noble women had to hide behind a curtain and were merely allowed to listen.⁴⁰

For Balatri, ordinary Muscovites seemed to be rather rude people, but they were not described as savages. This becomes most obvious when Balatri gives an account of his travel to the Kalmyk in the entourage of Boris Golitsyn,⁴¹ appointed ambassador to the khan in 1699.

The Kalmyks (Oirats) at that time were a borderland power, often allying themselves with the tsarist government against the neighboring Muslim population. During the era of Ayuka Khan, whom Golitsyn (and Balatri) visited, the Kalmyks rose to political and military prominence as the tsarist government sought the increased use of their cavalry in support of its military campaigns against the Muslim powers in the south, such as Persia, the Ottoman Empire, the Nogays and the Kuban Tatars and Crimean Khanate. Ayuka Khan also waged wars against the Ka-

38 IBID., fol. 59r-59v, 61v.

39 DAHLMANN, 2004.

40 HUGHES, 1998, pp. 187f.

41 BUSHKOVITCH, 2002, pp. 68f., 85-87.

zakhs, subjugated the Turkmens, and undertook expeditions against the highlanders of the North Caucasus.⁴² These campaigns highlighted the strategic importance of the Kalmyk Khanate which functioned as a buffer zone, separating Russia and the Muslim world, as Peter concentrated fully on Europe to establish himself as a European power.

Although, in his description of this journey, the castrato laments that Golitsyn with his military strength would not have taken in account that Italians were more sensitive than the Muscovite,⁴³ when they arrived at the khan's residence, the assortment of "we" and "they" suddenly changed. Ayuka Khan is interested in Balatri and unsuccessfully asks Golitsyn to leave the young Italian to him. It is now the Kalmyk who are depicted as "strange" with their infernal music ("infernal canzone"), their inappropriate clothes and disgusting manners, while good order prevails in the Muscovite camp. But Muscovites and Kalmyk have one thing in common: their passion of "l'Acquavita".⁴⁴

Despite his rather critical comments on Muscovia – "a land full of misunderstanding"⁴⁵ – and the Muscovite people at the very beginning of his tale when he deals with his arrival at Moscow, Balatri calls it "Patria".⁴⁶ He claims to have learned the Russian language within 18 months.⁴⁷ The mentioned Anna Mons asked him to write a letter for her "in Muscovite". However, receiving the chance to leave Russia in the entourage of Prince Golitsyn and to go to Vienna where Golitsyn was appointed ambassador was obviously happy news for Balatri.⁴⁸

42 KHODARKOVSKY, 1992, pp. 134-169.

43 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 22v.

44 IBID., fol. 24v-41v, quotations at fol. 25r, 28v. The following sequence (fol. 28v) is meaningful, too: "Almen' nel nostro Campo v'è buon'ordine / et ognun'è vestito dà Signore, / si balla in Simetria, in buon' tenore / si canta, e intutto non v'è gran' disordine." Nevertheless the khan of the "Tartari" is depicted as a kind of noble savage who appreciates Balatri's singing very much (fol. 29v-31v, 34v-38r).

45 "Paese pien d'errore". BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 71r.

46 IBID., fol. 13r. Cf. also fol. 142: "Ammè piace la Scitia".

47 IBID., fol. 17r.

48 IBID., fol. 126v.

2. “Muscovia” and Western Europe

When, as has been pointed out, Tsar Peter’s efforts to cultivate Muscovy by importing scientists and artists from Western Europe are praised by Balatri, he implicitly expressed a certain inferiority of Muscovy at the same time. In order to fulfill the designs of the tsar, the principal nobles of the country were sent to the most important cities of Italy, Germany, France and England.⁴⁹ According to Balatri, their task was to learn the western languages, to get to know the places of interest, the customs, the laws etc. so that they would return to Moscow as equals of the people of their host countries.⁵⁰ Furthermore, they should take learned men with them – a fate that happened to Balatri himself.

Balatri was *nota bene* not the only expert who traveled back from Italy to Moscow with Petr Golitsyn. Golitsyn extensively recruited craftsmen, scientists, artists and musicians for the Tsar’s service.⁵¹ Peter I developed a deeper interest for western European music during his “Great Ambassade” in 1697/1698, when he attended the courts of Brunswick, Königsberg, The Hague, Dresden, and Vienna.⁵² We have no recordings whether he was impressed by the music he heard. However, he was impressed by the way women and men came in contact through music – by dancing. It is noteworthy that Peter was keen to acquire musicians from abroad after his journey.

