

## The developments of spiritual music traditions in Oleksandr Shchetynsky's creative work

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**ABSTRACT:** *The article is dedicated to the contemporary Ukrainian composer Oleksandr Shchetynsky, and, in particular, the significance of compositions of spiritual and Christian themes in his creative work has been revealed. Brief biographical information about O. Shchetynsky has been given and the versatility of the composer's activities has been determined. The role of spiritual plot and imagery at the beginning of his creative formation has been emphasized. The genre-performance specificity of the two lines of O. Shchetynsky's spiritual music – the Orthodox one and the "Western" one (Catholic) has been revealed and the emphasis is on instrumental compositions of Christian themes as a modern kind of instrumental spiritual music. The example of the piano piece "Prayer for the Cup" presents a complex interaction of liturgical-symbolic thematic elements realized in the atonal sound field.*

**Keywords:** *spiritual music, spiritual instrumental music, Christian themes, choral genres, atonality.*

### I. Introduction

In modern classical Ukrainian music, spiritual and religious Christian themes occupy an important place. This is stipulated by the historical, mental features of Ukrainian musical art, first of all, to the centuries-old majestic choral tradition, which was destroyed and banned during the Soviet regime. After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine began a national revival and a return to its own artistic and spiritual sources. Their gradual restoration begins in the creative work of Ukrainian composers from the 1960s, initially in a veiled form; then, since the 1990s, in an open way. Of course, the main genres where Christian themes are most fully embodied are the genres of choral music, but in the 20th century there appears a tradition of creating instrumental music of spiritual and religious content, which is associated with various reasons, including the ban on this subject matter in the art of socialist countries and Soviet republics, hence – the "encryption" of spiritual symbols in instrumental music "without words"; on the other hand, with the composers' deep awareness of the spiritual essence of the creative act. According to S. Gubaidulina: "Apart from spiritual renewal there is no more serious reason for creating music" [1, p. 4].

Our contemporary, Oleksandr Shchetynsky, is one of those composers who felt the need to restore the age-old continuity of spiritual music. It is no coincidence that in his creative work he often turns to Christian themes, while understanding the depth of spiritual images through the prism of the latest musical traditions.

### II. Biographical information about Oleksandr Shchetynsky

Over the past 30 years, Ukrainian musical culture has formed a strong galaxy of talented composers who are now in the heyday of their creative work. These are Oleksandr Kozarenko, Oleksandr Shchetynsky, Alla Zagaykevych, Anna Gavrylets and others. The heirs of the "sixties" – of Valentyn Sylvestrov, Leonid Grabovsky, Valentyn Bibik, Vitaly Godyatsky, Yevhen Stankovych – successfully fit into the European musical context, while continuing to develop the avant-garde line and rethinking the national achievements of previous years.

Oleksandr Shchetynsky is one of the outstanding contemporary Ukrainian composers; his creative work represents a new type of a kind of Ukrainian-European universalism. He was born in 1960 in Kharkiv (Ukraine). In 1983 he graduated from Kharkiv Institute of Arts named after I.P. Kotlyarevsky (now it is the National University of Arts named after I.P. Kotlyarevsky) where he was in the composition class of Valentyn Borysov. In the early 90's Shchetynsky attended music courses in Poland, master classes by Edison Denysov. In the period of 1991-1995 he taught composition, instrumentation, led a special course on techniques of contemporary composition in the KhIA named after I.P. Kotlyarevsky. Among his students, the most famous is Sergiy

Pilyutykov. Oleksandr Shchetynsky is a member of the Union of Composers of Ukraine. He currently lives in Kyiv, but his creative and teaching activities continue to be closely linked to Kharkiv.

In his creativity Oleksandr Shchetynsky was able to synthesize the best traditions of the Kharkiv composing school with the achievements of the European avant-garde. His basic creative principles were formed not without the influence of Valentyn Bibik, who at the time of the young composer's education headed the Union of Composers of Kharkiv and was a bright contemporary artist, progressive thinker, authoritative professional musician, author of numerous symphonic, chamber and instrumental, vocal and choral compositions. It was V. Bibik who inspired Oleksandr to travel to Warsaw for the Warsaw Autumn Festival of Contemporary Music (back in Soviet times).

Since 1989, O. Shchetynsky has become a participant of international European music competitions and festivals as a composer. At many of them he won the laureate title (the prize-winner of 7 awards<sup>1</sup>). Famous musicians and world-class bands were and are the performers of his compositions.

