О ПРЕТВОРЕНИИ ПОЭЗИИ А. БЛОКА В СИМФОНИЧЕСКОЙ ПАРТИТУРЕ
БАЛЕТА Б. ТИЩЕНКО «ДВЕНАДЦАТЬ»

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ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE A. BLOK’S POETRY
IN THE SYMPHONIC SCORE OF B. TISHCHENKO’S BALLET THE TWELVE

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются взаимоотношения музыки и поэзии в балете «Двенадцать» выдающегося отечественного симфониста второй половины ХХ века Бориса Ивановича Тищенко (1939–2010). Спектакль знаменитого хореографа Л. Якобсона, поставленный в Кировском театре в Ленинграде в 1964 году, стал одним из первых балетов авангардного направления в Советском Союзе.

В исследовании делается акцент на различных подходах композитора и хореографа к претворению на сцене поэзии А. Блока, что приводило к серьёзным творческим разногласиям и даже конфликтам при подготовке премьеры. Тищенко в своем прочтении опирался на блоковский стих, его ритм, размер и сложную, подчас неожиданную семантику. Речевое начало в «Двенадцати» весьма ощутимо, композитор зачастую следует блоковским строчкам буквально. Они то и дело всплывают в потоке музыки, управляя ею не только в образно-смысловом и сюжетном планах, но и в ритмически-интонационном.

В статье содержатся выводы о том, что работа Тищенко над спектаклем привела к впечатляющему художественному результату: партитура балета написана свежим, оригинальным и современным языком. Тищенко’s music became the basis of the first avant-garde Soviet ballet performance and, in this context, firmly entered the history of Russian art.

Ключевые слова: Борис Тищенко, Двенадцать, Александр Блок, балет, Леонид Якобсон, симфонический оркестр.

Keywords: Boris Tishchenko, Twelve, Alexander Blok, ballet, Leonid Yakobson, symphony orchestra.

The works of Boris Ivanovich Tishchenko have a unique position in the panorama of today’s art. There is no need to remind how difficult the development of music in the 20th century was. Probably the greatest trial it had to pass was the urge towards radical innovations, which often led to the nearly complete loss of an individual style. Tishchenko’s music has a rare quality – it is instantaneously identifiable, literally by the first notes and bars. They form a world imperiously establishing its own laws and demanding maximum concentration of thought from the listener. Integrity, scale of artistic issues, and finally constant feeling of artist’s responsibility – such are the key points of the composer’s personality.

The whole life of Boris Tishchenko was related to St. Petersburg; it was there that his genesis as musician began. First of all, one should remember the years of study at the Rimsky-Korsakov School of Music, where Tishchenko studied piano with V. Michelis and composition with G. Ustvolskaya. Her influence proved to be powerful and fruitful, and no surprise that Tishchenko as author can be amply heard even in his early works (among them are the piano Variations, with which Tishchenko entered the Conservatory.)
Apart from composition, at the Conservatory, Tishchenko studied as pianist (with A. Logovinsky.) His composition classes were with V. Salmanov, V. Voloshinov and O. Yevlakhov, and his postgraduate studies, with Shostakovich. The role of creative contacts with Shostakovich cannot be overestimated. It was to him that Tishchenko dedicated his Third and Fifth Symphonies afterwards (the latter was written after the death of Shostakovich.) Already in his student years, many of his works became known, especially as some of them were performed for the first time by the author (First Piano Concerto, Third Piano Sonata.) In 1965, Tishchenko started his professor activity teaching various subjects at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, in particular score reading and instrumentation, and composition from 1974. Among his students were several well-known composers of St. Petersburg.

Boris Tishchenko was writing virtually in all existing genres, from super symphonies to songs a cappella. At the same time, it is evident that certain genres enjoy a special position in his creative work. Primarily, it is the genre of symphony. Addressing it is a special “plot” in the composer’s biography, from the early first written at the age of 22 to the Eighth. Each of the symphonies is unique, from the scoring of instruments to the overall concept and drama. Extended solo meditations and stunning tutti’s, acute and harsh contrasts keeps the listener in a great tension from the beginning to the end of the opus. Strict economy of resources is also surprising, with a brief motive generally used as the basis becoming the core for the whole development (suffice it to remember Postscriptum in the Third Symphony.) This can also be said about the instrumental concertos: the “playing” element, where the soloist discloses his/her virtuoso abilities, usually gives way to a strained monolog where the soloist and the orchestra make one voice (understandably, the Second Violin Concerto has also the title of “Violin Symphony.”)

