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Elements of Theatre in Soviet Glorifying Music of the 1920s – Early 1930s

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The present article is dedicated to the issue on inclusion of some elements of theatre and drama art into Soviet glorifying musical pieces of the post-Revolutionary times. Being created in the period of a new communistic state formation, these opuses were intended to make up a positive picture of the Soviet reality in the listeners' minds, to introduce its key concepts and ideas. The comparative analysis of the glorifying musical pieces and proletariat "meeting type" performance revealed a spectrum of the general techniques, including drawing upon a typical drama pattern, turning to canto texts, dividing the choir into groups engaged in a dialogue with each other, involving the audience into action. Among their typical features, there are: enhanced visual appeal and the originality of dramatic solution, in using such attributes as posters, hooters and a big drum in the actors' hands. The emphasis on spoken word is achieved by applying various genres and types of declamation, introduction of a reciter, reproduction of political meeting scenes. As a consequence, the drama element in the glorifying pieces of the early Soviet period is represented by the principle of powerful expression of the key concepts and ideas of communism.

Keywords: Soviet music, glorifying music, proletariat theatre, demonstration performance, post-revolutionary period.

October Revolution of the year 1917 caused dramatic reconstruction of all spheres of Russian life, making a great impact on the cultural and spiritual level of the community. Representing itself as something new, opposed to the "worn out" old, the Revolution gave the impulse to the reconstruction of political and social lives, proclamation of new communistic values, the reflection of which required a new picture of the world, different from the previous one. Contrasting with the reality, it included the optimistic vision of the present as a time of common enthusiasm about building the State of the Future. The reality

was mythologized and the ideological excitement was supported, besides some other ways, by art; because "if the Revolution can give soul to art, then art can give its voice to the Revolution" (Lunacharskiy, 1967:294).

"The more artistic the revolutionary sermon, the more effective it is", Lunacharskiy wrote. "The great collective preacher, the Communist Party, should arm itself with all possible forms of art"; the People's Commissar thought its major task as popularizing "the revolutionary way of thinking, feeling and acting all around the country" (Lunacharskiy, 1967:295). Similar calls

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formed a platform for other concepts of post-revolutionary art blossom, and the “myth of the state music construction” in particular (Vlasova, 2010:9). It brought up numerous propagandist appeals to the composers: “the victory of the Revolution will bring new musicians of the Beethoven type”, “we need to hear the natural rhythms born by our revolutionary city, in a new way” (Lunacharskiy, 1971:126-127), “let the musicians, first of all, glorify the October with specially composed anthems, songs and marches. It is the music the pyramids and giant columns of new musical architecture will be built from” (Lunacharskiy, 1926:4).

These calls were replied with a series of musical pieces, among which there was a soloist basso piece “About Lenin” by A. Davidenko to poems by A. Kruchenykh (1925). The genre was defined by the composer as a “musical poster”. There also was “Symphonic Monument” by M. Gnesin, lyrics by S. Yesenin (1925-1926), “The Mourning Ode” dedicated to Lenin by A. Krein (1925-1926), “October” cantata by N. Roslavets to poems by S. Rodov (1927), the first Soviet mass oratorio “The Way of October” (1927), the Second and the Third symphonies by D. Shostakovich (1927 and 1929), “The Poem of Struggle” by D. Kabalevsky with the finale to the lyrics by A. Zharov (1930), drama symphony “Lenin” by V. Shebalin to the lyrics by V. Mayakovsky (1931) and “Symphonic Dithyramb” by A. Krein (1931-1932). Hanging on the slogans on building the communist world and “forgery” of a new person, the authors of the mentioned opuses were in search for expressive means and techniques able to depict the images of the modern times in order to remain up-to-date. This search revealed itself on the different levels of musical text. For us the most important issue is implementation of drama techniques in the early Soviet glorifying pieces.

Creation of specific environment for the “new audience” which was intended to be simple,

but, at the same time, assumed brightness, visual appeal and efficiency of techniques, became one of the major tasks. For example, in the proletariat performance the “rousing of revolutionism” in the audience was often done by involving spectators into the action. For this purpose directors would not use theatre stage, footlights, pompous scenery. The people were allowed to come in their overcoats, eat seeds and smoke during the breaks, enter the performance hall at any moment, edge in their comments and at any moment call the actors for the bow (Rudnitskiy, 1969). One can find descriptions of small political meetings which spontaneously occurred during the performance, when one of spectators would act as a spokesman. “The communication between the stage and the audience was artificially enhanced by “plant actors” who would actively react to the action taking place on the stage, thereby providing an example of behaviour to the others” (Rudnitskiy, 1969: 238-239). The drive for accessibility caused the great interest of the authors to the sphere of folk-play traditions: some elements of rare show, street prop plays, traditional Russian lubok and circus shows were introduced into a theatre performance (Zolotnitskiy, 1976).

