

## ***Guido's Exercises and Dances* by Vladimir Martynov: Opera after Cantus Gregorianus**

If we look at Vladimir Martynov's work from the positions on which the composer seems to test traditional genres for permanence, treating them polemically and breaking the partitions between academic and non-academic art forms, it will appear that the only thing missing in the symbiosis of the stage and plain-air, the church and the concert hall, the "desk of a theologian researching into sounds" and the music stand with scores for future actions is the opera house – by itself or in the symbiosis with something else again.

And now there comes into the world the opera *Guido's Exercises and Dances* (1997). Commissioned for the Sacro-Art '97 festival held in Loccum, near Hannover, Germany, it presents an original embodiment of the idea of a "new sacral space". Its originality lies, in fact, in the conceptual strategy. The title is paradoxical, if not provocative. The text is in Latin. The genre arouses polemics. Journalists were guessing: is it an opera, a paraopera, a metaopera or, as someone suggested, even an "antiopera". The composer specified: it is "an opera about the opera".

To begin with, it is the libretto, written by the composer himself, which is conceptual. The multilayer textual structure is built out of excerpts taken from two medieval Latin treatises: the 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* by St. Bonaventura and the 11<sup>th</sup>- or 12<sup>th</sup>- century poetical Milanese treatise about the organum by an anonymous author. One more fundamental source by the name of whose author the opera is titled is Guido d'Arezzo's *Epistola de ignoto cantu* written by him to monk Michael. By *cantus ignotus* Guido meant singing at sight he himself invented. There is one more source of special significance – the first stanza from the famous Latin *Hymn to St. John the Baptist*. This text can be considered as the key one; it can be viewed as the opera's protagonist.

Martynov has found conceptual links between these texts. He uses St. Bonaventura's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* as the structural foundation. This is a theological study-cum-reflection, a fruit of refined intellectual and spiritual asceticism of the medieval Franciscan scholar. St. Bonaventura describes the path of soul as six ascending steps to God. This treatise and its structure serve as the semantic and form-shaping foundation of the opera. Its six chapters (six steps) determine the six-part structure of the central section of the opera entitled "Exercises".

Only one excerpt was taken by Martynov from the Milanese treatise about the organum, but it is important conceptually. Its anonymous medieval author describes in it a two-voice counterpoint. In the opera, this excerpt symbolizes the beginning of the composition. The excerpt reads:

*"In anticipation of a talk two female friends meet with such sympathy which happens only when the friendship is really intimate. One leads the other and in token of her amicability gives her friend a fourth as a gift. The other returns with a fifth, and the two together make an octave."*

Finally, Guido d'Arezzo's *Epistola*, the famous treatise where the scholar describes his system of singing by hand. The invention of staff notation by Guido d'Arezzo stemmed from the solmization system according to which each sound is perceived as *punctus* and, consequently, as a step (*vox, locus*) functionally different from the neighbouring steps. The medieval stepwise modality theory was laid into the foundation of staff notation. It was a great advance compared with neumatic notation which reflected motive-centred – formulaic, combinatorial – mentality. Guido's notation fixes not whole neumes-idioms, in which sounds are merged into a motive, but series of sounds-points which can be systemized into an abstract extra-motival, extra-intonational *stepwise* musical ABC – Guido's *ladder*, i.e., hexachord. The mentality formatted by the new technological principle – the point principle – turned to be free from the theological primary source of singing in favour of physical objects – sounds and their combinations so that to construct new physical objects. In other words, to engage in composition. Guido used the acroverse from the *Hymn to St. John* dividing the live motive into syllabuses-points from which an abstract six-note scale was formed – Guido's hexachord.

As it is known, the linear point notation invented by Guido became the basis of European composition as we understand it today. Martynov comments: "As a result, we got an offering to compose music, but lost the integrity of religions consciousness." All of the following music is presented as "Guido's exercises and dances". To my question, why "Guido's dances" feature in the title, Martynov said: "Guido returned corporality to music in the antique sense of sound as alternative to angelical (ideal) dances."

The passage about the harmony of fifths and fourths from the poetical Milanese treatise cited above is kind of reflection upon the excerpt from Guido's letter.

