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Research article

## Everything You Wanted and Didn't Want to Know about Mediaopera: A Cryptophonic Memoir

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### Abstract

If the compositional method for the so-called mediaopera reaches back to the conceptionalism of the 1990s and, with it, the invention of „cryptophonics,” this memoir details the creation of Iraida Yusupova's five media operas. Starting with *Einstein & Margarita* in 2003 and ending with *The Alphabet* from 2024, they involve the development – in parallel, yet unified – of sounds and images as separate staves in a total score that is not fully written. As each line develops over time, their vertical connections are created in the performance which serves as a definitive staging and ultimate referent for the mediaopera as a work. This distinguishes Yusupova's mediaoperas from animated YouTube opera stagings or the use of video-projections on the opera stage. If, according to the poet Tutchev, „the pronounced thought is a lie,” any meaning at all can be encrypted in different systems of signs. But even in the right musical key the encrypted meanings cannot be deciphered – allowing for a conversation between the living and the dead, especially the footage of Yusupova deceased husband and collaborator, filmmaker Alexander Dolgin, and herself.

**Keywords:** Mediaopera; Conceptualism; Cryptophonics; Principles of composition; Visual and musical systems of signs

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Научная статья

## Все, что вы хотели и не хотели знать о медиаопере: Криптофонические мемуары

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### Аннотация

Композиционный метод так называемой медиаоперы восходит к концептуализму 1990-х годов и, вместе с ним, к изобретению “криптофонии”. В этих мемуарах подробно описывается создание пяти медиаопер Ираиды Юсуповой. Начиная с “Эйнштейна и Маргариты” 2003 года и заканчивая “Алфавитом” 2024 года, они подразумевают развитие – параллельное, но единое – звуков и образов как отдельных нотных знаков в общей партитуре, которая не написана полностью. По мере того, как каждая музыкальная строка развивается с течением времени, их вертикальные связи создаются в исполнении, которое служит окончательной постановкой и окончательным референтом для медиаоперы как произведения. Это отличает медиаоперы Юсуповой от анимированных постановок опер на YouTube или использования видеопроекций на оперной сцене. Если, по словам поэта Тютчева, “мысль изреченная есть ложь”, то любой смысл может быть зашифрован в различных системах знаков. Но даже в правильном музыкальном ключе зашифрованные значения не поддаются расшифровке, что позволяет вести диалог между живыми и мертвыми, особенно в кадрах с покойным мужем и соавтором Юсуповой, режиссером Александром Долгиным, и ею самой.

**Ключевые слова:** Медиаопера; Концептуализм; Криптофоника; Принципы композиции; Визуальные и музыкальные системы знаков

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## INTRODUCTION

The telling of how I invented something that I named „mediaopera“ demands a start at the very beginning. And this beginning was rather mystical. In the early 80s when I was a conservatory student in Moscow, composing a string quartet, I had a strange dream which I still remember in detail. I heard beautiful music and saw my score with four staves for 2 violins, viola and cello – the ordinary notation for string quartets. But there was something unusual in this picture: first, the notes were running on as if in a cartoon, and second, there was a 5<sup>th</sup> line under the four staves, and it was a long narrow screen showing a film of a beautiful brook with green grassed banks and birds and butterflies fluttering over running water, and evidently the camera which filmed that brook was moving along with the stream. I understood the meaning of the dream only many years later when I started to master professional digital programs – obviously it was the fancy interface of multichannel sound editors with video channel which I started using in my digital practice.

After graduating from the Moscow conservatory I started to compose music for the theatre. I felt rather confident as a theatre composer because during my time at the conservatory I also attended classes by distinguished Russian theater director Petr Fomenko of the Moscow Theatre Institute (GITIS), also collaborating with his students. In spite of the fact that I was an absolutely insane cinema-fanatic, I thought that the cinema’s material recalcitrance was too tough for me to work as a composer in cinema. I didn’t even dream of working for the cinema. But despite my doubts, my first experience as a cinema composer was rather successful as was my rather unusual way of creating music which I proposed on my first project (“The Date”, director Arkady Yakhnis, 1989). Initially, the technicians of the project were shocked and complained about me to the Arseny Lapisov, the main musical editor of Mosfilm Studio. He asked me to tell him my ideas and then said to the team people “do what she asks for,” and to the film-director he said about me that “this composer has a cinema mentality which is actually a rare case.” On that project I was very lucky and very inspired as I dealt with footage by Alexander Knyazhinsky, one of the most outstanding Russian directors of photography who had previously filmed Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*. It became quite clear that it is the work of the director of photography which would inspire me most when creating music for the cinema is. No wonder, then, that I fell in love with the brilliant work of Alexander Dolgin who was the director of photography for my next project as a composer in cinema (“Farewell” director Arkady Yakhnis, 1992), only after that falling in love – also with him. He and his talent were equally precious for me. And we never parted even since his death in 2019.

