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Universidad del Zulia
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas
Maracaibo - Venezuela

The sacred in modern western European music: Between fires of cultural paradigms

Natalia Liva

Vinnitsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University,
Vinnitsia, Ukraine
natalevaya197145@vspu.edu.ua

Abstract

The article concerns identification and description of a number of phenomena, taking place in Western European music of the second half of the 20th – early 21st centuries and associated with a paradigm shift in the worldview via philosophical, culturological and musicological research methods. As a result, the authors find expression in the following musical and cultural phenomena: ambivalence of postmodern postulates, indicating not only breakdown of traditional cultural values but also the birth of new musical thinking. In conclusion, the processes given find bright expression in music both on the conceptual level and on more latent level of musical language.

Keywords: Sacred, Paradigm shift, Postmodernism, Consonance.

Lo sagrado en la música moderna de Europa occidental: entre fuegos de paradigmas culturales

Resumen

El artículo se refiere a la identificación y descripción de una serie de fenómenos, que tuvo lugar en la música de Europa occidental de la segunda mitad del siglo XX - principios del siglo XXI y se asoció con un cambio de paradigma en la cosmovisión a través de métodos de investigación filosóficos, culturológicos y musicológicos. Como resultado, los autores encuentran expresión en los siguientes fenómenos musicales y culturales: la ambivalencia de los postulados posmodernos, que indica no solo la ruptura de los valores culturales tradicionales sino también el nacimiento del nuevo pensamiento musical. En conclusión, los procesos dados encuentran una expresión

brillante en la música tanto en el nivel conceptual como en el nivel más latente del lenguaje musical.

Palabras clave: Sagrado, Cambio de paradigma, Posmodernismo, Consonancia.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of Western European history the historical period, covering the 20th – early 21st centuries, gives the impression of a prolonged crisis. The crisis is increasing consistently, being one of the global pressing problems of our time. Therefore, the necessity of identifying its root causes, as well as forecasting of possible consequences are still ring true today. We are deeply convinced that the roots of the cultural crisis should lay in the sphere of spiritual priorities of contemporary Europeans. It is the image of the world, a cosmological knowledge that has always been tightly and inevitably linked to the conception of the Divine Absolut. The contradictory nature of the period analyzed enables us to regard it as a prolonged transition phase. Focusing on a specific realm of human spiritual existence, defined as the Sacred, can help better understand the essence of the age.

Two phases could be highlighted in the evolution of notions about the Sacred: the atheistic one (the first half of the 20th century) and the period of restauration of spiritual values, characterized by humans' understanding of their place in the hierarchy of the cosmic whole (from the last half of the century up to now). The field of our research is Western European music art of the second half of the 20th –

early 21st centuries, where the processes specified find their expression on the conceptual level and in the sphere of the music language. On the level of ideas and conceptions, they are largely defined by contradictory aesthetics of postmodernism. The conception about the evolution of the understanding of the Sacred stated in the paper, allows – for the first time in art criticism – to identify the connection between European literary postmodernism and American minimal music as phenomena of the same nature.

Our attention is also paid to those philosophical and literary tendencies that form the conceptual space of the music art. These are: creating alternative models of the Universe and variants of the Last Testament (Richard Bach's *Jonatan Livingston Seagull* and *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*; Paulo Coelho's *Manual of the Warrior of Light*, and others). One of the most vital musical illustrations of the phenomenon is Luchano Berio's *Canticum Novissimi Testamente*.

Steady evolution, running in the realm of the music language, is also the subject of special regard. The tendencies, mentioned above, find expression in the character of aesthetic interpretation of consonance and dissonance. Thus, the cult of the dissonance, characterized by the first half of the 20th century, gives way to a rehabilitation of the consonance – the tendency increasing since the second half of the century. Nostalgic interest for the music of past epochs especially for Bach's works revived attention to the overtone scale in sonoristic quest of the second half of the 20th century, music

minimalism and the new simplicity, the development of eco-music and music ecology – all these things speak eloquently of themselves. In this connection, Arvo Part's Credo serves as a bright example of an interesting dialog between the present and the past on the level of musical intonation.

