

GENERAL MUSIC THEORY

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MUSIC IN “WOE TO WIT”

Annotation. *The subject of this work is the article of B. V. Asafiev about the comedy production of Alexander Sergeevich Griboyedov “Woe from Wit” realized by Vsevolod Meyerhold in 1928. Asafiev, a famous Russian and Soviet historian and theoretician of music and renowned composer, also took part in creation of this spectacle: he was selecting music that would illustrate the inner image of the characters. The goal of this article became his argumentation of this selection, especially the forming of the psychological likeness of the main character — Chatsky. The key point became Asafiev’s claim about musical characteristics as most active in manifestation of the essence of the character. The author compares the Sturm und Drang era with the times of Mozart, Beethoven, Shubert, and German Lied. Going analytically deeper into the music of Beethoven, the author highlights its multifacetedness, while turning to Mozart — he underlines in it not brightness, but the opposite, the features of the “world-pain”. In theatrological sense Asafiev counterposes the images of Chatsky and Famusov as irreconcilable, gives attention to the logic of the dialogues and ensembles, and the tempos of development of the play. He demonstrates, for example, the tones of French “happy” songs, to convey the street and drawing room vulgarity. As a result, characterizing Griboyedov’s famous comedy through music, Asafiev unfolds a broad musical panorama that includes in addition to the mentioned composers works of Bach, Field, and Wagner. The publication of this forgotten article sheds light on the collaboration between Asafiev and Meyerhold in both, the theatrical aspect, as well as the stage in development of the Asafiev’s intonation theory.*

Keywords: *Asafiev, Meyerhold, Griboyedov, Beethoven, drama theatre, improvisation, music-historical eras, styles, Russian person, theatrical characters.*

In the foundation of the musical arrangement “Woe to Wit”, lies the principle of the effect of musical-creative energy, which manifests itself in the improvisation and is emitted by the main character of the play — Chatsky. The discursive circumlocution of Chatsky is just one “visible” side of his persona. Is it this side alone makes the perception, comprehension and assessment of Chatsky one-sided and fragmentary? Another question that remains in the shadows — why is it that only the discursive criticism of Chatsky seems to be the most prevalent? Was there a lack of circumlocutionary preachers and circumlocutionary gossipers? But if we approach the character of Chatsky through music (which will in no way contradict with our idea of Griboyedov), then another, the most essential side of his nature becomes clear in our conscience: the dynamics and sharpness of his life perspective and the intensity of the emotional tone, which manifest themselves through Chatsky’s constant communication with music. His words stop being empty or even hollow; they are filled and enriched by the music. It reveals the depth and insightfulness of Chatsky’s feelings: the intensity of his love and hatred, and terror of vulgarity and satiate burgess existence. Who is Chatsky? He is a sensitive Russian man, artistically

gifted, having travelled to the West at the time when the giant Beethoven presented the mankind, penchant to a philistine dull existence, his insurmountable ethic criteria through the sounds of his music: Sturm und Drang has escaped the revolution. Everyone was getting sleepy. Only the music did not want to settle down and continued calling to conquest of “rights of man and of the citizen”. Philosophy took to the sources of music; all minds that were still living fed from it. Its energy affected all who refused to be inert, and killed all who were frail. In the end, this led to a great heroic figure — the musician and a revolutionary Wagner. The West was ruled by Beethoven, and next to him, the modest Shubert was idealizing the surrounding him mundane life and nature in his songs. The titanic symphonies of Beethoven and the romantic culture of the German Lied, followed by the light and shadows of Mozart’s melos and dampened recollections of the great era of Bach — on “sea of music”, possessed the conscience of the contemporaries. This is what moved and excited Chatsky, what he took with him coming home, and what produced in him such passionate and extreme protest against the dull and dormant Moscow life. This protest was intensified by the pain over the insulted bright feeling of love and the collision of

the image of his beloved, evoked by music, with her real image, already defiled by the vulgar perverted environment. Throughout the entire play Chatsky is at the peak of emotional strain. He draws will power from music, and it is music that relieves his anxiety. Chatsky lives, thinks and feels through music, as it was with Beethoven. Hence the saturation of the image of Chatsky with musical improvisations, the material for which is mostly Beethoven's music, taken not in its structurally complete forms, but as a live stream, a constant answer to any query of mind, will, or a feeling. The ancients would say that for Chatsky music is the oracle, while Socrates would find here his "demon". Not as much with words, as with music that Chatsky tames the "beast of the Moscow lifestyle" such as Famusov.

