

ТЕОРИЯ И ИСТОРИЯ ИСКУССТВА

УДК 001.2+781.1+82.01/09

“WITHOUT SETTING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN MELODY OF VERSE
AND THE ONE OF MUSIC”:
THE CONCEPT OF “SOUNDING SUBSTANCE” BY BORIS ASAFIEV
AND RESEARCH OF THE “LIVING WORD”¹

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The given article focuses on a concept of “sounding substance” by Boris Asafiev, which occupied a significant place in his theoretical heritage of post-revolutionary period. In the view of the researcher, the sounding substance accumulated the key communicative, dynamic, and semantic parameters of music that constituted its “anthropological” dimension: the organic consistency of the structure, fluidity, sensory tangibility, invocatory and suggestive features. The author puts forward a hypothesis that the given concept was largely affected by research of oral speech intonation carried out in the early 20th century under the aegis of so-called “Ohrenphilologie” (“auditory philology”). An important factor of such impact were Asafiev’s close contacts with philologists from the Institute of the Live Word, one of the leading platforms of the Ohrenphilologie in Russia of the 1910–20s. The paper establishes continuity between ideas of the specialists in Ohrenphilologie Sergey Bernstein, Boris Eichenbaum, and Victor Shklovsky on the one hand, and the concept of the sounding substance on the other.

Keywords: Russian musicology of the 1920s, Boris Asafiev, “sounding substance”, Ohrenphilologie.

¹ The article is prepared on the base of the research carried out with a grant support of The Aleksanteri Institute Visiting Fellows Programme, the University of Helsinki (2021–2022).

«НЕ СТАВЯ ГРАНЕЙ МЕЖДУ МЕЛОДИКОЙ СТИХА И МЕЛОДИЕЙ
МУЗЫКИ»: КОНЦЕПЦИЯ «ЗВУЧАЩЕГО ВЕЩЕСТВА»
Б. В. АСАФЬЕВА И ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ «ЖИВОГО СЛОВА»

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В центре внимания настоящей статьи находится концепция «звучащего вещества» Б. В. Асафьева, занимавшая заметное место в его теоретическом наследии послереволюционных лет. В представлении исследователя, звучащее вещество аккумулирует в себе ключевые коммуникативные, динамические и семантические параметры музыки, составляющие ее «антропологическое» измерение: органическую системность устройства, текучесть, сенсорную конкретность, инвокационные и суггестивные свойства. В работе высказывается гипотеза, что на становление рассматриваемой концепции оказали воздействие исследования устной речевой интонации, проводимые в начале XX века под эгидой так называемой «слуховой филологии». Важным фактором такого влияния послужили для Асафьева его тесные контакты с сотрудниками петроградского Института живого слова, который был на рубеже 1910–20-х годов одной из главных площадок развития «слуховой филологии» в России. В статье устанавливается преемственность между идеями специалистов в области «живого слова» С. Н. Бернштейна, Б. М. Эйхенбаума, В. Б. Шкловского, с одной стороны, и концепцией звучащего вещества — с другой.

Ключевые слова: российское музыковедение 1920-х годов, Б. В. Асафьев, «звучащее вещество», «слуховая филология».

In the history of the Russian musicology, post-revolutionary years designated a remarkable period of institutionalization: after its introduction in the early 1920s into research institutes and conservatories, it received an official status of academic discipline and a powerful impulse to development. The initiators of the budding musicology were deliberately building it as if “from a clean slate” and considered their field in the vein of the “trading zone” (if to apply a term of Peter Galison)² trying to engage it in an actual scholarly and even scientific discourse of the time.

² The term “trading zones” was introduced by an American historian of science Peter Galison: the latter called so crossings of several autonomous scientific and extra-scientific subcultures. In his opinion, in such zones, growth of a new knowledge goes on especially rapidly and intense [1].

