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Reflections on the Nature of Impressionism in Russian Music of the Late 19th – Early 20th Centuries

The author addresses the questions connected with Impressionism in Russian music: What is Impressionism and what are the peculiarities of its aesthetics; how Impressionism differs in various cultures; what the immediate manifestation of the properties of Impressionism in Russian music is; and how deep and long was the spread of musical Impressionism in Russia. The work aims to prove the idea that Impressionism in Russian music has become a reasonably bright movement of the late 19th-early 20th centuries. While reflecting on Impressionism, the author reveals the manifestation of the methods of absolutization of the moment and colorism; demonstration of anthropocentric (mainly in French musical Impressionism) and nature-centered (in Russian musical Impressionism) worldviews. Of significance is the discussion of the role of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov in the formation of the Russian Impressionist movement: the ideas of his unfinished book on the aesthetics of musical art, his late compositions, and his role in pedagogical and social activities. The article's main conclusion is that musical Impressionism in Russia, like in France, did not coalesce into a movement with a declared manifesto. Nevertheless, it occupied a worthy place in Russian culture.

Keywords: Impressionism, Russian music, French music, absolutization of moment, coloristics, anthropocentric and nature-centered worldviews, Debussy, Ravel, Vasilenko, Lyadov, Prokofyev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky, Cherepnin.

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Размышления о природе импрессионизма в русской музыке конца XIX – начала XX веков

В статье поднимаются вопросы, связанные с импрессионизмом в русской музыке: что собой представляет импрессионизм и в чём особенности его эстетики; чем может отличаться импрессионизм в разных национальных культурах; какова непосредственная реализация свойств импрессионизма в русской музыке; и насколько глубоким и продолжительным

было распространение музыкального импрессионизма в России. Цель работы видится в доказательстве мысли о том, что импрессионизм в русской музыке стал достаточно ярким течением конца XIX – начала XX веков. В процессе размышлений об импрессионизме выявляется реализация методов абсолютизации мгновения и колористики; проявление антропоцентристского (преимущественно во французском музыкальном импрессионизме) и природоцентристского (в русском музыкальном импрессионизме) мировоззрений. Важным является рассмотрение роли Н.А. Римского-Корсакова в становлении течения импрессионизма в России – идеи его незавершённого труда по эстетике музыкального искусства, позднее композиторское творчество и роль педагогической и общественной деятельности. Основной вывод статьи заключается в том, что музыкальный импрессионизм в России, как и во Франции, не оформился в направление с объявленным манифестом, но, тем не менее, занял достойное место в русской культуре.

Ключевые слова: импрессионизм, русская музыка, французская музыка, абсолютизация мгновения, колористика, антропоцентристское и природоцентристское мировоззрения, Дебюсси, Равель, Василенко, Лядов, Прокофьев, Римский-Корсаков, Стравинский, Черепнин.

Russian culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is known for the simultaneous existence of various styles. Most of them still present problems worthy of scholarly study. The essence of Modern and Avant Guard could exemplify such problems [18, p. 263]. Impressionism in Russian music remains to be an issue as well. In the early 20th century, it was considered decadence¹; in the 1930s, it was formalism; in the post-war years, it was believed to manifest the signs of cosmopolitanism². In the Soviet era, researchers cautiously handled the topics about the manifestation of Impressionism in Russian or even French music³. However, in the last third of the 20th century, Impressionism re-emerged as a scholarly topic in Russian music studies⁴.

In French musical art, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel⁵ are the recognized flagships of Impressionism. There were no composers of equal significance in Russia who would consistently use Impressionist ideas in their works. However, this absence does not mean that no one in Russia was interested in musical Impressionism. Russian music is relatively abundant, with works created by composers of different talents. Each pursued their lines

of experimentation, in which Impressionist manifestations are more or less noticeable. Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov (late works), Sergey Vasilenko, Anatoliy Lyadov, Sergey Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky, and Nikolay Cherepnin comprise an incomplete list of the composers in whose works one may detect the features of Impressionism.