The impact of the selected theatre genres, of propaganda “meeting” performance in particular, was the determinant in the studied musical opuses. In many of them (including “About Lenin” by A. Davidenko, drama symphony “Lenin” by V. Shebalin, “Symphonic Dithyramb” by A. Krein, “The Way of October” oratorio) there is a role of a reciter (a spokesman, a declaimer). And if in the majority of the pieces the role is composed of musical means, in the drama symphony “Lenin” by V. Shebalin to the poems of V. Mayakovsky the interlace of musical parts with poetical interludes of the reciter, untypical of symphonies, comes to the fore.

In the oratorio “The Way of October” the main character is a collective one: the narrator

choir. The soloists and reciters act as “voices of the crowd”, the pace-setters of the masses. The presence of the Leader (Lenin) is confirmed by the indirect characteristics and narration of him, expressed through the words of the crowd. He does not appear as an independent character; it is induced with features of a symbol-figure (Zenchenko, 2010).

In proletariat prop play, a genre which was shaped during the first post-revolutionary years, the “monolithically cast” mass-choir of several groups was usually brought to the fore. The visual difference between the extras and the soloists was smoothed over due to the static behaviour on the stage and the similar “overalls”; any difference in costume symbolized representatives of the enemy class. According to K.L. Rudnitskiy, “Meyerhold turned depersonalization into a principle and into a value, the “monolithic stature”. All “evil ones”²² in his performances wore same costumes, their movements were all coordinated, and together they merged into the unified poster-image of the winner class” (Rudnitskiy, 1969:250). The means of individualization of the Leader character were, first of all, solo recitation, expressiveness of declamatory intonation, body language and facial gestures, expression and improvisation in their stage behaviour. Great significance was obtained by enhancement of some voice tone specificity, for example, recital in a “nasal” voice. (Zolotnitskiy, 1976).

A series of musical pieces that conventionally incarnate some plot, is based on a dramaturgic pattern typical of proletariat plays (the oratorio “The Way of October”, the symphony “To October” by D. Shostakovich). Their key moments correspond to the main stages of the revolutionary movement: captivity and suffering of the people – revolt – wailing for the dead – grand finale. The literature fundament of the analyzed plays is mainly a cento, which we can also observe in the oratorio “The Way

of October” and in “Symphonic Dithyramb” by A. Krein. Thus, A. Krein composed the text from fragments of Stalin’s speech published in the “Pravda” newspaper, and the authors of the oratorio used poems and prose by numerous writers: M. Gorky, A. Blok, V. Mayakovsky, V. Kirillov, N. Aseev, F. Vagramov, M. Koval, P. Ediet, I. Gruzinov, M. Shorin, N. Kuznetsov, G. Fedorov. It is worth mentioning that the idea of joining literary texts has found its use in the theatre of the early 1920-s. There were quite a lot of so-called cento plays, and one of them was demonstrated in 1921 on the stage of Sidelnikov Central Studio. It was an adaptation of “The Dawn of Proletkult”, which was composed by V.V. Ignatov from poems by several proletariat poets. It is interesting that dramaturgically and compositionally it anticipated the concept of “The Ways of October”. It consists of four acts, the central ideas of which are, sequentially: the May Day meeting in the forest after the events of 1905, growth of the revolutionary movement before the October, the Revolution of 1917 and building of socialism. The cento composition methods typical of the mentioned theatre plays also reveal themselves on the level of musical pattern, for example, in symphonies by D. Shostakovich and in the oratorio “The Way of October” which also has a genre subtitle which claims it to be a “cento oratorio”. In general, the oratorio is an interchange of complete vocal and choir episodes, instrumental, percussion fragments, poem recital, newspaper texts, rhythmic recital adopted from theatre practice. Just like in the proletariat performance, the authors took up the task of maximal specification of the concept, conveyance of the idea to the most illiterate audience, achievement of the maximal ideological impact on the public. In the “meeting type” performance one of such techniques was reading out the messages of ROSTA (Russian Telegraph Agency) which was first used in the

1920, in the adaptation of “Les Aubes” by Emile Verhaeren, where a character’s monologue was replaced by the telegram about the Red Army’s victory over Wrangel. In the oratorio “The Way of October” before a dramaturgically significant episode is marked by raising of banners³, the most meaningful phrases were said into a megaphone, signals of a factory hoot were heard. The hoot, the symbol of the peaceful construction and the epoch of labour, also sounds in the beginning of the Second Symphony finale by D. Shostakovich.