The conception, proposed in the article, contributes to the research of the nature of today's cultural crisis. Investigation of the evolution of notions about the Sacred, reflected in music, is an actual and necessary line of the art research that helps to identify, in the generally negative context, constructive tendencies whose role in the overcoming of the cultural crisis may prove to be pivotal.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The conception of the research is a fundamentally new one. It is not covered in philosophical, anthropological and musicological literature. Therefore, it is not a direct logical continuation of a certain theory, but rather a result of a synthesis of some significant philosophical, theological and aesthetic phenomena of the 20th – 21st centuries. So, the subject and the aim of our study are tightly linked to many philosophical, anthropological and musicological conceptions, developed throughout the 20th – 21st centuries. Above all, it is the issue of cultural crisis that produced a powerful discourse during the 20th century. It takes its origins in the works of LEBRECHT

(1997) and continues in those of JUNG (2005), and other greatest thinkers of the century.

We also had to use psychoanalytical research of JUNG (2005) because of the specificity of our research. It offers a wealth of valuable material, concerning the investigation of subconsciousness and of the phenomenon of the collective unconscious that shed additional light upon the theory formed. The analysis of the definition of the concept of the Sacred, which is fundamental for our research, was made on the base of R. Otto's classic work where the term was used for the first time. The works of leading domestic art critics helped us much in analyzing processes that take place in contemporary Western European music. He is GERASIMOVA-PERSIDSKAYA (2012) who promotes a hypothesis about a cultural paradigm shift, and (ANDROSOVA, 2005). who has paid attention to the process of the rehabilitation of consonance and increasing of applied functionality in music nowadays?

When exploring crucial cultural events in the context of modern art criticism, we also focused on M. Lobanova's basic works dedicated to comparing the contradictions of baroque epoch's pluralistic polyphony with the artistic and cultural situation of the 20th century. In JUNG's (2005) works the baroque epoch is defined as critical and, therefore, polyphonic, in other words, as the period which is characterized by the coexistence of the new tendencies and the old medieval traditions in music culture. The polyphony of the baroque era on a new coil of the historical spiral is reflected in the stylistic and

philosophical polyphony of the 20th – 21st centuries. Postmodernistic philosophy, dealt with in the article, is the subject of careful examination of anthropologists and art critics nowadays.

Today there is a plethora of modern researchers of postmodernism. In our study, for the reason of focusing on the literary phenomenon of the death of the author, we rely upon basic works of (JUNG, 2005). The field of research of minimal music is also represented by many works. From that amount, the most valuable for us is evidence and impressions of those who are usually in the midst of the creative process, namely, of composers. That is why, forming our conception, we relied heavily on the text of that kind, being made by REICH (2017), the classic of American minimalism, and on the book of Johnson, the American critic (JOHNSON, 1989). These are works in which characteristic traits of minimal music are covered in their essential aspects.

It is necessary to note, however, that notwithstanding a large amount of philosophical, anthropological, and musicological papers, concerning postmodernism, minimalism, and polystylism the question of the parallels, existing between the literary phenomenon of the death of the Author and music minimalism, and their deep anthropological meaning have not been covered so far. Works and theses, linked to music ecology, mean much to us too as additional data concerning such terms as eco-music and a soundscape specific for the late 20th century (DENORA, 2017; LI, 2019; WHITING, 2019).

3. METHODOLOGY

Interpretation of culture as a mega-personality is a relevant methodological instrument created by us for analyzing the 20th-21st centuries' cultural situation. The vision of culture as a kind of thinking mega-person has been crystallizing step-by-step from the early 20th century up to now in philosophical, culturological and musicological works. We have built an integral conceptual system from those disparate theories. Oswald Spengler's interpretation of culture as a live organism that is born, reaches its prime, and dies underlies our conception: Cultures are organisms, and world-history is their collective biography. Spengler also uses the term the soul of the culture and characterizes, in particular, Europe as a kind of mega-personality who has Faustian soul and, therefore, is a more complicated substance than a merely biological organism.