This work aims to prove the idea that Impressionism in Russian music has become a reasonably bright movement of the late 19th – early 20th centuries⁶. To implement this goal, we will try to answer several questions related to Impressionism and musical Impressionism in general and its manifestation in Russian music in particular.

First, two interrelated issues need to be addressed: *What* is Impressionism in different types of art, and *what* are the features of its aesthetics? The issues arose because the numerous studies of Impressionist works (in music, painting, or literature) often show the peculiarities of technical means and rarely discuss the Impressionist worldview of the authors (other than mentioning that “they strive to convey the first impression”) [11]. The issues can be effectively addressed by assuming an abstract approach. It is borrowed



from the literature studies, but not as an established methodological system (there is no such system in literary studies), but as an idea. Its essence, as Andrey Esin notes, is as follows: “< ... > the larger the volume of the style, the more abstract its signs look” [4, p. 498]. According to this approach, the signs of Impressionism can be represented in the form of a hypothetical *work*: a generalized, abstract image of an Impressionist creation.

What should such *work* include from the standpoint of *aesthetics* in order to be Impressionist? Most likely, the concept of the “*aesthetics of Impressionism*” implies several properties, where the main one is artistic thinking based on a particular conflict-free attitude of a person (author) to the surrounding world (nature). The basic condition for such an attitude is the unity of man with nature, which does not depend on the social cataclysms of the reality in which the person (the author) lives. Nature is perceived as inherently “always beautiful.” At the heart of contemplation and impression as the ways of knowing the world is the method of “naive realism” (Ernst Mach) or, in other words, “child’s perception” (Hermann Bahr), which helps to achieve the effect of the first subjective impression (cited from [28, pp. 66–67]).

Aesthetics alone is not enough for a *work* to become Impressionist. Techniques are required to achieve this end. Such techniques are not new, but something makes them new, and this “something” corresponds to the time and space of the scene depicted in work. At this point, analogies with painting and with the aesthetics of Impressionism in general arise. The time factor “works” quite steadily at the level of themes-ideas and images, as well as genre and form, while the space of the “picture” organizes the entire complex of expressive means. Moreover, the time factor is static, while the spatial factor is dynamic. Meanwhile, time subordinates space, and

space is temporary. It turns out that such a time contains neither the past nor the future – only the present, only here and now, and the here and now exist in every absolutized moment. It is also obvious that despite the speed of fixing the impression, the material nature of the depicted remains in each such moment.

Even at the time of the first Impressionist works of French artists, it was noticed (for instance, by Louis Leroy, who coined the term “impressionists”) that such works contain specific means aimed at conveying the first impression. In terms of the content, genre, and compositional interpretations, they noticed *incompleteness*; in terms of color selection, brush strokes, and other similar techniques, they highlighted *the freedom from the canons of the image and softness of outlines* [15, p. 10]. Impressionism has *more than one* method. When it comes to incompleteness, the author implies a particular perception of time, in which space is fixed. For our purposes, we will call it *the method of absolutization of the moment*. In other cases, implied means show how the fixed time and space “play” in the work. Such means can be called *the coloristic method*. These methods “work” at similar levels in music as well. Thus, implementing *the method of absolutization of the moment* helps to implement the static time and can be traced at the levels of themes-ideas and images, genre, and form. It is designed to convey the impression and create the effect that the work is not finished. Meanwhile, *coloristics* (or colorfulness) is seen at the level of the means of musical expression, most often carrying the signs of sonority, which was noticed in the music of Romanticists [14, p. 383]. Coloristics was meant to create an impression that the work is free from rules and to ensure that such an impression is conveyed softly.

Question two: *How* does Impressionism differ in different national cultures? In this

question, it is necessary to understand *how* the relationship “Man – World” functions in different cultures in the depths of mentality. Naturally, it is impossible to consider all national cultures and all the angles that complete the mentality. Therefore, we will consider two national cultures – French and Russian. We will limit the analysis of their mentalities to general characteristics – specifically, *anthropocentric* and *nature-centric*.

