

UDC 78

## A NEW TYPE OF PERFORMER-LISTENER INTERACTION IN EKA CHABASHVILI'S SYMPHONY-EXHIBITION "KHMA"

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### **Abstract**

*In a week of November 30–December 8, 2018, visitors of Composers' Union of Georgia had the opportunity to participate in a syncretic multimedia project – symphony-exhibition "Khma" (voice). „Symphony“ means concord of sound. According to a project author Eka Chabashvili, the main aim of the exhibition is to unite different art fields, as well as human voices, so that they create a piece of art in concord. Thus, the project was an interactive process, where spectators could observe 6 visual installations, and participate in the dramaturgical development of the composition. The whole process was supervised by a guide-performer, who performed in the first part of a session a piece composed by Chabashvili for her new instrument KHMA, and invited later the visitors to participate in the performance. The role of the guide-performer was played by the author of the current article, who had the opportunity to observe the visitors during the sessions. As a result, a new type of performer-listener interaction was revealed. The paper aims to describe this new type, against the background of the historical development of the traditional interaction. It is this new type of interaction that plays an important role in the current artistic research project conducted by Nino Jvania, Eka Chabashvili, and Tamar Zhvania.*

*This work was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG) [grant number FR-18-4275].*

**Keywords:** *artistic research, performance, multimedia project, performer-listener interaction*

In a week of November 30 – December 8, 2018, citizens and guests of Tbilisi had the opportunity to participate in a syncretic experimental multimedia project – symphony-exhibition KHMA (voice), hosted by Composers' Union of Georgia. *Symphony* – a word of Greek origin – means *concord of sound*. According to a project author Eka Chabashvili, “the main aim of the exhibition is to unite different art fields, as well as human voices, so that they create a piece of art *in concord*” [1, 3].

The *voices* were represented by visitors of the exhibition. The project was an organized interactive process, where listeners and spectators of 30 minutes long sessions could observe 6 visual installations, listening to permanently sounding in the background audio installation and, at the same time, participate in the dramaturgical development of the composition: on one hand, they were invited to recite incantations (Eka Chabashvili defines them as "magic verses") handed over in advance, creating a new sounding layer in a composition, on another hand, they could improvise on a sculpture-instrument KHMA built by Chabashvili exclusively for this project. The whole process was supervised by a guide-performer, who performed in the first part of a session a piece composed by Eka Chabashvili for KHMA, and invited later the visitors to play the instrument.

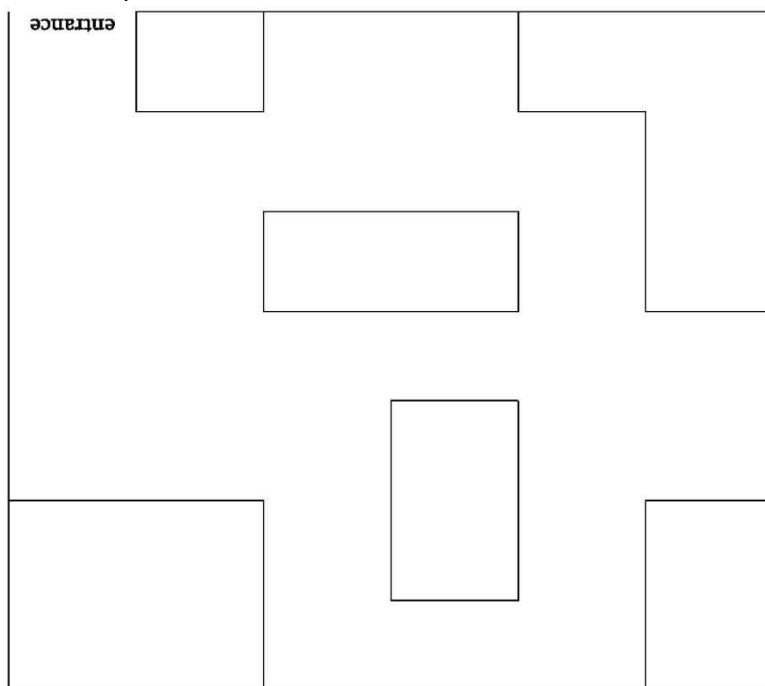
That was not the only way to participate in the performance. Each of 6 installations, according to Chabashvili, were connected to some inevitable occurrences that frequently take place in our

lives, producing some garbage in our material and non-material existence that we try to get rid of. The titles were related to those occurrences:

- I – House of Family (the variety of household items)
- II – House of Feelings (useless emotions and feelings)
- III – House of Health (cure, waste products of medical treatment)
- IV – House of Mind (unwished thoughts and ideas)
- V – House of Employment (waste products of employment and bureaucracy)
- VI – House of Homeland and Identity (immigration)

But the installations in the exhibition hall were not entitled. The titles were only listed in the programme notes and the visitors were welcome to choose appropriate titles for particular installations or to suggest new titles by themselves. Before the start of a session, the guide-performer would distribute exhibition plans along with programme notes among visitors, asking them to write next to appropriate shapes the corresponding titles and to return plans after exiting the exhibition.