Spengler's thoughts are logically complemented by the theory of social stratification elaborated by a group of Moscow sociologists in the mid-1990s. The main point of it is that any social group of any scale always has its image of the world. In the context of our exploration substantial is the statement that the status of a social group as of a bearer of an image of the world does not depend on its size or level. Possession of an image of the world is in equal measure an attribute of a separate person and the whole culture. The approach to the study of social groups, developed by JUNG (2005), is a direct analogy of the theory mentioned. Comparing the basic ideas of Murashkovsky's conception to the theory of social stratification made

it possible to trace a semantic similarity of the notion of the social group and that of the subculture, of the term the culture of a group and that of the image of the world.

It is of great importance to us that functioning of the phenomenon, defined by Murashkovsky, as an artistic system, and functioning of Spengler's phenomenon of culture are identical. The artistic system has analogous phases of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and death. The juxtaposition of the theories referred to enabled us to interpret culture, a subculture and an artistic system as mega-personalities, the bearers of a certain image of the world. Understanding of Western European culture as a mega-personality and focusing on its individual and authentic traits helped to choose the musical material necessary for analyzing. Thus, among several dozens of leading Western contemporary composers' pieces, we have picked those works where evolutionary tendencies were the most pronounced. In our choice of musical material, the composer's stylistic inclusiveness was crucial and not his affiliation to a certain music direction.

4. RESULTS

The new worldview, evolving in European culture throughout the 20th-21st centuries, lies in fading away of antagonism between rational and intuitive spheres that until recently have been considered incompatible. Furthermore, the main concept of the modern period, the

concept of personality, changes to self-understanding of human beings as links in the chain of the complicated cosmic hierarchy. These processes are tightly connected with the sphere of the Sacred as an important component of the man's mental space. This mysterious realm, which is beyond rational control, gives sense to our existence being a powerful alternative for weakness and imperfection and a source of creative and spiritual energy. It could be a study subject only in the context of the perceiving of it by the human. From the moment of introducing the term by Rudolf Otto, the Sacred is linked to a specific feeling defined as a numinous experience.

The accumulation of numinous experience in the collective unconscious leads to periodic crystallizing certain formulae on that base that find expression in religious tenets. The process has ambivalent consequences, however. Numinous impressions that people get in their immediate individual experiences are characterized by extraordinary emotional intensity and also by irrationality. As for the process of forming a sacral dogma, it makes the experience more logical but rationalization has its negative effect: deprived of emotional brightness, dogma gets rigid and at a certain point of the human mind's development a fixed formula needs re-thinking again.

For the reason of prolonged historical conflict between faith and knowledge, the specifics of the evolution of European consciousness lies in gradual spraying of the Sacred in different spheres of intellectual and spiritual activities: research, art, ideology, doctrine.

The bearer of European cultural tradition endures a state of permanent inner conflict. Jung writes:

Our denominational religions with their archaic rites and conceptions – justified enough in themselves – express a view of the world which caused no great difficulties in the Middle Ages but has become strange and unintelligible to the man of today (JUNG, 2005: 12).

Being in the limitation of the Christian cult is an impossible thing today because of the specifics of the time.

The tragedy of losing habitual spiritual values, the uncertainty of the future, and, at the same time, tireless search, open-mindedness for all new phenomena reflect brightly in the music art of the second half of the 20th – early 21st centuries. This art is defined today as postmodernism (postavant-grade). The phenomenon of postmodern as one of the most remarkable and ambivalent cultural events of the second half of the 20th century is a direct consequence of evolutionary transformations that continue to take place in the mega-mind of European culture. Postavant-garde aesthetics give the impression of cultural Armageddon. Dissolving of a creative personality in intertextuality, turning of the creative process into the ironical citation, eschatological accentuation of the postulate everything is already done in the art – all these things look like dangerous symptoms of decay. On the other hand, they could be interpreted as signs of developing the meta-intellectual sphere of the human psyche that enables people to identify themselves as a part of cosmic integrity.