Chamber music is a special sphere. For instance, symphonic drama mightily shows itself in the Second and Third String Quartets, and in piano sonatas. They may be rightly called symphonies for piano. The author’s idea seems to be tending to destroy the borders of traditional abilities of the instrument – by using a maximum dynamic range, or by combining transparent one-voice chant and deafening clusters (in the Seventh Sonata, bells chime in addition to the piano.) The emotional gamut is extremely vast there, it makes you remember the style of Ancient Russian frescoes, and lyrical sentimentality (this is also very clearly indicated in the “Portraits” cycle for organ.) The range of artistic themes of the composer’s vocal music is really broad. They include the vocal cycle “Sad Songs” written in the year of graduation from the Conservatory in Composition, and the parody grotesque of the “Little Orange” cycle (to words by various poets), and the piercing “The Race of Time” to words by A. Akhmatova.

Interestingly, as regards musical theater, Tishchenko preferred ballet rather than opera. The plasticity of dance becomes a visible embodiment of his music, which is as always subordinated to the symphony logic. Moreover, the very personages addressed by the composer demand some conflicting, dramatic symphonic development: The Twelve (after the poem by A. Blok), Yaroslavna (inspired by The Tale of Igor’s Campaign), a monumental choreosymphonic cycliade titled Beatrice (after Dante’s Divine Comedy.) The opera The Stolen Sun and operetta The Giant Cockroach (both after K. Chukovsky’s poems) refers to fabulous subjects but outwardly: the sarcasm and irony, and the very musical language in them are far from being “childish”.

A very important line in Tishchenko’s creativity is the history of Ancient Rus, full of stern fascination and detachedly proud greatness. The noble glory of warlike feats and sorrow for lost freedom, rejoicing chimes of bells and ascetic, severe sounds of sacred chants – these images will immediately come to the mind of a listener of the ballet Yaroslavna and soundtracks to the films Suzdal and The Tale of Igor’s Campaign.

The uniqueness and individuality of Boris Tishchenko’s style is strikingly emphasized by its relationship to absolutely different cultural traditions. On one hand, it is the music of past ages, Renaissance and Baroque. The passion for it has proved to be very stable – this primarily relates to works of J. S. Bach and C. Monteverdi (it is worth reminding that the composer created his own orchestral version of The Coronation of Poppea.) They are also the origins of the linear polyphonic type of thinking as the structural base of Tishchenko’s music. It is this feature that gives an impression of strict rationality and discipline, knowing nothing excessive and just emphasizing the rich fantasy of the author.

Another very important source of creative discoveries was non-European cultures: India, China, Japan etc., and folklore (the composer went to folklore expeditions a conservatory student.) It is due to them he generated a monodic type of melodies, infinite rhythmic diversity and freedom, and finally the development technique itself, where the whole grows out of a brief melodic “grain.”

And finally, we cannot avoid remembering the impact of the 20th century music, and primarily B. Bartok, A. Berg, S. Prokofiev, I. Stravinsky, and of course the composer’s teachers Ustvolskaya and Shostakovich. Probably the main thing connecting Tishchenko to them is conviction that any innovation turning into end-in-itself is disastrous for art. All discoveries of Boris Tishchenko in the sphere of rhythm, melodic texture and orchestration, and drama originate from his creative goals achieved under the laws of the art of music.

The features of the artistic space of Tishchenko’s music generally tend to support the musical utterance as a monolog. The author does not reproduce a model of the surrounding world in his music, but rather builds a separate enclosed world. The result is an utterance appealing to the depth of human mentality, to individual consciousness. In this aspect, Tishchenko presents two polar modes of human consciousness, the state of ultimate self-absorption, introspective meditation – and an image of total destruction, when
everything perishes in chaos only to be reborn again. Therefore in many of his works we hear a dialog of archaic monodic cultures and aleatorics, dodecaphony, playing with metro-rhythms, and methods of contrapuntal development. Thus the most ancient forms of the art of music become involved in the system of today’s musical thinking. The image of the inner world appears in the integrity and uniformity of the author’s “Self” refracted through the prism of the 20th century culture.

Tishchenko’s music addresses various strata of musical experience, from allusions to the Renaissance art (in the finale of the Fifth Symphony) to dancing pop rhythms (in the Seventh Symphony for example.) The bare tragic intonations of Requiem to words by A. Akhmatova, alumus patriotism of the cantata The Music Garden and restrained touching intimacy of songs to words by O. Driz, and finally the infinity of senses in the Dante Symphonies – all this emphasizes once again the universality and abundance of the composer’s artistic world.

