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W. B. YEATS AND 20TH CENTURY RUSSIAN MUSIC: NEW AESTHETIC IDEAS AT THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURE

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Abstract

The article dwells upon the conceptual parallels between one of the greatest Irish poets W. B. Yeats and Russian composers of the 20th century, Alexander Scriabin and Igor Stravinsky.

Yeats first became known in Russia in the end of the 19th century. Gradually, his works entered the literary context and subsequently opened a new perspective in the critical studies of early 20th century Russian poetry (prominent examples include works by the linguist and anthropologist Vyacheslav Ivanov, the poet and translator Grigory Kruzhkov, and so forth). However, very little attention has been given so far to the intriguing connection between Yeats and his Russian musical contemporaries.

Thus, the article focuses on the comparative study of the philosophy and aesthetic principles of W. B. Yeats and the Russian composers, and highlights similarities in their aesthetic systems (such as the idea of time and Hermetic symbolism in the philosophy of Yeats and Alexander Scriabin).

The comparative approach allows the author to look at the music of Scriabin and Stravinsky through the prism of poetry and vice versa to view Yeats’s works through the music of his Russian contemporaries. The author also aims to find out how the poet and the composers expressed similar ideas and aesthetic principles using completely different systems — that of music and that of the language.

The subject of the present article is the connections and parallels between one of the greatest Irish poets W. B. Yeats and his Russian musical contemporaries. If we take a closer look at the philosophy and aesthetic principles of some of the Russian composers of the 20th century, we can observe rather curious similarities with Yeats. In this article, we would like to focus mainly on the comparative analysis of the aesthetic ideas of Yeats and two Russian composers — Alexander Scriabin and Igor Stravinsky.

Although their music and principles differ radically, Scriabin and Stravinsky have one thing in common — their thorough attention to poetry. Scriabin, for instance, who was one of the leading exponents of the Russian Symbolist movement, was never close to his fellow composers, he was much closer to the Symbolist poets of the Silver Age (especially, to Vyacheslav Ivanov and Konstantin Balmont).

Stravinsky, in his turn, admired the possibilities of language, and often referred himself to poetic meters and rhythms while working on his compositions. We can notice even a slight trace of linguistic approach in his statements about music: for example, in his lecture the Phenomenon of Music Stravinsky compares the hierarchy of forms in music with that in the language [10, p. 42]. Stravinsky collaborated with W. H. Auden who wrote libretto for his opera A Rake’s Progress and his music had great resonance in poetry. For instance, as Daniel Albright pointed out in his book Modernism and Music, T. S. Eliot “wrote his Hollow Men (“We are stuffed men... Head-piece filled with straw”) partly in response to the eerie energy of the marionette in Stravinsky’s Petrushka” [1, p. 2].

Scriabin believed in Art as the driving force of the Universe. He considered himself a creator, a god of his own microcosm that he tried to build through his music. In his search for spirituality and inspiration he experimented with white and dark magic, studied different occult practices, and, like Yeats at a certain point of his life and creative search, was highly influenced by the doctrines of Helena Blavatsky.

One of Scriabin’s most important ideas was the cyclical time. “The end of each cycle, the reunion of materia and spirit”, he wrote, “symbolizes the beginning of a new and higher turn of the gyre. The complete dematerialisation, climax and perfect confluence mean a leap to the next stage of development” [2, p. 169]. This quotation introduces a symbol of the widening gyre, that represents the changes of cycles and epochs, which was crucial for Yeats as well, as can be seen, for instance, from his poem The Second Coming:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity” [12, p. 158].

In these lines, the poet uses the symbol of the gyre to illustrate the changing of
the historical cycles. In Yeats’s philosophic system, a double gyre becomes an indis-
pen sable symbol for understanding and describing the transition from one period of
civilisation to the next or from one era to another.

Going back to the Scriabin quote, we can notice one more similar concept in the
ideas of Yeats and Scriabin — the concept of dematerialisation, alchemic decomposi-
tion of the prima materia (i.e. the starting material for the creation of the Great Work),
which always precedes rebirth and renewal.