Exhibition plan – location of the installations in the hall



Thus, understanding the essence of installations, entitling them, would become a part of performance. Visitors were also participating in the performance while moving in the exhibition hall. The lighting system and audio effects devices developed for this exhibition and installed in the hall by a physicist Zaal Azmaiparashvili would react to visitors' movements. Viewers were also asked to use one of the installations - a white board, with permanently dropping water, watercolours and brushes - to paint or to write something before leaving the room. So, this action could also be considered as participation in performance.

Installation – the white board in the end of a session

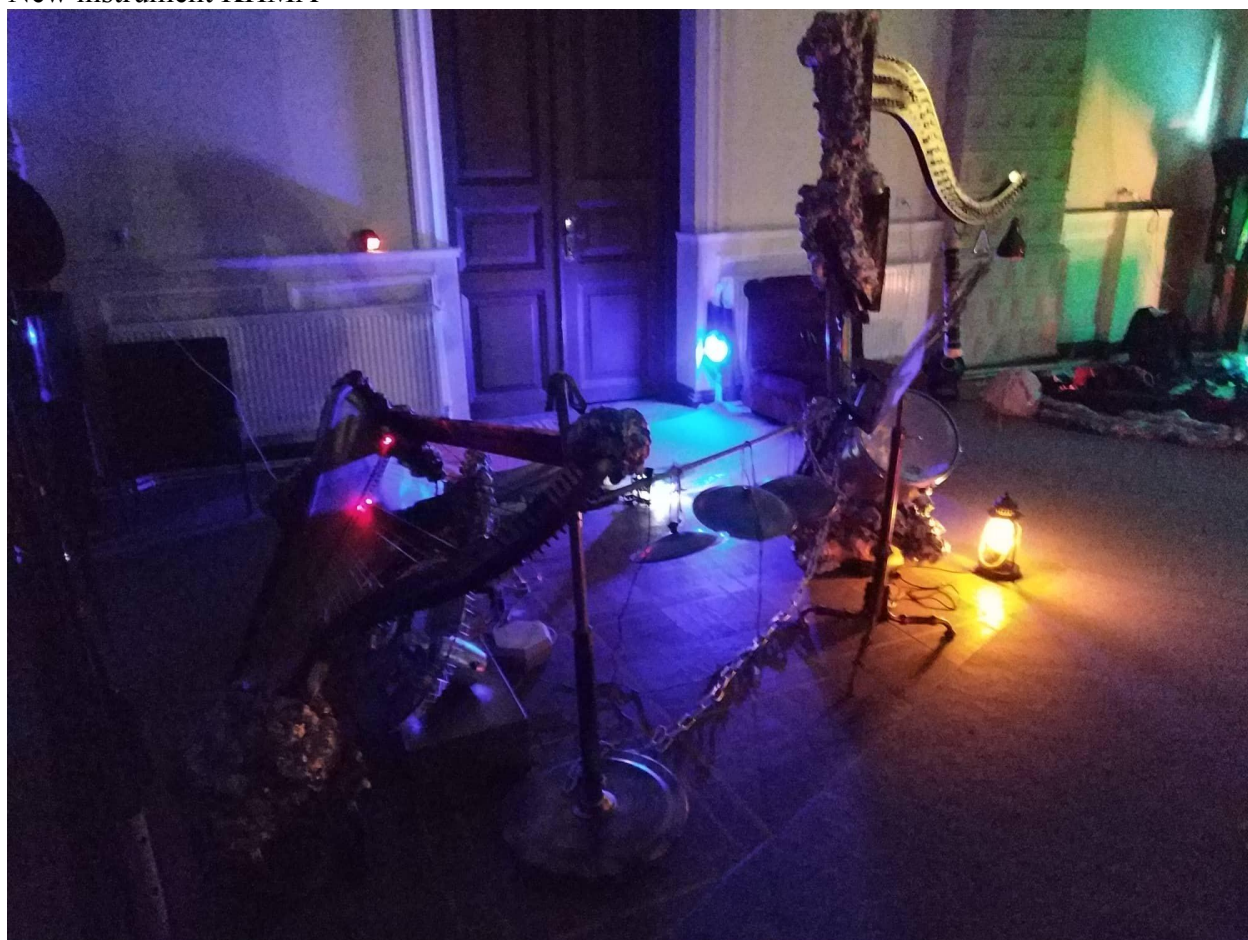


"The given experimental piece of art is an act of meditation", - writes Eka Chabashvili in her notes. "We aim to create a somehow slowed down temporal and spatial environment, in order to help you to release a tension imposed on you by the reality. We ask you to distance yourself from a tempo-rhythm of your everyday life and to participate in the implementation of the piece" [1, 3].

Several factors helped Eka Chabashvili to create the slowed down temporal and spatial environment. On one hand, the visitors were asked not to talk with each other in order to be able to fully concentrate on this piece of art - even the guide-performer herself would give all directives during the session silently; On another hand, a track containing NASA sound recordings of planets would continuously sound during the sessions. (As is well known, NASA designed special instruments that made it possible to record electromagnetic vibrations of planets and to transform them in audio signals perceivable by human ears). 10 minutes long composition composed by Eka Chabashvili for her new instrument KHMA would add another acoustic layer to the NASA recordings.

The KHMA represented one of six installations. An old harp was used as a basis for this instrument. It was disassembled, painted and decorated. Some of the strings were maintained, and they were plucked with hands, or struck with a violin bow. One could also turn on a ventilator, located nearby and directed at strings, imitating Aeolian harp. Chabashvili hanged different subjects on the corpus of the harp - classical and exotic percussive instruments, cast-iron bowlers. She also inserted plastic bottles into the corpus, so that one could blow in and imitate some wind instruments. Zaal Azmaiparashvili developed a special device, resembling Termenvox, which would react to hand movements producing sounds of different pitches without physical contact. While playing KHMA, the guide-performer would produce various sounds using hands, the bow, mallets and hammers.

