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BOOK REVIEW

Book review of *The Lost Pianos of Siberia*

Sibirya'nın Kayıp Piyanoları Kitabının İncelemesi

Roberts, S. (2020). *The Lost Pianos of Siberia*. London: Doubleday. 448 pp.
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Anahtar kelimeler

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The Lost Pianos of Siberia is the first book by the British travel writer and journalist Sophy Roberts. Part-memoir, part-travelogue, it portrays the immense changes that Siberia has undergone over the past 250 years through the history and spread of that most emblematic of instruments, the piano. The work is based on the author's extensive travels in the region, which were motivated by the quest to source an antique Siberian instrument for Odgerel Sampilnorov, a Mongolian concert pianist with ancestral roots in Siberia. In pursuing this aim, Roberts delves into aspects relating to the history and role not only of the pianoforte but also of eastern Russia itself. As such, the piano becomes a means of exploring this fascinating and mysterious region through the author's visits to myriad places, as well as her encounters with the people who live there.

The book is divided into three major sections which ostensibly correspond to major epochs in Russian history, but nonetheless are rather fluid in terms of space and time. The

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work is opened by an introductory note from the author in which she outlines the concept of “Siberia”, so evocative yet mysterious to the Western reader. Starting with well-known aspects (for example, the Trans-Siberian railway, the cold temperatures, and the notorious gulags), Roberts quickly takes the reader into less-familiar territory.

In temporal terms, the first section, from 1762-1917, takes the reader from the accession of Catherine the Great to the October Revolution. Drawing on scholarly resources, it includes information about the development of the piano and its first arrival in imperial Russia in the 1700s. This is supplemented by details regarding the presence of international composers – such as John Field – at the imperial court, as well as the foundation of the famous Jakob Becker piano factory in early nineteenth-century St Petersburg. Accordingly, this panorama provides a prelude to Roberts’ travels in Siberia itself, which begin in the city of Khabarovsk, site of virtuoso recitals by Franz Liszt. In Irkutsk, Roberts searches for a piano belonging to the wife of one of the Decembrists, the opposition group to Tsar Nicholas I’s rule who were exiled there in the 1820s. In Kiakhta, she documents the faded golden age of this nineteenth-century pioneer boom town where the piano was a must-have status symbol. During a visit to Tomsk, Roberts highlights the city’s links to Poland, as demonstrated by the Poles who were exiled there after the failed 1830 Warsaw uprising, and who brought the music of Chopin to this corner of the world. The first section of the book concludes with the author’s trip to the forbidding penal colony on the island of Sakhalin, off Russia’s Pacific coast, where she intertwines the social history of the piano with a visit to the island by the writer Anton Chekhov in 1891.

Comprising the seventy-four years of the Soviet Union’s existence, the second section of the work runs from 1917 until 1991. In Ekaterinburg, against the omnipresent background of the assassination of Tsar Nicholas II and his family, Roberts searches for vestiges of the last piano owned by the imperial household, thereby bringing a new perspective to a familiar story. Afterwards, she heads to the Altai mountains, where she meets a former Aeroflot navigator and piano aficionado with ambitions to build a concert hall in the remote wilderness. A trip across the Chinese border to Harbin forms the next chapter, where the reader learns of the city’s burgeoning Russian population in the nineteenth century and its former role as an important port of call on the Trans-Siberian railway. Always keeping the city’s pianos in mind, this information prefaces an insightful overview of the vicissitudes the city suffered during the twentieth century, including the impact of the Russian revolution and its aftermath, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, and

the Cultural Revolution in Mao Zedong's China. By way of contrast, the Yamal Peninsula in the Russian Arctic also bears witness to tales involving mysterious pianos, including the fate of the instrument on the explorer Fridtjof Nansen's ship, as well as meetings with a composer from the local ethnic group, the Nenets. Subsequent chapters deal with searches for pianos in the city of Magadan, famous for its gulags, and with Novosibirsk, the Siberian metropolis that served as a cultural capital and important seat of Soviet power during the siege of Leningrad in World War Two. It is here that Roberts meets one of the important protagonists of her pianistic quest: a young piano restorer who yearns to further his craft abroad. This section of the book concludes in Akademgorodok, a town that seems to have once been like a Soviet proto-"Silicon Valley", designed in the post-war years as a seat of learning and research for the country's academic and scientific elite. Here, Roberts follows the trail of a once-famous concert pianist who subsequently faded from time.

The third – and shortest – section of the work covers the last three or so decades of Siberian life, exploring the impact of Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* reforms through the prism of Sviatoslav Richter's pan-Soviet tour. From the Kamchatka peninsula, Roberts travels to the remote Kuril Islands, before heading back to Khabarovsk, the city of Liszt's recitals and where the whole work started from. In the work's epilogue, Roberts details the complexities of travel to and in modern Russia, especially with regard to the logistical and practical considerations which account for the truncated length of the book's final section. Happily, though, the work ends with a coda celebrating the dénouement of the quest for a suitable piano for Sampilnorov, as well as an illuminating update about many of the people the author encountered on her extensive travels in Siberia.

As can be imagined, the volume contains considerable geographical and temporal mobility, yet Roberts succeeds in writing a wonderfully insightful and cohesive account of her unusual quest. To this end, each chapter is helpfully prefaced with a map which highlights the towns and cities featured in that excerpt, and the book contains a valuable timeline to keep abreast of the chronology, as well as a list of sources and references for further reading. Though some of the basic details may be familiar, Roberts manages to bring together diverse strands – historical, geographical, and of course musical – into an illuminating and enlightening work. Indeed, one of the book's strengths is how the author manages to maintain the theme of the piano as a leitmotif to keep the fundamental story going, developing this with numerous nuggets of interesting information. The vo-

lume also contains several photographs, and the book's accompanying website (<https://www.lostpianosofsiberia.com/>) features a broader pictorial record of Roberts' travels, thus helping to link faces and places with the vivid descriptions detailed by the author in the text. This is of fundamental importance for, interspersed with the relevant historical and pianistic facts, above all it is the stories of the people that Roberts meets which enrich the fabric of the work and ensure a lasting impression in the reader's mind. As such, this makes *The Lost Pianos of Siberia* recommended reading not only for the interested generalist, but also for musicians, musicologists, and historians eager to gain a different perspective on this mysterious yet entrancing part of the world.

Reference

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