During his life, Scriabin, like Yeats, tried to create an ideal masterpiece, the Great
Work — which was meant to be his Mysterium, that he never finished. Like Yeats,
Scriabin describes his work using alchemic terms: the Mysterium, he believed, must
lead to “the Universal rise, the surge of energy resulting in ecstasy and... death, de-
materialisation, end of the material world” [2, p. 174]. Yeats speaks about his life-time
work in the same terminology: in 1906 he wrote “I am a little disappointed with the
upshot of so many years, but I know that I have been busy with the Great Work, no
lesser thing than that although it may be the Athanor [the Alchemic furnace] has
burned too fiercely, or too faintly and fitfully, or that the prima materia has been ill-
chosen” [5].

Scriabin believed in the ultimate force of ecstasy and passion because only these
sensations could help break the boundaries, overcome the barriers of one’s own self
and thus create a true masterpiece of Art. It seems that the same idea is reflected in
Yeats’s Tables of the Law: “At first I was full of happiness... for I felt a divine ec-
stasy, an immortal fire in every passion, in every hope, in every desire, in every dream
<...> and it was as though I was about to touch the Heart of God” [11, p. 198]. We
can notice that Yeats often speaks about Flame, “measureless desire” or “the trans-
formation of life into Art” [11, p. 177] in his works based on alchemy and the doctrines
of Blavatsky’s Order of the Golden Dawn.

However, Scriabin’s Great Work had never been finished for he died prema-
turely in 1915 at the age of 43. Therefore, we can only wonder, as did Igor Stravinsky,
about the possible sound of the Mysterium and whether Scriabin’s beliefs and music
could have altered if he had lived longer.

Stravinsky himself never shared Scriabin’s passion for occultism which often led
the latter into extremes. According to Stravinsky’s own words, Scriabin was one of
the gods of Symbolism and Decadence, however Stravinsky viewed symbolist prin-
ciples as outdated and Helena Blavatsky’s doctrines as old-fashioned [4, p. 47]. His
own music turned to what later became known as neoclassicism.

Stravinsky’s approach to music is a curious combination of spirituality and ratio-
nalism. On the one hand, he speaks about himself as being a vessel through which
music comes to life, he speaks about love as “a creative factor”, as “a dynamic force” (“What force can be more potent than love?” he remarks) [9, p. 81]. On the other hand, he strongly believes in order, in the importance of following the rules, when composing and performing music. Moreover, he defines the purpose of music as “establishing an order in things <...> the coordination between man and time”. The sensation produced by music (once its “construction” is completed) is similar to that evoked by “the interplay of architectural forms” [9, p. 54].

Giving advice on how his music should be performed, Stravinsky emphasizes that it is not to be interpreted, but to be read and executed — this statement once again points out the importance of rules and order for the composer. He is very meticulous about the correct “articulation” and “rhythmic diction”: “Articulation is mainly separation, and I can give no better example of what I mean by it than to refer the reader to W. B. Yeats’s recording of three of his poems. Yeats pauses at the end of each line, he dwells a precise time on and in between each word—one could as easily notate his verses in musical rhythm as scan them in poetic meters” [3, p. 135]. Stravinsky sensed the inner music and implied chanting in Yeats’s poems. What is more, this quotation shows us, that Yeats (a poet) tried to apply music principles towards his poems, despite not having a good ear for music. In this regard a quote from Ezra Pound’s ABC of Reading comes to mind: “Mr. Yeats probably would distinguish between a g and a b flat, but he is happy to think that he doesn’t, and he would certainly be incapable of whistling a simple melody in tune. Nevertheless before writing a lyric he is apt to ‘get a chune in his head’” [8, p. 197-198]. On the contrary, Stravinsky (a composer) often treated music according to the rules of poetry. In 1928 he composed a ballet Apollo in which “the principal subject is versification” and the basic rhythmic structure is iambic: “The individual dances may be thought of as variations of the reversible dotted-rhythm iamb idea” [7, p. 33].

