

# THE EXPERIENCE OF SUBSTANTIATION OF THE NATURE AND CHARACTER OF MUSSORGSKY'S MUSICAL STYLE

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**Annotation:** The object of Boris Asafiev's article is to define the reason why Modest Mussorgsky's music strongly affects the listeners. Asafiev invents his method of analysis himself from his observations of life impulses that generate the movement towards the artistic outcome. The main quality was not in his composing good melodies, but in his ability to fill his melodies with the image and human character of the protagonist and to manifest it into the intonational and plastic expressivity. Asafiev bases his elaborations on the concept of intonation developed by him. Another feature of Mussorgsky's artistic thinking is disclosed by Asafiev through the parameter of musical form; the theorist makes note of the variant type of thinking and the writing of the music in different versions. The researcher came to the conclusion of the functioning here of the principle of improvisation. And this assertion by Boris Asafiev is a unique one in the entire music literature about Modest Mussorgsky.

**Keywords:** Mussorgsky, melody, intonation, image, expressivity, effect, human being, form, variant quality, improvisational quality.

I shall attempt briefly and concisely to set forth my views on everything that comprises the most important premises of Mussorgsky's musical style: the leading and formative principle and the organizing cause, due to which no efforts of conservative school catechises can deprive his music of its force of effect. Mussorgsky is at his core a vocal composer, but his vocal characteristics are of a special kind. He is not a «vocalist,» in the sense of the virtuosic pompous style of Italian opera, and not a nationalist stylist, in the sense of borrowing of folk melodies for the sake of including them into a common European formal framework. Therefore, in my subsequent exposition I shall refer to Mussorgsky's melodies not as themes arranged by

the composer, but as Mussorgsky's *melodicism* — the entire sphere of *vocal intonations*, which comprise one of the most important elements of his musical language. Let me emphasize — *vocal intonations*. This means that if one is to examine the concept of intonation on an actual level (as a sound manifestation and as an effort dependent on it, i.e. sound generation), in Mussorgsky's musical output its intonating stands in a direct connection with human *respiration*, perceived not through an instrument, but directly through sound, generated by the organism itself, existent in it.

Paradoxical as it may be, it remains a fact: a composer may write art songs and operas, while, at the same time, not being a vocal composer, if he

\* Boris Vladimirovich Asafiev (1884–1949) is one of the most important Russian musicologists, one of the founders of Soviet musicology, a composer, music critic, pianist, ballet accompanist, pedagogue and public figure. His literary pseudonym during his lifetime was Igor Glebov. He was the only musicologist who was an Academician of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Asafiev wrote a number of operas and ballets, among which «The Flame of Paris» and «The Fountain of Bakhchisarai» are still being staged up to the present day. As a music theorist, he is the author of the famous research book «Muzykal'naya forma kak protses» [“Musical Form as a Process”], Volume 1 (1930) and Volume 2, «Intonatsia» [“Intonation”] (1947). Musical form was regarded by Asafiev not as a static construction, but as a dynamically moving process. He also introduced the generalizing triad of functional organization of form that is applicable to the entire diverse assortment of classical forms: i-m-t (initium — motus — terminus). Asafiev's concept of «intonation» has become a fundamental discovery in Russian music theory. This term describes the expressive content of any structural units: motives, themes, and even entire forms. The concept of «intonation» in this sense has received thorough dissemination in Russian music theory and practice, but has made almost no impact outside of Russia.

In the domain of music history, Asafiev wrote outstanding works on almost all Russian music of the 19th and 20th centuries, from Mikhail Glinka to Dmitri Shostakovich. Especially influential are his books «Glinka,» «Simfonicheskiye etyudy» [“Symphonic Etudes”], his monographical books about Piotr Tchaikovsky, Modest Mussorgsky, Alexander Scriabin and Alexander Glazunov and «Kniga o Stravinskom» [“Book about Stravinsky”]. His numerous articles devoted to Sergei Prokofiev, Nikolai Myaskovsky, Aram Khachaturian and Vissarion Shebalin, as well as to composers from outside of Russia — Alban Berg (Asafiev assisted the production of «Wozzeck» in Leningrad in 1927), Paul Hindemith and Ernst Krenek. Asafiev defined in an insightful manner the individuality and historical role of each composer.)

composes vocal music because his memory retains melodies of human voice and, in general, fragments of vocal music from the past, while his imagination recreates them by means of their integration. Such a composer does not participate in the generation of musical intonations — he merely assembles together a selection from the vocal material «existent» in music. To express it in figurative language, he does not mint this coin himself.

