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EDVARD GRIEG AND RUSSIAN SYMBOLISM: ANDREY BELYI'S *NORTHERN SYMPHONY*

Edvard Grieg never reached Russia, but his music did. Journeying farther than Grieg, his music reached Moscow where it inspired many artists. In the early 1900s, the Russia symbolist, Andrey Belyi (1880-1934) stormed Russian literature with *Symphonies*, an experimental four-work collection dependent on the novel idea of marrying music and literature.¹ Fulfilling his ambitious plans, Belyi dedicated his *Northern Symphony (First or Heroic)* to the Norwegian composer.²

As well as listening to his mother's domestic recitals, Belyi, himself a gifted pianist, enjoyed playing Grieg's compositions and listening to his music at Moscow's concert halls.³ Falling under the spell of Grieg's *Ballade* (Opus 24), he decided to commemorate its beauty in words—his *Northern Symphony* was born. No doubt, its lyrics are Nordic and reflect Grieg's impressionist coloratura.

Focused on Grieg's music and Belyi's poetical interpretation thereof, this paper aims to explain how using Grieg's music Belyi successfully introduced novelty into his own experimental prose. This article discusses Belyi's conceptual rather than formal borrowings from Grieg, identifies Grieg's essential musical techniques and explains how Belyi interprets them. Scholarly writings on Grieg's music and publications on Belyi's symbolism are used and an attempt made to discover why these two artists chose their paths to novel perceptions of reality far distant from their contemporaries' more conventional works. Discussed also—how music and literature reflect these perceptions.

¹ *Severnaia simfoniia (1-aia, geroicheskaia)* (Moscow, 1904); *Simfoniia (2-aia, dramaticheskaiia)* (Moscow, 1902); *Vozvrat: III [‘ia] simfoniia* (Moscow, 1905); *Kubok metelei: Chetvyortaia simfoniia* (Moscow, 1908). All four symphonies have been reprinted in Andrey Belyi, *Chetyre simfonii* (Munich, 1971). The citation of the *Northern Symphony* (its other titles are also used in the text: *First Symphony* or *Symphony*) will be to this edition.

² Later, in 1913, Belyi visited Norway for a month (September-November).

³ See Lavrov A.V., *Andrey Belyi v 1900-e gody* (Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie: Moscow, 1995), pp.48-50, 62, and Belyi A. *Material k biografii* (RGALI: f.53, Op.2, n.3, list 11) in which Belyi describes the period of October—December 1898 as the beginning of his interest in Grieg's music. With reference to Belyi's diary Keys also argues, “Belyi was attracted by orchestral suites and lieder of Edvard Grieg... during 1899.” – Keys Roger, *The Reluctant Modernist. Andrei Belyi and the Development of Russian Fiction 1902-1914* (Clarendon Press: London, 1996), p.127.

Among the many books about Grieg, Schjelderup-Ebbe's has a special place because it addresses Grieg's style in detail, especially the technical aspects of his music. According to Schjelderup-Ebbe, harmony to Grieg was a central concept. He aimed "to make the harmonies as fitting to the melody as possible."⁴ The composer, however, understood the concept of harmony slightly differently than did his predecessors. Arguing that Grieg's music is part of impressionistic tradition, Schjelderup-Ebbe considers that the obscurity of tonality (the frequent shifting between major and minor), the use of pentatonic (a reduced scale) and chromatic (rather than diatonic) scales, and the liberation of chords (the exploration of unconventional combinations of dissonant and consonant chords and their tensions and progressions) are the distinguished elements of his harmonic garb. Some of these novel devices, the composer borrowed from Norwegian folk music, a style in which instruments have little possibility for modulation, and instead use alternative ways of tuning.⁵

Belyi, too, was apt to experiment with sound: being under the spell of Grieg, he employed in his *Northern Symphony* exotic colouristic effects. Discussed by Belyi scholars, the musicality of his early prose is not only powerful but also clearly perceivable.⁶ Lavrov writes that the text of Belyi's *Northern Symphony* is dependent on its musical prototype; literary images repeat constantly because they have a function of musical leitmotifs.⁷ Although Belyi could not copy Grieg's musical techniques, he borrowed Grieg's concepts. He took some of Grieg's wavering modality, modern scales and extraordinary chords, using these concepts in his own unconventional verbal compositions. Belyi's experiments focused on the creation of unusual images: the backbone of his invention is the idea of multi-faceted words and his readiness to play with their meanings. For instance, instead of long successions of dissonant chords Belyi creates a degree of tension in his description of a variety of images by underlining their diametrically opposed characteristics. Slow reading of *Symphonies* is essential because to understand fully his exotic verbal patterns require time. They sparkle, after thorough digestion, and show facets previously unknown or unthinkable. The diametric use of words is how dissonant characteristics become

⁴ Schjelderup-Ebbe Dag, *A Study of Grieg's Harmony with Special Reference to his Contributions to Musical Impressionism* (Johan Grundt Tanum: Oslo, 1953), p.86.

