



Music: A Language Of Its Own

Olga Meerson

In what way is music a language, if it cannot be translated to other languages? After all, every attempt to paraphrase music or our impressions from it seems to make its beauty and the uniqueness of its effect on us collapse and fall flat. Such is the case with poetry as well. A work of art is not paraphrasable, yet one constantly feels an urge to paraphrase it, to talk about it in order to enter a dialogue with it, and to convey one's own impressions from it. I have known this paradox firsthand as a translator and a student of translations—fictive, poetic, and, last but not least, biblical. Translation makes an old Soviet dissidents' toast sound particularly relevant: "To the success of our hopeless cause!" Amen.

Music adds another dimension to the problem. It affects us throughout means other than words, but it triggers the same kinds of associations as language. As a former musician, I have been haunted by the question of how these associations speak to us for my whole adult life.

What, then, is music's basic unit of meaning? Perhaps a quotation. This is very similar to language, namely, to literary intertexts such as epigraphs. They quote from other works or snatches of conversations, factual or imagined, but each with its own original context. Then their context is reassigned. As a result, the new context begins to clash

with the original one, generating additional layers of meaning. Even simpler than epigraphs are shorter units of context-shift with quotes. For example: "'Do not judge lest ye be judged,' as my friend X (a notorious gossip) says." This sentence immediately raises the discrepancy between the original authority behind the quote—that of the Son of God himself—and the new, unworthy one. Hence the irony. Thus meanings are born out of shifting and clashing contexts, relying on the addressee's knowledge of both the original and the new context.

In music, however, the original quoted material may not be equipped with words. My favorite example is Mozart's self-quotation at the end of *Don Giovanni*, during the scene of the ominous feast where Don Giovanni welcomes the Statue who is about to drag him to hell. Mozart, it seems, still wants to save him, and gives him a final warning by alluding to a threat made to another skirt-chaser. This warning comes in the form of a brief, wordless musical quotation of the aria "Non più andrai" from *The Marriage of Figaro*, which had premiered the year before *Don Giovanni*. In the original text of that aria, Figaro tells the affectionate Cherubino:

*Non più andrai, farfallone amoroso,
notte e giorno d'intorno girando;
delle belle turbando il riposo,
Narcisetto, Adoncino d'amor.*

Opposite Page:
Tapestry by Antonina Kozlova.

You shall go no more, lustful butterfly,
Day and night flitting to and fro;
Disturbing ladies in their sleep
Little Narcissus, Adonis of love.

The conclusion to the aria appears to entice Cherubino with military glory, while actually threatening him with the imminent military draft. This peril is still a very mild version of the threat of imminent hell in *Don Giovanni*. If we agree that the army is not yet a sure way to perdition, Mozart's message is that he is trying to save Don Giovanni at all costs, seizing every chance, however slim, even when the threat of hell is imminent. Some may argue, however, that the two things, the army and hell, are now and perhaps have always been uncannily comparable. In that case, Mozart's allusion in *Don Giovanni* to Figaro's address to Cherubino in his earlier opera can be regarded as a euphemism, just as the army can be regarded as a euphemism for hell. The message of Mozart's self-quotation is therefore twofold: it is metaphysically moralistic, yet also politically anti-militarist.

The same effect is achieved by Fyodor Dostoevsky in his putatively blasphemous reassignments of biblical quotations to profane contexts. An example occurs in *Demons*, when Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina's grudges against Stepan Verkhovensky are described as something "she would treasure in her heart" (царала в сердце своем)—in the same way, apparently, as the Mother of God would treasure her son's words in her heart. The similarity of the wording only underscores the striking contrast between the petty and vain Varvara and the meek and lovingly attentive Mother of God. There are many similar examples in Dostoevsky, which I have extensively discussed elsewhere. These allusions are made by invoking recognizable phrasing—not always ver-

bal quotes but, in some cases, syntactic and morphological calques. This latter kind of association trigger works similarly to music: the shape of the phrase remains and can be recognized even as the actual lexical content changes.¹

Back to the nonverbal allusions, however. For the purposes of the problem at hand, it matters that, in the finale of *Don Giovanni*, the music of the aria is purely instrumental, played by woodwind musicians invited to the feast and thus appearing wordlessly onstage. One could cite many other instances of nonverbal musical quotations. Ludwig van Beethoven, for example, quoted a melodic figure from the finale of Mozart's Fifth Violin Concerto in the finale of his own Seventh Symphony. Mozart's theme is light and playful, but in Beethoven's Symphony it becomes fully Dionysian: playfulness becomes dangerous, perhaps potentially lethal.