The opera is plotless, although a narrative aspect is present in it. And what a remarkable piece of narrative it is! Martynov has taken from Guido's *Epistola* the description of events that predetermined the destiny of European music, namely, his having an audience with Pope John XIX who queried Guido about his new invention.

*“The Equal to the Apostles John, who presently rules the Roman Church, having learnt about the fame of our school and how boys recognize songs they have never heard before looking at our antiphonaries, was very much surprised and through three nuncios summoned me to come.”*

As Martynov explains, it was such an outstanding event that the excerpt in which it is described is repeated six times (i.e., by the number of steps in the hexachord). It is known for certain from Guido's letter that the pontiff decreed to propagate Guido's training system throughout. In this way, Guido's text (the tenor aria) and the text from the Milanese treatise (the soprano duet) have the cause-and-effect relation. As Martynov says, Pope John XIX “cherished a snake in his bosom”: instead of protecting the Church foundations he had unintentionally contributed to the alienation of consciousness from the Church.

So, Martynov has set literary sources into the relationship of conceptual intersections. And the concept of 6 is the main object of their intertextual links. The structural play in the libretto originates in analogy: equivalent to St. Bonaventura's ladder are the number of lines in the stanza from the *Hymn to St. John*, the number of motives-segments from the *Hymn*, as well as the scale sequence – “Guido's hexachord” *ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la* – itself. The concept of 6 runs through the entire structure of the opera, from its large to the smallest melodic constructions. The central part of the opera, “Exercises”, is built, similarly to the steps of the hexachord, in the form of a gigantic progression having six cycles which, like patterns, have the same structure and textual content:

- introduction-*initium* denoting the cycle name, that is, the step and the syllable “UT”, the next – the syllable “RE”, and so on;
- declaration of the name of chapter from St. Bonaventura (melody sustained by the ison);
- tenor aria (Guido about the audience). From aria to aria, the ambitus of melody in the aria ascends from the unison (not counting auxiliary sounds) to the sixth;
- duet of two sopranos (the Muses) to the text of the treatise about the organum;
- segment from the *Hymn to St. John* corresponding to the given syllable (monody);
- choral refrain accompanied by soloists and an instrumental tutti, where the male chorus sings the hexachord as cantus firmus.

Table of macropatterns

<i>Initium</i>	Guido's Aria ambitus of melody, tenor solo	Duet of the Muses	Segments from <i>Hymn to St. John</i> . Choral monody	Choral refrain, soloists, instrumental tutti
UT	Unison c (hcd)		Ut queant laxis	Ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la
RE	Second cd		Resonare fibris	Ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la
MI	Third cde		Mira gestorum	Ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la
FA	Fourth cdef		Famuli tuorum	Ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la
SOL	Fifth cdefg		Solve polluti	Ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la
LA	Sixth cdefga		Labii reatum	Ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la

The melodic material of the opera originates in two sources, two cantus firmi: the *Hymn to St. John* as a whole and its segments and Guido's hexachord which functions as a series and as a cantus subject to segmentation. Hence, *Guido* is not just a monothematic, but also a cantus firmus opera, like there were a cantus firmus Mass or a cantus firmus motet.

Each of the three texts is given its own music material. St. Bonaventura's text sounds in the forms of psalmody, Gregorian chant (similar to the *Hymn to St. John*), organum and early polyphony (Introduction), and in the genres of hymn, responsories and antiphonies. The texts of Guido's and the Milanese treatises are

embodied in opera singing: 6 Guido's arias and 6 soprano duets, the duets of the Muses, which impersonify composition ("exercises"). But the opera melos is nothing but variations on the cantus: the hexachord is fully dissolved in the coloratura of Gregorian melodies transformed into ornamental vignettes.

The instrumental finale ("Dances") contains no texts, but its music material bears wholly on the *Hymn to St. John*. It is worthy of note that the concluding 7<sup>th</sup> line "St. John" (discarded by Guido) is present, as if restored in its place, in the Finale.

*Guido's Exercises and Dances* is an opera about six stages in the history of music. Six stages of the alienation of music from the sacral primary source of singing go with the soul's ascent up St. Bonaventura's ladder. It also tells of the beginning and the end of the opera, its brilliant but short history. Martynov's opera adheres to the postmodern aesthetics with its great liking for double and triple coding. It features the minimalist framework, the bricolage technique and work with stylistic complexes. It also has a triple subtext. "I bring in Mozart and use his devices to make something else," Martynov said about his *Requiem*, but this idea has direct relevance to *Guido's Exercises and Dances* as well. In the final analysis, the opera appears as a conceptual art object having a multilayer structure. There are at least three layers: the music proper, magicity and conceptuality. In fine: an opera, a mystery, an action.