**The music for the ballet The Twelve after the poem by Aleksandr Blok**

The chronicler of the Leningrad musical life S. Slonimsky in his memories on the composing schools of St. Petersburg noted an important tendency in the work of B. Tishchenko in the early 1960s: “Boris's aesthetics has undergone a new round of evolution. Having mastered the skill, at a new stage he returned to literary-centric concepts. Following the powerful Second Symphony “Marina” (after M. Tsvetaeva, 1964), he creates a Requiem on the verses of A. Akhmatova” [8, p. 76]. We agree with a brilliant connoisseur of contemporary Russian music, but note that Slonimsky's “list” lacks another very important work for Tishchenko's composer's development – the ballet “Twelve”. The score, based on the poem by A. Blok, without any doubt, must be classified as literary-centrist: the music of the young Leningrad author is inspired and thoroughly imbued with Blok's verse and deep poetic meanings.

In 1959, B. Tishchenko met and made friends with I. Brodsky, and from that time on, modern poetry and literature entered the composer's life with full rights and blood. So, Tishchenko's social circle includes A. Naiman, E. Rein, A. Akhmatova. It is not surprising that he chooses bright, bold, unusual, poignant poetry for his first symphonic opus. Tishchenko was the first composer to create a work based on poems by M. Tsvetaeva, and the forbidden “Requiem” by A. Akhmatova gave immense creative possibilities for musical embodiment, but did not leave the author of the music a single chance for public performance.

And what about A. Blok? At first glance, he did not adhere to the circle of those poets who excited and inspired the young Tishchenko. However, in the informative article by M. Nestiева (and she quite deeply and interestingly investigated the work of the young Tishchenko), we find confirmation of the organic nature of the appearance of the author of the poem "The Twelve" in the life of a musician: “There is an artist in Russian culture with whom the Leningrad composer is related by the very sense of reality and, as a result, gravitation towards similar ideas, figurative-semantic, emotional layers. This artist is Alexander Blok” [6, p. 340].

The music for the ballet The Twelve after the eponymous poem by Aleksandr Blok was composed by Boris Tishchenko who was commissioned by the prominent Soviet choreographer Leonid Yakobson (1904–1975) for staging at the Kirov (now Mariinsky) Theatre in Leningrad. Leonid Yakobson (also spelled as Jakobson) was a true innovator, an ingenious artistic director who often ventured into confident experiments. Early in the 1960s, Boris Tishchenko composed two ballet miniatures for Yakobson’s ballets based on myths – Prometheus and Danaida. Yakobson liked them and suggested that the 23-year-old composer take up a challenging and ambitious project. According to Tishchenko’s memoirs, “Yakobson showed a burning desire to stage Blok’s “The Twelve.” I had a condition though: the finale should be the one conceived by Blok: “Ahead of them goes Jesus Christ.” Yakobson promised: “Yes, I’ll keep Christ.” But Yakobson went back on his promise, Christ was ruthlessly axed from the music score. It was definitely due to the interference of Communist Party leaders, but Yakobson himself did not really care too much either. It’s one thing when Jesus Christ is present on paper in Blok’s poem, but it’s quite different if Jesus appears on stage, and dancing on top of that. Tishchenko preferred a “gentle” finale (and he made it astonishingly beautiful: the music is gradually dissolving in echoic call-offs among the flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and trumpet as is if moving away from the stage to the silvery sounds of celesta and harp, and supported by long organ pedals), while Yakobson wanted the ballet close to be full of energy, trenchant rhythms, and powerful orchestral dynamics. But first things first.

As known, Blok wrote The Twelve very fast (it took him but a few days, and then he only slightly amended it), and yet, despite the apparently fragmentary and spontaneous text, the poem’s composition was carefully elaborated. Block created The Twelve under a strong influence of the October 1917 Revolution, he gave a new meaning to all of his previous works. Instead of the amazing musicality of his verses he now opted for polyrhythm, folk rhymes, and brusque jargon. The poem turned into a mix of different, sometimes contradictory semantic and style accents: it combines the mystic concepts of a revolution as global renewal and God-seeking, tones of urban legends, and cultural contexts of contemporary Russia, popular speech, vulgarisms, and lexical and rhythmic diversity, and always relying on meticulous musical imagery, scansion, and verse intonation.

The poem was bluntly rejected by Blok’s colleagues refusing to accept Soviet power, but even categorical proponents of the October Revolution were strongly perturbed by it. None the less, after Blok’s death The Twelve turned into the flagship poem of the Soviet revolution. Leonid Yakobson turned to the poem as a natural follow-up to his search for a new choreography so it was logical for him to invite Boris Tishchenko as a composer with a strong symphonic potential who leaped to the centre stage in Leningrad’s
musical life at the beginning of the 1960s. By 1963, Tishchenko was the author of the First Symphony, Cello Concerto that gained fame after it was interpreted by M. Rostropovich, as well the “Sad Songs” vocal cycle, two string quartets, and a number of sonatas for various instruments.

