

A Phenomenological Approach of a Special Artwork

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Centered on describing, understanding, and interpreting conscious experiences lived by the subject open to objects of various kinds, in the endeavour to catch some of the meaning of life, finally, in particular contexts, phenomenology provides efficient opportunities for questioning and appropriating the meaning of musical works in their complexity, depth, and dynamics. Although music is considered to be the universal language to most people, this art form (of sounds organized in melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, “color”, temporality, etc.) raises serious difficulties when it is theoretically approached in view of a better knowledge and comprehension. A hermeneutic phenomenological analysis can lead us to deciphering much more as regards the “aesthetic object”, which herein is a musical composition signed by Rodion Shchedrin. The “object” of contemplation is “Balalaika” for violin solo pizzicato. It is an uncommon piece of contemporary music we will tackle by applying the phenomenological perspective belonging to Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka. In this essay, we try to emphasize part of the inspiring potential “phenomenology of the ontopoiesis of life” that shows for living and grasping the sense of a peculiar encounter; the perceiving subject does experience with an expression of the art that exactly took its name from the “Muses”. And it matters the more so as the aesthetic experience is articulating together with an ethical, very own human, one.

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Introduction

One of the most important contemporary musicians of the world is Rodion Konstantinovich Shchedrin: “A fine composer, a respected performer, a provocative member of the musical community”, according to the interviewer and writer on music Bruce Duffie (*Composer Rodion Shchedrin: A Conversation With Bruce Duffie*, 2008, <http://www.kcstudio.com/shchedrin3.html> [accessed: 14.01.2019]).

Born in 1932 into a musical family and educated at the Moscow Choral School and Moscow Conservatory where he studied piano and composition, Shchedrin is the author of an impressive production covering a variety of works, such as operas and ballets, symphonies and concertos (for orchestra and for solo instrument and orchestra), choral music, chamber music, works for piano and for different other instruments, music to films, etc., revealing him in the status of a “post-avant-garde composer”, as he states: “I’m post-avant-garde composer, because some of my work also was experimental work”, with large “possibility for notation, for colors, ... many worlds of rhythms” (*Composer Rodion Shchedrin: A Conversation With Bruce Duffie*, 2008), and still showing a multitude of tendencies “combining elements of the Russian style from the eighteenth and nineteenth-century composers to more recent generations” (Virelles del Valle, 2008, p. 1).

Writing in a diversity of genres and styles, Rodion Shchedrin manifests the valences of an original

musician gifted with a rich and fresh “spirit of invention, masterly instrumentation and the power of authenticity” (Neef, 2017, p. 6). His oeuvre constitutes an attestation to a unique potential of a veritable master in elaborating works of vast dimensions, for large orchestra(s) and choir(s), for example, the works for the stage—many of them based on Russian literature from which the composer draws inspiration, as he similarly does concerning the Russian folklore, like the operas *Dead Souls*, *Lolita*, *Levsha*; the ballets *Anna Karenina*, *The Seagull*, *The Lady with the Lapdog*; concertos for orchestra No. 3 “Old Russian Circus Music”, No. 5 “Four Russian Songs”; concertos for solo instrument(s) with orchestra; music for soloist, chorus, and orchestra; choruses a cappella, etc. At the same time, his proficiency emerges from miniature musical pieces that display notable elements for the composer’s style in a concise and synthetic form, representing veritable moments of music experience.

About an Uncommon Artwork of Contemporary Music

In the frame of Rodion Shchedrin’s extensive musical creation, we find a peculiar miniature, “Balalaika” for violin solo pizzicato, dated 1997.

Taking into account the division in three periods enshrined by analysts, like Onno van Rijen (*Catalogue of works and biographical notes about Rodion Shchedrin*) and Mikhail Tarakanov (*Tvorchestvo Rodiona Shchedrina*), this instrumental piece belongs to the “third period, from 1980, where Shchedrin’s music has acquired more spiritual depth” (Virelles del Valle, 2008, p. 5).

Indeed, even the title evokes the Russian spirit, seeing that *balalaika* is well-known as a stringed instrument emerging from the Russian musical tradition (sometimes being called the “Russian three-string guitar”) and having a long history behind it. For many people, balalaika is seen “as the quintessential icon of traditional Russian music. ...whether in proverbs, music, history, painting or any number of other Russian cultural elements, the balalaika remains a singular feature of popular recognition”; but over time, “the balalaika exceeds its role as a folk instrument, and in fact represents an adaptable and multifaceted musical tool, fulfilling a wide variety of roles within Russian culture” (Chlebak, 2015, p. 2)—a true observation, for which also the work of Rodion Shchedrin is an eloquent testimony. Once again, the composer’s love for his great native culture appears; just to mention that the musician has dedicated to this traditional Russian instrument a composition for piano solo, too: the last movement of *Four Pieces* from *The Little Humpbacked Horse*, “I Play the Balalaika” (dated 1955).

