

UDK 78.01

## The Influence of Eastern and Western Cultural Traditions on the Form Creation Processes in Avant-Garde Composers's Creative Work

Bolashvili Ketevan

Ph. D., Ass. Professor

Tbilisi State Conservatoire

8-10, Gribodov str., 0108, Tbilisi, Georgia

**Summary:**

*The purpose of this article is to attract the listener/ reader's attention to the interpenetration of separate features of typologically different system of thinking, their synthesis. The report is devoted to one aspect of interaction of cultures and interpenetration – the influence of the eastern cultures on structural thinking of European and American composers of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

*It is stated that the interest to the eastern culture was imagined differently in different epochs but unlike 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the interrelation of the traditions of the west and eastern cultures is not external and superficial that means not the use of theme, instruments, intonations, but makes profound impact on form-building processes, mindset system.*

*The following issues are highlighted in this report:*

- ✓ *a different approach to the organization of musical time – continual and discrete types of time;*
- ✓ *penetration of typical improvisation in written western tradition;*
- ✓ *universality of general logical regularities and difference of concrete manifestations;*
- ✓ *novel understanding of the balance between ‘action’ and “meditation” and priority of meditation in the western music.*

*The mentioned issues are regarded on the example of the works by Stockhausen, Cage, Riley, Reich, Glass.*

**Keywords:** Avant-Garde Music; Eastern and Western Cultural Traditions; Musical Form; Structural Principles of Identity and Equivalency; Musical Time; Karlheinz Stockhausen; John Cage; Terry Riley; Steve Reich; Philip Glass.

Mutual influence of cultures and issues of interpenetration have long been interest of scholars and study topic for culturologists and narrow specialists. The paper encompasses only one aspect, more precisely, the viewpoint of interrelation of the Eastern cultures of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Western avant-garde. The paper aims to attract the readers' attention to the interpenetration of separate features of typologically different systems of thinking, their synthesis. The features which were formed on the one hand in Western culture and on the other hand in Easter culture and revealed themselves in the creative works of the distinguished representatives of avant-garde. It should be mentioned that when setting a boundary between musical cultures (Eastern and Western) for us the initial point is the two historically formed types of professionalism – written and oral and the absolute complex of thinking characteristic to them.

There are many theories on the difference between types of thinking. Most distinct among them is the priority of discrete in European/Western culture and the priority of continual viewpoint in Eastern culture. Correspondingly, emerge different concepts for the organization of artistic time and space. It was Western world that provoked specific forms of self-expression such as sonata and symphony genres and their structural equivalent – sonata-symphony cycle directed towards their final

result. While oral type of professionalism, oriented to the continual development of musical thought was formed and developed in the East. Edgard Varèse talked about this in one of his lectures: “...it is curious to note that it is this lack of flow that seems to disturb Eastern musicians in our Western music. To their ears it does not glide, sounds jerky, composed of edges of intervals and holes and, as an Indian pupil of mine expressed it, ‘jumping like a bird from branch to branch’.” (Varèse, 1966:18).

Historically formed, the so-called Western type of culture, oriented towards the accurate fixation of text, existing from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, reached its pinnacle in the 1950s in the epoch of total serialism. In this period particularly activated the relation between Western and Eastern cultures. This opinion may naturally provoke many counter ones, because it is known that in European music conscious interest to orientalism started in the Baroque and Classicism epochs. Let us remember, **Les Indes galantes** by Rameau or **Die Entführung aus dem Serail** by Mozart and other chrestomathic examples, or the re-activated interest to non-European cultures at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for instance in Mahler’s creative work (**Das Lied von der Erde**). But implied here is not this type of cultural relations, external, even decorative type, but the more organic and in-depth one, rooted in Debussy’s creative works, which developed in Messiaen’s creations and later on in that of the avant-garde composers’ of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Debussy and particularly Messian laid foundation to the particular attitude to non-European cultures, for each of them there was an especial element as a starting point, which amazed them either as innovative or unfamiliar: for Debussy these were modes, for Messiaen – rhythm, as rhythmic modi (namely Ragavardhana), also the principles of rhythm formation and each of these elements are applied so that they create an effect of their complete integration in one, individual creative space.

Thus, in Europe of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked out was the strive for expanding creative horizons, consideration of existing different cultural traditions anew, and in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century qualitatively new connections were formed on the basis of the achieved.