So, Beethoven serves as the main material in improvisational interpretation. Therefore, the play is rich with his sketches and drafts as the prototypes of his ideas and the stimulant for life and defiance of the consuming vulgarity: throughout the play, Chatsky uses music to resist the vicious tentacles of the octopus of burgess. Stable and unstable, passively-contemplative and pertinent, confirming and shallow "moments" in music when possible were chosen in such way, that they would on one hand answer the emotional state of Chatsky, while on the other, express his feelings and will. At this point an important part of course would have a sort of a musical-psychological prospect: back to Bach — the motto that takes Chatsky farther away from the vulgarity that surrounds him (the scene with Famusov), and at the same time, through Bach the persona of Chatsky becomes most humane, "class-transcendent" and all-encompassing, and nears the modernity. Chatsky turning to Mozart receives the same meaning of psychological perspective. But the Mozart selected here is not the sunny, not collected, rather dreamingly gloomy, shaky and divided: it is precisely as a counterweight of the Beethoven's titanic will that we see the traits of Weltschmerz are underlined in Mozart — a ripening Byronism.

Chatsky is filled with music — music on a global scale. Thus his musical improvisations are the emotional charge and the constructing will of the play. But Chatsky is counterposed by the music of the Moscow mundane life. It has two faces. One is ennobled — a musical "pinnacle" that always, throughout all epochs transforms the hideous features of the most "bestly existence" into a human state. The other face — a small, tavern-styled and filled with burgess perversion. Tender and day-dreaming Mr. Field with his nocturnes idealizes life in the best way possible, hiding from it in the shallow moonlight of his exquisite melodies and harmonies. The dance Beethoven — Rubens of the early 19th century — brings a healthy and emotional "Flemish" joy into the atmosphere of greedy over-indulgence. Even more common dance music of

Shubert brings its coziness into the drawing room of gossips of ignoble servility. Consciously avoided was the historic stylization of the true serf orchestra and repertoire of the era. In music, the everyday life was taken from the outside of this place, i.e. the Famusov's Moscow, and "elevated" and "ennobled", as was done at those times by Shubert, Field, and others. Thus, there should be even a greater contrast with the vulgarity of speeches and feelings.

To characterize the other face of the lifestyle (a light Molchalin's coquetry and provincially adopted vulgarity of the Paris boulevards) typical tunes of French "happy" songs are selected with an unexpected fall from the "Viennese" Shubert, roughly vulgarized on the "lips" of a blatant French woman. The goal was to evoke through the "French-Viennese-Moscow" musical dialect the feeling of disgust towards all contamination of the human image of Sofia with the street and drawing room vulgarity, the image that Chatsky dreamt of, having created in his own musical imagination. Thus, whenever possible (whenever possible — meaning to not overshadow the "verbal" and "material" action of the play with the musical images) the music reflected the collision of worlds, ideas and feelings, embodied by Griboyedov in the "Woe from Wit". Besides the actual music, the musically-constructive and forming elements are contained within the spectacle as its organizing factors, manifesting in structuring and progression of the scenes, in dynamic nuances of dialogues and ensembles, as well as in musical development of the pace of acts. Of course, the musical-symphonic principle of contrast and various levels of tone gain play a significant role within the musical substratum of the play. But to focus on these details is pointless.

EPILOGUE. ON THE STORY OF BORIS ASAFIEV'S ARTICLE

This text of Boris Asafiev is a part of the material that was generally titled "How the "Woe to Wit" was made" and was published a day after the premiere of the play based on the comedy of Alexander Griboyedov "Woe from Wit" that took place on March 12th, 1928 in Meyerhold Theatre. On the pages of "Modern Theatre" weekly, the creators of the play talk about its production: director ("With Meyerhold on the day before the premiere" — that was the title for the interview taken by a correspondent, who hid behind the initial N.), the author of the musical arrangement of the play (this is the published here text of Asafiev), and the art directors Victor Shestakov ("On material theme") and Nikolay Ulyanov ("On costumes").

In the research on the history of the theatre, in the memoir literature for this play, even the title of which in itself spoke to the intent to give a new interpretation to Griboyedov's comedy (Meyerhold chose to use the original title of the author), there is a place dedicated

to one of the most original and at the same time characteristic events in the work of Meyerhold of the end of 1920's^[1]. As in a number of previous works of the director ("Teacher Bubus" by A. Faiko, "The Government Inspector" N. Gogol, 1926), the music was included into the play as an unchangeable component of the act. In the production of the play "Teacher Bubus" (1925) — "comedy on music" (by the genre definition given by Meyerhold) — fragments of compilations of Chopin and Liszt, performed on the grand piano placed in a special shell and visible to the public, corresponded to the world of bourgeois and intelligentsia. The music "leads the continuity of the scenic existence and life of the character", while the "verbal material of the actor becomes sort of a recitative", — was the way Erast Garin explained Meyerhold's approach towards musical theme in the "Teacher Bubus" — one of the leading artists in Meyerhold Theatre at the time playing the role of Khlestakov in "The Government Inspector", and Chatsky in "Woe to Wit"^[2]. With regards to "The Government Inspector" (1926) Meyerhold was referring to "musical realism" meaning not only the music sounding during the spectacle (it was partially composed by Mikhail Gnessin, partially comprised from the compositions of the Gogol's period — Alexander Dargomyzhsky, Alexander Alyabyev, and others), but also the entire fabric of the play, which had to be structured "in accordance with all rules of the orchestral composition", where part of every actor "needs to be immersed in groups of instruments and roles; these groups need to be intertwined in an extremely complex orchestration; the path of the leitmotifs have to be underlined in this complicated structure, and make the actors, light, movement, even objects be conducted together as an orchestra"^[3]. It is this musicality of the Meyerhold's "The Government Inspector" that was celebrated by Boris Asafiev in the review printed on the pages of the "Red Newspaper" on January 30, 1927^[4]. It was one of the most heartfelt responses in the polemic that unfolded in the press regarding the innovative production. Soon after, Meyerhold and Asafiev begin their joint work on "Woe to Wit".