Initially, in the beginning of the 1990s, we continued working at different cinema projects separately and both became more and more disappointed. We brought to these projects a lot of authorship but not every film-director was ready to share this authorship with us, even when they saw that it was right, agreeing with it in their heart. For some time, we hoped in vain to meet “our” film-director. As the cinematic production process became more and more digital and mastering much of it ourselves, we became ever more confident in choosing the format or independent auteur, becoming film-directors ourselves. This was very hard work – blood, sweat, and tears – but it proved to be absolutely fruitful and gratifying for us both. We understood each other without words



and very often invented the same things simultaneously. Making everything with our own hands by using our basic professions we learned to master additional skills – I edited video and audio, made sound design, while Alexander recorded sound and worked on animation and compositing.

As for the content, for our various features I contributed the macro-dramaturgy, with Alexander providing micro-dramaturgy. Around 2002 I started referring to our experiments as “mediaoperas” and was thus the first to use this term at least in Russia. Initially these were multimedia compositions with music as the organizing element. But I can now define five works more properly and fittingly as mediaoperas because they are real operas realized through multimedia methods. I was often asked how our mediaoperas differ from other media art, from traditional opera, or contemporary opera stagings that include many media elements such as screens on the stage or electronics mixed in with acoustics, and also how they differ from Fluxus happenings and their documentations. These question made it rather more difficult for me to express what I always felt. I will try now: mediaopera is a conceptual artwork (Bernyukevich, 2025). It is hard to explain this more clearly. For me, the most evident example of this is Karlheinz Stockhausen’s cycle of operas *Licht* (Stockhausen, *Licht* (“Light”), Nr. 47–80, 1977–2003). Having been in the early 1990s performance in Moscow, I can say that I witnessed there the strong verticals of a “creator/performer.” These were provided in the conception of the performance and not by the composer’s or writer’s hand which is never so strong as the hand that creates the performance. This mystical vertical connection became for me the main guide in my subsequent development.

And now I will turn to my five main mediaoperas.

### EINSTEIN & MARGARITA

In 2003, Alexander and I created *Theremin’s last secret* (Yusupova and Dolgin, 2003). A year later we read about the romantic affair of Albert Einstein and Soviet spy Margarita Konyonkova who was the wife of Sergey Konyonkov, the famous Soviet sculptor. The Konyonkovs lived in the United States for almost 20 years. This story had many parallels with *Theremin’s last secret* and was more intriguing than our invented plot. We clearly understood that we would never make a movie based on it, but to this story into an opera would be very possible. Besides, in opera I would remain absolutely free to invent elements of the plot. Later I found out that some of the details invented by me took place in reality. For example, Einstein really got acquainted with Leo Theremin and tried to play the theremin.

I never knew how to recruit people to participate in my projects but always infected them with my insane enthusiasm. I needed a libretto and I got the best one possible: My close friend, great poet Vera Pavlova and her husband, the brilliant translator Steven Seymour fell prey to my obsession. Vera wrote the poetical part of the libretto and Steve translated it into English. (Einstein’s love story had much in common with their own, and that is why they were so enthusiastic about this work.) I wrote the dialogues in Russian and English – the main characters met in America, and since one spoke Russian the other German, they communicated in English as it was in reality). Besides English and Russian



there are four more languages in the libretto – German for Einstein and his second wife, Italian for his first wife, Latin for the final *Lacrimosa*, and Hebrew for the angels of death who are counting the last minutes of his life (tenors and basses call out the end of his life separately, with 15 minutes between them because there are two versions of his time of death, 15 minutes apart). Also, I used for singing the texts of some well-known arias' texts such as Isolde's *Liebestod*, for example) in the original language, set to my own music, of course. Vera did not translate these arias but rendered them in Russian poems of her own which Steven translated into English.