**The opera.** The musical component dominates notwithstanding the conceptuality. The music is integral and self-sufficient. The layer, as we would say, of genuine opera music in its traditional sense matches it. Besides, this is not stylization or a simulacrum; rather it is a sign, a hieroglyph of the opera. It demonstrates all attributes of the operatic genre: the sine qua non leading tenor (the protagonist), arias, duets, choruses, the multilayer texture of the orchestral-choral body of music, the virtuoso bel canto style. The harmonic language undergoes changes to comply with one period of time or another, but the tonal base of harmony persists. The classical romantic idiom, bel canto, the virtuoso fioritura vocal lines – all these components of New Simplicity answer the idea of an average opera lover of what the opera should be.

A distinctive feature of Martynov's style is the unhurried unfolding in the Introduction where the listener is kept long in the austere minimalist Gregorian ascesis in order to convert our present racing time into another, nonlinear, medieval, metaphysical one. Then the listener will hear the following operatic beauties as the composer wishes them to hear, for it is only in the flow of metaphysical time that they will be heard adequately to his conception. Thereupon "opera in the opera" begins – the long-awaited royal feast that plunges the listener (not without an element of absurdity) into the state of blissful shock at entrancing bel canto and breathtaking gushing fountains of operatic beauties. Real beauties they are indeed! Probably as elevated as Handel's, as enchanting as Mozart's, as captivating as those of Rossini, Bellini and the whole of Italian opera. "Bravo, maestro!" would hail the boxes, the stalls and the gallery in response to the composer's generous gestures when he lavishes top-class cantilenas that challenge the known operatic hits and leads us from one style to another, from one epoch to the next. He does it only to turn them into precious fragments at every new step, into the ruins of a nearly half-millennium myth which we call opera, this word denoting the most absurd and the most delightful of all what the European culture has created. All this sinks into the sand, is washed away by time as untrue, as just a beautiful mistake of history. And from the depth emerges the eternal preimage of Gregorian singing, which returns everything to its original sources – to the pale of liturgical singing.

**Conceptuality.** Simple, but only at first sight. This is an absolutely elitarian composition. Everything in it is subordinated to the extra-plot yet logically running line of conceptual dramaturgy. Here the «intrigue» is the history of singing in the Western European tradition, its moving away from the sacral primary source, that is, from Gregorian chant, and passing the way through Roman polyphony to the secular art – the opera (baroque, classicism, romanticism). In fact, style evolves, but the opera is still minimalist, which is pivotal, so eclecticism does not occur. The repeating components of thematic material also seem to be akin to the operatic leitmotif system. However, they categorically do not belong there: the repetition of structural components is due to the concept of number, minimalist repetitiveness and the ensuing ritualism.

**Mystery** – the result of fusing the symbolics of number and ritualism. The strict order of repetitions controlled by number, Latin as an "abstruse language", incomprehensible, but producing a magic effect (according to Khlebnikov) – all these are the summands of mystery. The voltage of breathtaking play simultaneously on the level of text and musical structure and the linguistic closedness of Latin produce the atmosphere of a magical performance, powerful in its effect. The earlier of the two versions of the Finale (1997) especially gravitates to mystery. The ascent ends in reaching the desirable goal, and on top the singing "straightens" into unison, into psalmodying. Opera turns into liturgy. Such is the early version of the Finale. According to it, the

historical outline of a one-act opus: Liturgy – Opera – Liturgy. Here the parallels with *Parsifal* or *Kitezė* are not accidental. Perhaps, *Guido's Exercises and Dances* is a present-day attempt to correct Guido's "mistake" and return music from the opera house to the church.