This kind of imitative and essentially secondary composition in the sphere of vocal melodic writing is also characteristic of Mussorgsky, to a minimal degree. Such «neutral» expressive means<sup>1</sup>, generic for his epoch, can be found in his music, as well, but it is not they that express the quality of *his* musical language and his musical characteristics, — namely, the intonations by which one may immediately sense a living, concrete person, including his belonging to one particular social group, rather than to another one. Thus, Mussorgsky's vocal quality (the melodic aspect, in particular) is distinguished from the vocal qualities of the formal type in its constant presence of in it of the element of intonation-based inventiveness, which upon listening is perceived as something fresh and vivaciously direct. Why is it as such? Mussorgsky aspires to creating intelligible melody, generated by characteristics of human speech. Consequently, for him the spoken word and living speech are not formal impulses, but an intonation-related basis. By extracting from intonations of speech their musical elements, he thereby conceives the melody, which is formed by him as being in direct connection with the psycho-physiological processes regulating human speech. Breathing (the level of its intensity) and emotions (the level of their tension) constitute an essential ingredient of Mussorgsky's music. In other words, each musical intonation chosen by him is *validated* by living stimuli: it is tested by practice, and it is derived from the world perception of a given opera character, since there are reflected in his speech.

From here arises the exclusive force of the impact of Mussorgsky's melodic writing — it passes from a living situation to another one. This melodic style contains inherent inner dynamics (stemming from the emotional tone, breath and intensity of the musical and speech intonations stipulated by the given emotional condition and the objective qualities of the intonations inherent to a given operatic character of social group). Consequently, it could be said that Mussorgsky's music presents by itself a living experience of transformation of the inner subjective

life of human subjective life into musical language through the mediation of (through the observation) of reflections of emotional states in intonations of speech. Thereby, the melodic style of the composer's music and the overall sphere of sound perceptions become enriched. The composer does not combine the musical material chosen by him mechanically, but rather observes and single-handedly brings in the intonation into it, to the extent that it is not possible to speak here of a passive fixation of melodic phrases from memory or of manipulation of «elements of speech» already present in his musical vocabulary. I do not deny the possibility of other types of enrichment of the sphere of melody by the means of new intonations, but I emphasize that in the case of Mussorgsky this enrichment took place predominantly by means of intonations of speech and dynamics of human breath. Naturally, as a result of the richness of observations and practice, Mussorgsky's musical speech has always brought joy and amazement to the listener with its novelty and freshness: for this reason it always possesses the elements of *surprise* (it must be emphasized: not randomness, but *surprise*). This element of surprise is quite organic and appropriate. There can be no valid description of formlessness.

However, it is necessary to determine whether or not this element of surprise of the same kind is present, to the same degree as the speech of any person contains the element of surprise and fancy, at the same time being organized as a psycho-physical phenomenon. Or, rather, is there any artistic meaning present in such an element of surprise, upon the contraposition to its formal unity and the various types of integrating principles of form-generation in art? In other words, since Mussorgsky did not pay attention to the customary rules of voice-leading and the arguments of musical rationality, then does his music remain to be, notwithstanding all of this, music of a creative, artistic plan? There is no doubt that the answer to this is *yes* — this is how it was and how it remains, since Mussorgsky always knew how to find a precise expressive realization of his intentions by means of lengthy and persistent intonation-related experiments, continuously evolving to a greater (for him) and bigger specification or detailed elaboration. For us these stages and these experiments have already become for the most part an object of artistic perception and satisfaction, because Mussorgsky in his search for better solutions forsook the good ones. Or, to be even more precise — when he passed from the incomplete to the more complete, in the forsaken music one can frequently encounter such rich and accurate details, that it becomes necessary to value them no less than the sketch drawings of the great masters of painting.

<sup>1</sup> One example that can be demonstrated is the cycle of songs «Youthful Years' (1857–1866), in which we witness, with very few exceptions, an «immature» Mussorgsky.

Thus, once and for all, one must not confuse the technical «awkwardness» or incompleteness with an inability to manifest one's musical thought in an appropriate manner. Such an inability is not the case of Mussorgsky. Nonetheless, what may be said about his technique is that he does not always transform a sketch or draft into a rationally organized picture. Those same features that are labeled as cases of feebleness are, in essence, the feebleness of an insightful artist, for whose artistic endeavors his very epoch had not yet created the technical means that correspond in full measure to the new creative intentions. This is not in the least a paradox, despite the fact that he lived in the epoch of Wagner.

Mussorgsky's letters make it possible to come to the conclusion (drawing our attention to the fact that he did not expound consistently any conscious aesthetical system), that he contrasted an inimitable unity of living intonation of a given operatic character at a given moment with a certain formal supply of intonations the given epoch, always present to be used by any composer. The primary experience of sound combination is given preference by him to the secondary. Objective observation and a selection of musical intonations made from these observations is preferred to a subjective use of available norms.