The relationship of the *anthropocentric* and *nature-centric* worldviews to French and Russian Impressionism is not arbitrary, especially since French and Russian art at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries experienced a wide cultural exchange. *The anthropocentric worldview* is characterized by the dominance of the subjective (Me) over the World. The *nature-centric* one depicts an interaction between a Man and the World, which is most often accompanied by the “dissolution” of the subjective (Me) in the World. These concepts are intended to exist only concerning each other, explaining the degree of Man’s presence in the work. The aesthetics of Impressionism implies a relationship between the World and Man, in which the World and the perception of the World by Man are united. That is, the implication that Man is the center and the highest goal of the universe not only does not work in Impressionism, but it also fundamentally contradicts its aesthetics. In the anthropocentric worldview of Impressionism, Man dominates the World, but, once again, as a unity of the World and the vision of the World. In turn, the dominant idea of the nature-centered worldview is the notion that a Man is an inseparable part of the World when Man “dissolves” in the World, and the World prevails.

The difference between these two types of worldviews is explained by the inherent differences in the peculiarities of the cultural and historical development of a particular

nation and its mental properties. The French Impressionists, as the art critic Vyacheslav Filippov notes, “were the heirs of a great artistic tradition based on the combination of rationalism going back to Cartesianism, the Rousseauist cult of nature and the elegant lightness of the French Rococo, its sparkling sensuality and high artistic taste” [25, p. 30]. These sources reflect an essential feature of the French mentality – the combination of external elegance, refinement, exquisiteness, lightness, and even frivolity with internal rationalism, pride, and courtesy [3, p. 484]. In this way, French Impressionists are close to the anthropocentric worldview.

In Russian culture, people’s worldview is conditioned by such qualities of mentality as sacrifice, spiritual openness, dreaminess, hope for a miracle, kindness, spiritual perception of the surrounding world, and a deep understanding of nature. The roots of such qualities can be found in Orthodoxy. However, in the late 19th – early 20th centuries, the society and the artists were interested not only in the Christian faith (which can be traced in the works of outstanding philosophers Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolay Berdyaev, and Ivan Ilyin) but also in unorthodox mystical teachings – in particular, the theories of Rudolf Steiner and Elena Blavatskaya – as well as pagan cosmism, which manifested itself in the 20th century, for example, in the ritual component of Russian Orthodoxy. This phenomenon largely explains the cultural proximity to the nature-centered worldview.

The historical and cultural atmosphere of Russia in the late 19th – early 20th centuries was interpreted differently by contemporaries of this period – either as a decline (for instance, poets Alexander Blok and Elizaveta Kuzmina-Karaeva saw it) or as a flourishing (according to philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev and poet Nikolay Otsup). Probably such differing feelings were due



to the contradiction between the life of art, which was experiencing an extraordinary rise at that time, and real life, with its deep crises, such as political upheavals: revolutions (in 1905 and 1917) and wars (Russian-Japanese war in 1904–05 and World War I). One way or another, many people of art deliberately “hid” themselves from the surrounding reality in their invented ideal world. The statements, letters, and memoirs of composers (Sergey Vasilenko, Nikolay Cherepnin) and visual artists (Konstantin Korovin, Konstantin Yuon), as well as their works, allow us to trace the life-affirming nature of the mood, despite the sometimes-difficult life [22, pp. 25–33]. The artists expressed kindness, spiritual openness, spirituality, and light, joy, and harmony. Therefore, it can be assumed that Impressionism and its poetics have positive imagery. Perhaps, this feeling reflects the well-known mystery of the Russian character.