In 2004, it seemed to me that this was a first example ever for this way of staging an opera. Before that, when we started to work, I was absolutely sure that owing to the protagonists and its plot and the success, for example, of the operas by John Adams, this one would be welcomed by any opera house. And this even in spite of the musical difficulties of my score – the need for a full symphony orchestra that couldn't be reduced, the necessity to amplify partial voices, additional instruments such as a piano, jazz-band, five saxophones and a drum-set, the use of phonograms and rear voices like basso-profundo and counter-tenor, and the extremely difficult part for soprano. When finishing the score in 2004 I started to see more and more clearly that I could not show it adequately to anyone without recording its music. I managed to receive a theatre grant for a modest alternative staging, and used this grant to produce instead a multichannel recording of the best quality. After spending the funds on recording the music, I proceeded to create the visual part with zero budget. Alexander was my next victim. We made the movie with the recording of the full opera as its soundtrack – using old black&white movies, quoting from documentaries, along with Alexander Dolgin's animation (Yusupova & Dolgin 2006). In addition, there was a shoot with famous Moscow conceptual poet Dmitry Prigov as Margarita's husband, the sculptor Konyonkov. Prigov had become my next victim because he studied to be a sculptor in his youth and was able to create a sculptural portrait of Einstein for the camera. His zealous performance of first creating, then splitting Einstein's clay's head with an axe proved really quite funny. We also filmed well known musicologist Pavel Loozker as Einstein because he looked very similar and knew how to play the violin.

The opera's multichannel recording was really excellent with one of the best Moscow orchestras directed by my favorite conductor Mark Kadin, including one of the best choirs, outstanding singer-soloists, and as sound-producer Petr Kondrashin, the legend of Soviet and Russian musical recording (this work became his swan song). The movie was exhibited with success at different events and cinema festivals. In order to justify the grant-money I received, I had to claim a theatrical performance, however. That's why, in 2005-2006, there were some events with me and Dmitry Prigov sitting underneath the movie-screen, playing as in chess with photographic dolls that were also created by Alexander. My purpose was to interest opera houses in my opera, but instead our modest theatrical performance met unexpected success in the form of several nominations and awards (nominated for the Golden Mask award in Moscow, receiving the Courtan's D'Hour – the main prize of the Rusk-Off festival in the city of Nice, invited to many festivals and cultural events). After that, nobody wanted to produce a second



staging of the opera, perhaps because we had already realized it in the best possible way. Indeed, I now consider it so definitive a reference that it cannot be remastered.

## THE PLANET PI

Like *Einstein & Margarita*, my next opera score for 11 singers, an ensemble of 12 instruments and fixed audios was initially conceived for real staging as an opera. All the same, however, it was a mediaopera because from the very beginning of working on it I knew that in the staging there must be a translucent screen instead of theatre decorations, and singers must interact with it from both sides – real persons before the screen, making shadows persons behind it. The idea of the translucent screen was the main inspiration for me during the whole time of writing the score. The plot was based on Carlo Gozzi's last play *Zobeida* (Gozzi, 1884), the libretto written by brilliant Vera Pavlova (Steven Seymour later translated it into English for the subtitles). It is interesting that Gozzi did not write a final monologue for the heroine, letting each actress playing this role speak whatever she would want to. Vera wrote a rather unexpected and very touching text for the final aria. And, getting ahead of the story: even though the score was finished in 2007, as a mediaopera *The Planet Pi* was not finished until 2021 and still appears very contemporary (Yusupova, 2021).