Around 1700, Peter’s interest in secular music began to develop. The use of musical instruments, including the organ, was still banned in church, but sacred music for human voices was adapted in the new era.⁵³ Thus, Balatri and the other “imported” musicians were also welcome here. Peter showed greater preference of parades, celebrating military victories with fanfares and also choirs singing panegyric verses and chants. In this way, the Muscovite seventeenth century choral tradition was harnessed for the needs of the state. The richness of the Russian unaccompanied

49 See apart from the Golitsyns the most prominent example of Boris Kurakin: ZITSER, 2011.

50 “Ci vuol’ insomma, che si faccin’ uomini / e ch’al ritorno si dimostrin’ tali, / che piuच्che ponno rendansi coeguali / al Gallo, all’Anglo, All’Italo, ò a cui nomini.” BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 9v. Cf. IBID., fol. 10v; the best study on the *sloboda* is the rich and thorough account of KOVRIGINA, 1998.

51 SCHLAFLY, 1997, p. 182.

52 In detail studied in: GUSKOV, 2005.

53 A brilliant overview is provided by JENSEN, 2009.

choral music in church continued into a new age under the influence of both Russian native composers and foreigners, as did folksong. The ruling elite, as Peter's favorite Alexandr Menshikov and the Golitsyns, maintained a choir of Russian and Ukrainian singers, for example, and started to hire foreign instrumentalists to play alongside the choir. Balatri may have seen the beginning of these developments, which came into full swing after the move of the court to St. Petersburg after 1712.⁵⁴ Balatri may also have heard the first modern chants in the churches of Moscow around 1700. But it was not until the 1730's that a complete opera production from an Italian troop was to be seen in St. Petersburg.⁵⁵

It is interesting that Balatri qualifies his singing as mere "passable" at that time but satisfactory to please Peter's wish to hear "our" music at Moscow.⁵⁶ Thereby he underlines the differences between the western countries and a strange, obviously culturally inferior Russia. Also the descriptions of the *sloboda* suggest a cultural inferiority of the Muscovites because western artists have lived there for hundred years, now, and Moscow does not seem to have become independent of this foreign aid, so far.⁵⁷ Only in *sloboda* one can find "the rarest things which the Russians do not know".⁵⁸ Obviously, the level of education is very low, books are a scarce commodity.

Another point of criticism is the situation of the women whom the tsar wants to be released from their "imprisonment" of the above mentioned *terem*.⁵⁹ In the palace of Peter Golitsyn, Balatri became the trustee of the lady of the house, Darya Golitsyna, a conservative religious woman who ruled the house through the *terem*. This was not a weak position, but for Balatri, who had access to the women's chambers, it was strange enough. Although Darya seemed to be charmed by the castrato who was no threat for the women in the *terem*, she had strong reservations about the new style of events taking place in the *sloboda*. She only changed her attitude when she accompanied her husband (and Balatri) to Vienna.⁶⁰

54 HUGHES, 2006, pp. 72f.

55 HUGHES, 1998, pp. 243-248.

56 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 11r.

57 IBID., fol. 13v.

58 "La si trovan' le cose le piu rare / delle quali li Russi so' ignoranti". IBID., fol. 96v.

59 BALATRI, vol. 1, fol. 97v-98r, 125v; for the situation of the women cf. IBID., fol. 139r, too.

60 SCHLAFLY, 1997, pp. 193-195.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that also in Balatri's view there had been an exchange between Moscow and the western countries even before Peter. Balatri by no means evokes the image of an isolated, self-content Russia. But, he obviously thinks that the Muscovites have to be enlightened and he himself tries to do his best in this respect.⁶¹

As has been pointed out earlier, another difference was clearly marked by the confession. In this respect, Balatri alludes to a difference between Tsar Peter, the high nobility and the ordinary people: When Peter or the Golitsyn exercised severity against one of his persecutors, they were accused of injustice and protection of heresy.⁶² Even among the entourage of Prince Golitsyn in 1701, there are people who are afraid of the lands of the infidels they expect to enter.⁶³

Conclusion

Balatri, who was to become famous following his Russian experience, was neither the first nor the last to come to Russia and to make a specific contribution on the westernization of court culture. It is not easy to estimate their impact in a longer perspective, because transfer and influence of people, practices and habits in Russian elite culture were severe and led to new forms of hybrid fashioning in Russian high nobility as well as the new court in St. Petersburg. The patterns of his travels are similar to later examples in as far as most of these travelers just stayed for a short period of time. This is especially true for musicians, actors and artists. What renders Balatri's case singular are the ego-documents left by him presenting and digesting his various and capricious experiences within – and not only on the periphery of – the Muscovite court. Furthermore, his observations illuminate a crucial period of change from Muscovia to the Petrine Russian Empire, a period that has not at least been shaped by the re-definition of relations to Western Europe, and Balatri's writings provide an insight into this from a point of view which is, at the same time, internal and “western”. Of course, this is just one reason why they should be examined more closely and in greater detail.

61 *IBID.*, fol. 140r. He uses the verb “illuminare”/enlighten here.

62 *IBID.*, fol. 61v.

63 *IBID.*, fol. 127r-127v.

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