Of course, negative imagery and a sense of fear are sometimes felt in the Russian Impressionist works, but at the same time, certain signs of a different style are most often observed in such works. A mixture of styles was also observed among the French. For example, Claude Debussy vividly implements both Romanticism and Symbolism, which is emphasized, in particular, by Polish musicologist Stefan Jarociński [26]. In addition, neoclassicism also manifested itself in the late works of Claude Debussy and to an even greater extent in Ravel’s. Russian composers whose works clearly showed Impressionist features, such as Igor Stravinsky and Sergey Prokofiev, freely modulated into other styles, including the fields of symbolism and neoclassicism. Therefore, they could express something else apart from the positive imagery.

The third question is related to studying the implementation of the properties of Impressionism in Russian music. When answering this question, we observe

some similarities with French musical Impressionism. At the level of the method of absolutization of the moment, this is the lack of a consistent plot narrative in the program works and pronounced contrast; the preference for picturesque quality in genre interpretations; the desire to obscure the boundaries of form; the frame-like nature of the form. At the level of the method of coloristics, this is the use of dispersed as well as concentrated musical themes; equalizing the relief and background; showing interest in colorful harmonies (augmented, diminished), colorful modes (whole-tone, symmetrical, pentatonic), timbres that bring a fabulous atmosphere (bells, celesta, harp, and others) and contribute to the associativity, and sometimes sound vividness.

Both methods (absolutization and coloristics) are found in many works of French and Russian composers that emphasize the presence of Impressionist features. Among the most striking examples are “La Mer,” “Nocturnes,” and “L’Après-midi d’un faune” by Claude Debussy, as well as the “Magic Lake” by Anatoly Lyadov, “The Enchanted Kingdom” by Nikolay Cherepnin, and “Fireworks” by Igor Stravinsky. While they emerged from Romanticism, all of them “lay down” on the ready-made ground connected to the “exotic-romantic” (Daniel Zhitomirsky) tradition in music⁷.

Thus, the “Magic Lake” by Lyadov became a typical embodiment of not only Romanticism but also Russian nature-centered Impressionism. On the one hand, it reflects the deep levels of the Russian person’s mentality and, on the other, the development of the “exotic-romantic” tradition. At the same time, Impressionist methods of absolutization of the moment and coloristics are also traced in this piece. They are manifested in the means of musical expression aimed at the associations with a fabulous picture of nature, forests, lakes,

mermaids, glares, splashes, waves, starlight, dawn, and other similar features⁸.

Igor Stravinsky, who started his career in the first decades of the 20th century, was known for anthropocentric thinking, and this disposition predetermined the use of Impressionist features. The fantasy work “Fireworks” is an excellent example in this case. The concept of this piece traces the influence of the “exotic-romantic” tradition. However, it obeys the aesthetics of French Impressionism, where unity is formed only between the World and the Worldview (while the unity between Man and the World is not achieved). A Man curiously observes the bright flashes in the night sky, but he does not “dissolve” in them.

Unlike the works of the composers of the St. Petersburg school (Lyadov and Cherepnin), in the works of Moscow authors (Scriabin and Rakhmaninov), Impressionist methods are present along with the non-Impressionist ones. They are subject to the aesthetic concepts of individual authors’ styles (and to a much greater extent than in their St. Petersburg colleagues). Nevertheless, to some extent, they can also be considered exposed to Impressionism. Among such examples are some works of Sergey Rachmaninov (“Easter” from Suite No. 1 for two pianos, the vocal-symphonic poem “Bells,” many romances), Alexander Scriabin (Preludes of op. 11, “Poem-Nocturne” op. 61, and others), Alexey Stanchinsky (certain pieces from the Twelve sketches, Nocturne), and specific compositions by Mikhail Gnesin and Georgy Katuara. A peculiar exception is Sergey Vasilenko’s work, which incorporated the traditions and principles characteristic of St. Petersburg composers: He carefully studied such principles and deliberately imitated them in his works. Illustrative examples in such a case are his symphonic poems “The Garden of Death,” “Flight of the Witches,” “Chinese Suite,” and other compositions.