Such a position of the “neophytes”, consciously cultivated by the specialists, in many cases allowed them problematize unexpected analogies and connections in their object — a widely understood musical realm. As one of illustrative examples of that, one can consider a concept of the “sounding substance” by Boris Asafiev, which contemplated music within a broad context of mental and sensory — predominantly auditory — human experience.

Since his very first steps in musicology, Asafiev was deeply involved in search for anthropological dimension of music — an observation of its emotional, semantic, and communicative parameters, reflection upon the process of reception of music and upon the tools of its psychophysiological impact on hearer. All these aspects were accumulated for him in a phenomenon of **sounding substance**, a category that was introduced by Asafiev and occupied a significant place in his works of the 1920s. In addition to two articles, directly devoted to this category [2; 3]³, it appears in the majority of his texts of that time in theory and history of music, methodology of musical study, musical criticism and pedagogics. Asafiev regarded the sounding substance as a phenomenon at the sources of sound communication, a special form in which surrounding world represents itself to human’s active hearing. Arising in the course of involuntary “objectification” of sounds of the world by human conscience, the sounding substance does not yet constitute music as itself, but forms a breeding ground for creation of music, a matter that lives in mind in a form of a moving stream of meaningful sounds. Composers’ works keep in touch with the sounding substance through such their characteristics as an organic coherence of organization, fluidity, and capability for growth of their music material (the “symphonism”, by Asafiev’s own term), sensory concreteness, invocatory and suggestive qualities that produce an effect of involving of hearer in the stream of music. All these features are inherent in music prematurely in its live sounding and provide its focus on the listener.

To analyze such aspects the musicologist could not use an equipment of traditional theory of music, which primarily focused on static parameters of music, recorded in writing. In the meantime, in literary studies an adjoined research field had begun to develop as early as in pre-revolutionary years. An impetus for that was given by spreading in Russia of ideas of “**Sprech- und Ohrenphilologie**” (“the oral and auditory philology”) by a German linguist Eduard Sievers, to which the members of the OPOJAZ group Boris Eichenbaum, Vladimir and Viktor Shklovsky made a remarkable contribution. Later on, researches inspired by them concentrated mostly at the Institute of the Live Word in Petrograd (ILW). Meaning by the “live” word a sounding word, the Institute research fellows scrutinized oral speech

³ I. Glebov (Igor Glebov) was a pseudonym of Asafiev in his academic publications of the 1920s.

in its real utterance and effect on hearer, paying a particular attention to various kinds of declamation (poetic, dramatic, oratory), everyday speaking practice, and folk recitation. The Institute possessed a special laboratory of sound recording where scholars of many specialties – from linguists and art critics to psychologists, physicians, speech therapists, and radio technicians – collaborated in their study of oral intonation. For the philologists working there, the key matter of interest were sound aspects of art word – poetic and prosaic speech.

In the early 1920s, Asafiev too participated in ILW endeavor, though his personal contacts with literary researchers had probably started even earlier: since 1919, he collaborated with Viktor Shklovsky at the editorial board of a newspaper "The Life of Art" which at that time was in effect functioning as a publishing platform for the OPOJAZ members⁴. One of the title research papers in the Russian "Ohrenphilologie", a monograph by Boris Eichenbaum "The Melody of the Russian Lyric Verse" prepared for publication in 1921 contained several references to Asafiev and even mentioned that the latter "shared his observations" with the author upon musical material [5, p. 455, footnote]. Hence, the scholars had happened to discuss this work in person at the very stage of its elaboration. In the same pre-revolutionary five-year period, the musicologist himself was working at a research topic in poetry studies. Throughout those years, he created voluminous articles "Afanasy Fet's Auditory Perception of the World", "Dante and Music", "At the Sources of Life (to the Memory of Pushkin)", "The Vision of the World in the Spirit of Music (Alexander Blok's Poetry)", "Verses in Russian Music. Romances by Nikolai Medtner to Pushkin's Lyrics" as well as a methodical guideline "Russian Poetry in Russian Music". At one time Asafiev intended to include these texts in a monograph on relations between music and poetry he was pondering on in the early 1920s, but the project remained unfulfilled.