The care and attention with which Mussorgsky, during his work on his opera «Khovanshchina,» first created before himself the *image* and dramatic situation in their most concrete and characteristic features show that the case here is that of an undoubted artistic selection, following the principle of search, observation and organization of elements of *expressivity* in order to achieve the greatest force of emotional impact. Mussorgsky first selects and gathers together everything that makes the given image plastically vivacious. Then, henceforth, his imagination generates the intonation-related sphere, setting the image to music out of abundant observations. The dramatic action or the aspiration to objectify in an artistic way the emotional state through the characteristic forms, expressive in their intonations, serves as a stimulus for this. In this respect Mussorgsky is in no way guilty of the accusations of «formlessness» addressed at him. On the contrary, there is one circumstance present that indicates at his aspiration towards musical emotional expression only through strictly sought form. The only thing is that this form is conceived by him not as something finally crystallized and generalized, but as a certain constant approach towards a more and more precise manifestation of the image exciting the listener's imagination. During the course of the process of artistic *search* described by me earlier the form becomes individualized in a set of different musical versions.

Just as in the music of the Impressionists the observed phenomenon is conveyed in a multitude of momentous manifestations, so in Mussorgsky's works the human emotional element concretized in the given act of living behavior or sensing any type of personality admits a number of «intonation-based portraits.» But even though personality and its living experience are changeable, at the same time at its basis this experience pertains particularly to the given personality in a concrete situation. Consequently, the element of unity is always present in the form-generation, as a certain ideal object, which essentially admits an infinite approaching. This is why in Mussorgsky's music the *different versions* start to play an important, predominating role. This is the circumstance to which I have just alluded to.

Mussorgsky's opera, as well as his art songs (the latter, in particular) confirm this aforementioned phenomenon, albeit having numerous different versions — the approach to the object presented by life. It becomes difficult to determine, which of the versions is more perfect, since the same thing happens with the versions of folk songs. Each new version becomes a new detail, a new penetration, a new emotional-expressive nuance, upon the presence of the same stimulus — namely, the object (the character of the person, his emotions, or a given dramatic situation, its intensity). This kind of vivid fact brings us to the inevitability of the conclusion that in Mussorgsky's music we are dealing with sensations of the dynamic nature of musical form with a predominance of variant-type formations over the finite, absolutely self-contained forms (since only the latter are achieved and fixed in a final shape). Moreover, the process of form-generation, in its aforementioned sense, brings along here no less than the final outcome. Just as an impressionist artist, grasping the basic principle in his landscape, nuances it in numerous tints and retains the element of surprise in his depiction of one and the same object, just like the hues of chiaroscuro and colors in nature and in the air contain this surprising element, so Mussorgsky «sketches out» his «Seminarian» numerous times, stemming from the basic psychological situation, as well as from the rhythms and intonations of rote-learning Latin words.

Thus, variant presents not a random, but an organic phenomenon in Mussorgsky's creative process, naturally resulting from the experiential and observational character of this process, from its emotional-dynamic nature and from the necessity of the *n*-th set of approaches to the changeable object. The approaches are carried out only by means of fixation of more and more new intonation-related nuances of various levels of intensity. The guiding role is played by the vocal intonations.

So in which sphere of artistic activity do we encounter the possibilities of unlimited usage of the variant with the given primary idea? The answer is — in the sphere of *improvisation*. It seems to me that it is not necessary to explain the genuine artistic meaning of this concept, in contrast to the amateurish, salon attitude. To express it concisely, improvisation comprehended as a form-generating principle requires the coexistence of constant impression of a maximal amount of surprise, with a maximal inner natural conformity, and simultaneously presents itself as an overcoming of the scheme by means of surprising contrasts and overcoming of randomness by means of rational submission of all «elements of surprise» to the leading idea. In the sphere of theater, this principle is wholly inherent to *commedia dell'arte*. In music it is inherent to the mastery of Domenico Scarlatti and is not lacking in Beethoven's music (for instance, in the late sonatas). In the long run, this is the principle of *free form*, unfolded as far as to reach the possibilities of open-ended form.