The **fourth question** is how deep, and long was the spread of musical Impressionism in Russia? Impressionism in Russian music demonstrates the signs of an integral artistic *trend* that united several composers whose works of the late 19th and early 20th centuries represent the aesthetics of Impressionism and its technical means. Like in France, it was short in Russia: approximately from the early 1890s to 1917. Meanwhile, the trend was adopted by many followers.

In the context of this question, the unfinished work “Aesthetics of Musical Art” by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov deserves special attention. The ideas and provisions set out in it are not just the composer’s views on the nature of art. They could become a program of Impressionism in Russia: The composer’s thinking is in contact with the Impressionist type of artistic expression. The fundamental ideas of his work are peculiar intersection “points,” in that sense of beauty is decisive both in life and in art. The World of beauty is perceived only subjectively through imagination and contemplation: Man and the World are one – that is, Man and his thoughts are inseparable from “nature and life” [20, pp. 65–70]. The fact that Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov’s views are close to the aesthetics of Impressionism is also confirmed by the composer’s late works (for example, some pages of the operas “The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya,” “Kashchey the Immortal,” and “The Golden Cockerel”).

In addition, by being a teacher and social activist in St. Petersburg, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov influenced his colleagues and students, including Anatoly Lyadov, Igor Stravinsky, Nikolay Cherepnin, Maximilian Steinberg, and Sergey Prokofiev (Cherepnin’s disciple), as well as Moscow composer Sergey Vasilenko, who admired Rimsky-Korsakov’s works. These composers did not comprise a group such as the Mighty Handful, and they



did not have an announced artistic manifesto that could unite them into a movement. Nevertheless, the commonality of views on Impressionism and on the work of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov predetermined their “relative unity,” which allows us to conclude that Impressionism in Russia developed into an integral artistic trend similar to French musical Impressionism.

Thus, the questions posed enable to picture that the fundamentals of Impressionism’s aesthetics are the conflict-free attitude of a person (the author). At the same time, “naive realism” (“children’s perception”) is the basis of their contemplation. “Naive realism” helps embody the first subjective vision with the most extraordinary immediacy without losing connection with the tangible side of the depicted. The moment should be “stopped” and made absolute; then, the first impression must be expressed through colorful means. The methods by which this is achieved are conventionally called the methods of absolutization of the moment and coloristics.

A comparative study of French and Russian Impressionism shows a gap in the views of the representatives of two different national cultures, which is expressed in the anthropocentric and nature-centered worldviews, respectively. This gap is due to the different attitudes of the French and Russian to the relationships between Man and the World (Nature). In the anthropocentric worldview of the French, Man dominates the World, while in the Russian nature-centric approach, Man “dissolves” into the World, and the World dominates. In part, this difference in worldviews is due to the mental characteristics of the two nations.

The implementation of the properties of Impressionism in French and Russian

music is very similar. The methods of absolutization of the moment and coloristics include a similar set of tools. Connected with Romanticism and the “exotic-romantic” tradition, the methods have a thin borderline between them. It stems from the aesthetic messages of the anthropocentric and nature-centered worldviews: such messages are displayed primarily at the level of the ideas of the compositions and their embodiments. For example, whether the unity between Man and the World is achieved, or is it preserved only in the unity between the World and the vision of the World?

The unfinished work “Aesthetics of Musical Art” by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov could become a program of musical Impressionism in Russia. The composer’s later work and his pedagogical and social activities also support such a possibility. In their aesthetic views and musical creativity, his colleagues and students were also close to Impressionism: Lyadov, Stravinsky, Cherepnin, Prokofiev, and a few others were among them.

It is difficult to imagine the development of Impressionism if the fatal revolutionary events had not occurred in Russia; if Igor Stravinsky (1914), Sergey Rachmaninov (1917), Nikolay Cherepnin (1921) had not left their homeland; if Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov and Anatoly Lyadov, as well as Georgy Katuar, Vladimir Rebikov, Alexander Scriabin, and Alexey Stanchinsky had lived longer. Nevertheless, some friends, students, adherents, and followers of these composers stayed in Russia. Therefore, the aim to investigate how Impressionist methods (a part of them, at least) can be traced in the works of Russian composers in other aesthetic conditions could serve for further investigation of Impressionism in Russia.