Anyway, such a persistent turn of the musicologist to analysis of poetry testifies to a particular significance of this subject to him in the period under question; and it is very likely that its coincidence with the stage of the most intensive work of Asafiev at the concept of the sounding substance was not an accident. Indeed, many facts indicate that among diverse research directions at ILW poetry studies produced the strongest effect on this concept⁵. The content of Asafiev's articles on poetry provides a glimpse into the reasons of his research interest in this kind of literary art. The musicologist regarded music and poetry as arts intimately kindred by virtue of their common sound essence. He admitted that at times he was able to "comprehend melos of poetry almost in tune with that of music, or, in other words, without setting

⁴ On Shklovsky's work at the newspaper see: [4].

⁵ As well, as works by Vsevolod Vsevolodsky-Gerngross on speech intonation. See: [6, p. 123–128].

boundaries between melody of verse and the one of music, to hear sinning tension and duration of verbal texture filled at every given instant and chained at every particular moment with the preceding one" [7, p. 9]. In Asafiev's view, in comparison with other kinds of fiction, it is poetry where musical principle presents itself the most comprehensively and determines many aspects of impact. Undertaking analysis of poetry, Asafiev stated that many poets possess a keen musical feeling comparable with a hearing of composers, and are equally sensitive to musical substance poured in the world, the substance they in various ways imprint into their lyrics⁶. Perceiving the world through listening, poetry, as well as music, deals with sounding substance: the both arts imply a process of symphonic formation and a melodious quality. However, their tools are different: whereas music surpasses poetry in sonorous nuances, poets contrary to musicians operate with a conceptually definite word. In this regard, the musicologist concluded, various aspects of sounding substance are more available for scrutiny in poetry where they are subject to verbal objectification.

The study of Asafiev's musicological concepts within the context of history of ideas, though being an extremely exiting task, at the same time poses serious, sometimes almost insurmountable difficulties for the researcher. One of such complications results from a regrettable "stinginess" of his references, which in most cases are far from covering the full range of sources guided the musicologist⁷. The same situation is the case with regard to "Ohrenphilologie": its diverse refractions in the musicologist's works of the 1920s are, as a rule, not amply supplied with references and require a special reconstruction. In the meantime, an impressive number of the arising analogies does not let chalk them up to occasional coincidents, especially given the facts of Asafiev's close communication and cooperation with ILW research fellows in the period under question. The undoubted connection of such analogies with his key concepts of those years encourages reconstructing as a complete network of them in his legacy as possible. As a step towards

⁶ Asafiev presented the most detailed argument on this matter in his work: [8]. See also: [7; 9].

⁷ There might have been several reasons for that. The first one was a young age of Russian musicology, which at that time had not yet formed regulatory requirements to academic writing. The second reason could be Asafiev's personal manner of writing which evidently gravitated towards essay practice. In his autobiographical documents and letters, he more than once mentioned his habit to write texts "in one gulp", following a freely flowing stream of his thought. For instance, in September 1925, he wrote to Roman Gruber: "What is to be done: when I write or speak, I feel a creative process, and then positively everything falls out of my memory: book titles, authors, pages etc. Vice versa, they pop up like landmarks only if I lose my way" [10]. Finally, additional adjustments seem to arise from political circumstances in Russia of that period, such as recurrent aggravation of persecution against authors or entire research directions that for one or another reason did not satisfy the current ideological trend. As is well known, Asafiev was extremely sensible to political course and carefully avoided in his texts any potentially compromising allusion.

unfolding of this large-scale topic, one may regard the article under consideration, which focuses on multiple resonances between poetry researches at ILW and Asafiev's concept of sounding substance.