Paying attention to “Balalaika” for violin solo pizzicato, the audience faces a short-lived musical piece within a hearing that takes less than four minutes as usually its score written in only 93 measures is performed.

In its whole, “Balalaika” offers a musical auditory perception that can remain an unforgettable one, because the ingenuity of the composer translates the sound(s) of balalaika for violin. It amalgamates technical and expressive characteristics to imitate as much as possible the playing of the balalaika. And somehow it includes a sort of “parody on experimental performance techniques, which escalates into absurd virtuosity” (Rodion Shchedrin, <https://en.schott-music.com/rodion-shchedrin> [accessed: 16.01.2019]), emphasizing what the composer asserts to be his deep conviction: the trust in intuition.

Towards a Phenomenological Analysis

According to Shchedrin, *intuition* is “the decisive factor for each composition” beyond any “musical ‘religions’ such as serialism, aleatoric composition, minimalism or other methods” (Rodion Shchedrin,

<https://en.schott-music.com/rodion-shchedrin>).

It is, actually, the *intuition* as the central concept in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, highlighted by the German philosopher in the effort to get the conceptual world grounded on the immediate experience; *intuition* represents the interface of consciousness and of the object of consciousness, "a kind of givenness" operating as a source of knowledge, comprehension, and interpretation. The musical "object" (in this case, a musical work) is present in its essence to the subject (composer, performer, and listener, alike); and "as an intuitive consciousness it 'makes this object given', as perception it makes an individual object given originally in the consciousness of seizing upon this object 'originally', in its 'personal' selfhood" (Husserl, 1982, p. 10).

In a certain way, "Balalaika" for violin means a kind of sample for Rodion Shchedrin's capacity to display thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and especially his affection for the Russian folk music—a constant of his entire componistic oeuvre—in small-scale productions, too, mixing lyrical and amusing passages, and conveying the character of his own national innate musicality.

Written to be performed *pizz. sempre*, as we see the indication printed at the beginning of the musical score, this composition shows also some of the author's skill to use a particular technique (*pizzicato*) to appropriately transmitting the plucked nature of the instrument and to put it at work in view to synthesising the typical flavor of traditional Russian song with aleatoric and serial music.

Balancing between inspiration and technique, there are differences of mood, between virtuosity and meditation, in the play of graceful and tender, but also passionate and somehow dramatic passages, through modulations of the chords, in a variety of dynamics moving from very soft and quiet, to loud and forceful accented by rapid or gradual transitions between *p* and *mf*, *mp* and *f*, *p* and *sff*, with marked rhythms changing the metre (duple and triple) and the tempo from moderately fast (Allegretto), through fast and very fast (Allegro-Allegro assai), to very, very fast (Presto) at the end. According to Shchedrin's affirmation, "I am very different. ...[the] mood is every day changing many, many times" (*Composer Rodion Shchedrin: A Conversation With Bruce Duffie*, 2008).

For the listener to music, an important problem is made by the possibilities of living music that—only within certain limits—can be approached and explained in the framework of hermeneutic phenomenology, which starts from the status of the subject as a perceptual consciousness. Realizing this situation and trying to appropriate as much as possible during and after a musical audition, she/he is able to disclose into understanding the message carried by the sonorous flux.

Applying Phenomenology of Life

In such a context, a relevant theoretical support is offered by *phenomenology of the ontoipoiesis of life* established by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (1923-2014).

An outstanding post-Husserlian phenomenologist in the world, the Polish-born American thinker has developed an original perspective about the "creative inwardness" of the subject through a variety of perception within the complex mechanism of constructing-deconstructing-reconstructing towards the crystallization of a unitary form that links sensations, perceptions, ideas, and experiences in the pursuit of deciphering and accomplishing the meaning(s) of art.

Identifying "three movements of the soul toward transcendence" that structure the spiritual development, namely, "radical examination, exalted existence and transcending movement" (Tymieniecka, 1988), and focusing on the power of the primordial passions under the direction of will, intelligence and, especially, the

Imaginatio Creatrix (operating both association and dissociation), Tymieniecka (1990) has brought into being a major conceptual triad: *wonder(ment)*, *fabulation*, and *idealization*.

These are three intentional acts through which: Firstly, the human spirit turns toward marvel and beauty, and at the same time it seeks to speculate about; secondly, it produces objectifications, respectively *fabulae* (of philosophy and literature) aiming to discover “the positive truth about life, human existence and destiny and the universe”, giving “prototypical models of human character, conduct, societal organization, visions of humanity” (Tymieniecka, 1990, pp. 18-39); and thirdly, there is the stance of producing moral ideals in a temporal continuity, emphasizing the capacity of subject to manifest in its authenticity as a moral responsible and courageous actor able to permanently project and follow supreme ideals of human living.