After "Teacher Bubus" and "The Government Inspector", Meyerhold made one more step towards the fusion of music with the main conceptual components of the drama play. This time, the music was supposed to represent the very essence of the main character of the play — Chatsky, who was practically presented as a musician ("It is not Chatsky, rather some sort of a neurotic pianist" — notes one of the unfavorable critics of the play^[5]). From the published letters it is evident that the plot of such decision for the main role comes from Meyerhold, while Asafiev had to find the "specific musical content" of the character, the "musical sphere" in which Chatsky dwells^[6, 263]. Expressing his doubts on this matter to Meyerhold, Asafiev rejects the

natural course of using the music of Russian composers that could be known by Griboyedov — for example, the early works of Alexey Verstovsky. To Asafiev it seems too mundane, while Chatsky "is able to feel the musical sphere of a higher order"^[6, 264]. Thus he stops on Beethoven as a main, even though not the only source of the material for the musical solution to the main character. It seems that overall it was an easy decision to make, and later, it was only further refined and corrected in details^[7]. The second task was to discuss the questions of selecting the music that would characterize the visual aspect and atmosphere of the act (Asafiev mentions it in the last paragraph of the article); in this case it required orchestration of the proposed or approved plays by the director. The poster for the first production read: "Music by Bach, Beethoven, Gluck, Mozart, Shubert, Field, and others; chosen and instrumented by Boris Asafiev / Performed by A. G. Pappé"^[8].

Asafiev, who at the time lived near Leningrad in the Detskoye (Tsarskoye) Selo, was unable to come to Moscow for the premiere of the play. He was trying to get information, asking if people new of the reaction to the play or responses in the press, among which, especially during the first days after the premiere, they were mostly negative. Asafiev came to the conclusion that the play was not understood mostly due to the musical part, and was contemplating his possible miscalculations^[9]. In his letter to Meyerhold, the disappointed by the reception of the play Asafiev was expressing a number of serious thoughts on the nature of music in the drama theatre, suggesting that he may not have taken into consideration certain general facts of the perception of this genre. As to the main subject — the interpretation of the Chatsky's character — Asafiev makes a note that in our opinion addresses the real problem, a true solution of which is hard to imagine even with all the mastery of the actors in the play. He writes: "...it [the idea] can only be fully delivered if the artist was a musician-improviser and would truly find the motivation and foundation to his words in music"^[6, 281]. In reality though, the actor performing the part of Chatsky was forced to only imitate playing the piano, while his act was accompanied by the pianist behind the curtains, and it continued throughout the entire play^[10]. But it would seem that Meyerhold did not find in this any significant obstacle for expressing his idea. For over two years "Woe to Wit" continued performing, and in 1935 Meyerhold brought back the edited version of the play maintaining the "musical" part of Chatsky's character.

When in response to Meyerhold's request Asafiev wrote the text that is published here, he accompanied it with the following acknowledgment: "...the original idea — Chatsky — a musician — was yours. I only developed it. If my progression does not deviate from

your original idea — I will be happy. If it does however, — make necessary changes”^[6, 275]. It is hard to imagine that Meyerhold, who was busy preparing for the premiere, made changes to Asafiev’s article. Even if he read it, it is unlikely that he disagreed with its content: the entire complex of Meyerhold’s statements regarding his idea speaks to the fact that Asafiev in his own way, but fairly adequately describes director’s main idea regarding the musical theme of the play. At the same time, it is the comments of Asafiev, a composer and musicologist, to his own work; but it is not only expression of Meyerhold’s ideas, but also his own, emerged as a concretization and development of director’s idea. Moreover, Asafiev’s work on the musical theme for the “Woe to Wit”, as the article itself can be viewed as a stage in the path of developing

his intonation theory. The attention has already been given to the fact that Asafiev’s composing work, which frequently refers to borrowed musical material (in form of quoting, adaptation, continuation of unfinished compositions), for him often became a verification of his scientific positions in practice. Thus Y. M. Orlova, tracking the history of development of the “intonation theory of a musical style” mentions the compositions of Asafiev of the early 1930’s (ballet “Flames of Paris”) as a significant stage in the development of the scholar’s ideas, and his core concepts of “intonation dictionary of the era”, “re-intonation”, and “style of the era”^[11]. As to the role of collaboration with Meyerhold in the establishment of Asafiev’s main ideas — it remains unclear and insufficiently researched.

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