In addition to composing, O. Shchetynsky performs active musical, social and research activities; he is a popularizer of contemporary Ukrainian music both in Ukraine and abroad; one of the organizers of competitions and festivals of contemporary music ("Contrasts", Lviv; a number of concerts "New Music in Kharkov", etc.). He actively communicates with the media (for example, the periodical "Day", Radio Svoboda, Radio Kyiv, etc.; speaks on the radio of many European countries). He is the author of musicological articles (for example, about Virko Baley, Valentyn Bibik); his last thorough edition – the book called "Lines. Crossroads. Accents" – is dedicated to the creative work of the famous composer of the sixties, a member of the band "Kyiv Avant-garde" V. Grabovsky.

O. Shchetynsky is the author of more than 130 compositions of various genres: opera, symphonic, choral, chamber-instrumental, vocal; he made his own orchestrations of compositions by other composers. Shchetynsky also collaborated with the theatre director Andriy Zholdak and the film director Igor Podolchak (music for the films "Las Meninas", "Delirium").

### III. Spiritual music as an integral part of O. Shchetynsky's creative work

The compositional formation of O. Shchetynsky is impossible to imagine without genres of spiritual music, and, in general, without spiritual and religious themes and imagery in his creative work.

In European composing practice there is a certain tradition when the appeal to spiritual and religious themes occurs most often in the late (or the latest) period of creativity, and this is a sign of the composer's maturity; but O. Shchetynsky *begins* his career with the musical embodiment of complex biblical, evangelical themes along with the development of modern compositional techniques. And this is not a contradiction, on the contrary, as noted by musicologist O. Kushniruk, "a deep combination of sacredness and innovation positions a sign of the author's style of the composer" [2].

Addressing eternal themes in the early period of creativity (1984-1998) testifies to the high level of philosophical comprehension of the Christian themes by the composer, to the intuitive understanding of the divine essence of sound, when spirituality becomes synonymous with the life of sounds in "pure" music. This is intertwined with the creative principle of O. Shchetynsky – a special attitude to sound as a self-sufficient value. Therefore, in the pitch organization of compositions on spiritual themes – tonal or atonal – there is no opposition or distinction; there is an organic interaction of all sound elements, including aleatoric, sonorous, and timbre ones; a single sound field is built.

The author's choice of the title of the composition: biblical, evangelical or prayerful, is also distinguished by a special care. Let us quote the author on the orchestral composition "Glossolalie": "... the idea of enlightenment, the acquisition of some bright qualities, signs of holiness under the influence of the Holy Spirit, this idea is reflected here. In general, I think that the title of the composition is a very important thing. It cannot be arbitrary; it must be a part of the content of the composition. When a person reads the title, it creates a certain ground for the perception of music, it becomes much deeper and more meaningful" [3]. That is, the composer believes that the atmosphere of sublimity and pure, noble sounding are well combined with spiritual titles. Here are some titles: "The Preacher's Word" for soprano and string quartet, "The Baptism, Temptation and Prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ" for bass and chamber ensemble, "Prayer for the Cup", "Praise Ye the Name

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<sup>1</sup> *Main and Special prizes at the International Kazimierz Serocki Competition, Poland, 1990 (for "Glossolalie" for orchestra), First Prize at the International Sacred Music Competition, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1991 (for "The Preacher's Word" for soprano and String Quartet), Second Prize at the International Witold Lutoslawski Competition, Poland, 1995 (for Flute Concerto), Second Prize at the International Henri Dutilleux Competition, France, 1996 (for "The Baptisme, Temptation and Prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ"), etc.*

of the Lord" for piano, "Now Lettest Thou..." for chamber ensemble, "Pater Noster" for female (or children's) choir and flute, "Apostle John's Testimony" for soprano, baritone, mixed choir and orchestra, etc.

From the early period to the present day, the composer turns to choral genres, which represent a traditional variety of Ukrainian spiritual music; they also undergo evolution in his creative work, and are rethought, and at the same time reflect the complex process of stylistic formation. The first choral spiritual composition was the cantata "Svit vo Otkroveniye (Light to Lighten)" for mixed choir *a cappella* and two bells, written by O. Shchetynsky in 1989; next – the *Requiem*, the creation of which began in 1991 and was finally completed in 2004. These two compositions outlined the two future directions in the vocal and choral creative work of the composer: the *Orthodox* line, which will continue its development in liturgical compositions<sup>2</sup> (e.g., "Three Easter Choruses" 2008-09) and will be embodied in a *cappella* choral music on Ukrainian texts (G. Skovoroda's "Know Yourself", "Six Poems of Pavlo Tychyna" for mixed choir *a cappella*, "Slobozhansky Pismi (Songs of Slobozhanshchyna)") and "*Western*" (Catholic), started with the *Requiem* and cantata "La Naissance de Saint Jean-Baptiste", and associated with the sound of the choir (or voice) with instrumental accompaniment. Later it will be transformed in the operas ("Annunciation", scenes of the tale of the Frog in the "Bestiary") and will be continued in cantatas on texts from the Gospel, the Psalm Book in other languages – English ("A Song of Degrees" for mezzo-soprano and chamber ensemble, written on the text of Psalm 130), Greek ("Apostle John's Testimony" for soprano, baritone, mixed choir and orchestra).