⁵ For more information read Schjelderup-Ebbe (1953), pp.19-23

⁶ See Steinberg Ada, *Word and Music in the Novels of Andrey Belyi* (Cambridge University Press, 1982). Tilkes Olia, *Literatura i muzyka Chetvyortai simfoniia Andreia Belogo* (no place, no date).

⁷ Lavrov, p.62.

consonant. For example, “1. The snow of humpbacked mountains was glittering by a lilac fire.”⁸ Here, the unusual pairing is snow and fire. In comparing dissonant characteristics of extreme heat and cold, Belyi emphasises the whiteness of snow—as pure as only fire can be—and the concept of purification by flame. Another quotation from the text shows the same technique: “1. He smiled with a dead smile.”⁹ How could a smile be dead? Was this smile a cold one? Imagining a dead smile, Belyi states that there are no grounds for believing that the Old King’s son will return: to some extent, a smile is a symbol of hope, but in this case, there is no such hope because the Old King knows that his son has abandoned him. Other examples illustrate the point that Belyi’s images are rich in unusual harmonies and full of wisdom.

An ability to create vivid images characterises Belyi’s and Grieg’s works. In *Spring-rain* (Opus 49, no.6), Grieg paints rainfall in lush tones. This imitation of nature “has been achieved by a soft speech-song-like melody, supported by a series of unconventional, daring chords and progressions, combined with delicate pedalling effects.”¹⁰ Following the same methodological pattern of impressionism, with blurring of contours and creation of particular moods, Belyi describes the abandoned city by applying powerful metaphors. Readers perceive the city’s deep misfortune through Belyi’s use of all possible facets of *тоска* (pronounced as ‘toska’ stressing the second syllable) to give this impression. *Тоска*, a Russian word, is extremely difficult to translate into English. It has many meanings, among them melancholy, nostalgia, loneliness, emptiness, sadness, darkness and unreality. These meanings are all present in the ten-verse description of the abandoned city.¹¹ Here Belyi applies a conceptual, rather than acoustic, onomatopoeia.

In many respects, Belyi sees music as a tool to help him create a new literature. His literature, however, is not an entire acoustic play. It possesses another meaning: music is also magic uncovering the secrets of human minds.¹² Belyi, likely, was able to perceive this quality of music from Grieg’s compositions, and to apply it.

By Grieg’s own words, an entry to the Diary of 1865-1866 from August 7, 1865, “The artist’s task is not to reproduce the physical event itself, but rather to

⁸ *Chetyre simfonii*, p.36. My translation of “1. Снега горбатых гор сверкали лиловым огнем.”

⁹ *Chetyre simfonii*, p.38. My translation of “1. Улыбнулся мертвой улыбкой.”

¹⁰ Schjelderup-Ebbe (p.98).

¹¹ *Chetyre simfonii*, pp.23-24.

¹² Keys, p.119.

create a reflection of the feelings awakened by that event; if this is done with brilliance, the impression is equally divine despite the absence of those overpowering effects that belong to nature alone.”¹³ Grieg scholars also underline the importance of his interest in the Self and his attempts to translate emotions into sound: Harald Herresthal, a professor at the Norwegian State Academy of Music in Oslo, argues that Grieg succeeded in expressing in his music thoughts and emotions recognisable everywhere.¹⁴ Boris Asafiev’s book on Grieg addresses this issue in detail arguing Grieg’s musical understanding of minds.¹⁵ Obviously one cannot claim that Grieg made his contribution in order to further the development of Cognitive Science (a science as yet unborn), but it is appropriate to underline his ideas on mind since they show how he managed to model thinking techniques unique to human minds.¹⁶ Grieg’s cognitive elements are emphasised by listing the cognitive elements of Grieg’s music as identified by Boris Asafiev, and by showing how these elements are transformed in Belyi’s *First Symphony* into relevant verbal constructions.

Belyi’s *Northern Symphony* opens with the Old King, near death, naming his son as the future king. With his last words, the King requests the windows be opened, that he may breathe the air of coming spring.¹⁷ To an extent, the story develops in the framework of Romanticism. The story comprises such elements as an eternal struggle between dark and light forces; a powerful love story, which ends optimistically; noble characters: kings queens and knights; and horrible creatures. The opening scene highlights the subject of death and it bears a strong resemblance to Grieg’s sad experience of 1875, the year he lost both of his parents. Belyi did not experience any personal loss while writing his *Symphony*, but only months before the work was to be published he suffered the loss of his father.