The visual appeal, an essential part of any scenic action, is present in many musical episodes of glorifying pieces. Thus, at the first night of “Symphonic Monument” by M. Gnesin a choir of young pioneers theatrically marched across the stage, beating the rhythm on a big drum. In mass sketch-scenes from the oratorio “The Way of October” (“The Street Disorders”, “Along the Mother Russia”, “The Goodbye”) choir singing is interchanged with some harmonica passages and interjections of short comical dialogues of choir characters. Often the authors turn to the effect of a dialogue between the spokesman and the audience (“About Lenin” by A. Davidenko), the spokesman and the crowd (“Symphonic Dithyramb” by A. Krein), the choir groups (cantata “October” by N. Roslavets, “Symphonic Dithyramb” by A. Krein, drama symphony “Lenin” by V. Shebalin, oratorio “The Way of October” etc). All this range of techniques is conditioned by the direct impact made on the language of music by mass street performances and pageantries, traditionally gathering a great number of spectators. For example, in the year 1920 the mass performance “Assault of Zimny Palace” illuminated with 150 projectors was participated by 8000 people (Vlasova, 2010), and the pageant “To the World Commune” was performed by 4000 Red Army soldiers and members of theatre groups (Lunacharskiy, 1967). Very often such actions were played by

both amateur and professional troupes, like, for example, “The Blue Blouse” (“Sinyaya Bluza”) or the Petersburg Theatre of Revolutionary Satire (“Terevsat”), the actors of which played in the squares, balconies, open tram platforms etc.

In the oratorio “The Way of October” many episodes contain some forms of spoken word, which were typical components of a “meeting type” performance:

- Cadence, scansion of an ideologically tinged, rhymed phrases (No.9 “The Bright Star of Freedom”, No. 15 “With Courage We Go to Fight”, No.19 “Marche”, No.23a “Let Every Day Be Array Day!”);
- Information message (declamation of the news about recent events) is present in No.2 “War with Japan!”, No.24 “And Then The Revolution Went in a Different Tempo”;
- Proclamation (appeal to the audience with a call): in No. 11 “Finish This War!”, No.13 “For the Sake of October!”, No.17 “The Call”, No.26 “In These Anxious Times”;
- Reading aloud (emotionally expressive recital of the text to the audience): in No.4 “Somewhere in the Foggy Capital” and No.22 “We Won!”.

Moreover, in many early glorifying opuses there is a scene of a protest meeting, which often was a natural continuation of the performances of the 1920s. It is found in the “poster” “About Lenin” by A. Davidenko, “Symphonic Dithyramb” by A. Krein. In the second part of the symphony “Lenin” by V. Shebalin the logic of musical composition is built to reproduce an episode of a mourning meeting. The tempo transformation (Largo – Moderato non troppo – Andante – Largo) conventionally reflects the change of emotional tone within one and the same state. The situation of leaders’ speech is conveyed through the interchange of vocal tones

and types of narration, choir or soloist singing (choir – mezzo soprano – basso – choir).

Here an important role is also played by the change of themes of every section, in which it is possible to notice the connection between the different genre models and the spokesman's intonations. The dynamic accentuation of the key words and phrases of the poetic text covers the rhetorical questions and statements that indirectly emphasize the significance of the Leader: "What did he do?", "Who is he?", "Both he and us value the same", "Losing breath of admiration, I would give my life for him", "Why? What for? And what's the reason?" Speaking about the theatre techniques of presenting the Leader figure, it is important to underline the fact of his absence as a character, "the first person": the image of Lenin is confirmed only through the narration about his personality and deeds.

The instrumental episodes depicting a political meeting are present in many musical works of the studied period: in symphonies by D. Shostakovich, "The Mourning Ode" by A. Krein, "Symphonic Monument" by M. Gnesin. In works by D. Shostakovich the themes, which metaphorically refer to the utterances of the spokesman, are played by soloist brass instruments: trombone, tuba, trumpet. Consequently, in the development of the Leader's image sphere a significant role is played by the principle of tone personification, opposed to the sphere of the masses, which is represented by sections of woodwind and string instruments.