Applying the Tymienieckan phenomenological vision to the experience challenged by the listening to Shchedrin’s “Balalaika” for violin, first of all a kind of *wonder(ment)* appears in the consciousness of the perceiving subject.

From the beginning, the listener is fascinated about this modality of pinching the violin strings so imaging the sounds of balalaika. Although *pizzicato* is known in classical music since the 17th century through works for viola da gamba by the Scottish composer Tobias Hume (in his *Captain Humes Poeticall Musicke* collection) and for string orchestra by Claudio Monteverdi (*Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*), and over time we find compositions to be played entirely *pizzicato*, elaborated by J. S. Bach, Niccolò Paganini, Josef Strauss and Johann Strauss Jr., Edvard Grieg, Léo Delibes, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Jean Sibelius, Béla Bartók, Benjamin Britten, Leroy Anderson, and others, it is worth noting that “Balalaika” for violin by Rodion Shchedrin is unique in its genre. Only one string instrument—the violin—makes the most of its potential without any resort to the bow. At the same time, the instrument is partially held on the lap in a semi-horizontal position, so the performer plays as much like a balalaika singer.

Regardless of the author’s intention to parody the excess of virtuosity, the listener feels a natural surprise and an apart astonishment due to the attempt of composer to exploit the latent qualities of violin in a peculiar playing technique, by plucking the strings, and finally realizing something new: The violin sounds as unity and alterity at the same time.

Once more, with this short piece, we have an example—we often find concerning the musical oeuvre of Rodion Shchedrin—about the composer’s “constant search for new possibilities of artistic expression” (*The Sikorski Music Publishing Group*, https://www.sikorski.de/340/en/shchedrin_rodion.html [accessed: 20.01.2019]). It deserves to stress that at stake is a technique not at all easy, which Shchedrin has successfully used for piano, too, in “A la pizzicato for piano” commissioned by the International Adilia Alieva Competition for piano in Gaillard, France (2005).

The title “Balalaika”—highly suggestive selected by the composer—finds full support, thanks to the manner of transposing the principal theme, calm, and delicate, within the density of a richness of unfoldings, even though the entire sheet means less than 100 measures.

The *intuition* of the perceiving subject is challenged to go deeper and to question, to disclose and to understand some as regards the meaning of balalaika in the Russian culture; she/he finds herself/himself in the situation of willing to know much more about the instrument, its history, styles of playing balalaika, etc. Thus, a second stance is in progress, that of *fabulation*. The listener may plunge in a sort of narration that carries her/him through the evolution and the proper contexts—telling a plenty of stories—connected to balalaika: “an instrument found almost exclusively within Russia” (Neef, 2017, pp. 2-3).

During auditioning, the sonorities of violin that uses the *pizzicato* technique make possible to think and to want know much more about balalaika: Historically, an instrument from the East Slavs mentioned in 1688 and developed by the Russian musician Vasily Vasilievich Andreyev (1861-1918) who has standardized the instrument and introduced six types of balalaika in his “Great Russian Orchestra” of string instruments, contributing to an increased fame of it and “causing an explosion of balalaika compositions” (*Vasily Andreyev*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasily_Andreyev [accessed: 11.01.2019]).

Many folk traditional Russian melodies are executed by balalaika that became part in concert performances, too. And it seems a perfectly natural act of Rodion Shchedrin to write such a piece like “Balalaika”, because his profound fondness for the Russian culture with whose music this instrument is essentially identifying.

The main theme heard from the first six measures (bars) in duple meter and quavers is relatively calm. It interferes with a middle phrase in semiquavers, which brings a more precipitated atmosphere. But the basic motif returns from time to time, somehow maintaining a directory melodic line with marked rhythms of the entire musical structure in the play of duple and triple metres.

The tempo of this musical miniature balances between *Allegretto*, *Allegro* (with triplets) and *Allegro assai*, to finalize in *Presto* (the last three measures), stirring up different emotional states in the soul of listener. For that, not infrequently, the musical notes are used at wide size intervals, sometimes in glissando or tuning in a music accord. Also, the dynamics is expanded to many levels, so almost all dynamic markings are indicated from soft (*p*), average (*mp* and *mf*), to loud, louder and very very loud (*f*, *ff*, and *fff*), and time to time forceful accent is used as *sff*. Besides, gradual changes between moderately stronger and quieter appear; and often dynamic transitions from *sforzando* to *piano*, between *forte* and *mezzo-piano* or even from *subito fortissimo* to *piano* within the same bar are specified by the composer in the notation of the musical score, so that the perceiving subject reaches to experience interchanging light and shade in feeling.