Grieg’s *Ballade in the Form of Variations on a Norwegian Melody* (Opus 24), completed in the spring of 1876, sees days of sorrow and despair transformed into

¹³ *Edvard Grieg: Diaries, Articles, Speeches* edited and translated by Finn Benestad & William H. Halverson (Peer Gynt Press: Columbus, 2001), p.13.

¹⁴ Please see his Grieg’s Biography on Edvard Grieg Homepage: www.mnc.net/norway/EHG.htm

¹⁵ A member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, a musicologist Boris Asafiev (real name Igor Glebov) wrote his book on Grieg in 1942, which was published later, in 1948. – B.V. Asafiev, *Grieg* (Muzgiz: Moscow, Leningrad, 1948). This book was translated into Norwegian and published in 1992 – Boris Asafiev: *Grieg*. Innledning, oversettelse og kommentarer ved Asbjorn O. Eriksen. (Solum Forlag, 1992).

¹⁶ Grieg’s interest in the Self might be explained by the spirit of his time: the 1880s and 1890s mark the birth of Psychology from the vast body of Philosophy. This particular period is associated with pioneering work in Psychology by Wilhelm Wundt, William James and Sigmund Freud.

¹⁷ *Chetyre simfonii*, p.21.

music addressing the issues of life, death, eternity, religion and art. The theme of the *Ballade* is a simple and song-like melody, mournful and tragic by its character, which corresponds to the state of Grieg's mind. According to Benestad and Schjelderup-Ebbe, Grieg might have borrowed and adapted one of the melodies from Linderman's collection of *Older and Newer Norwegian Mountain Melodies—The Northland Peasantry* song.¹⁸ Grieg presents the folk melody in fourteen variations distinguished by their tempo, rhythm, texture and dynamics. Perceived not as a fragile composition, the *Ballade* is a thoroughly solid piece of music. The logic of its arguments, its moody variations, supports the firmness and wholeness of the song. Asafiev argues that in this particular way there is a chance to shift unexpected associations and unusual intonations in order to perceive what they represent in the purist form. In this way, Grieg's methodology of establishing a multi-tune melody is a strong tool. This type of melody not only represents the various points of his argument but also sharpens it. Asafiev states that to Grieg, emotions and thoughts with their many and varied permutations are similar to, and comparable with, variations on musical themes.¹⁹

What kind of thought does Belyi attempt to tune in his *Symphony*? He states that the first part of his work focuses on the description of spring, in particular a Nordic spring. This theme persists in the remainder of the *Symphony*, but emphasis switches to issues of Apocalypse and the coming of Sophia, the Divine Wisdom or the Eternal Feminine. The central image of the *Northern Symphony* is that of the Young Queen.²⁰ In the opinion of Belyi, a young man of nineteen years when he wrote the *First Symphony*, words were heavy and cruel, and tools not to be used to express delicate subjects such as his fondness for young women. Belyi's shyness may explain why he looks to music, and musical techniques, to record his emotions in his writings. Although sounding strange, it is likely that Belyi blends the unconscious naivety of a young man looking for a girlfriend with his conscious urge to theorise on this old-as-life truth. Embedded in this blend of nature and theory, Belyi's meditation on the Young Queen reminds one of Grieg's tunes in the *Ballade*. The sadness and beauty of loneliness, the fulfilling and destructive sensitivity, the transparency of lakes and the stench of swamps, and the colours of light and dark all contribute significantly to the themes of the *Symphony*—and to some extent, represent verbally the variations of the

¹⁸ Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Edvard Grieg: the Man and the Artist*. Translated by William H. Halverson and Leland B. Sateren (Alan Sutton: Gloucester, 1988), p.201.

¹⁹ Asafiev, p.144.

²⁰ Belyi, 'Material k biografii (intimnyi)' (RGALI: f.53, op.2, n.3), list 13 – ob.14, list 16.