For several years I tried in vain to find possibilities to stage my opera. At last Alexander and me decided to realize it as a movie all by ourselves. The selection of the visual style selection was very important for us. A very inspiring visit to Karel Zeman's museum in Prague finally provided the clue. We were true fans of Zeman's work before, and thought that it was sign of fate when we happened upon his museum on our way. Since we did not have any sponsors for the project, we made it on our own money, and therefore everything went slower. And this is where I come upon the saddest part of my story and of my life. By 2017, the music was recorded and edited, by 2018, all the footage was ready for editing, composing and animation. Alexander had created two episodes, the preface and the first half of the third act. In June 2019, he died. First, I thought that *The Planet Pi* had died with him, and I would never touch his footage. But as the time passed, I felt a strong connection with his immortal soul, trusting that it would provide guidance and ideas of how to deal with his material, use his animation footage, and finish the piece. Naturally, *The Planet Pi* turned out to be quite different from how it was planned, but I don't find this difference detrimental to the piece. Comparing the result to the planned project I would say that it is more multidimensional with theatre elements in the cinema, with aloofness and additional characters, without the presence of the author but an added dimension of the eternal. All these elements compensated for the lack of visual richness that Sasha would have provided, were he alive, but they also provided a felicitous natural background for his two original episodes.

After finishing *The Planet Pi* I thought that I would never make a mediaopera again. But never say never.





## PINK MOUSE

Aside from creating mediaoperas, most of my work is for the concert hall. In 2014 and 2015 two of my compositions premiered at the yearly event for which they were written, namely the Gorky Prize that is awarded on Capri. Here I met the famous Russian writer Viktor Erofeev who was chair of the jury. He was very impressed by my music and recollected how he heard it while working on his novel *Pink Mouse* (Erofeev, 2017). He called me five years later and asked to write an opera after his new novel. I wasn't surprised because I knew *Life with an Idiot*, Alfred Schnittke's famous opera that was based on Viktor's novella. I had read *Pink Mouse* and saw right away that I wouldn't want "to write an opera" but would instead create a mediaopera as if Alexander were alive (Yusupova, 2021). This was not only because of the risk of writing an opera-score that would not go anywhere. More importantly, for Erofeev's novel to become embodied in opera (as I imagined it) demanded means that were impossible to realize in a traditional staging. By this I do not mean a multimedia approach which is already quite familiar in live stagings, but the need to preserve the main feature of the novel, namely the quick pace of scenes and high concentration of events.

I could not imagine creating this mediaopera without Alexander, but suddenly I had a very fruitful idea that would solve several problems: Alexander had been working with the Moscow Nonconformism Museum named after Anatoly Zverev (AZ Museum), creating the public image of the museum and authoring many animations that feature nonconformist pictures. This footage would become the ideal visual content for the *Pink Mouse* opera, at the same time getting a second life. This idea allowed me to considerably reduce the expensive animations that would have to be made especially for this project. I applied for the Zverev Art Prize with the promise to create a mediaopera that would actualize the AZ Museum's collection. The idea convinced not only the museum's director Natalia Opaleva, if only because of the success of *The Planet Pi* which in the final phase was also supported by the museum. And so I made *Pink Mouse* and received the Zverev Prize for it.

As soon as I had a firm idea and knew that I would make it all by myself there was no necessity to write out the total score. Instead, I produced isolated fragments for the musicians and recorded them in different settings, sometimes less than fragments but parts of a fragment. I then used digital sound editors to integrate them according to a virtual plan. Incidentally, my recording activity was further limited by the Corona pandemic. As to the libretto, based on the novel I wrote it myself, using original dialogue from the book. But for the fragments of the "bottom" substrate I used the dialogue only in the subtitles, inventing a "bottom" language for singing and sound performance.

As to visual part, I processed all I had – footage by Alexander and by specially invited artist-animators as well as photos of different pop-personalities. But I also had to create visuals by myself, learning to master composing and animation procedures, all of this within the short time-frame set by the Zverev Art Prize deadline – September 2021. Any necessary shooting was done by Sasha's close friend and colleague Dmitry Livshitz. I was happy that Vera Pavlova's eldest daughter Natalia would brilliantly sing the main part (along with her sister Lisa she had appeared already in *The Planet Pi*). My own daughter Anastasiya Braudo sang the part of Alice in Wonderland. She had also appeared



in *The Planet Pi* already as a conductor of recorded music, and she would have several parts in my next mediaopera *The Duel*. Also featured in *Pink Mouse* and a great help was Katya Erofeeva, Victor's wife. In reference to the piece *Endless Daughter* in my dedications after poems by Vera Pavlova (Yusupova, 2022a), I would refer to all of them as my endless daughters.