One of the earliest stages of active creative contacts is connected to the familiarization of Western composers with Eastern philosophical doctrines and their mastering. Travelling to Southern and Far East countries resulted in the changes of their viewpoints and specific means of musical expressions. Thus in the early 1950s first in the creative works of Cage – a Zen-Buddhism follower, and later in the creative works of Stockhausen, Boulez and other West-European composers revealed was unusual attitude to musical text. Namely, this earlier **absolutely** or **almost-absolutely** solid category of musical thinking became **absolutely** or **almost-absolutely** hesitant. Created was a number of aleatoric works which were directly – e.g. Cage’s **Music of Changes**, **Ryoanji** or indirectly e.g. Stockhausen’s **Klavierstück XI** connected with the improvisation art originated and widely developed in the East, and so organically, that it is impossible to dissolve them into constituent parts. It can also be said that the more fixation of the text in aleatoric piece is, the closer it is to Western type of thinking and vice versa, the more independence the composer gives to performer and turns him into co-author, the closer we are to Eastern type of thinking.

All afore-mentioned concerns the peculiarities of musical language organization, which directly reveal themselves and do not need any particular efforts to be found. In deeper layers of musical thinking such connections are lesser noticeable. Thus, the connections with the East<sup>1</sup> are not clearly seen on the surface in the principles of identity and equivalence, in the structural thinking of avant-garde composers. Here mention should be made of the fact that in different epochs and cultures different principles of form-making are revealed with different intensity, which is directly connected

---

<sup>1</sup> Mentioned here should be that these concepts belong to the logic principles of forming the whole; they proceed from the universal features of each notion and equally reflect musical regularities of different epochs or cultural traditions.

with artistic objectives and common aesthetic context. For instance, the identity principle<sup>2</sup>, which is the foundation for more organic and complex ornaments in Eastern cultures, is fairly widely disseminated in Western art as well.

According to American philosopher F. Northrop for a Western person a time image is connected with a thrown arrow or flowing of a river, the source of which is far away and which flows far way to the future. Their places are not here and now. As for an Eastern person he imagines time as a quiet and calm reservoir, the surface of which mottles from time to time, but then calms down again (Northrop, 1979:343). Consequently it can be supposed that the identity principle is unknown for Western art, substantially it exists under specific conditions and in particular historical epochs. Namely, they frequently speak about the expression of identity principle in early Medieval and Renaissance art, including music, on various levels of artistic thinking. One of the most distinguished and original 20<sup>th</sup> century composer Anton Webern applies similar principle of thinking and analogous ways of expression. Most of his serial instrumental works are based on the identity principle, which act both on the level of the series and entire work. Such approach to the organization of the whole was accepted by avant-garde composers, but later expanded it with new elements. It is interesting, that these new elements originated on the basis of the synthesis of different cultural traditions. Most distinguished among the works created on the basis of such synthesis is Stockhausen's **Stimmung** for six vocalists.

This work created in 1968, together with the others is the herald of the new stage in Stockhausen's creative work and wider in European music in. Upon the completion of totalitarian serialism, a new stage initiated in Stockhausen's creative work; which he determined as Weltmusik. Of course in **Stimmung** as well as in **Telemusik** the concept of Weltmusik was interpreted and realized not as mechanical combination of the elements of various cultural traditions at certain extent, but as their synthesis. Stockhausen is a master of the perfected synthesis of different structural and thinking elements, thanks to which particular, even unique artistic result is achieved. When listening to this work on the one hand the attention is drawn to the preference of the statics, contemplation, intuitive priority typical of Oriental mysticism and denial of the discrete, finite vector time. On the other hand the only pitch axis of this over an hour-long work is an overtone chord (the Ninth chord b-f-b-d-as-c) the constituent parts of which are develop gradually displaced in space – unconditional symbol of European thinking, which at the same time "sinks" and deepens into it, monologue type of artistic thinking. **Stimmung** provides the synthesis of written and oral traditions: the notated text is limited to its single-page scheme (Formschema), representing the outline of the work's pitch structure. But the entire text of **Stimmung** also includes additional cards with the rhythm, articulation models of and magic names. Indefinite choice of cards makes each performance unique within definite and consecutive pitch structure. It is also interesting, that the coordination of ensemble music-playing is realized here more by breathing rather than by strict meter and rhythm, which is similar to the performance tradition of Asian ensembles, including the Japanese Gagaku (see Raynolds, 1975). It is noteworthy that signs of different cultures are also encountered in the verbal text of **Stimmung** – in magic names provided on separate cards, pronounced by the performers ad libitum, but only in the sections indicated by the composer.