Let us note that in the compositions of the Orthodox tradition the most important sign elements are *a cappella* – as a semantic attribute of Ukrainian spiritual choral art, as well as *the Ukrainian language* (and its varieties: Old Ukrainian, Church Slavonic) – as a verbal-sign system associated with the spiritual tradition, and which is an expression of deep historical and cultural ties of the modernity and the bygone (and this is the revival of the Ukrainian choral tradition from many-voiced and choral concerts to the compositions by M. Lysenko, O. Koshyts, D. Leontovych, K. Stetsenko, and J. Stepovy).

The piano compositions "Prayer for the Cup" (1990), "Praise Ye the Name of the Lord" (1988) together with the orchestral "Glossolalie" (1989), written at the beginning of the composer's creative formation, represent a kind of *instrumental spiritual music* which is new for Ukrainian musical culture. In the creativity of the 20th-21st centuries this kind of spiritual music is not uncommon. Suffice it to mention O. Messiaen's "Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jesus"; the works of Polish composers A. Panufnik and H. Guretsky; "Offertorium" and "Seven Words of Christ" by S. Gubaidulina, and others. The origins of this tradition are in the rhetorical figures of the Baroque era; as well as related to the symbolic and spiritual timbre of the organ.

The universality and self-sufficiency of musical sound are able to embody religious and spiritual imagery at a deep level without the use of words. Let us quote O. Shchetynsky's statement: "For me, music is the art of self-sufficient sound images. They do not need translation into gestures, colours, etc.; they themselves are quite informative" [4, p. 8]

In the mature period of creativity (since the early 2000s) "Martha and Mary" for 8 cellos, piano concerto "Liturgical" and other instrumental music with spiritual titles will be written. It will be related to the general philosophical program nature stated in the early compositions "Way to Meditation", "Face to Star", through which Shchetynsky will come to comprehend the universality of the philosophical worldview of Hryhoriy Skovoroda (and whose texts he will repeatedly use in compositions of various genres).

"*Prayer for the Cup*" is a unique composition in which the depth of the turning point in the life of Jesus – the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane – is embodied by means of instrumental music; complex program finds correspondence in the musical process – both traditional-symbolic and emotional at the same time. Verses 41-43 from Chapter 22 of the Gospel of St. Luke become the "plot" outline: "... and kneeled down, and prayed, saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an Angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him".

The music of the piano composition is not a direct illustration of the Gospel text; nevertheless, it serves as a starting point for purely musical development, directing the pitch and dramatic organization. The thematism itself is deeply symbolic: "a horizontal" – a melodic line – is a kind of monodic chant (albeit with a high "concentration" of chromatisms); "a vertical" – four-voice consonances with long durations symbolize ringing quality. Both monody and ringing quality are attributes of Orthodox worship; they, as the only permissible "musical accompaniment" of the Liturgy, are consciously chosen by the composer for his composition.

These two thematic elements interact, and, at the same time, develop in parallel; each one is going through their own sound transformation. Both in the melodic line and in the chord, the idea of equality of sounds is realized, although it is not strict dodecaphony, but rather atonality. An important role is played by minor-second combinations (the filling of the tonal distances with them) in one-voice, which can be called microchromatics. These same combinations of minor seconds build verticals, only in the form of minor ninths of 4, almost always adjacent, unrepeated sounds. The thematic material develops on the principle of quantitative

<sup>2</sup> But this is spiritual music for a concert performance

increase and "growth" of phrases in the melodic line, its range, consonance in the vertical (from one to four), textural and dynamic saturation. According to this development, on the one hand, the form of the composition is built as double variations; on the other hand, the presence of a reprise and a textured-contrasting middle indicate a three-part quality.

Thus, the complex vicissitudes of thematic (intonation, texture) work in a piano composition embody the full depth of the gospel scene, the level of generalized symbolism of which is accurately reflected by means of instrumental music, i.e. immanent, purely musical, without verbal text.

#### IV. Conclusion

Spiritual-Christian imagery is of great importance in the creative development of Oleksandr Shchetynsky. The Ukrainian composer continues to develop a centuries-old tradition of spiritual choral genres and to create compositions of instrumental spiritual music. The embodiment of complex biblical, evangelical themes and plots takes place through the interaction of traditional tonal means and modern compositional techniques. This corresponds to the creative principle of O. Shchetynsky – a special attitude to sound, which indicates an intuitive understanding of its divine essence. The musical reading of a complex gospel scene in "Prayer for the Cup" (1990) represents the organic interaction of all the components of tonal and atonal pitch, which is a characteristic feature of the composer's style.

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