## THE DUEL

I was by then very inspired by the idea to give new life in new mediaoperas to footage by Alexander Dolgin, and in the making of *Pink Mouse* I had acquired the necessary skills of editing, composing, and animation. This allowed me to take a chance again. Moreover, being a conceptualist, I do not resist the power of a strong idea but let it develop until a new work is finished. I am thus attracted to my ideas which seem like something that only I could invent – the translucent screen and penguins in the place of in *The Planet Pi*, the use of photographic cut-out images of pop-idols like Johnny Depp and Ashton Kushner in *Pink Mouse* or Elon Musk in *The Alphabet*, filming the poet Dmitry Prigov as he practices his former sculptor's skill in *Einstein & Margarita*, etc. These ideas or elements make me forget risks and possible problems.

My next mediaopera appeared exactly like this (Yusupova, 2022b). It also included an inspiring element, namely the collaboration in this project with the singer Boris Komlev. In my mediaoperas I never limited myself to the academic vocals of traditional opera but included sound-performance and declamation as well. I almost always I invited outstanding singers to perform in different styles and thus brought very interesting sound performers into my projects; but Boris Komlev deserves separate mention. He performed all male singing parts with different timbres and in different manners in *The Duel*: rock vocals including growling, pop-songs, and poetic performance in the role of Zverev, romantic counter-tenor as Marinetti, classical counter-tenor as the bird-angel, academic baritone in the role Aseev, and an imitation of authentic British rock music in the British Embassy episode. Boris would also perform the main part in *The Alphabet*, my last mediaopera.

But despite all this, the most inspiring factor for me was still my video archive of Dolgin's footages. Alexander and me engaged in many media projects for the Moscow AZ Museum, and I had a lot of footage of Zverev's animated paintings, graphics, and private photos featured in different AZ Museum's exhibitions. Being of high artistic value they could be integrated in new mediaopera-biopic-fantasy stories. Anatoly Zverev himself was more than suitable personage for even all opera roles – romantic, tragic and comical as well. He was one of the most extravagant personalities in Moscow's unofficial art scene of the 1960s to 80s (Museum AZ, n. d.). His love story was also very intriguing and "operatic": he was deeply in love with a woman almost forty years older than he. She was a widow of Nikolay Aseev, the official soviet poet, former futurist, and close friend of Mayakovsky's. She and her four sisters were muses of futurist poets in their youth. Mayakovsky, Burlyuk, Pasternak, Khlebnikov, Severyanin, and Aseev often visited their open home in Kharkov, young people recited poems, sang, danced, played piano, arranged masquerades and fancy parties. Zverev adored the Russian "silver" age, and





Oxana Aseeva personified this “silver” age in his eyes. He was jealous of her past and often proclaimed that if he had lived in those times, he would be no less great a poet and artist than all those gigantic figures. Starting from all this I created the fantastic story of Aseev going by Time Machine to his favorite “silver” age, meeting the futurists and competing with them. The well known playwright Yulia Tupikina wrote the libretto and made some further changes in the course of events: By time machine Zverev went first to Kharkov in the 1920s, saw young Oxana – still Sinyakova at the time– and fell in love with her. He then met her in reality but did not notice how old she was, seeing her only as the beautiful girl he met in Kharkov while travelling through time. Then he returned to those times and places again, fought the poetical duel with all futurists and even with Marinetti in Italy. Besides Yulia’s texts there are many original poems in the libretto. Historical characters pronouncing their original poetic texts, including those of Zverev since he also wrote poetry, and so I used his poems including their translation into Italian for the duel with Marinetti. My working method was the same as in *Pink Mouse* – written music for the particular fragments and the total score in my head, not only a musical score one but one uniting audio and video. This time we creatively worked together with me, Yulia Tupikina, and artist-animator Victoria Malechkina simultaneously moving along and towards each other. Victoria taught me many things about composition and animation. This method of interaction accelerated the working process considerably.<sup>1</sup>

