

Alexei Losev's Approach to the Meaning and Language of Music¹

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ABSTRACT: The article considers a problem of musical sense and meaning in their relationship to musical language. Specific character of music is in that fact: the musical essence does not include images of the real world. At the same time music as a rule correlates with reality. The problem is: what concept can embrace extra-musical reality, symbolized in music, if it is not the content (as in literature, painting, etc.)? To decide this problem Russian thinker Alexei Losev was based on ancient and medieval epistemology and used correlative concepts: essence and energy, or name as the fullness of energies of essence. The name is manifestation of the essence in the external sphere, but the name is not the component of the essence. So, a programme reflects the musical essence in not musical images. According to Losev, the essence of music is life of numbers in time, expressed in sounds – musical *eidōs* is sounding number. This Pythagorean conception is very usable in modern musical practice, science and philosophy.

KEYWORDS: *musical content, form, essence, energy, name, language, eidōs, number, time*

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1. ON MUSICAL CONTENT AND MEANING

'WHAT is the Meaning of Music?' – this question is no less difficult to answer than the question of the meaning of life. It is no easier to understand what type of meaning is conveyed by a sparsely sounding intonation of a handful of sounds than to speak of the meaning and the 'subject' of all of music as a form of art. Understanding music as a language does indeed depend particularly on answering such questions – what plays the role of the signified for signs in musical language, and does it possess such an attribute at all? These questions had been answered in very different and even contradictory manners.

For musical consciousness in the 18th century the situation presented itself as comparatively simple: music was understood as the language of feelings, affects. The contemporary researcher Olga Shushkova writes:

The concepts of 'affect' and 'content' in a composition were equated by theoreticians of that period of time. [...] It was done most overtly by C. P. E. Bach, who utilized the terms 'content' and 'affect' as synonyms [...] in his treatise the following use of these terms was also made – 'content or affect' (Shushkova 2002: 99).

At the same time, for 18th century musicians, who were living at a time when the phenomenon of ‘pure’, ‘absolute’ music had not yet been formulated, affects were far from being extraneous to the world of sounds (as being merely the ‘signified’), but were a part of the very essence of music.

However, in the 19th century, and even more so in the 20th century, conceptions of ‘affect’ (imagery, feeling, etc.) as an immutable feature of musical essence itself began to be subject to revision. It suffices to remember the thoughts of Eduard Hanslick regarding the change of text in the famous aria of Orpheus in Christoph Willibald Gluck’s opera (*Che faro senza Euridice*) to their very opposite meaning (cf. Hanslick [1854] 1986: 17–18). Intensive study of the abundant experience of 20th century performance practice demonstrates that ‘moods’, ‘affects’ and ‘feelings’ suggested by a musical composition in various performance renditions vary in a very broad range (moreover, this is especially relevant, particularly in regards to 18th century music – to the time period when the theory of affects was predominant).

Nevertheless, in the 19th century as well, the perception of music as a means of expressing feelings remained timely relevant and corresponded in full to the experience of compositional practice. According to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, musical content is “spiritual subjectivity [...] the human soul, feeling in itself” (quoted after Mikhailov 1981: 21). Incidentally, it is impossible to overlook the fact that, notwithstanding all its traditional and seemingly apparent qualities, the present definition possesses the flaw of an apparent one-sidedness and does not involve in itself all the abundance of musical content.

The dichotomy of content and form was widely in use by 19th century composers (including Robert Schumann, Peter Tchaikovsky and others), who perceived it as being something absolutely obvious. Musical content continued to be understood as a predominantly extra-musical phenomenon in its practical, pre-theoretical use of the expression, as well. For example, Franz Liszt wrote in the programmatic introduction to his symphonic poem *Prometheus*: “Sorrow, overcome by the persistence of unshattered energy – this is what comprises in this case the essence of musical content” (quoted after Milshtein 1968: 4).

At the same time, as the idea of ‘absolute music’ became more prominent, the opposite non-verbal conception of music also expanded: from Hanslick to Stravinsky, Boulez and many thinkers about 20th century music. This is how it is expressed in the language of Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht: “Music does not signify something extra-musical, it signifies itself” (quoted after Kazantseva 2001: 8).