Tishchenko’s music for The Twelve, vanguardist, refined and even sophisticated as it is, does not offer any philosophic generalizations. On the contrary, it is full of energy, revolutionary vigor, and march-like rhythms, on the one hand, and wonderful lyrical revelations, and simply beautiful, slow, instrumental episodes, on the other hand. The composer wrote a ballet of 12 parts in strict accordance with Blok’s 12 chapters, and entitled each part using a relevant line from the poem. The ballet scenario devised by Yakobson was quite simple: “The blizzard of the Revolution is sweeping off the old world. Red guards are marching amidst the snowstorm through Petrograd after dark. One of them is Petrukh. He spots Ka’tka and Van’a hoofing in a dive debauchery. They are riding full speed toward the twelve guards with a reckless driver. Once Petrukh sees Ka’tka, jealousy and anger start boiling in him. Blamm... and Ka’tka falls down. Love, despair, and remorse are torturing Petrukh. Ka’tka’s image is haunting him. He wills himself to keep marching. The old world is left behind. The twelve soldiers of the Revolution are making headway toward a new, bright world.”

Tishchenko’s ballet was the first attempt to choreograph the Blok’s poem. The composer’s task was to find the tones that would help translate the verbal image into the language of plasticity and scenography. And the author had created a lot of music that was graphic and pictorial i.e. definitely good for the purpose. But Tishchenko wanted to compose, first and foremost, a symphonic work focusing on poetic speech. Speech origination is clearly present in The Twelve, the composer sometimes follows Blok’s lines word for word. Time and again they emerge in the music stream and steer it not only through images, meanings and plots but through rhythmic intonations just as well. But such is all instrumental music composed by Tishchenko, full of narratives and dialogues. His music does not shy away from graphic and depictive conventions, it broadly conveys the plasticity of gestures, and it is prepared to interpret any sound manifestation of the outside world, yet its leading extramusical source is the tone of human speech, both daily and poetic speech. In The Twelve, the composer exploits these tendencies in full measure, forever reminding us of the sounding of the string of words, and tuning up to it his own string of sounds. Merging with the words, Tishchenko’s music indulges in the freedom of its own development, where the key objective is comprehending the poet’s narrative. It is in this context that we can watch a rhythmic representation of a metamorphosis in which an anarchic mob turns into a closely-knit detachment of Red Guards, or the bold vulgarity of the speech tones of Ka’tka and Petrukh. Moreover, the composer uses Blok’s lines not only in the headings of ballet parts but also to illustrate various episodes and fragments. His music adds on to Blok’s word, is supported by it and fuels it using the entire potential of a big symphony orchestra.

Tishchenko’s music absorbed the tragedy of events, richness of street scenes, grotesque, “holy wrath,” belief in the ultimate righteousness of the revolution, and style diversity. All this comes from Blok, but the composer elaborates the images of The Twelve, snowstorm, Ka’tka or Petrukh from a symphonic perspective, using intonations, timbre, rhythm, and dynamic variations. An intensive development of the themes endowed with a symbolic significance adds symphonic properties to the ballet music keeping it from being illustrative. Tishchenko’s first ballet is distinguished for his undoubted talent and ability to plunge into the world of another artist without dissolving his own world in it.

The ballet was performed at Leningrad’s Kirow Theatre three times, and then was permanently removed from the repertoire. It was hard for everybody: the dancers (only one cast was engaged, Yakobson’s choreography was first-of-a-kind and demanded a lot of physical strain), the orchestra (Tishchenko’s scores made musicians perform at the top of their capabilities), the public (the ballet seemed out of place for a far-famed theatre focusing on classical ballet performances), but primarily, for both theatrical and Communist Party bosses. The ballet was doomed to perish right from its birth – in a wrong time and place. However, we believe that this work of art (in terms of its musical and symphonic components) became the first vanguard ballet performance in Soviet Russia, and in this context made it into the art history in this country. It is also clearly essential for the ballet world, even though its worthiness could not be appreciated during the first performances. The onstage life of this unconventional ballet was short. By the irony of destiny, its opening night was December 31, on the eve of New Year 1964. Few members of the audience succeeded in overcoming their pre-festive excitement to be imbued with the tragic pathos of what they saw. And yet – as is often the case with a ballet theatre – the apparently short-lived performance influenced the artistic exploration by the next generation. Yakobson’s unconstrained plastique was a gulp of fresh air in the rarified atmosphere of feeble imitations of classical masterpieces.

References:

