

UDC 78

## FOREIGN LITERATURE IN RUSSIAN MUSIC: THEMATICS AND SYMBOLISMS OF RIMSKY-KORSAKOV'S OP. 4 NO. 2 ROMANCE

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**Abstract:**

*Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's romances are short vocal works, where the composer uses the singer's melody to depict poetic ideas while evoking a set of literary meanings. In Op. 4 No. 2, Rimsky-Korsakov outlines the message of the poem by balancing a well-coordinated piano accompaniment with the vocalist's melody by generating a constant pulse through a unique rhythmic structure. The metric configuration of the song allows the composer to characterize the plot of the poetry and depict the poetic ambiguity of Heine's text. This research dissects the stylistic traits of the compositional language in Op. 4 No. 2 and presents an analytical perspective on the song's lyricism, tension, and musical zest, as the composer employs the music and the text to bring out the connotation of the literature. First, Rimsky-Korsakov uses the main rhythmic motive to signify the galloping of a horse. Second, the recurrent rhythmic structure generates a high level of suspense and uncertainty that is never resolved at the end of the poetry. Third, Rimsky-Korsakov defines the poetic tension through the amalgamation of vocalist's melody and pianist's accompaniment; both are equally important, serving as prime examples of music supporting the literature, particularly emphasizing on the theme of unresolved love.*

**Keywords:** *music analysis; music and text; music symbolism; Rimsky-Korsakov, romance.*

### 1. Introduction

Rimsky-Korsakov is a prominent representative of Russian compositional school, and his works serve as sources of profound influence on the oeuvre of Russian Romantic composers [1]. While highly acclaimed for his orchestral and operatic output in musicological and performative spheres, Rimsky-Korsakov's miniatures are not investigated with emphasis on analysis when looking from perspectives of Western music theory [2]. Vocal romances are examples of such small-scale works that define his compositional creativity and artistic evolution throughout his career. Rimsky-Korsakov's romances generate an essential link between the notions of music and text – a prevalent component of interdisciplinary music studies in Russian Romantic repertoire due to the artistic integrations with noteworthy literary figures of Russian Golden age [3]. Rimsky-Korsakov's romances, along with his compositional approaches, can be interpreted through the symbols and meanings of poetry, as it is the duty of the composer to integrate words with music and present an own literary reading of what the poet intended to depict [4].

Rimsky-Korsakov completed his early period romances, which include Ops. 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8, between 1865 and 1870. While these songs are relatively short in length, a close investigation from an analytical point of view reveals a plethora of musical phenomena that shape the early compositional style of Rimsky-Korsakov, guided by the principals and methods established by the Mighty Five [5]. The romances likewise disclose the lyricism and a sense of musical equilibrium between text and music, hidden underneath the performance practice traditions revealed through the integration of accompaniment and the soloist's melody [6]. Furthermore, the romances expose a link

between the literary and the musical components, engraved in the poetic texts. Op. 4 contains a total of four songs with three set to Russian poetry and one to foreign. Text interpretation plays a significant role in how a composer chooses his compositional tactics [7]. In the case of Op. 4 No. 2, text interpretation is guided by Rimsky-Korsakov's understanding of Heine's text through Mikhail Mikhailov's translations of *Die Botschaft*. Rimsky-Korsakov's early romances outline his eloquent and scenic approach to integrating poetry into music, shaped by coherent and unambiguous melodic and harmonic tactics. In Op. 4 No. 2, Rimsky-Korsakov takes the opportunity to framework an own approach to synthesizing literature and music, hence creating a separate art form that expounds his thoughts and ideas based on Heine's text.

The four songs in Op. 4 display an interplay among Russian and non-Russian poetic voices with the integration of a variety of literary influence. Rimsky-Korsakov uses the vocal melody for "evocation," recalling the plot and depicting poetic ideas to conjure literary characterization into the music [8]. Rimsky-Korsakov employs the piano accompaniment in such a way that it synchronizes a set of poetic components and allows for the music to coordinate with the text to portray a particular depiction of a scene, a character, or an event. In Op. 4 No. 2, the composer uses the melodic and rhythmic motives to define three elements of poetry. First, Rimsky-Korsakov uses the main rhythmic motive to signify the galloping of a horse. Second, the recurrent rhythmic structure generates a high level of suspense and uncertainty, a phenomenon that Rimsky-Korsakov never resolves at the end of the poetry. Third, the amalgamation of vocalist's melody and pianist's accompaniment define the poetic and dramatic tension; both are equally important, serving as prime examples of music supporting the literature, particularly emphasizing the theme of unresolved love.

## 2. Analysis

The preceding work of the cycle, Op. 4 No. 1, is based upon contemplations and observations. In *What Is It in My Name to You*, sixteen lines of text are just enough for Pushkin to thoroughly discuss his place in the world of the woman he used to love, as the poet contemplates on time spent with Carolina Sabanskaya [9]. Op. 4 No. 1 is full of uncertainty, confusion, and indetermination from Pushkin's point of view, defined through Rimsky-Korsakov's use of melodic apogees in the music [10]. On the contrary, Op. 4 No. 2 is based upon a series of proposed actions, as the main character threatens to kill himself due to the notion of unattainable love. Heine's text in the second song of the cycle is the most apparent direct example of non-Russian influence in the Op. 4 set. An evident chain of contrasting musical elements is revealed by Rimsky-Korsakov in this work as based on the plot of *Die Botschaft*. The suspense, the uneasiness, and the uncertainty of further poetic actions are all of the features that can be traced in Rimsky-Korsakov's music, as the servant rushes to find out which of the king's daughters is getting married, something that will ultimately decide the main character's fate [11]. The notion that there is no happiness without love, and there is no purpose to live without happiness, incarnates the symbolism of the poetry. A view of unattainable love can also be assigned to this poetry because no resolutions exist, and no definite conclusions can be made based on the actions of the poem's characters alone. In Rimsky-Korsakov's music, the composer shifts from the key of G $\flat$  Major, as seen in Op. 4 No. 1, to the key of G $\sharp$  minor, as seen in Op. 4 No. 2, taking a distinct compositional approach, realized through a series of linear textures that occur between the piano accompaniment and vocal melody, the tempo, and the musical structure, all guided by the frequent rhythmic drive that controls the majority of the work.



Figure 1: Rimsky-Korsakov's Romance Op. 4 No. 2 in G# minor, m. 1.

Rimsky-Korsakov utilizes a simple rhythmic motive and expands it among both pianistic and vocal parts in mm. 1-35, as seen in Figure 1 [12]. This particular dotted rhythmic structure is the backbone of the second song of the cycle. Rimsky-Korsakov likewise employs such motive in both right and left hands of the first musical phrase, as well as in the vocal line; the vocal melody solely utilizes the given motive with piano accompaniment providing the chordal outline of the tonic chord in the first inversion, as evident in mm. 34-35. Furthermore, mm. 30-32 present an instance when merely the pianist employs the motive in the left hand, as the three symbolic words in the vocal melody contain the text "спешить не надо," referring to the main character stating that if one of the king's daughters, whom he loves, will get married, his servant should not hurry back and instead – shall head to the market and buy a cord that the main character will use to take his own life. The final four lines of the poem delineate these ideas in the text.

Line 13: *Тогда ступай на рынок ты:*

Line 14: *Купи верёвку там!*

Line 15: *Вернись шагом — и молчи:*

Line 16: *Я угадаю сам.*

Rimsky-Korsakov begins to shape the structure of the composition at the very beginning of the song, as seen in mm. 1-3 of Figure 2. The rhythm serves as the fundamental building block of the entire work, configuring how the vocalist is to sing his line. The piano accompaniment begins the song by setting the mood before the vocal melody enters. Rimsky-Korsakov chose *Allegro moderato* for this work to carry the effects of the paced and agitated character, as the poem itself. The vocalist begins after hearing the initial rhythmic introduction, presenting two short phrases in the span of two measures. Rimsky-Korsakov merely resembles Heine's desire to swiftly access the main thematic ideas without any preceding introduction, as the poem's main character orders the servant to prepare for his upcoming task that will ultimately decide between life and death. The combination of a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note in the accompaniment is imitated by the singer to introduce the opening thematics of the song.

**Allegro moderato** ♩: 128

Figure 2: Rimsky-Korsakov's Romance Op. 4 No. 2 in G# minor, mm. 1-3.

Heine defines orders, probable actions, potential outcomes, and decision-making values as core components of his poetry. One such set of instructions with a potential for severe consequences is given to the servant in mm. 34-35, as outlined in Figure 3. The main character instructs the servant of what would happen in the case of unattainable love. In his music, Rimsky-Korsakov charts the significance of this phrase through the lack of rhythmic determination in the piano accompaniment; instead, the accompaniment produces only the harmony by defining the tonality, which progresses towards two sets of octaves.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature is G# minor (three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The vocal line has the lyrics "Тогда ступай на рынок ты: ну." written below it. The piano accompaniment consists of a series of chords and single notes, with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) at the beginning.

Figure 3. Rimsky-Korsakov's Romance Op. 4 No. 2 in G# minor, mm. 34-35.

The roles reverse in mm. 30-32, as it is the piano accompaniment that generates the pace through harmonic outline and the use of rhythmic motives, while the singer strides along. As seen in Figure 4, the three prominent words in this passage are "спешить не надо." The pace slows down, and Rimsky-Korsakov includes *meno mosso* to proceed with the fermata before continuing onto the next phrase, linking the literary meaning of the text with the tempo marking of the music. While a certain level of appeal and inquisitiveness exists in the listener's curiosity to seek out the resolution to the poetic dissonance that Heine creates, this is not the case in Op. 4 No. 2. Rimsky-Korsakov advances the rhythmic structure through the use of tonic tone before finalizing on the tonic chord in m. 32. The vocalist's line consists of six syllables, each defined by a note on tonic, mediant, subdominant, or dominant scale degrees.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature is G# minor (three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The vocal line has the lyrics "спе- шить не на- до, брат." written below it. The piano accompaniment consists of a series of chords and single notes, with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) at the beginning.

Figure 4: Rimsky-Korsakov. Romance Op. 4 No. 2 in G# minor, mm. 30-32.

Similar to Op. 4 No. 1, the second song of the cycle is merely sixteen lines in length, which is just enough for Heine to emphasize elements of vagueness, tension, and Romanticism, leaving the reader without a clear finale. It is not clear what happens after the servant goes about his duties, and the reader does not find out in the sixteen lines of poetry if the servant returns. Furthermore, the plot does not reveal which of the king's daughters is getting married. Finally, it is likewise important to note that the reader does not find out if the main character of the poem would complete his

promises with a suicide. In Op. 4 No. 1, the composer uses a series of melodic apexes to characterize the climatic points of the poetry that were aligned together with the prominent musical summits; such analytical components of music theory are inexistent in Op. 4 No. 2, yet the notion of musical phrasing is emphasized on the use of exclamatory marks and its position with a variety of harmonic regions that Rimsky-Korsakov chooses to set the text to. The composer translates the poetic elements of the text into his music through the use of tonic and subdominant harmonic regions. Such a simplistic approach is not an infrequent occurrence, as Franz Liszt applies a similar harmonic and structural drive to his fourth Transcendental étude, titled *Mazeppa*, based on the poem of the same name by Victor Hugo with similar thematic ideas as in *Гонец*. There is a total of eight phrases that have an exclamation mark as per Mikhailov's translation, which is equivalent to a half of Rimsky-Korsakov's music. From these eight lines, there are a total of six words that end with an exclamation mark, where the stressed vowel occurs on the final part of every word. These are "слуга" – "the servant", "седлай" – "to saddle", "короля" – "the king", "жди" – "to wait", "назад" – "back", and "там" – "there". The sixteen lines of text display five separate themes. Lines 1-4 represent the orders to the servant and the plan of the proposed action. Lines 5-8 reveal the theme of unresolved love. Lines 9 and 10 portray the possibility of a lack of romantic interest. Lines 11 and 12 define the possibility of the romantic interest – a contrasting and an opposite element. Lines 13-16 conclude that the worst possible outcome with the harsh proceeding consequences would occur with the potential culmination of the unresolved love.

