CHAPTER 5

Sources and Styles

Chapter 5 examines the styles and possible sources of the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann piano music. Gurdjieff promoted all of his music (music for Movements, piano music, and harmonium music), along with his Movements and teachings, as deriving from ancient, esoteric sources that he had accessed on his travels through Central Asia and the Middle East. As previously discussed, Gurdjieff was not averse to fabrication or to mythologising details of his life and teaching. Associating his teaching and methods with ancient, esoteric sources gave them authority and guaranteed the attention of his target audience: those with Theosophical and esoteric leanings. Writing of his time in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital of Russian Turkistan, prior to his arrival in Moscow in 1913, Gurdjieff admits that his teachings particularly interested “people giving themselves up to various “woeful” ideas in these spheres of quasi-human knowledge…which today are called “occultism,” “theosophism,” “spiritualism,” etc.” He continues, “I directed all my capacities and attention to coming into contact with people belonging to one or other of these vast organizations... my reputation...became that of a great “maestro” in all that comprised

supernatural knowledge.”2 By also indicating that his teaching and methods derived from Eastern sources, Gurdjieff tapped into the strong Western preoccupation with the exotic East at this time. Indeed pupil Margaret Anderson states that Gurdjieff initially struck her as,

[a] dark man with an oriental face...we immediately recognized Gurdjieff as the kind of man we had never seen – a seer, a prophet, a messiah?...the knowledge he had to offer was that which, in occult books and in the schools of the East, is given through allegory, dialogue, parable, oracles, scripture, or direct esoteric teaching...We looked upon this man...as a man who could clarify for us a world we had hoped to fathom - the world which the natural scientists had revealed but not interpreted.3

Similarly, in recollecting his first meeting with Gurdjieff Ouspensky describes him as “a man of an oriental type, no longer young, with a black mustache and piercing eyes, who astonished me first of all because he seemed to be disguised and completely out of keeping with the place and its atmosphere. I was still full of impressions of the East.”4

Gurdjieff’s claims of the origins of his music will be assessed and argued to be unlikely for a number of reasons. An examination of the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann piano music will then follow, with the aim of shedding light on its possible sources and influences. Adopting Laurence Rosenthal’s model in “Gurdjieff and Music,”5 the piano music will be examined within three broad

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2 Gurdjieff, Herald, 21–22. When formulating his teachings in Moscow and St Petersburg from 1913 to 1916 Gurdjieff must have looked to Theosophical circles for pupils. At this time Theosophy was flourishing in Russia, particularly in these cities which were major centres for the occult revival. Indeed some of Gurdjieff’s closest pupils had ties to Theosophy, such as the de Hartmanns, P.D. Ouspensky, A.R. Orage, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Olgivanna Lloyd Wright (née Hinzenberg). For more see Johanna Petsche, “Gurdjieff and Blavatsky: Western Esoteric Teachers in Parallel,” Literature & Aesthetics, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2011, 98–115. Here it is argued that Gurdjieff capitalised on the popularity of Theosophy by donning a Blavatsky-like image and using recognisable Theosophical terminology in order to attract followers in Russia. In this way he could define himself in a way that was not just acceptable, but highly attractive, to his target audience; those familiar with, and ultimately disillusioned by, Theosophy.


4 Ouspensky, Search, 7.