In general, the development of research of "the live word" in Russia followed two main directions. The first one, represented, in particular, by Sergey Bernstein, studied word in its real sound actualization, working with sound recordings of oral speech and declamation. At a time of his work at ILW Bernstein specialized primarily on author's declamation of poetry regarding it as an autonomous art, not only rather independent of versification itself, but also different from it in terms of material. Whereas a poet, he claimed, operates in his work with phonemes, which present a conventional substrate of sound, a reciter deals with real sounds possessing physical qualities, therefore "declamation is thoroughly material, as well as architecture or sculpture" [14, p. 39]. Bernstein sought to create a theory of declamation that would cover its specific means of expression. It is remarkable enough that when doing so, he, although unintentionally, emphasized in declamation mainly the features it had in common with music. In particular, in analysis of sound recordings he was taking into account such features as timbre characteristics of the voice, "the emphasis weight" of the word (dynamic, melodic, temporal), volume level, melodic forms of the verse (direction of melodic lines, principles of their combination, "the variations of tessitura"), division of speech stream by pauses (including the volume of declamator's breath, its regularity or intermittency), and so on⁸.

If to juxtapose means of declamation expression described by Bernstein with Asafiev's concept of sounding substance it becomes clear that they practically coincide with those characteristics of sound, unavailable to precise musical notation, which the musicologist admitted the most meaningful for music. Asafiev must also have found undoubtedly akin to his thinking the physical feeling of poetic declamation which Bernstein substantiated and repeatedly demonstrated in analysis — for instance, by his attention to a character of reciter's breathing, muscular tension during articulation, bodily experience of verse rhythm. In one of the talks the linguist delivered in 1923, he stated that listener perceive dynamic of declamation on a bodily level, through physically experienced sense of tense and relief. The same bodily sensations, in his opinion, underlie the emotional experience of verse content and even determine the very character of emotions [16]. In very similar terms, Asafiev described impact of music on human mind in which he gave a significant role to bodily-kinesthetic empathy. For instance, he drew attention to tension the listener experiences when hearing intervals uncomfortable for voice, pointed out that the length and structure of phrase is determined by natural extent

⁸ See, in particular: [15].

of singer's or instrumentalist's breath. He also stated, quite reasonable, that musical rhythm could be the most directly comprehended through bodily-kinesthetic sensations [17, p. 257]. Along with that, he insisted on the kinetic genesis of such categories as "melodic pattern", "steady tone", "mode", "mode gravity", "musical material" etc. [18, p. 200–205]. Thus, studies of art declamation carried out by Bernstein experimentally proved many of Asafiev's intuitions about sounding substance, which manifests itself both in music and in poetry.

The other direction of the "Ohrenphilologie" focused on the search for "the remnants" of oral speech in written — mostly poetic — literary genres: a vivid example of such approach in ILW became, in particular, works by Boris Eichenbaum. Eichenbaum suggested introducing auditory analysis directly into the sphere of literary poetics: he believed it could facilitate rethinking of many commonplaces of literary studies. "We often completely forget that the word itself has nothing to do with letter, that it is a live mobile activity created by voice, articulation, intonation along with gestures and mimics", — he wrote in 1918, encouraging colleagues to search for "traces of live word" in writers' legacy [19, p. 152]. Contrary to Bernstein, Eichenbaum reckoned that in particular kinds of fiction genetically related to oral utterance — poetry, first of all, — sound qualities are inherent in works primordially, regardless of the particular act of declamation. Having shown an extraordinary auditory sensitiveness, the researcher elaborated in his works analytic techniques, which enabled him to reconstruct elements of oral sound in written literary texts.