In this sense, Mussorgsky appears to me as an improviser (just as Dargomyzhsy also demonstrated himself as an improviser in his opera «The Stone Guest»). He never followed the idea of finished and completed form (in its formal-abstract sense). He was drawn to the process itself of sound organization, which he perceived as a truthful embodiment of emotional life in music. It suffices to be familiar with Mussorgsky's sketches to understand that any kind of discourse of whether it is permissible or not to perform the episodes and scenes from his operas supposedly omitted by the composer himself, or the compositions supposedly unfinished by him, stem from their underestimation and failure to fully understand them. Being an improviser, Mussorgsky composed variant after variant and proceeded from variant to variant, notating each one most painstakingly. His manuscripts are essentially calligraphic. However, becoming familiar with the versions of the separate episodes in the scenes of his operas, or with the versions of his songs, it is in no way possible to assert that some particular variant, being the final one, presents itself as the completed and decisive one. One can only choose or give personal preference to one of them over another. That is the only thing which can be done. Because, had Mussorgsky returned once again, for any reason, to a given artistic plan, he would have done it in a new way and would have left another no less perfect variant. In this respect, the manuscripts of Mussorgsky's songs the abundant field for research. However, doubtlessly, this is how «Boris Godunov» was composed. One can unearth one after the other of the composer's versions of the opera, but it is not possible to assert that only the version familiar to us from the piano-vocal score of 1874 is the only one

that is eligible of being performed — even if we are to reject Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral metamorphosis of «Boris Godunov.» Does this mean that Mussorgsky had no definite dramaturgical conception of the opera in his imagination? No, it is hardly the case. Such a conception, undoubtedly, existed, and if one is to compare the initial version with the final one, one can see that in the initial variant had the landmarks of the folk drama presented and planned with greater precision and perspicacity than they were in the later versions. However, the dramaturgical conception of the opera shall be discussed in another article. Here, to return to the question of the nature and character of Mussorgsky's music and his manner of composing, I wish to indicate at another important circumstance: as it seems, for Mussorgsky there did not exist any single, only one possible solution to the problem of «providing music for» a given text, situation, scene or emotional condition. Or, if it existed, it was rather in the form of an instinctively apprehended ideal (an ideal fixation of an object teasing the imagination) or a temporary satisfaction with the achieved results (expressed in both his personal satisfaction and the praises of his friends), rather than a strictly rational, formally self-contained and theoretically conditioned construction. In other words, it was not some kind of objective musically aesthetical norm that formed the criteria for completion, but the direct subjective sensation of the correspondence between the emotion caused by music and the dynamics of the emotional state caused by it. For the most part, this is what constituted the *truth*, desired by him. Thereby, the manifestations of the different versions of the same musical objectives may have arisen in Mussorgsky's mind due to the insufficient consistency of the music he came up with first to the emotion that had inspired it. However, notwithstanding the changeability of the emotional life, this consistency may have remained infinitely sought for and unattainable. For this reason, strictly speaking, any conception joined with an improvisational process of construction is likely to turn into a lengthy artistic problem of manifestation — into a profoundly vital task to be carried out during the course of a lengthy period of time (which is why his opera «Khovanshchina» took so long to be composed).

So, what kind of conclusions may be arrived at from everything that has been stated about Mussorgsky's creative process? First of all, to evaluate Mussorgsky's music (especially, to analyze it) different criteria must be applied from those proper for musical works by composers of the rationalistic kind. Secondly, if one is to perform his compositions, it is not proper to limit oneself to assuming a formal attitude towards the task and necessarily turning to the final version of the work as supposedly the

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definitive one, authorized by the composer, since all the versions of his respective works are equally genuine and are of equal merit, since, essentially, Mussorgsky did not have and could not have fully finished or completed any of his compositions in a decisive way. In this respect, musical composition presented for him an integrally vital process. All the accusations against Mussorgsky of supposedly easily changing separate elements and considerable segments of his music under somebody else's influence, or upon his own inclination, become bereft of all foundation, if one is to take into careful consideration his nature as a composer and refrain from judging him by criteria applicable to others. On the contrary, it would be strange if Mussorgsky could not have altered his music, or had demonstrated obstinacy towards himself: emotional life is so diverse, and frequently one and the same perception of life has so many different nuances and degrees, that the latter are capable of receiving numerous various interpretations in music. Mussorgsky, having

tested on other people, and especially on those whom he trusted, the power of the impact created by various types of sound combination, and having convinced himself, that it did not achieve the aim he sought for, did not reject the new versions of his musical compositions he came up with. This was, essentially, the situation with him. However, it is doubtful that it was as such in all cases. Personally, I think that Mussorgsky also had occasionally come up with such solutions in some of his musical works that he did not have any doubt in, since he had never surrendered his positions at any time or before anyone, but, once again, not out of conformity with some kind of formal norm, but from his inner conviction and perception of maximal approach to the «truth of intonation,» towards the precision of manifestation of sound or the depiction by musical means of a certain given object. Mussorgsky's letter to Stasov sets forth many valuable indications regarding this question.

1928

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