From here and following *wonder(ment)* and *fabulation*, the Tymieniecka’s third intentional act comes to the fore, the *idealization*.

In the Horizon of Aesthetic and Ethical Intertwining

Beyond all, during the musical performance, the listener has the opportunity to live a sense of pleasant hearing and admiration, which touches his/her soul after the last musical chord. She/He keeps some of the musical audition, understanding more than in ordinary situations: A peculiar experience is occurring, contributing to a valuable apprehension of living each moment as significant one for the totality of life. Somehow, the subject reaches to experience the “absolute moment” in an authentic unity of living and deciphering more the meaning of being/becoming; in terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer, the reference is to the fact that “the work of art wrests the living subject from the life’s concatenation, but at the same time, it re-connects the living subject to the totality of existence” (Gadamer, 2001, p. 63).

The listener is engaging in new interrogations, thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. She/He is challenged to interpret and explain what has touched the spirit; no less, is invited to project another reality, and to unceasingly try elevating her/his soul, attitudes, acts, etc. At the same time, she/he supports a transformation because at the end of such a performance she/he is no more exactly the same as before; something new, different has marked her/his world and in general her/his beingness-in-becoming, even though it has happened just for a few moments. Always, a sensitive listener to music experiences also an ethical (self-)overcoming, a

sort of human self-fulfilment, reaching “out the bounds that the moment sets for him. ...Thus even as an ethical agent, man is the limited being that has no limit” (Simmel, 2011, pp. 5-6).

Encountering music means a complex and unique experience for woman/man that supposes not only hearing—a necessary condition, but *listening to* what has been heard. With each musical audition, thanks to its integrator and dynamic features, the perceiving subject lives a re-discovery of self, of world, and of life. Her/His comprehension is continuously evolving, tuning, and completing by the “aesthetic, intellectual and moral senses bestowing” as defining articulations of the “creative human condition” able to bursting in novelty but also to achieve the desirable equilibrium in the play of “impetus and equipoise” principle of life (Tymieniecka, 2000).

And admitting that a musical audition engages by priority the process of *listening*, the extension in understanding the latter leads us to a moral dimension, too, challenging toward signs that can shape the human character. Throughout listening to music a peculiar insight happens: It is something close to the Ancients’ apophtegmes—those akousmata, which were functioning as listening precepts (“medèn ägan”/“nothing in excess”, or “métron äriston”/“moderation is best”, for example), determining the (re)modelling of the moral human profile in the search of Beauty and Good, respectively the Greek ideal of “kalos kai agathos”. The fact is possible merely through a *logos* (the music) that facilitates human capabilities to reach the most hidden articulations of life, to elevate under the auspices of ideals, and to enhance in cognition and enlightened comprehension by getting a wise learning in life, finally.

In the hermeneutic horizon, the perceiving subject of such a significant musical liaison *logos-ethos* proves a distinct, singular liberty of interpreting the music she/he has heard, often being in the position of overcoming the author’s intention; and thus succeeding—on the base of her/his own understanding generated by the hearing—to widen the meaning of a composition, participating in a creative manner to its fulfillment; since she/he has tried to realize the reconstruction of meaning through a phenomenological approach.

Undoubtedly, the interpretations are diverse, even for the same perceiving subject in different moments of living; and here comes the valences of the creative human condition within the “ontopoiesis of life”. This type of creativity is deeply related to the Tymienieckan *idealization* that manoeuvres on the moral dimension (among others) implied by the interpretation process, with theoretical and practical consequences for the listener.

Always, an ethical call interferes, with various degrees, in accomplishing the classical triad: *logos* (the musical language, herein), *pathos* (the emotion without which composer, performer, and listener could not become authentic subjects facing a musical work), and *ethos* (permanently a moral standing), recognizing together with Vladimir Jankélévitch that “anywhere wo/man is present, in its turn ethics is efficient; because, by definition, human being is an ethical one” (Jankélévitch, 1981, p. 8).

By “distanciation and appropriation” from Paul Ricoeur’s theory about the dialectic between comprehension and explanation, the perceiving subject can reveal part, at least, of the *meaning* of music, and eventually of life.

Conclusion

The hermeneutic phenomenology successfully operates as a path of analyzing and deciphering some of the message music carries with it, which is important for a listener to grasp in its never-ending unspoken essence. As an apart artistic sonorous phenomenon, music covers an ineffable universe that profoundly touches the

listener in the potential of understanding some of the perceived and experienced life, claiming the attitude of a seeker in its mysteries; and no less of a subject eager to catch part of them, at least; through both the steps of “distanciation” from what has been heard and has filled the soul, and “appropriation”, subsequently, merging with and acquiring the core value of living music in its fullness and functionality (Ricoeur, 1986).

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