The term the death of the author, a concentrated concept of postmodernistic aesthetics, owes its emergence to Roland Barthes. The French critic identifies a new approach to the author's role in the process of creating a literary work. It almost completely dissipates. The scriptor (not the author!) just records a certain text that exists independently reflecting itself in the many-faced reader's mind. Barthes' ideas are supported by Michelle Foucault's work conceptually related to those. Comparative analysis of synchronous artistic processes helps to reveal essentially identical phenomena in the music of the given period. These are musical minimalism and polystylistic. Thus, both creators of minimal music and postmodern scriptors demonstrate the identical vision of the creative process: a piece writes itself, leaving to the artist a passive role of an observer (REICH, 2017).

Another illustration of postmodern thinking is polystylism as an essential peculiarity of musical thinking of the epoch. The music events mentioned are a direct consequence of the large-scale process of re-thinking of the phenomenon of personality replaced by a hyperpersonal principle. In our research, we also rely on JUNG's (2005) conception, where baroque epoch and musical contemporaneity are compared. Her conception enables to see that in large historical scale the baroque and the 20th-21st centuries make up a kind of an arch. The early modern period, whose main priority is a personality, lies in between. The period is defined in the postmodern discourse as an epoch of absolute (non-applied) music that meets its end nowadays.

Contemporary European music is, in a great measure, under the influence of philosophy and literature. The following tendencies are actual today: 1) creating alternative models of the Universe; 2) regularly emerging variants of the last testament. Luchiano Berio's *Canticum Novissimi Testamente* is a prominent example of this tendency. The mega-cultural processes find reflection in the aesthetic assessment of dissonance and consonance. The credo of the first half of the 20th century could be defined as the priority of the dissonance as a bearer of artistic truth and, therefore, disdain for consonance as a tool for the depiction of banality. Since the second half of the century consonance is justified again. This event expresses itself in such musical phenomena as the restauration of ancient music, minimalism, the new simplicity, strengthening of the role of applied art, and eco-music.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the article represents research resulting in identifying in Western European artistic and cultural large-scale mega-cultural processes as a corollary of the prolonged transition period. A catalyzer of the transition process is re-thinking of the image of the world and, therefore, re-thinking of the phenomenon of the Sacred by the bearer of European culture. Nowadays, like in R. Barthes' essay (the Author diminishing like a tiny figure at the far end of the literary stage), the human gets a little shorter. In other words, he begins to think of himself not as a center of the Universe, but only as a humble part of it.

We have labeled approximate time borders that show the dynamics of the evolution of European culture bearer's notions about the Sacred. Thus, the first large period (the first half of the 20th century) ran under the sign of atheism and negation of God. The second one, from the second half of the century up to now, marks a new era in human's understanding of sacral values and is characterized by the search for a new spirituality. We have established that the processes given find bright expression in music both on the conceptual level (more noticeable and perceived more directly) and on a more latent level of musical language. The processes of the emerging new reflect in several phenomena of music culture. Specifically, among them:

- The ambiguity of postmodernism postulates that not only indicate a decay of traditional cultural values but also testify to the birth of new musical thinking;
- Susceptibility of the music artists to the literary tendencies of the second part of the 20th century (modeling of alternative Universes and creating of the variants of the last testament);
- Nostalgia for tonality and clarity of music language, increasing in European music in contrast to the complexity of avant-garde works' language of the first half of the century (this nostalgic mood finds expression in a strong interest in the music of the past epochs, particularly Bach's works; simplifying of music

intonation – up to making it primitive, the movement of the new simplicity);

- A principally new attitude to the sound environment or soundscape that emerged in the late 20th century; development of such phenomena as eco-music, the ecology of music, and music ecology.

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