Thus in Stockhausen's **Stimmung** a particular type of thinking is realized on different levels of the whole, when the whole and each of its constituent units are identical, on the other hand this whole originates as a result of the synthesis of different cultural signs and their in-depth dialogue.

---

<sup>2</sup> I consider identity a bit different from what is accepted in musicology, namely, not as repetition, as encountered in Asafiev's theory (Asafiev, 1971), but only as the principle  $x=y$  (Aransovsky, 1991). Obviously, only accurate repetition could not be the topic of the study, but if regard the problem wider, it turns out that the identity principle provides many ways for the organization of the musical whole.

Similar to **Stimmung** such cultural dialogue is encountered in Stockhausen's **Mantra** (1970). Here, unlike **Stimmung** the title itself includes certain datum<sup>3</sup> and performance rule, analogous to which constructed is Stockhausen's **Mantra**. On the first page of the work written for two pianos and live-electronics provided is its idea-formula, peculiar genetic code of the work, its image-structure based on 13-tone row. This formula, simultaneously, is the constructive and artistic basis of the work: includes fundamental units of the musical text, determining pitch development on the basis of rhythmic moduses of various lengths and pauses, specific dynamics, articulation, register and timbre.

**Mantra** is an eight-bar formula, giving impulse to the extremely gradually development of the work; here means not the tempo of performance, but the processes going on in musical tissue. The work and each of its stages the so-called "cycles" are based on the equivalence principle, on the one hand provoking associations with the variations typical of European structural thinking, and on the other hand with the improvisation on the canonic mode, same formula disseminated in the East.

One of the most significant factors of being in certain meditation state is the application of different acoustic means, the pianist additionally use crotales (antique cymbals) and wood blocks, as well as the system of loud speakers, which besiege the audience in reproduced "live" and transformed sound.

When talking about Western and Eastern cultures I cannot avoid the creative work of Cage and minimalist composers. It is known, that Oriental art was one of the sources for minimalism together with today's unified world. More precisely, the strive to achieve deep meditative, continual state, without any preliminarily set objective. But, in the creative work of American minimalist composers, in our opinion, despite the fact, their being the representatives of multicultural space, synthesis is not perfected and organic. As a rule, the signs of Western cultural tradition predominate in their works. However, not in all works and not in the works of all authors. For instance, with Terry Riley, in whose works most significant unit is Jazz improvisation, priority is given to the Eastern attitude to time and space, construction of works on the basis of slight gradation changes. Philip Glass, on the contrary, actively applies the images of contemporary civilization and the genres traditional of European music. Steve Reich's creative work holds intermediate position, in some of his works such as **Electric Counterpoint** and **Different Trains** dominates Western world, in the others – Eastern, e.g. **Tehillim** and **The Cave**.

Thus, it can be concluded, that the Western composers of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century achieve the organic synthesis of the cultural tradition elements, as compared to previous epochs, which is in the first place revealed on the level of the work structure and correspondingly on the level of artistic thinking.

Here I would like to mention that proceeding from the format I consciously touched upon only one aspect – issues of musical form making and West-east relations on the example of Western music. It seems interesting to discuss analogous problems on the example of Oriental composers, carriers of eastern cultural tradition, who accepted Western-type professionalism.

### **Quoted sources:**

Northrop F.S. *The Meeting of East and West: An Inquiry Concerning World Understanding*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1979.

Reynolds R. *Mind Models: New Forms of Musical experience*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975.

Varèse E. *The Liberation of Sound. Perspectives of New Music*, 1966 N 5 (1), pp. 11-19.

---

<sup>3</sup> Mantra – sacral text-formula, which demands accuracy in pronouncing its constituent sounds.

Aranovsky M. Sintaksicheskaya struktura melodii / Syntactic Structure of Melody. Moscow: Muzika, 1991 (in Russian).

Asafiev B. Muzikalnaya forma kak protses / Musical Form as a Process. Leningrad: Muzika, 1971 (in Russian).

Savenko S. Muzikalniye idei i muzikalnaya deistvitelnost Karlkhaintsa Shtokhausena / Musical Ideas and Musical Reality of Karlheinz Stockhausen. In the collection: L. Diachkova (ed.) Teoriya i praktika sovremennoy burzhuaznay kulturi: problemi kritiki. Vipusk 94 / Theory and Practice of Modern Bourgeois Culture: Problems of Criticism. Vol. 94. Moscow: Gnesin State Musical College, 1987, pp. 82-119 (in Russian).

---

**Article received: 2015-07-03**