NOTES

¹ In particular, composer and critic César Cui finds decadence in Impressionism and provides evidence in his article “A few words about modern innovations in music” [12].

² After the Resolution of April 23, 1932 of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b) “On the restructuring of literary and artistic organizations” and the unification of all writers, as well as artists, composers, architects, and others into Unions, the ideologization of art intensified. It is noteworthy that the publication of works on French Impressionism, not to mention Russian, almost completely stopped at that time. An article in newspaper “Pravda” dated January 28, 1936 about Shostakovich’s opera “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk” started the negative processes began leading to the Decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b) in 1948 “On the opera “The Great Friendship” by V. Muradeli,” and a “movement” against formalism and cosmopolitanism in Soviet music arose. The work of Dmitry Kabalevsky, “Rimsky-Korsakov and Modernism,” could serve as an example of such a movement. The author sharply condemned the statements of “formalist musicologists” Asafyev, Karatygin, Keldysh, Engel, and many others who claimed that Impressionism in Russia existed in some form [7–9].

³ The fate of the famous Russian musicologist Daniel Zhitomirsky is indicative. In 1948, he was dismissed from the Moscow Conservatory. Among the charges brought against him was the researcher’s study of bright decadent influences in the works of Soviet composers, such as Impressionism, the styles of Mahler and Hindemith, as well as Scriabin, early Prokofiev and Myaskovsky [10, pp. 575–576].

⁴ Since about the last third of the 20th century, Russian musicologists have noted the impressionist “colors” in the “Russian” works of Igor Stravinsky (Smirnov and Yarustovsky [23, 27]) and Sergey Prokofiev (Nestiev [17]), in the works of Vladimir Rebikov (Tompakova [24]), in Anatoly Lyadov’s “Magic Lake” (N. Zaporozhets, M. Mikhailov [6, 16]), etc. Tamara Levaya made significant remarks about Impressionism in Russia in the book “Russian music of the early 20th century in the artistic context of the age.” She wrote that “the specificity of the

Russian version of impressionism is not elusive, but a “caught” beauty, a caught and extended moment of the present, which is a projection on the music in the time of the namesake period in painting” [13, p. 129]. In the 21st century, Golubenko published several works on the Russian musical Impressionism. She noted the shared fields between composers and artists (Levitin and Rachmaninov) [2], revealed the genetic origins of Impressionism in the Russian music of the St. Petersburg school of composition (in Russia, after two conservatories – in St. Petersburg and Moscow – were opened, it became customary to distinguish graduates by these schools) [1]. At the same time, she believes that Impressionism in Russia “took advantage not so much of the full range of aesthetic developments, but of purely technical, practical findings, applying them on a different basis related to national traditions” [1, p. 77]. The author of this article considers this remark less fair since Impressionism has been embodied in the works of several composers, and Russian national musical traditions are close to Impressionism not only using expressiveness, but also by their aesthetics [22].

⁵ In particular, French researchers confirm this (for example, see the study by F. Lesure [29]).

⁶ There are different points of view on how to construe the concepts of “trend” and “movement.” Two points of view prevail. One suggests that the concepts are synonyms; the other suggests that the trend is always within a movement. The author relies on the definition proposed by literary critic Genady Pospelov that differentiates these two concepts. The “trend” presupposes an ideological and artistic unity in the works of a group of composers of a particular historical period. Unlike the movement, the trend does not possess a declared aesthetic program (manifesto) [19, c. 136].

⁷ The “exotic-romantic” tradition unites the compositions of Russian music of the 19th century, where one can detect “pure colorfulness, decorativeness, exquisite stylization” [5, p. 36]. The same can be observed in Romanticism, including the French one.

⁸ See more details about Lyadov’s “Magic Lake” in the textbook and monograph by Saduova [21, 22].



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