## THE ALPHABET

My last mediaopera is based on Diana Vouba’s (2022) eponymous visual project. In this project she created visual objects out of small elements – signs of an alphabet system that was invented by her, inspired by her own beautiful legend. These objects are not only non-anthropomorphical live beings, communicated by song-thoughts without visible human organs like eyes, ears, mouths, they are also space animals, buildings etc. The planet “An” where they all dwell, born from the bosom of Enoire the Queen who created all alphabetians from the signs of the alphabet. All this was Diana’s part of the story, I then invented a love story between Enoire and an astronaut from the Earth in whose screen image I used photos of Elon Musk. Alexander Dolgin and I had collaborated with Diana a long time ago and I had Alexander’s animated footage of Diana’s pictures. The libretto I wrote myself, and it features laconic subtitles in Russian and English because the singing and sound-performance is for the most part in an artificial space language. Some texts of the songs are in English, they are translations of Vera Pavlova’s and Marina Maximik’s poems and of a very popular Soviet song by the famous writer-

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, I am immensely grateful to every participant in all my projects. It is impossible to mention all of them here. After Petr Kondrashin’s death, sound-producer Dmitry Misailov recorded my *The Planet Pi* and parts of *Pink Mouse* and *The Duel*. Owing to his talent and mastership, *The Planet Pi* won the Clean Sound. Other parts *Pink Mouse* and *The Duel* were recorded by the talented sound-producer Igor Sklyarov, and by Dmitry Cheglakov who also recorded *The Alphabet*. Cheglakov is also a great cellist and electric guitarist (he played both instruments in these three operas), a composer himself, and my friend and “partner in crime” for more than thirty years.



dissident Vladimir Voinovich (1960/2012) that was written especially for the first space-flight: „14 minutes before start.“

If I presented too many boring details about the creation of my mediaoperas, I shall conclude with some more about my compositional technique. In the early 1990s, when it was still possible to generate new musical ideas, I invented some composing techniques which made it possible for me to create complicated academic music without a total score. „Cryptophony“ was invented simultaneously but independently and with different motivations by me and my friends and colleagues Ivan Sokolov and Sergey Nevraev. The term was coined by Nevraev but the technique was also referred to as spontaneous polyphony, samples' polyphony and, vertical polystylistics. Another reason for mentioning them here is that our cryptophonic collaborations produced my first two mediaoperas *avant la lettre*. Created in the 1990s and thus long before I used the term „mediaopera“ there was *Opera-Cryptophonica*, created and performed together with Ivan Sokolov and Sergey Nevraev, as well as *Opera-Marina*. Since they contained the seeds of my future mediaoperas, they might deserve more detailed consideration. For the time being, two rather more abstract statements of the cryptophonic program may suffice.



## APPENDIX

Facsimile from the August 1999 issue of *20th Century Music*: Iraida Yusupova (1999) „Thoughts on Cryptophony,“ followed by Sergei Nevrayev (1999) „Cryptophony“ from the same issue of *20th Century Music*

### Thoughts on Cryptophony

IRAIDA YUSUPOVA

Feodor Tutchev (1803-1873)  
*Silentium!*

Be silent, be secret, hide  
Your feelings and your dreams.  
Deep in the depths of your soul  
Let them mutely rise and set,  
As clear stars do in the night:  
Admire them and be silent.

How does a heart speak out?  
How to explain yourself to another?  
Will you grasp what you live by?  
Pronounced thought is a lie.  
Your burrowing troubles the waters:  
Drink of them and be silent.

Know how to live within -  
Your soul contains a world  
Of mysterious, magical thoughts;  
The outer tumult stifles,  
The beams of daylight blind.  
Hear their song and be silent.\*

It is for a particular purpose that I begin my text about cryptophony with quoting this poem by Tutchev. As is well known, poets are, by their very nature, prophets, and the prophetic line of Feodor Ivanovich, "the expressed idea is a lie" has been confirmed by the discoveries of 20th-century science in the twentieth century: that human thought is in its very nature integral and continuous, and its symbolic expression (i.e., that which is expressed out loud or to oneself or written down) is, by its nature, discreet – which means that humans do not have the substantial ability to carry out their thoughts to one another. Apparently, this is why even when conversing in our own respective native languages, we frequently do not understand each other. Meanwhile, when transferring a symbolic expression of thought into another system of symbols, all the vacuum areas necessarily have to be filled up, since in a new means of expression of thought new vacuum phenomena appear, which have to do with the peculiarities of a different system of symbols.