The experience of communication with music, after profound and sensitive consideration, is compelled to recognize the relative truth of both

extremely opposite positions, each of which, when presented solely by itself, is not sufficient and weakens the conception of music. One means of overcoming this given antinomy is traced in the breadth of the complete works of 20th century Russian thinker Alexei Losev.

2. POSTCLASSICAL THINKING AND RESURRECTION OF ANCIENT CONCEPTS

In truth, the categorical apparatus of classical (including Hegelian) philosophy and aesthetics bears in itself the mark of scientific, rational thinking, geared primarily on comprehending objects of an impersonalized world, which is unfathomable for human beings. This apparatus does not always correlate to knowledge of the world of living personality, the symbolic manifestation of which is art.

As is well-known, the revolution in scientific thinking, which took place during the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, demonstrated the relativity and the limitedness of classical systems (such as Euclidean geometry, Newtonian mechanics, etc.). The latter were not revoked, but were then viewed as singular, isolated cases in the context of many other, non-classical conceptions. A similar change occurred also in philosophical and aesthetical thought, but did not produce a great effect on music theory, with the exception of a few separate, especially outstanding examples.

One such example is the Russian philosopher and music theorist, Alexei Losev – an Orthodox Christian Neo-Platonist, phenomenologist and dialectician. The categorical apparatus of his thinking was rooted in Antique and Medieval (predominantly Byzantine) philosophy, directed at comprehension not of a detached ‘objective reality’, but of living, animated nature (in Ancient Greece) or the Living God (in the Middle Ages).

So what is it that Ancient philosophy could offer as a substitute for the New European type of thinking, which in itself is rather ‘dry’ and ‘soulless’ in its dichotomy of ‘content’ (‘composition’) and ‘form’ (‘structure’)? Following the thought of the ‘father’ of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, Losev revives the antique concept of the *eidōs*. Essentially, the *eidōs* is not an abstract, purely conceptual idea, but a concrete image, a ‘picture’ or, in Losev’s words, an “intelligent sculpture” (an ideal sculpture of the mind); etymologically it derives from the word meaning ‘image’. The word *eidōs* was understood by Plato as denoting an idea, a substance (i.e., the characteristics of ‘content’) and is translated in the corresponding manner in Plato’s texts. Nonetheless, a tradition has emerged in application to Aristotle’s texts, in which *eidōs* was translated as ‘form’. Thus, *eidōs* presents the unity of form and content, a perfectly designed idea-construction, the

ideal model or prototype. These kinds of concepts in particular present themselves as the most adequate for the specific character of the 'figurative-artistic' rather than the 'abstract-scientific' thought (cf. Losev 1927).

It is easy to comprehend that the musical *eidōs* ('idea-meaning-essence-form'), unlike most of the other types of artistic *eidōses*, does not contain concrete life-based images, concepts, etc. The question of the correlation of the musical and the extra-musical is not revoked, but instead of the uncomfortable concept for its comprehension, 'content', it is appropriate to make use of the dichotomy, which emerged as far back as the Orthodox Christian theology from the 14th century Byzantine Empire (Gregory Palamas), which was revived by Losev. It deals with the categories of essence and energy (i.e., name).

2.1. Essence and energy (name)

It must be noted immediately that the classical Hegelian dichotomy of "essence and phenomenon" (Hegel [1817] 1974: 299) is also not entirely adequate for describing the being of personality. After all, phenomenon might be a completely passive 'manifestation' of essence, whereas the word 'energy' accentuates action – in medieval translations the Greek word *energeia* was replaced by the Latin word *actus*. However, *energeia* is also used to denote reality as the **realization** of possibility², in other words, action-realization. This is precisely what the meaning is of artistic creativity, which actively exerts influence on human consciousness, and especially the meaning of music.

The teaching of Gregory Palamas presented for Losev not merely a form of theology, but also a universal basis for philosophical epistemology. The energy of essence is the manifestation of essence in the **other**, the identity of essence with the other, and, hence, energy is essence manifesting itself. The name of essence is understood as a special, 'enhanced' level of concentration of its energies. However, essence taken by itself, beyond the connection with the other, does not present either name or energy. Thus, Gregory Palamas discoursed about the unfathomable essence of God and its effective manifestation in energy (for instance, in the example of the Divine and Uncreated Light). Losev attributed to this given conception a universal philosophical meaning, applying it to any type of essence (cf. Losev 1995).