In particular, in his monograph "The Melody of the Russian Lyric Verse", he declared that in lyric poetry the leading role in organization of material belongs to musical principle, which manifests itself through syntax, rhythmic and melodic organization of stanza, and a specific tuneful intonation. The melodic principle performs many functions in poetic text: it spiritualizes the verse through separating it from common speech, forms within it "the second plan structure", and sometimes produces an additional semantic layer by transforming verbal semantics⁹. However, Eichenbaum regarded as the most important effect of the verse melody its capability to alienate reader from plot of the lyrics: in the philologist's opinion, it was a basic prerequisite for the art impact of poetry, which by no means could be reduced to empathy with the storyline [5, p. 539]. The researcher even identified a particular genre prototype of melodic system in lyric poetry, having quite reasonably pointed out its historically established relation with song and romance. Based on these connections, Eichenbaum stated, poetic text forms the respective rhythmic and melodic patterns able to produce an effect on reader relatively independent of the verbal layer.

⁹ Eichenbaum found such examples, for instance, in Lermontov's poetry. See: [5, p. 420; 431].

The experience in analysis of verse melody also affected Eichenbaum's research in the field of literary prose. It is remarkable that in this literary art, historically much more largely than poetry oriented on writing, the researcher too discovered connections with oral speech: it is through such connections, in his opinion, that the principle of play and improvisation manifests itself in literature. "Author is always an improviser by nature", he observed. "Written culture forces him to choose, perpetuate, process, but all the more willingly he strives to preserve at least an illusion of free improvisation" [19, p. 154]. In terms of communication, improvisation noticeably enlivens the narrative and as if turns it toward reader who becomes an observer and a partner of the creative process unfolding right before his eyes. In Eichenbaum's view, the spirit of improvisation penetrates into written prosaic text through **oral tale forms**: he meant by the latter multiple kinds of narrative prose, which create "an illusion of oral speech of the narrator" [20, p. 413]. Apart from a special "oral" syntax and composition plan, the tale is characterized by a peculiar, almost physiologically concrete "tangibility of word" achieved via various mimic and articulatory "gestures", elements of "abstruse language", play on words and other techniques, which emphasize in the word its sound aspect. Such methods, the researcher believed, aim at returning the reader to sensory experience of word inherent in oral speech.

One may assume that Eichenbaum's approach was akin to Asafiev's one because of the very intention of the philologist to "hear" literary text, the recognition of significance of auditory component in prose – the practice, which, according to generally accepted view, had pretty much detached itself from its bygone connections with music over the last ages. It is also very likely that Asafiev took interest in the philologist's techniques of reconstruction of sound effects in written texts – in relation to music, he elaborated a similar approach revealing in composer's works "idioms" of oral tradition. For example, in his monograph "The Symphonic Etudes" (1922) he discovered the improvisational method in a work by Alexander Dargomyzhsky. "This seems to me the best characteristic of "The Stone Guest" by Dargomyzhsky: it is an improvisation, the magnificent, concise, swift, free musical uttering that does not fit into the scheme and flexibly follows the verse... In this case, there can be no question of either a rigid construction or a formal, strictly logical development. All organically harmonious sound combinations are achieved by colorful use of timbre and nuances of human voice, beyond any concern about schematic construction" [21, p. 30–31].

The role Asafiev attached to bodily sensations in musical impact has already been mentioned in this paper. It is tellingly enough that he associated the greatest intensity of emotional and bodily empathy with perception of oral practice – the improvisational music of folk tradition. "In singing, in this marvelous legacy of ancient times, the invoking, spontaneous hypnotizing aspect of music entirely manifests itself ... In singing we feel life through breathing..., we breathe in unison, in accordance

with an irregular rhythm of nature,” he wrote, for example, in 1918 [22, p. 1]. Such ideas corresponded to Eichenbaum’s observations on the oral tale forms. Equally informative Asafiev might have probably found many of the philologist’s ideas in the field of sound pragmatics of verse — in particular, his hypothesis about ability of its melodic system to communicate hidden meanings of the text over its verbal semantics. In his work “The Speech Intonation” prepared for publication in 1925, Asafiev paid a particular attention to how various, sometimes rather subtle, emotional nuances are modeled in melody of opera recitative: “question-curiosity”, “question-reflection”, “question-irony”, “question-astonishment mixed with contempt”, “rapture”, “command”, “horror” etc. [23, p. 8–18].