A wide-spread technique used in proletarian propaganda plays⁴ was involving the audience into singing popular songs. According to D. Zolotnitskiy, singing "The Internationale" together with the audience often served as the final accord of stage performances. In the analyzed opuses the composers preferred using songs "Be brave, comrade, in cadence" ("The Way of October", the "Assault of Zimny Palace"

episode), "The Internationale" ("The Mourning Ode" by A. Krein), and the instrumental quotation of a motive from "You were the victims..." ("Symphonic Monument" by M. Gnesin, "The Mourning Ode" by A. Krein).

In the majority of the analyzed samples there are examples of recital of various types that replaces the melody of the voice part: it is another evidence of the impact made by theatre genres and forms. In the single-part vocal and instrumental piece "Symphonic Dithyramb" by A. Krein there is a thoroughly written part of the Spokesman who recites a prosaic text; another example of using poetic text recital is the drama symphony "Lenin" by V. Shebalin.

In the first Soviet oratorio "The Way of October", rhythmic recital is widely represented in many episodes. This piece's specificity is in the strict rhythm of utterances without any indication of the pitch. Among the oratorio episodes with rhythmic recital there are: No.2 "War with Japan", No.4 "Somewhere in the Foggy Capital", No.5 "Czar! We, the workers..." No.8 "Along the Mother Russia" etc.

In post-revolutionary Russia great popularity was gained by so-called collective recital, which meant reproduction of sound and music scores by a group of people by uttering texts, separate syllables, laughter, exclamations, whistle and various noise effects made with hands, feet etc. Development of this trend caused formation of numerous groups of collective recital and publishing of instructing books, like the brochure "Collective Recital" by P. Zhatkin (1924). It was considered to be an ideologically useful kind of amateur activity, successfully developing solidarity within the communities of young people (Lenzon, 1987). This type of recital found its place in the oratorio "The Way of October", where the third episode of Perekop Assault is a sound composition by S. Ryauzov. It is performed by two reciters, reading texts by V. Mayakovsky

and F. Vagramov, and a choir which makes up the background with various words, syllables and stamping their feet on the floor. The choir performs four parts: the first one reads the text in a certain rhythm (“Piebald bull of days, slow bullock-cart of years” [*dney byk peg, medlenna let arba*]). The others, following the rhythm stamped by the feet, quasi pizzicato say a set of sounds and syllables (*tram, rrram, tarararam, b, p*).

In the finales of symphonies by D. Shostakovich and “The Poem of Struggle” by D. Kabalevsky, and also in the poster “About Lenin” by A Davidenko one can find an example of indirect expression of recital effect with musical means. The melody of the choir part is close to recital due to its narrow limited diapason, presence of repeated tones, quartal steps, imitation of the spokesman’s appeal intonation, domination of dotted rhythm and triplet rhythmic figures.

The theatre effects are achieved in the vocal and symphonic glorifying opuses due to the specificity of choir texture organization. It is dynamic, which is manifested in the interchange of full choir and soloist voices, texture parts when one voices are off and others join. These effects reproduce a dialogue or a polylogue within the masses, or emphasize the people’s single-mindedness. In the finale of the Second Symphony by D. Shostakovich the image of oppressed masses is especially impressive due to the *diminuendo* texture in the phrase “silence, suffering, oppression”. Successive cut of the choir voices together with the dynamic attenuation and gradual lowering of the pitch results in smooth fade out of the sound: the word “silence” [*molchanye*] is sang out loudly, in six-voice texture; “suffering” is three-voice, with the dynamic sound *tr* [*stradanie*], and “oppression” [*gnyot*] is slowly sustained at the same pitch in basso part.

In the poetic texts of the analyzed opuses it is possible to trace some similarities with the texts

of theatre performances: in both the poets are influenced by the symbols of stone, fire and iron, crystallized during the creation of the myth about the Revolution and building of the new world. In the proletariat performance the mentioned semantics of stone, fire and iron turn up in the names of some performances⁵ and in some texts: “With the steel step just forward you go, all the time forward incessantly I march with you” from the drama “Red Corner” by V. Ignatov (1918), “Hard and powerful is our strike, Communard! Communard!” – while forging the Communard heart of a piece of iron in the “Legend of Communard” by P. Kozlov (1919). Stone and iron were often used for making scenery. In the oratorio “The Way of October” “iron” and “fiery” are interpreted as qualities of a superhero: “Frunze, the captain of steel, held the wheel firmly in his hand” (from “Perekop Assault”) or “the body which hosted the spirit of flame and power could not stand it” (from the message of Lenin’s death). In the symphony “To October” by D. Shostakovich, Lenin forging the freedom is compared to a blacksmith making “iron” heroes, determined and fearless, ready to struggle. In the text of the finale of the “First of May” symphony, the images of light and fire dominate: “blowing the spark into fire, the flame captured the forest”, “it is the dawn of May that goes straight forward, under the light of mournful flags”, “the May which is in the eyes of the future with its bright lights”, “for you to set the fire to the old and give the start to the new”.

