

## A Running Nose

### *CUBE Circuits (Fall/Winter 2005)*

by Janice Misurell-Mitchell

On the weekend of May 20 in St. Petersburg I attended two concerts that will be of special interest to our CUBE Circuits readers: a performance of Shostakovich's youthful opera, *The Nose*, and a concert presented by the Union of Composers that included four works by Chicago composers (see page 3).

*The Nose*, based loosely on Gogol's story of the same name, had been staged in Russia only twice before the current production. The premiere in 1930 received sixteen performances but was later denounced by critics from the Stalin and Khrushchev eras as being indicative of extreme petit bourgeois "contemporaneity" of the Soviet culture of the 1920s. It was not staged again in the Soviet Union until 1974, after numerous performances throughout Europe; the latest production, at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg was first given in 2004.

The story revolves around the loss of the nose of a petty bureaucrat; the nose is cut off accidentally by a barber and then creates a life of its own. Written during the reign of Nicolai I, it satirizes the government of the time, but also clearly can be seen as a mocking of Soviet bureaucracy. There are numerous visual and musical puns on the loss of identity, sexual prowess, political power, all connected with the loss of the nose.

The opera, described by the composer as a "musical and theatrical symphony," uses many innovative techniques musically and visually. Shostakovich includes both sung text and *sprechstimme* (speechsong), vocal and instrumental writing in extreme ranges, abrupt shifts from simple tonality to strong atonality and vice versa, satiric versions of traditional styles, and an action section (of a chase) using only percussion instruments (unusual for its time).

This production was also visually striking, from the use of apartment-like structures on either side of the stage for choral sections to the presence of a large funnel-like structure in the center of the stage, reminiscent of Russian constructivism of the 1920s; each structure had many identities and uses, reflecting the different social levels of the population, all of whom interacted in imaginative comic fashion. The extraordinary cast was headed by Alexei Safiulin as Kovalev, the bureaucrat; Alexai Tanovitsky, the barber; Ekaterini Tsenter, his wife; and Sergei Semishkur, as The Nose.