## New instrument KHMA



"The main idea of the experiment was to look at the things, that are considered useless, from a new perspective, in order to realize, how aesthetically they look in a piece of art; to listen to the sounds that disturb us in everyday life, in order to understand their importance when they become a part of music. We want to persuade people, who think they will never be able to create a piece of art, that they are part of the artistic process. The world is a vast, well organized machine and if you exist, you are a little bolt of that machine. Everything united around one idea becomes valuable and you – a little part of the machine – are important for this world", - writes Eka Chabashvili [1, 3].

It has to be mentioned that visitors were not obliged to participate actively in the performance. That was stated in the programme notes: "If you wish, you can be an active listener/spectator, conducting particular activities or a passive one, automatically participating in the process" [1, 3]. As already mentioned, the lighting system and audio effect devices would react to any movement, thus, making automatically every visitor a participant of the performance. Though, the main aim of the guide-performer was to involve visitors into the process, to persuade each of them to become an intended *voice* of the symphony-exhibition. This function pushes the boundaries of traditional performer-listener interaction.

What does the traditional interaction mean? A performer, interpreter, presents a piece of music to a listener, thus contributing to some extent to creation of the content of the particular piece. The fact is that this content varies from one interpretation to another, emphasizing thus the importance of a performer. The performer follows composer's concept, encrypted by means of musical notation. He/she is a mediator between a composer and a listener. But mediation does not mean that the performer just presents the concept to the listener. He offers his view of the concept, first decrypting and interpreting it. This makes the performer a valuable player.

Though, decryption and interpretation of the concept is not the prerogative of the performer. Composer's concept, interpreted by him, is further interpreted by each listener, as Karlheinz Stockhausen would say, in "inner space and time of listener's imagination" [2, 186]. As a result, the content of a piece varies not only from one performance to another, but also from one perception to another. So, listener's role in final implementation of a piece is actually very important. That is why Theodor Adorno, describing eight different types of musical conduct, assigns the highest rank to the *expert* listener. That is the one who is capable of structural hearing, "whose ear thinks along" with a composer and a performer [3, 5].