**Action.** But the second version (2006) presents a different concept of the Finale – action. The ascent-and-descent reaches the last stage, and there comes a sudden break in the whole "play": an alien invasion of music in the style of hard rock ("Dances"). Rock as it was seen in the 1960s and 1970s, with its breakthroughs, protests, fervour and passion, with the desire to make itself heard by the clogged ear and the clogged mind. The contrast with operatic features is existential. Sharpness and hardness are not traditional vehicles of opera dramaturgy. Rock is a direct, real challenge to the establishment, academic music, operatic glamour, philharmonic, and the concert situation in general. A challenge to the culture of the Modern Age. But it has its own mission: the rock part revives the *Hymn to St. John*, although in a typical for rock brutal articulation. The effect is comparable to the sensation that a group of demonstrators burst into the hall from the street. At any rate, the "Opus posth" ensemble headed by Tatiana Grindenko looked exactly like that. Nobody would play it in this way except Grindenko (she was member of Martynov's rock group in the 1970s) and her ensemble!

Perhaps rock alone, using its street vernacular, is able to express reality authentically, making it tangible ontologically. Paradoxically, it turns out that the sublime can be achieved by descending. While descending, the meaning of words gets cleaned down to their original sense. Now, whereas the vocal fiorituras of the operatic bel canto make Gregorian jubilation into nice vignettes, the fierce energetics of rock articulation lends fervidly true meaning to Gregorian melodies. Opera-mystery has transformed into action. The frontiers of art have been assaulted. The falling out into reality has taken place. A perfectly existential gesture!

Here it seems appropriate to cite Martynov's words about the difference between artistic expression and real action:

"If we compare bel canto and any natural folk voice in Eastern cultures, we shall see that bel canto certainly sounds beautifully, but it lacks energetics. The beauty and roundness are achieved at the cost of original energetics which is lost. The people concerned with any form of authenticity – the early baroque or the Renaissance, or Old Russian singing – come up from different sides to energetics which is practically lost in classical performing art. The beauty is actually a substitution, a representation of energetics. My claim on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century art of composition boils down to the fact that this is the art that represents, while I am striving for the art that does not represent but is what it is. For instance, Skryabin wrote *The Poem of Ecstasy* where... a man experiences the feeling of represented ecstasy, while a shaman beats his drum and enters into that ecstasy. Beating the drum really drives him into ecstasy. The composer is engaged in unreal things, while the shaman deals with real things. This is the essence of authenticity. Anyone concerned with authenticity surely stands closer to the original energetic impulse than any of the best equipped and sophisticated composers... The same in performing art. When Montserrat Caballé sang with Freddie Mercury, who is an absolutely grandiose energy generator, no synthesis came out. He overwhelmed her energetically. The results were false. The same happened to Pavarotti when he tried to sing with rockers: he just got lost, if not vocally, then energetically. Any normal rocker will overwhelm an academic musician."

In the first version, the Hymn to St. John sounds in the Finale as played by celesta solo. The instrument's tone quality ("celestial") is symbolic: gentle music, serene simplicity. The opera ends not as the soul's meeting with God, but rather as petition for such meeting. The waiting for answer passes in prolonged silence. The second version of the Finale was a great success. The ordinary sinner's prayer was better understood by the public than the illumination of a man of faith. The result – a standing ovation (2006).

The opera is difficult for performers, not to speak about its adequate staging. It is a hard nut for a director whose intellectual aristocratism should match that possessed by Martynov so that to preserve the high style and not to step into the realm of irony or kitsch. Clearly enough, this work should have nontraditional opera theatre dramaturgy, for it is not personages who act here but cultural flows and historical styles. A very special environment should be created for it. The first version of the opera was written for its performance in the ancient Roman basilica of the Loccum monastery where the Sacro-Art '97 festival was held. It was a concert performance, and no staging was needed. A really perfect situation. The 800-year old vaults that remember and keep much to this day formed a faultless environment for what the opera tells about. What stage solution is in store for the second version is a question addressed to the future!

When Martynov spoke about the impossibility of writing operas today, and someone remarked that he himself had written one, the composer answered: “My opera is about the end of the opera.” Quite a lot of declarations had been made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century about the end of this or that from the Modern Age culture. Martynov declared “the end of the era of composers” and “the end of Russian literature”; Peter Greenway proclaimed “the end of the cinema”. “The end of the theatre”, the end of philosophy, the end of the metastory, and the death of Author were likewise announced. Valentin Silvestrov’s utterance about the “postludium state of culture” hints at the end of culture... Meanwhile, Greenway shoots new films, Jerzy Grotowski and Anatoly Vasilyev create mystery theatres, Silvestrov writes postludiums, and Martynov writes “post-opus-music”, including a “*post-opera*”.