² Let us remember the Aristotelian dichotomy of potential and energy (cf. Losev 1975).

2.2. On Losev's philosophy of music

What does Losev say about the essence of music? Music, according to Losev, presents an ordering of a chaotic, formless, irrational force, which the philosopher attempted to characterize by means of applying Ancient Greek terms of *hyle* and *meon* – non-essence. This material is not substantial, but 'intelligent', pertaining to meaning, it presents an endless potential of all meanings and forms. In his work *Muzyka kak predmet logiki* ("Music as a Subject for Logic", 1927) Losev writes that this forms the "material of number", the meonal-hyletic force of number – i.e., the **other substance** of number as of a certainty. In truth, everything in music is numerable: rhythm, proportions of form, pitch relations of sounds (harmony, melody). But this is not the most relevant thing! The 'count' adds absolutely nothing to the understanding of music, with the exception of special cases of numeral symbolism. Hence, musical numerology does not in the least 'verify algebra with harmony', it is not a computing-formal, but a truly artistic phenomenon.

In correspondence with the revived view of the Neo-Platonic vertical of the universe, any real-life object corresponds to its eternal 'original sample' – or, to put it simply, the meaning, the idea, the *eidōs*. Even higher up from the *eidōs*, in the guise of its 'framework' or a certain architectural, geometrical construction, is the number. Music, according to Losev, is a pre-eidotic formation (in the sense of the *eidōses* of various things), whereas its own *eidōs* is the number. The number – essentially a construction, free of any whatsoever type of attributes of matter or substance – becomes the *eidōs* of music, its expressible and inexpressible essence. Music is an allogical formation of number, its life in the dimension of time. Thus, the idea of organization and transfiguration of chaos and darkness particularly in music obtains the highest type of expression: it has to do with both extreme chaos and formlessness (*meon*) and with extreme formal design (number).

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2.3. Some examples from practice in musical composition

According to Losev, one of the most important traits of "pure musical existence" is

[...] the final amalgamation and the seemingly extreme elevation of one object into another; it presents their inseparable, reunified and diversified unity. [...] This formless plurality-unity moves, aspires, draws itself forward continuously. [...] It presents a constant imperceptibility and, at the same time, omnipresence [...]. Hence, it is not possible to speak of this Reality. One can only speak by means of Itself, i.e., only It could reveal Itself overtly" (Losev 1995: 421, 639).

This is the approach to the meaning of music as testified by the opinions stated by many composers who dealt with program music. Thus, Robert Schumann, who himself had the tendency of bestowing programmatic titles to his compositions, understood their relativity and incompleteness. In his discussions of Beethoven's symphonies endowed with titles (the Third – the *Heroic*; the Sixth – the *Pastoral*) he even expressed the regret that Beethoven promulgated these titles and, hence, restrained the listeners' imagination. Many such cases are well-known, when the composer inserted programmatic titles during the process of his work on a composition, and upon finishing composing he took them away, so that the music would not be limited by the framework of certain definite indications of material subjects. Claude Debussy acted in a very intricate manner in his cycles of Preludes, putting the titles to the Preludes not at the beginnings of the pieces, as their headings, but at the end, under the final system of the musical scores, in parenthesis and followed by an ellipsis of three dots, as one of many possible variants of titling a musical essence.

2.4. Context of Russian 20-century research of art

According to Losev, music is the **life and formation** of number in the dimension of time, **expressed** in sound (cf. Losev 1995). Hence, the essence of music reveals itself directly in all the peculiarities of structure, since they are endowed with a numerical nature (rhythm, proportions of form, syntax, harmonic and melodic structures, timbres, volume levels), and also equipped on the level of formation (development, drive towards the recapitulation, stable element, Asafiev's triad: beginning, middle and end, etc.; cf. Asafiev 1947) and expression (sound expression). The aforementioned categories themselves, when presenting the corresponding musical phenomena with verbal appellations, convey titles that are the nearest to their essence, in which their very essence exists. This is particularly that kind of appellation which according to Alexandr Mikhailov comes from within the composition: "the composition offers its meaning, and in offering it, gives it a title" (Mikhailov 2002: 9).