The system containing the greatest amount of universalism is that of music. It is not accidental then that according to one version of the Biblical story of the tower of Babel, the first language for humans was particularly music. If we are to continue contemplating this theme, we can assume that the Babylonian confusion of languages is none other than the appearance of a symbolic expression of the thinking process and the further development of both (i.e. of the process and of its symbolic expression) in an indissoluble connection with each other.

In this manner, our cryptophonic method of composition is a means to bring out the hidden substance of the manifestations of the Spirit, which take place in the world of the Beyond, which are perceived by those that are chosen and expressed by them in a helplessly weak manner, so that all would hear them.



\*F. I. Tutchev, *Poems and Political Letters of F. I. Tutchev*, translated and with an introduction by Jesse Zeldin (The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1973), 42-43.



## Cryptophony

SERGEI NEVRAYEV

What is cryptophony? The term could be translated from Greek as “mysterious sounding” — certain hidden meanings implied which are true transmitted through real sounds. Cryptophony is best understood as one out of many possibilities of that artistic trend frequently known as conceptualism, and specifically Russian conceptualism.

Russian conceptualism differs somewhat from its Western equivalent, the former being closer to a type inherent in the art of 19th-century romanticists. Whereas Western art carries in itself, as a crucial feature, a process of analysis of the very elements of the language of art, Russian art to this day still focuses a great deal of attention on the programmatic content of the artistic text. In contemporary Russian art there exists a certain conflict — indeed a polarization — between two contrasting intellectual approaches (in the manner of the traditional argument between the “Westerners” and “Slavophiles” in 19th-century Russian thought): the structuralist versus the old-fashioned “romantic” conceptualism. The latter approach, though frequently manifesting itself in forms that might be avant-garde in appearance, in reality adheres particularly strongly to tradition.

It is in this second camp that the interest in cryptophony arose among three composers: Iralda Yusupova, Ivan Sokolov, and Sergei Nevrayev. Their interest did not appear accidentally, but as a singular reaction to this existing intellectual polarity, as a search for a middle road between an excessive structuralism and an equally excessive conceptualism

A structuralist artist — for example the abstract artists in painting (Mondrian, Kandinsky) and the Second Viennese School in music (Schoenberg) — focuses attention exclusively on pure “musical” qualities and sees the entire meaning progress in the progressive development of the means of the language of art, which has its own inherent meaning, that cannot be reduced to any other extraneous sense. Priority is given to the language, inherent in any type of art. Development is reduced to the self-development of an language.

The path of conceptualism leads towards another destination: towards a quest of certain extraneous semantic content, towards subordinating the whole structure of the work of art to this content and, in the final outcome, towards a denial of the self-sufficiency of the artistic text, the case being that the text transcends itself into a “meta-text.”

Coming out of such an understanding of the processes going on at the present time in art, one can once again define the cryptophonic technique as being a compromise between the two extremes of the “ultra-text” and “meta-text,” as reconciling these two directions, as, speaking in a student-Hegelian language, a particular type of “alleviation” of this contradiction, an alleviation of the antinomial qualities — it is difficult to say between what — possibly the unity of these two opposites.

Here one must note once again that cryptophony appeared as a method of musical composition simultaneously among three composers, who were practically totally independent of one another in their respective creative development and who, only after sharing their discoveries with each other,

determined that they are not solitary in this newly discovered artistic realm. It means that the appearance of cryptophony was not accidental.

If one is to speak of the substance of this technique, one can determine that, as always in such cases, just as it was in the case of the 12-tone technique, its roots can be traced quite far back in history. Most likely, precursors to its appearance have always existed; in any case the founder of contemporary notation, Guido D’Arezzo established the pre-requisites for it, when he tied together elements of notation with elements of a literary text (a Latin hymn). That is, here already we can see a certain ciphering involved, and one can say that all the music, written down in notes, is subordinated in one way or another to the deciphering and interpretation of this code.

Analogously, neumatic notation, existing prior to Guido, could be likewise viewed directly as a ciphering system, since each musical symbol in this system was connected to a certain element of literary speech.