This is what Martynov said about Anatoly Vasilyev’s production of *Mozart and Salieri / Requiem*, which can be applied to the opera *Guido’s Exercises and Dances* too: “The whole performance is a farewell to Western European culture. <...> The point at issue is the end of a certain paradigm of the existence of music. We see that composed music is not the be-all and end-all of this world. Many of the most brilliant results had been achieved without the participation of composers, to say nothing of all the great ancient cultures and the traditional contemporary cultures. The figure of composer is unknown to any system of liturgical singing, or to folklore, or to jazz or rock. The Western European theatre has come to its end, <...> but there exist rituals, shaman actions, divine services etc. <...> We work in this space, and my personal opinion is that this space is the most fertile.”

## Santrauka

### Vladimiro Martynovo „Gvido pratimai ir šokiai“: opera pagal grigališkąjį chorą

Vladimiras Martynovas savo operą „Gvido pratimai ir šokiai“ (1997) apibūdino kaip „operą apie operą“. Originalus autorinis libretas pristato daugiasluoksnio teksto konstrukciją, sudarytą iš dviejų lotyniškų traktatų fragmentų – tai „Sielos vedlys pas Dievą“, parašytas šv. Bonaventuro (XIII a.), ir Guido Arciečio laiškei. Operos melodika kilusi iš dviejų šaltinių, dviejų *canti firmi* – Himno šv. Jonui ir *Guido hexachordo*, kurie veikia kaip serija ir *cantus* subjektas segmentacijai. Todėl „Gvido pratimai ir šokiai“ yra ne tik monoteminė opera, bet ir *cantus* opera, panaši į senųjų laikų *cantus* mišias arba *cantus* motetus. Operoje viskas paklūsta ne siužetui, bet nuosekliai plėtojama konceptualiai dramaturgijai: istoriniam giedojimui, kuris nuolat tolsta nuo savo pirminio šaltinio – grigališkosios monodijos, praėjusios per romanišką polifoniją į pasaulietišką Naujojo amžiaus meną – operą (baroką, klasicizmą ir romantizmą). Operos stilius evoliucionuoja priklausomai nuo jos koncepcijos, tačiau vienijančiu dalyku lieka minimalistinis metodas.

Opera mums atrodo kaip konceptualaus meno objektas, turintis daugiasluoksnę konstrukciją. Ji susideda iš trijų sluoksnių: pačios muzikos, magiškojo elemento ir konceptualizmo. Todėl kūrinys tuo pačiu metu yra ir opera, ir misterija, ir akcija.

**Operos** muzikinis turinys, nepaisant konceptualaus sumanymo, yra pakankamas. Jis turi tikros operos muzikos sluoksnį: vedantysis tenoras kaip pagrindinis herojus, arijos, duetai, chorai, daugiasluoksnė orkestro tekstūra, virtuozinis vokalas ir *bel canto* stilius.

**Misterija** – simbolių skaičių ir ritualų rezultatas. Griežtas skaičių modelio kontroliuojamas pakartojimų skaičius, lotynų kalba atlieka „nesuprantamos“ kalbos vaidmenį, veikia kaip magiškas elementas (pagal Chlebnikovą) – visa tai yra misterijos elementai.

**Akcija** – sunkiojo roko stiliaus muzika (1960–1970 m., su savo protrūkiais ir socialiniais protestais) sudaro egzistencinį kontrastą operai. Grubaus ir aštraus roko įsiveržimas nėra operos dramaturgijos dalis. Roko muzika yra tiesioginis, realus iššūkis priimtoms nuostatoms, akademinėi muzikai, filharmonijoms ir koncertų tradicijoms. Plačiąja prasme – iššūkis visai Naujųjų laikų kultūrai. Jis turi ir savo misiją: atgaivina Himną Šv. Jonui, nors ir ryškia, brutalia artikuliacija.

Operinis *bel canto* pavertė grigališkąją jubiliciją gražiomis vinjetėmis, o grigališkųjų giesmių melodijos aistringoje roko muzikos artikuliacijoje įgavo kandžiai originalią prasmę.