In his striving for figurative and sensually concrete perception of written literary text, Eichenbaum also in many ways converged with a concept of “resurrection of word” by Victor Shklovsky suggested in his article of the same name as early as in 1914. For Shklovsky, such “resurrection of word” meant a recovery of its primordial sensual and figurative sense it was amply endowed with at its birth. Over time, nevertheless, when getting a part of everyday lexis, words become gradually reduced to abstract notions, “algebraic signs”, which people habitually recognize but do not experience. To give back to the word its figurative sense, make it tangible again, one should break down the inertia of using it: this can be achieved through placing it into non-habitual context. One may, for instance, use the word in a way of metaphor, supply it with an unexpected epithet or utter it in a singing voice: in his later publication (1917), Shklovsky called this technique a **“defamiliarization”**. However, he continued, such defamiliarization leads not only to a new empathy with the concrete word, but also to “a resurrection of things”, a new discovery of reality in all its sensual entirety [24, p. 40; 25, p. 63]. From this point of view, every poetry in some respects defamiliarizes word by subjection it to melody and rhythm of verse, and a psychological consequence of that is an esthetic catharsis its reader experiences. A phenomenon of the same kind subjectively felt as a mysterious revelation, epiphany, noted Shklovsky, is the case in religious cult, not least due to psalmody, a peculiar melodious manner of pronouncing the sacred text.

An effect similar to “the resurrection of things”, Asafiev described in relation to invoking qualities of sounding substance, which, quite like “the resurrected word”, plunges listener into the current moment and returns him to intense emotional and sensory experience of music and reality. For instance, the musicologist believed that oral musical tradition was able to synchronize body with rhythm of nature, introduce a man to special mental states and sacred knowledge. “Even in its primitive stage, in intonation of spell, in recitation of rhapsodes or teachers of tradition,” Asafiev noted, “the very manner of intoning and the very consciousness that this and that ought to be uttered in a singing voice, with a sacred awe, implies a lyric, vocal, melodious principle. And a human being when following it as if becomes consecrated

by attaching their voice to the voice of the cosmos" [26, p. 60]. Thus, the exposure to sounding substance makes one keenly and intensely experience a moment of harmony with one's own body, nature, and the universe.

Applying a contemporary term, one may conclude that the ILW members contemplated literary word within a broad range of its discursive manifestations: they associated it mainly with intonation component the word obtains in oral use. Following different ways in their reasoning, the researches converged on the idea that poetic word becomes "live", that is, socially and artistically effective, through musical principle inherent in oral speech intonation. Among a great variety of means of musical expression, the chief matter of their interest became so-called "non-specific means", which were not subject to precise notation and the most entirely unfolded their qualities in a real auditory practice. These were those very qualities, Afafiev quite reasonably found constitutive for musical sounding substance: syncretic parameters on the boundary between music and speech, the most saturated with semantics and expression. No wonder that the observations carried out by specialists "at the other side" of this boundary served as an important guideline for Asafiev's pursuit. It is noteworthy that in Russian humanities the phenomenon of oral intonation, which became accessible for study after invention of sound recording, attracted at first not as much musicologists' as philologists' attention. Therefore, when Asafiev turned to the concept of sounding substance, it was the latter who could offer him effective methods for his research. Asafiev's works provide a glimpse into how a few years later the musicologist employed these research interests to work out his other extremely influential concepts. One of them, "the music of oral tradition", had a great impact on the following generations of Soviet ethnomusicologists. The other one, "the intonation vocabulary of the epoch", formed the basis of historical research, having enabled the musicologist to insist on correlations between speech intoning inherent in a particular culture or generation and its musical language.

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