*Вставай, слуга! коня седлай!  
 Через рощи и поля  
 Скачи скорее ко дворцу  
 Дункана-короля!*

*Зайди в конюшню там и жди!  
 И если кто войдёт,  
 Спроси: которую Дункан  
 Дочь замуж отдаёт?*

*Коль чернобровую — лети  
 Во весь опор назад!  
 Коль ту, что с русою косой, —  
 Спешить не надо, брат.*

*Тогда ступай на рынок ты:  
 Купи верёвку там!  
 Вернись шагом — и молчи:  
 Я угадаю сам.*

Another instance when the rhythmic pulse commands the piano accompaniment occurs in mm. 16-22, as shown in Figure 5. The left hand of the accompaniment continues with the rhythmic motive by continuously emphasizing on note D#. The right hand uses a series of chords to create an alternative melody during the time that the singer is silent. This passage serves as the transition between the second and the third stanzas. Before the transition, the listener finds out the particular action plan for the servant as in the context of unresolved love and what it is that he needs to do. Rimsky-Korsakov uses the transition to hold back and buy some time before the listener finds out the details and the specifics of the main character's romantic interests. The two brief melodies shaped by the slurs fill in the transition, creating a sense of musical resolution, even though one does not exist in the poetry.

Figure 5 shows two systems of musical notation. The first system contains a vocal line with the lyrics "за - муж от - да - ет?" and a piano accompaniment. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with the lyric "Коль чер-но." The piano part features a consistent eighth-note rhythmic pattern in the right hand and a more complex, often six-note simultaneous texture in the left hand.

Figure 5: Rimsky-Korsakov. Romance Op. 4 No. 2 in G# minor, mm. 16-22.

The final measures of the song are unique in the context of how Rimsky-Korsakov approaches the conclusion, as shown in Figure 6. The music does not present any rhythmic elements in the vocalist's main melody nor the pianist's accompaniment. The pace slows down, and the absence of horse galloping reveals the potential costs of unattainable love. In the final two measures, Rimsky-Korsakov returns to the G# minor tonic by outlining the first and the fifth scale degrees and avoiding the third. This is likewise the thickest texture in the harmonic makeup of the song, as the composer reveals six consecutive notes played simultaneously.

Figure 6 shows the final measures of the piece. The vocal line has the lyrics "ША-ГОМ И МОЛ-ЧИ:" and "Я У-ГА-ДА-Ю САМ." The piano accompaniment concludes with a thick texture of six consecutive notes played simultaneously, indicated by a large bracket and the word "Сдвоенн" (Double) written vertically.

Figure 6: Rimsky-Korsakov. Romance Op. 4 No. 2 in G# minor, mm. 38-40.

### 3. Conclusion

The song's pulse is driven by the constant rhythmical patterns, illustrated by the galloping of the horse that the servant uses in order to complete the main character's duties. Such a rhythmic configuration allows Rimsky-Korsakov to characterize the plot of the poem in a suspenseful way. Likewise, such a rhythmic configuration allows the composer to incorporate and musically depict the poetic ambiguity of Heine's text. This is the only song in the Op. 4 cycle to be explicitly written for a male voice – another attempt to portray a highly dramatic musical action. The form, the harmony, the relationship between the accompaniment and melody, as well as the rhythmic expansion, create a recurring set of ideas that are used to interpret Heine's text. The rhythmic configuration of Op. 4 No. 2 allows Rimsky-Korsakov to characterize the plot of the poem in a

dynamic way in addition to allowing the composer to integrate and illustrate the poetic doubt of Heine's work. Rimsky-Korsakov digs deep into poetic tension and presents a musical perspective to bring out the connotation of the poetry. Rimsky-Korsakov always pays careful attention to the text of his works and continuously challenges himself to find compositional tactics that would align poetic texts with his music to reveal a precise meaning or a particular significance that the composer finds imperative.

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**Article received: 2020-04-05**