The urge of composers to have listeners who *think along* with them has become more evident in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in its second half. On one hand, musical language has become quite complicated and more and more composers wish to inform listeners to some extent in order to be perceived, understood properly; On the other hand, new genres – a happening and its variations – emerge, actively involving viewers in implementation of performances. (Though, the happening is not a pure musical genre, it was initiated by an American composer John Cage, and mostly it involves music too. So, it influenced relatively the development of academic music). Involvement of the viewer means, he/she can choose objects to observe, sound events to listen to; or he/she can act, adding an element of chance to the performance, so that every time the piece is performed or exhibited it is never the same as the previous times. Eka Chabashvili offered to visitors both options. But if artists staging happenings believed that art could be brought into the realm of everyday life, Eka Chabashvili wants to drag her visitors out of tempo-rhythm of everyday life. But she also has another goal. "The most interesting examples of the syncretic art – the round dances were already created in the BC era. In round dances people would feel the united energy. This urge to get united revealed itself in our age too, manifesting itself in a variety of social media. The virtual world, however, is not enough for a healthy interaction and we need to create 'contemporary round dances', where people feel each other sharing energy currencies. This project could be considered as a contemporary round table, a long improvisation, particular type of art therapy, where everyone can participate in an artistic process,"- writes Eka Chabashvili [1, 3].

It might sound somehow esoteric, but sharing energy currencies with listeners is an inseparable part of any performance. Any performer would agree with this suggestion. Though, in KHMA the intensity of the sharing is unprecedented. The whole symphony-exhibition was created to help viewers to meditate and to create in the hall a unified energy field. Just imagine: you walk in a dark hall, you are silent, you permanently hear abstract and random sounds of planets, the new instrument and the sound effect devices; all those sounds are organically integrated into the exhibition; you observe installations and contemplate, trying to find corresponding title for particular installations.... *Meditari* in Latin means *to think, to contemplate*. Thus, to meditate means to concentrate on present, to think about the event that occurs right now, in this very moment. That is the initial stage of meditation. So, you are meditating and the guide-performer starts reciting incantations. You get an opportunity to choose one or several "magic verses" printed on a piece of paper and to recite them repeatedly in concord with the guide and other viewers. Not only when you pronounce those incantations, having very minimalist structure, but even when you hear them, especially repeated many times, you start meditating. And at the moment, when you are completely relaxed, joining that unified energy field, the guide-performer indicates that you can approach the instrument and play it. Even if one has never had any experience of performing music, one has been observing the guide performer playing the KHMA for 10 minutes, realizing how easy it is to produce sounds on that instrument. First you start imitating him/her, than you research and sometimes find new ways of producing the sounds. Especially children were very good in that. They used to find new methods of sound production, I as a guide-performer have never used while playing KHMA.

As a result, the final part, which would start with the guide-performer painting on the white board, mostly would last more than planned 10 minutes. The meditating viewers usually would not



want to leave the hall. Not only viewers were meditating. I mostly was in the same condition that could and should make it problematic to supervise the whole process. But on the contrary, having become the part of the energy field of this contemporary round dance, I was always capable to fulfil my main duty – to regulate the sharing of energy currencies. Having guided more than 20 sessions, I realized, what the main function of a performer is.

In one of his public lectures Karlheinz Stockhausen, talking about his piano pieces, characterized the process of listening to his pieces as “moving through a zone of feelings and thoughts in a no man's land” [4, 149]. In my opinion, one could relate that to any piece of music. But we have to admit that very seldom a performance affects listeners this way. As a performer, I quite oft would be very happy about my live performance, but after hearing the recording of the same performance I would feel unsatisfied. And on the contrary, some recordings would show that some interpretations that made me to feel uncomfortable were quite good. Having discussed this subject with many colleagues of mine, I can state, the majority had the same experience. I believe the mismatches should be attributed to listeners. In the first case the sharing of energy currencies occurred, in letter - it did not. Having guided so many sessions of KHMA I have realized how important the role of the listener in the final result is. The listener has to follow the performer, his ear has *to think along with the composer*, and only in this case the sharing of energy currencies occurs, and music fulfils its most essential purposes. That is impossible without complete involvement of listeners. Eka Chabashvili managed to persuade her viewers and listeners, representatives of all age categories, to think along with her, to perceive her concept, to become the part of the creative process. And she made the performer capable of guiding listeners on this path which leads *through a zone of feelings and thoughts in a no man's land*.

How to use these skills in traditional performances? That is one of the most important topics of the current artistic research conducted by Eka Chabashvili, Tamar Zhvania and Nino Jvania.

P.S. Some fragments from the symphony-exhibition KHMA could be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jK-F6xY0eIE>

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**Article received: 2019-12-13**