Similarly and even more interestingly, Alfred Schnittke's Gogol Suite includes quotations from Mozart's overture to *The Magic Flute*—chromaticized, tonally disbalanced, deconstructed, fragmented, and reassembled in a heart-breaking way, but always recognizable as derived from Mozart—as well as from Tchaikovsky's near-pop classic *pas de deux* from *Swan Lake*—in contrast, deliberately more archaic than Tchaikovsky's own modes of expression, with a harpsichord playing the theme in the style of, say, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. The stronger and more recognizable the allusions, the more striking and deliberate their reuse or recycling in the new context, as exemplified by Schnittke's take on dualism (both *The Magic Flute* and *Swan Lake* have dualist, near-Manichean, plots and character conflicts) in the uncannily grotesque modernity of his own historical context. Similar principles apply to Schnittke's Cadenza to the Beethoven Violin Concerto,

¹ See, for example, Olga Meerson, *Dostoevsky's Taboos* (Dresden: Dresden University Press, 1998), 205.

which contains many allusions not just to various works by Beethoven but also to Johannes Brahms and Dmitri Shostakovich. Though a champion of quotation and self-quotation, Schnittke was hardly unique among composers who entered into bickering polemics and impassioned dialogues with one another and with their listeners and performers.

What might be the theological relevance of music as language, especially in the context of the Orthodox Church, where music and text are closely linked? The short answer is that once a particular melody or tone becomes associated with a particular text, all instances of the same chant inherit those textual associations. Thus the Obikhod tone six melody—a simplified Kievan chant—may be associated in the minds of the faithful with the post-gospel hymn of the resurrection (“Having beheld the resurrection of Christ, let us worship the holy Lord Jesus...”), or with the Paschal processional stikheron (“Thy resurrection, O Christ our Savior, the angels in heaven sing...”). This may be the case even in a fully English-language OCA or ROCOR parish, provided they use Russian arrangements—which quite often, they do, given the history of their conversion to Orthodoxy and the ensuing liturgical heritage. These associations of the same text with different chants will, of course, be different for a Greek or an Antiochian ear. In each case, they create certain clusters of associations, usually as nation-specific as the relevant chants used in a given parish.

My hymn associations are fully Russian, no matter what language I am singing in. The advantage of these nation-specific associations is that, paradoxically, they may create a possibility for multi-lingual services that are fully relevant and comprehensible to parishioners of different linguistic backgrounds. Thus when we repeat refrain

verses to a prokeimenon, or to the hymn “God is With Us” (based on the prophecy of Isaiah), we all know what is sung even if the languages keep switching or alternating. These sets of what the Orthodox call the *octoechos* or *glasny*—the eight tones—are heard by the faithful as something like theme songs. Listeners mentally supply the texts based on the place of the hymn in the service or its associations. Eventually, through the liturgical experience of sharing the same parish with the same musical practices, these theme songs make what were originally nation-specific references international, available to people using different languages.

A theme song, as we know, is able to be wordless. Orthodox hymn melodies have thus been used by some composers of instrumental music who were steeped in a national tradition in order to universalize that culture’s system of references. The most interesting example is Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Russian Easter Festival Overture*, as it is known in English. In Russian, the same work is known as the Bright Feast—that is, Paschal—Overture. The difference in titles is telling. For a Russian ear, it is quite evident that the themes from this symphonic work refer to various important hymns in the Orthodox Paschal service, each with its message: first, the theme song of Psalm 68, “Let God Arise,” and eventually, after the music has undergone a spiritual battle of fragmentation, chromatization, and dissonance, the immediately and uniquely recognizable melody of the Paschal troparion: “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.”

