

Unknown Pages from Nikolai Myaskovsky's Music

by Elena V. Lobanova

This article is devoted to the almost unknown (in research and performing practice) vocal works by Nikolai Myaskovsky set to Zinaida Gippius's verses. The characteristics of the musical genre of romance are examined by the author. The reasons, for which, in the author's opinion, this considered stratum of Myaskovsky's creativity is not more widely performed or attracts research interest, are also stated in the article.

Until now, vocal works by Myaskovsky with Gippius's verses set to music remained almost unstudied among the composer's romances. In Russian chamber and vocal music, the poetry of Gippius, the "white devil", a refined decadent, one of the brightest representatives of poetic symbolism, appeared to be neglected compared to her fellow poets — K. Balmont, Blok, V. Ivanov. However, Zinaida Gippius's poetic world — sophisticated, antinomic, tragic, where hopeless despondency suddenly gives way to ecstatic rapture, an insight into the ultimate meaning of human existence - happened to be surprisingly similar to the mindset of young Myaskovsky. An extreme psychological isolation and a painful search for his creative vocation were reflected in Myaskovsky's early compositions. Boris Asafyev defined the overall tone of the composer's music as "a state of anxiety in varying degrees, and colour of its manifestations" (Glebov, Igor, 37) (1). In Myaskovsky's works, Daniel Zhitomirsky heard a "dark and tragic 'raging', poignant in its psychological restraint, ... without air, without prospects" (D. Zhitomirskiy, 60).

Nikolai Myaskovsky is the only composer whose creative aspirations were so much in tune with the broken, somewhat morbid lyrics of Gippius, the main significance of which was the relentless tragic duality of the world. In her poems, Zinaida Gippius often embodied images that went beyond generally accepted aesthetic standards of that time. The poetess was attracted to the aesthetically "ugly": leeches, spiders, dust and cobwebs. Undoubtedly, at the beginning of the twentieth century it was regarded as a transgression beyond the boundaries "permitted by the classical Aristotelian aesthetics of understanding and reflection of beauty" (Y. Durandina, 2005, p. 161). In the chamber and vocal heritage of Myaskovsky, Gippius's poetry is represented with 27 romances which were included in the "On the Verge" (comp.4), "From Z. Gippius's Poetry" (comp.5), "Premonitions" (comp.16) cycles. Unfortunately, the stratum of the composer's legacy, which is interesting and important for understanding the sources of creativity as well as his mature style, is insufficiently studied by researchers and is rarely performed in concert practice; the recording of the songs was neglected.

There are several reasons for this. First, after 1946, none of the romances by Myaskovsky with Gippius's verses set to music were reissued either in the USSR or abroad. The vast majority of publications were printed in small editions up until 1922. Myaskovsky's romances with Gippius's verses were not included in the 12-volume edition of the composer's selected works (2) and in the collection of his vocal compositions (3); therefore, musical texts of the romances were simply not available to many researchers and performers. Moreover, four of the romances ("A Knock", "A Christian", "Another Christian", "The Limit") have never been published and are only in manuscript form (4). The peculiarity of their musical style is another reason for the "unpopularity" of the romances. Several researchers (B. Asafyev, D. Zhitomirsky, E. Ruchevskaya, I. Stepanova) have noted an intensive process of "intellectualisation" that took place in the genre of romance at the beginning of the twentieth century, related to the inundation of modern poetry, its new imaginative spheres and principles of versification, into chamber and vocal music. This was manifested in an increasing complexity of all elements of the musical fabric: by the domination of declamatory and recitative melodics, and by a gradual movement of harmony towards atonality, in a maximum richness of a piano part, which often became the conveyor of musical symbols. All these traits turned out to be highly concentrated in Myaskovsky's romances with Zinaida Gippius's verses set to music.

Nikolai Myaskovsky, deeply feeling a poetic duality of the poetess's world, selected musical means, almost exactly corresponding with Gippius's sombre contemplative lyrics. All of these features — a sharp acuteness of intonation cells, often a lack of grains of theme in the melody of the designed, harmony saturation with alternative chromatic accords, an extreme density of texture in conjunction with, as a rule, the dark, tragic, sometimes “appalling” (“Leeches”, “Spiders”, “Pain”) content of the poetic text — of course, complicate the perception of romances.

Elena Koposova-Derzhanovskaya, the first performer of the romances with Gippius's poems and a close friend of Myaskovsky, writes about this in her memoirs, “I was very attracted to N.'s romances. They constitute an important part in his work, and have a special place in the vocal literature. Here, the names of Mussorgsky and Dostoyevsky come to my mind first of all <...>. N.'s romances leave a deep impression in the minds of the performer and the listener — not because of a foreign prettiness, <...> but because of the depth and intensity of the creative thought; therefore, they are so difficult to perform and grasp” (Koposova-Derzhanovskaya, E., 2008). These lines, written half a century ago, remain relevant to this day. “The complexity of performance and perception”, so accurately noted by E. Koposova-Derzhanovskaya, was, in our opinion, the main reason, the “stumbling block”, which stood in the way of performers and listeners comprehending the music of romances.

Going back to the style of the romances, we note that the researchers (D. Zhitomirsky, V. Protopopov, T. Levaya, Sokolov, E. Durandina) associate it with the musical expressionism movement of Mussorgsky and Scriabin and A. Schoenberg's creative work. Moreover, in all of Myaskovsky's chamber-vocal heritage, it was in the songs with Gippius's verses set to music in which the leading, “vanguard” tendencies of the genre development were most powerfully embodied at the beginning of the twentieth century. Of course, Myaskovsky's romances from Zinaida Gippius's verses are a bright and original phenomenon in Russian chamber and vocal music of the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, they represent an anthology of Gippius's musical creativity, and we should hope that this still little-known stratum of creativity of one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century will soon enter into the sphere of interest of a wide range of researchers, artists and students.

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Footnote

We are aware of only three songs on poems by Z. Gippius, written by other composers: S. Prokofiev “Grey Dress”; L. Drizo “No Cheating — One Love”; Ya. Ugarova “Follow me.” 2 Selected Works, V. 11, Vocal Compositions / Ed. com.: Glière R., etc. Moscow: Мүзгиз, 1956. 3 Myaskovsky N. Vocal Works: For Voice and Piano in Two Volumes / Ikonnikov A. Moscow: Мүзыка, 1981, 1982. 4 The manuscripts of romances are stored in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2040.

References

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4. Koposova-Derzhanovskaya, E. 1964. Memory of a friend. N. Myaskovskiy Collection of materials in two volumes, Vol.2. Moscow: Publishing house “Music”, pp. 201—226.