Such symbolism finds its metaphorical reflection in the musical language of the symphonies. It is no coincidence why the Leader themes are given to the brass winds, and the thesis theme of the Second Symphony, just like the “spokesman” solo in the meeting scene of the Third Symphony is played by the most powerful of them, which is the tuba. In the Second Symphony the colourful Ges harmony

(in finale, Fis at the word “October”), which is the reminiscence to the finale of “Prometheus” by Skryabin, is perceived as a colour of light and flame. The audial association is completed with the program subtitle of the piece by Skryabin: “about a mythical character who delivered fire to the world”.

In musical pieces the semantics of colours, which has always played a great part in proletariats performances, also finds its place. In the scenery, in the costumes, and other scenic attributes special significance was given to red and golden, the colours of the new communistic world, which were opposed to grey and black. Grey colour, which often was the colour of the “working overalls”, symbolized the crowd, purposelessly suffering in slavery; black was always associated with the images of the past. In the cento of the oratorio “The Way of October” red colour manifests itself as a symbol of revolt (“bloody dawn”, “red flags”, “Red Army”), white is interpreted as the colour of death (“the blizzard cottons up with white

veils”, “white snows”). Grey, or gray colour, just like in the “meeting type” performance, is the embodiment of the revolutionary masses: it is the colour of the uniform jackets.

It is true that the diversity of features of drama in the early Soviet glorifying music gives us the right to speak of theatricalization as a powerful principle of presenting the leading images. Its impact covers many layers of the artistic language of the opuses, among which there are: the melody, the texture, the tone plan and the poetic text. Wide penetration of the theatre techniques into music was a result of the composers’ experiments, caused by their wish to achieve maximum influence on the audience, and also by their striving to make the musical and poetic language of their works more democratic and accessible. The widening synthesis of the theatre and music led to significant widening of the range of means and techniques used in Soviet music.

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¹ There also were variants with a grey (silver coloured) and blue blouses, which came into common theatre use later.

² In drama piece “Mystery Bouffe” by Mayakovsky it was a way to call proletariats.

³ Usually they indicated the time and the place of action or the event: “Year 1905” (No.2), “Bloody Sunday” (No.6), “February 1917” (No.8), “Meeting at the front” (No.10), “Assault of Zimny Palace” (No.12), “In the memory of the 12” (No.16), “Perekop” (No.17).

⁴ ...also in collective events of the Soviet times, such as meetings, gatherings etc.

⁵ Among them there is the performance “The Mason” based on the play by P. Bessalko shown in 1918, and “Les Aubes” based on the play by E. Verhaeren, the first night of which was on November 7, 1920.

Элементы театрализации в советской славильной музыке 1920-х – начала 1930-х годов

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Данная статья посвящена рассмотрению вопроса о претворении элементов театрального искусства в советских славильных музыкальных сочинениях послереволюционного времени. Создаваясь в период становления нового коммунистического государства, эти опыты были призваны сформировать в сознании слушателя позитивную картину советской реальности, преподнести ее ключевые образы и идеи. В ходе сравнительного анализа славильных музыкальных сочинений и пролетарского спектакля-митинга был выявлен спектр общих приемов, в числе которых: опора на типовую драматургическую схему, обращение к текстам-литмонтажам, деление хоровой массы на группы, ведущие диалог, вовлечение зрителя в действие. Для них характерно усиление зрелищного начала, выражающееся в оригинальности сценического решения, а также в употреблении таких атрибутов, как плакаты, гудок, большой барабан в руках артиста. Акцентирование роли устного слова достигается применением различных его жанров и видов декламации, введением партии чтеца, воссозданием сцен митинга. Следовательно, в славильных сочинениях раннего советского периода театрализация выступает мощным принципом подачи ведущих коммунистических образов и идей.

Ключевые слова: советская музыка, славильные сочинения, пролетарский театр, спектакль-митинг, послереволюционный период.