Subsequently, the letter names of the notes of the musical scales appeared, which likewise infrequently inspired composers to use different kinds of ciphers. The musical signatures of Bach, Schumann, Shostakovich, and Denisov are all too well known, all of which could be looked at as an elementary type of cryptophonic technique. One can say that the new, more detailed cryptophony has been engendered by the historical course of events. In addition, this is the proper occasion to remember Newton, who matched the spectrum of colors in concordance with the seven-note scale; it is worthwhile to remember the Ancient Greek and Roman authors, who successfully combined concrete musical scales and modes with particular ethical modes and conditions. It is necessary to remember the medieval symbolism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with its ramified system of symbolic meanings, which frequently connected works of art with particular events in the Gospels, as well as with a particular type of numerology (the avidly reviving system of Neo-Platonism). Possibly one can also bring into account other artistic manifestations, about which we do not even have information at the present time.

Nevertheless, if one can, without any digressions, speak about cryptophony itself, the technique exists in two versions: as macro-cryptophony and as micro-cryptophony. Macro-cryptophony is close to that technique which utilizes concrete anagrams-notograms. The difference between these techniques, however, is that in macro-cryptophony the notogram, chosen for any particular text, determines the whole musical language of a given composition. The point of departure of macro-cryptophony lies in the letter names of the notes. It is possible to decode and read this direct ciphering system more or less rather easily.

Micro-cryptophony utilizes a more intricately detailed ciphering system, and this is the particular brand of cryptophony with which composers Yusupova and Sokolov work with, which can be determined as being cryptophony in the truest meaning of the word. In micro-cryptophony it is very difficult to decipher the connection between text and music, as well as between musical and verbal symbols and practically impossible to do so without knowing the ciphering



system. It seems proper to remember the opinion formed in political intelligences of Russian ciphers as the most complicated in the world – which is another argument in favor of the conclusion that it was no accident that cryptophony was invented particularly by Russian composers. Most likely, Russians possess a special talent for Aesop's type of communication.

The emergence of cryptophony can be established at around 1989. It was at that time that I began to write my macro-cryptophonic musical composition *Paraclete*. Two *Little Concerti* of mine, written with the aid of the macro-cryptophonic technique (namely *Paraclete* and *Strings caressing fingers – fingers caressing strings*) could be likened to the genres of the commentary or a sermon, which are built on playing around with as well as an “artistic” development of a certain respective thesis: in *Paraclete* it is a religious thesis, while in my second *Little Concerto* – a para-religious thesis following an Eastern Tantric tradition. These two compositions could be analyzed as commentaries about the content and purpose of asceticism, as well as the content and purpose of “counter-asceticism.”

The term “cryptophony” itself appeared in 1991. At that time I wrote my *Sensitive odes* to which I supplied personal commentaries or program notes, where in a somewhat humorous manner I determined the substance of the cryptophonic technique. At any rate, it was particularly in this text that the term “cryptophony” appeared for the first time. Subsequently, this term has become, so to speak, authorized. The composers, Yusupova and Sokolov, upon hearing the term for the first time, accepted it unconditionally and it could be said that at that time this technique has finally received its proper name: the composers started to determine their technique as “cryptophonic.”

For me, in addition to macro-cryptophony and micro-cryptophony, there exists yet another form of cryptophony, which I term as super-cryptophony. In 1993 I wrote a *Symphony* for string orchestra, in which the ciphering code was created in such a way that each note corresponds with any possible note of the Latin alphabet. This way, the cryptophonic substance of the composition lies in the fact that any possible text utilizing the Latin alphabet can be contained in the musical text. This can be, on one hand, a dead-end for cryptophony, while, on the other hand, it could be characterized as “super-cryptophony.”

In this manner, cryptophony can now be subdivided into three brands: that of macro-cryptophony, micro-cryptophony, and super-cryptophony. In addition cryptophony appears as one of the means of attainment of and/or approach to that universal artistic model, which combines in itself a philosophical, religious and mathematical generalization, in other words, it turns out to be a transcendental means of overcoming an esthetical apprehension, a search for such a generalization, which is capable of giving a new life to already existing elements.

Cryptophony is one of the possibilities of the quest for the “glad tidings,” bringing new life and revival to already developed existing forms, and presenting one means out of many of forming a new cosmos in the conditions of a historically conditioned chaos, in which, as according to Taneyev, “each sound can be followed by any other sound,” in a situation where it is necessary to have a substantial foundation for creating such combinations of the elements of speech, which would have sense.

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