Ballade. For example, the tenth variation is a dance melody with bouncing rhythms. When the dark forces of the swamps are dancing, one hears Grieg's powerful sharp chords on the pages of Belyi's *Symphony*. Here witches' sabbath and goats' movements represent sin. The children of the marshes dance a satanic dance—"kozlovak".²¹ To Belyi, this dance opportunely symbolises the sensuality of ordinary love (Dionysian or sensual tendencies) as dark animal forces hostile to the high spirituality of real love (Apollonian or aesthetic tendencies). When writing his *Symphony* he disputed the loves with Sergei Solov'yov, a young nephew of Vladimir Solov'yov. To Belyi and Solov'ev, real love had a divine origin and owing to its extreme spirituality and purity, the colour white should represent real love.²² Recognize that the crisis in Grieg's life of 1875 concerned not only the loss of his parents but also an increasingly problematic relationship with his wife.²³ "*Kozlovak*" is but one example of how Belyi's sound and meaningful words interpret the depth of Grieg's musical variations. Belyi's ability to grasp Grieg's tunings does not emphasise his superiority or a power of word over sound, but directs one's attention to the issue of understanding other artistic minds.

Asafiev's next point, underlying Grieg's compositions, is the impulsive development of melodies. He states that this musical impulsivity is similar to mind impulsivity. This does not mean that these variations are purely random: even in the case of contradictory melodies or thoughts, there is always a possibility of hearing something that unites them. This unity is perhaps unexplainable in worldly terms since it is an ongoing process with repeated rapid changes. Here, formulated in musical terms, is a multiple-draft model of mind, nearly half a century earlier than Daniel Dennett's theory.²⁴

In the *Ballade*, Grieg's drafts are the variations of the song, so that the current draft of his perception of some issues associated with the melody will be a variation playing at the very moment one stops a tape recorder or CD player. In Belyi's work, drafts are images of a Nordic spring. As previously mentioned, the "kozlovak", a

²¹ Pp.75-59. "Kozlovak" might be a short version of two words, a goat ("kozyol" in Russian) and an orgy ("vakkhanaliya" in Russian).

²² Lavrov, p.60.

²³ Benestad and Schjelderup, p.199. See also Levasheva Olga, *Edvard Grieg Ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva* (Muzyka: Moscow, 1975), p.335. Many scholars underlined that the *Ballade* was too personal to Grieg, and he did not ever play it in public.

²⁴ For more information see Dennett, D.C. *Consciousness Explained* (Boston and London: Little Brown and Co, 1991).

wild sensual dance, is the tenth variation. The eleventh and twelfth variations sound like a hymn to a rising sun, such that there is an impulsive change in the mood and perception of the melody. Everywhere is light, and spiritual forces of the sun and blue skies celebrate their victory over the dark forces of forests and swamps. A glorious day dawns after a black night—in nature, new life follows death. This is another message, another tuning of Grieg’s melody. Belyi has managed to perceive the mood and portray the right decision made by the Young Queen.

After receiving a spiritual message from heaven, the Young Queen leaves her tower to fulfil her worldly duties. She raises an image of the crucified Christ on a stick found in the forest and with this as her banner, the Young Queen journeys through forests to her country where she meets her grandfather, who is happy to give her his kingdom.²⁵ Here Belyi, on one hand, develops his story about the abandoned land in the North, and, on the other, continues to add new elements to his understanding of a Nordic spring, the Young Queen representing spring in the story. This time the issue of spirituality is tuned into the melody. The Queen is brave and strong. She organises resistance to the dark forces of human sexuality. She is the Lady of the Sun. She heroically overcomes the army of the Black Knight. This explains the *Northern Symphony’s* alternative title of the *Heroic*. The Queen is as strong as a Nordic spring, her actions heroic: she uses her powers of the Sun purposely in order to establish a new spiritual order of spring. As in nature—after death, comes life. In the north, winters are long, cold and harsh—springs are victorious.

This paper acknowledges the influence of Douglas Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*. Following the advice of the Anteatr, a character in book, a richer understanding of Grieg’s scores and Belyi’s writings is possible, as is a natural mapping of their works. Grieg’s music and Belyi’s literature show us a novel perception of reality, one that is deeply personal and sincere. Moreover, their reality is new: it is the reality of human mind. Perhaps the *Ballade* and the *First Symphony* are those most complex sources which might be discussed in the company of the Anteatr, Achilles and friends such that a breakthrough in the field of acoustico-retrieval might be made.²⁶ In other words, and on a more serious note, Grieg’s music

²⁵ *Chetyre simfonii*, pp.88-89.

²⁶ According to Achilles, “The name tells it all: it is retrieval of acoustic information from extremely complex sources. A typical task of acoustico-retrieval is to reconstruct the sound which a rock made on

functions beyond Grieg's time. It offers ideas for use in other art forms, ideas of which Belyi's experimental prose is but one. Grieg's music will surely flourish in the garden of human cognition.

plummeting into a lake, from the ripples which spread out over the lake's surface." - Hofstadter Douglas, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* (Penguin Books: London, 2000), p.152.