Russian folklore (the Firebird, Petrushka, the Rite of Spring, Pribaultki, etc.) was always one of the greatest inspirational sources for Stravinsky. In this regard we cannot but mention Yeats who often used the elements of Celtic lore in his works (poems, as well as prose and plays). But speaking about plays it is interesting that both Stravinsky and Yeats involved oriental theatre practices when creating a play or a ballet based on the folklore of their native cultures. We can only wonder if there were some direct contacts between Yeats and Stravinsky, which is quite possible. However, the staging of some of Yeats’s plays (e.g. At the Hawk’s Well) might have been to some extent influenced by the Russian Ballet, for the so-called “authentic interpreter of the Gaurdian’s dance” Michio Ito whom Dulac introduced to Yeats was in fact a disciple of Vaslav Nijinsky and the Russian Ballet [6, p. 38].

Finally, one more idea should be explored that Yeats and Stravinsky seem to have shared — the idea of Art, as the result of making, transforming the raw material of Nature, aestheticizing it, or, in Stravinsky’s words, adding to “the gifts of nature the benefits of artifice” [10, p. 24]. The poet and the composer seem to have had a genu-
ine interest in new technical inventions and mechanisms. Thus, Stravinsky was fascinated by the pianola, he scrupulously examined the mechanism itself and gladly accepted the challenge of composing some tunes specifically for this instrument. This kind of excitement feels similar to what Yeats may have experienced when preparing to read his poems on the radio or when listening to his own poems set to music by Harry Partch and played on the instruments Partch invented.

Earlier Stravinsky wrote an opera *The Nightingale*, in which the voice of the mechanical nightingale sounds so beautifully ornamented. It does not overshadow the value of the live bird, but clearly shows the composer’s admiration for a true work of Art, for an exquisitely and elaborately made masterpiece, which reminds us of the last stanza in Yeats’s poem *Sailing to Byzantium*:

> “Once out of nature I shall never take  
> My bodily form from any natural thing,  
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come” [12, p. 163].

Thus, in this paper we have studied side by side the philosophic and aesthetic concepts and beliefs of Yeats and two Russian composers — Alexander Scriabin (a true symbolist) and Igor Stravinsky (who mostly belonged to the post-Symbolist era). The research allowed us to look at their music through the prism of poetry and vice versa to view Yeats’s works through the music of his Russian contemporaries. The poet and the composers lived mostly in the same historical period, and therefore, as we have tried to show in the article, experienced the influence of similar movements, practices, schools of thought and philosophies (for instance, alchemy, occultism or later — orientalism). The comparative approach has also opened new perspectives that are worth exploring in further research. Drawing the hypothetical parallels between the poet and the composers gives a chance to find out how similar the development of their creative thought was and how a poet and a composer could express them using completely different systems — music and language. Finally, by comparing Yeats to the two composers (Scriabin and Stravinsky) we can look deeper into the development of his creative and philosophic ideas and trace the way his views changed and evolved through time.

REFERENCES


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У. Б. ЙЕЙТС И РУССКИЕ КОМПОЗИТОРЫ ХХ В.: НОВЫЕ ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННЫЕ ИДЕИ НА ПЕРЕКРЕСТКЕ КУЛЬТУР

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Аннотация

В статье прослеживаются параллели между ирландским поэтом У. Б. Йейтсом и русскими композиторами XX в., Александром Скрябиным и Игорем Стравинским. Йейтс стал известен в России в конце XIX в. и постепенно его творчество вошло в литературный контекст и открыло новые перспективы литературоведческих исследований поэзии первой половины XX в. Однако, на сегодняшний день мало исследований посвящено культурным и философским связям между Йейтсом и русскими композиторами, современниками Йейтса.

В статье проводится сопоставительный анализ философии и эстетических принципов Йейтса и двух русских композиторов ХХ в. (Скрябина и Стравинского), а также прослеживаются точки пересечения их художественных идей (к примеру, идея цикличности времени и алхимический символизм в философии Йейтса и Скрябина).

Сопоставительный анализ позволяет автору статьи взглянуть на музыку Скрябина и Стравинского через призму поэзии и, наоборот, проанализировать творчество Йейтса через призму музыкальных произведений его русских современников. В статье также предпринимается попытка выяснить, каким образом поэт и композиторы выражали родственные по своей сути идеи, используя для этого совершенно разные системы — музыку и язык.

Ключевые слова
Ирландская поэзия, диалог культур, А. Скрябин, И. Стравинский, У. Б. Йейтс.

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