The titles coming from exterior sources, from the extra-musical sphere – genres, programmatic titles, characteristic features of feelings and affects – reveal the musical essence not *per se* but as the result of its interaction with other essences and partially, with more or less completeness. This type of appellation directed towards the surface, aspiring towards the first type, is endowed with a completely opposite 'mechanism': when presenting a name or title, it presumes a meaning. The present system of conceptions changes radically all the traditional notions of the correlation of form and content, which were typical for the aesthetics of the 18th and 19th centuries. The way that 'content' of a musical composition was customarily

understood (as ideas, feelings or images) is currently perceived as lying completely outside of the essence of music, outside of the meaning of music proper, within the domain of presenting the latter with a title. A noteworthy parallel with the conception affirmed by us (after Losev and Mikhailov) could be made in the ideas of Georgy Konyus, who divided musical content into the 'technical' type ('of primary order') – indicating the composition itself, its material and form – and the 'artistic' content ('of the second order') – the composition, perceived by us and suggesting certain emotions and thoughts (cf. Shkapa 2004: 41–42). Konyus' 'technical' content ('of the first order') – this is, indeed, the essence itself of the musical composition, whereas the 'artistic' content (of the second order') present the energies, the name of the essence.

Similar conclusions have been reached by Lev Vygotsky: "The form of a work of art is the primary starting moment in the perception of an artistic masterpiece [...] which is brought to the formula 'from the emotion of form to something that follows it' " (quoted after Shkapa 2004: 40). Vygotsky's conception of 'form' is quite identical with the 'essence-*eidōs*'.

The outstanding Russian musicians-thinkers of the 1920s aspired towards an understanding of the meaning of music which accumulated the entire experience of culture, towards finding a foundation for conceptions from the domain of musical essence itself. Such are the notions introduced by Boris Asafiev of intonation and symphonic thinking (cf. Asafiev 1947). Boleslav Yavorsky, who presumed that all of music is essentially programmatic, wrote at the same time that "the rhythm of modes" is the only essence of musical utterance and "the process of life is reflected in a musical composition by means of modal rhythm". Later on, he writes about the symbolic imprint by modal rhythm of the most diverse extra-musical processes: "[...] physical movement, sensations, emotions, passions, thinking in all its capacity and creativity" (Yavorsky 1923: 189–190).

3. TO THE PROBLEM: MUSIC AND LANGUAGE

The traditional scientific apparatus turns out to be even further away from the most obvious and natural intuitions of musicians, than is the outdated Ancient Greek and Medieval system of conceptions. This system is capable of substantiating theoretically things which are obvious for any real musician: the primacy and independence of a purely musical meaning, which generates numerous symbolic connections with the extra-musical world. Thus, what is usually understood as 'content' of music is considerably broader than its essence and exceeds by far the limits of the latter. The meaning of music possesses energy and radiates out into

infinity. Herein particularly lies the possibility of viewing music as a language: albeit, not some kind of not fully developed language with an unmediated meaning of its signs (as Eduard Hanslick said, “Music can never be ‘elevated’ to the level of speech”; cf. Hanslick [1854] 1986: 43), but the language of symbols with an infinitely indeterminate multitude of meanings, wherein lies its strength. Andrei Bely replied to Hanslick *in absentia*: “Music can never descend to the level of speech” (quoted after Levaya 1987: 35). However, one can speak about indeterminacy of meanings only in regard to the extra-musical world; in regard to musical form itself this meaning is quite definite. It is interesting to observe that it is musical form in particular with its most concrete immanently musical meaning of signs (in the era of the 17th–19th centuries) had also intensified to the maximal degree its transcendental ‘sphere of language’.

The ‘sphere of language’ of European music in the New Age is, in all possibility, the sole of its qualities which is juxtaposed to the realist principle of construction of the artistic world in the other forms of art.

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