Thus for the Russian ear. What about people not sharing the Russian liturgical tradition, however? In 1979, when I was a student at Mannes College of

© 2021 The Wheel.
 May be distributed for
 noncommercial use.
 www.wheeljournal.com

Музыкальный фрагмент, состоящий из четырех систем нот. Каждая система включает вокальную линию (верхняя часть) и фортепианное сопровождение (нижняя часть). Под нотами в каждой системе приведены русские слова, соответствующие мелодии. Система 1: Да вос-крес-нет Бог, и рас-то-чат-ся вра-зи Е-го. Система 2: Пас-ха свя-щен-на-я нам днесь по-ка-за-ся. Система 3: Пас-ха но-ва, свя-та-я, Пас-ха та-ин-ствен-на-я. Система 4: (без слов).

Obikhod chant for
 the opening of the
 Paschal stikhera.

Music in NYC, our student orchestra played this overture. What was Russia to these excellent young musicians? What were they to Russia? By then, I had already been a priest's wife for a little over a year, responsible for directing my husband's parish choir, which was bilingual but—like, say, the choir at St Vladimir's Seminary—used mostly Russian chants. In the Mannes orchestra, our trombonist was rehearsing his part, which was actually the melody of "Let God Arise." (Later, in 1981, when my husband needed a theme song for his religious broadcasts on Radio Liberty, I picked that one for him, and he was very glad.) The trombone player had no clue what words were associated with that theme. When I told him, he said that that information made quite a difference. Like Russians, he became an insider to Rimsky-Korsakov's secret

code, so to speak. Hence the difference in the overture's title in Russian and in English. For a Russian, the program of this work is not nation-specific, and neither is its title, the Paschal Overture. For an outsider, however, it is markedly Russian to the point of exoticism, referencing Russian liturgical theme songs, or, if you will, buzz melodies. Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic work has neither words nor a choir, yet he manages to share these Russian Orthodox church melodies with the whole world, so that, precisely because they are devoid of words, they make the association between Pascha and this music more, not less, universal.

His is a perfect example of how music, a universal language, turns the nation-specific into the universal. It is the Esperanto of pan-human asso-

B Maestoso.

Tromboni.
a 3.

f *dim.* *f* *dim.* *f*

Tutti. *mf*

Viol. *mf* *div.*

mf *div.*

tutti V-celli. *mf* *div.*

ciative triggers. This ability to turn local and specific national references into something universally relevant works for all art forms—music, architecture, and everything in between. Rimsky-Korsakov’s effort bears comparison with a much earlier one: that of the fifteenth-century northern Italian architect Aristotele Fioravanti, who planted the Ghibelline style of Tuscany and the Veneto in, and as, the heart of Muscovy—the Moscow Kremlin. This is what Dostoevsky—another Russian who was relevant far beyond his national tradition—called “universal responsiveness” and attributed especially to Alexander Pushkin.

Like the arts, church too can cherish the nation-specific while universalizing it by letting people share associative triggers. Rimsky-Korsakov translated a cappella Russian Orthodox liturgical chants into the idiom of wordless symphonic music, and thereby made the reference system of these melodies available to the minds and hearts of people very far removed from Russia. Art always finds ways to cherish the local yet to make it relevant for the whole world. In the same way, the Church makes the whole world the New Israel, overcoming ethnophyletism without negating the multitude of national traditions. ✱

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Russian Easter Festival Overture*, opus 36 (1888; Leipzig: M. P. Belaïeff, 1890).



Olga Meerson is a professor in the Department of Slavic Languages at Georgetown University and an associate faculty member in the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies. She received her MA and PhD in Russian literature from Columbia University. Meerson’s interests range from Old Testament exegesis to Russian Orthodox liturgical poetics and musicology to contemporary Russian literature. She is married to an Orthodox priest and has three children.