

*Liu Nan*

## **INTERPRETATION PROBLEMS OF MUSSORGSKY'S CHAMBER VOCAL MUSIC POETICS MASTERING**

*In this work the factors causing exclusive interpretation difficulty of Mussorgsky's chamber vocal works is discussed. The following factors are examined: a) increased requirements to the articulation of the verbal text of songs; b) necessity of accustoming to composer's musical language features; c) the necessity of development of the wide cultural context allowing to comprehend the themes, problems, plots, characters in Mussorgsky's chamber vocal works; d) singularity, complexity and paradoxicality of composer's poetics. The working definition of "poetics" as a musicological term is given. Some pedagogical receptions for the revealed difficulties overcoming are planned.*

*Keywords: Mussorgsky, chamber music, vocal music, poetics, verbal text, musical language, cultural context.*

The number of investigations and publications devoted to Modest Mussorgsky is huge. It should be noted that the interest to his personality, life and creative works doesn't weaken with the course of time. Every year new articles are published and theses are defended on the points connected with his name. Firstly it proves that his artistic heritage and his personality are inexhaustible in the sense of their intensional and formal richness, diversity, originality alongside with their complexity, problematical character, and even mysteriousness. These features attract special keen investigators' attention.

Secondly, the constant broadening of Mussorgsky's creative activity investigation range witnesses for the unquenchable interest of amateurs and professional performers to the composer's compositions. Really his operas "Khovanshchina" and "Boris Godunov" are staged in the best world opera theatres, such as La Scala, Grand Opera, Covent garden, Bolshoy Theatre. The orchestral tone poem *Night on Bald Mountain* is included into the most popular repertoire compositions. The same can be said about the piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition* which became one of the masterpieces of the 19<sup>th</sup> century piano art and which gave inspiration for the orchestral (M. Ravel), electronic-sound (Isao Tomita), rock musical (ELP) and other artistic versions.

Despite the global popularity of Mussorgsky's creations, his chamber vocal music concert performances are hardly noticed. What is the reason? Are his romances, songs, and vocal cycles inferior to his operas, symphonic or piano opuses? This question needs thorough investigation.

This direction of Mussorgsky's creative activity investigation is actual for all European countries including Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus where the composer's works became the integral part of the highest musical culture level. The question under discussion is still more important for the Chinese culture. One of the noted and important peculiarities of the modern Chinese culture is the process of vast audience familiarization with foreign music, first of all with the traditional classical European genres and styles.

First the Chinese got acquainted with the chorus singing tradition, later solo instrumental and orchestra music was developed. Recently the first European type opera theatres have appeared and the opera vocal culture is being implemented. The introduction of chamber vocal and instrumental art into performing practice is the current tendency.

The chamber music is lagging behind and this can be explained by its being rather demanding: it requires highly developed musicality, special susceptibility, attention to the smallest details of the artistic text from the side of the audience as well as the high mastership, flawless exactness of the form presentation and artistic talent from the performer's side.

Furthermore the chamber music supposes the most exacting esthetic taste and high level of general culture. Thus, the chamber music performers should be brought up on the best chamber music samples and the chamber vocal music by Mussorgsky can definitely be called one of them.

We are sorry to say but this author's chamber music, which is honored all over the world, is practically unknown in China. Neither mass media nor other sources have ever mentioned any Chinese vocalists performing Mussorgsky's chamber vocal music. There is no mentioning of any foreign singer performing the author's compositions in his concert program.

This actual practical problem requires serious attention. We'd like to find out the reasons of the Chinese performers' and, consequently the audience's neglecting Mussorgsky's vocal chamber music. What prevents these chamber genre masterpieces from taking the proper place in the Chinese singers' repertoire?

What specific tasks should be fulfilled by the musician performer in the process of successful interpretation of the composer's vocal chamber music?

These definite questions, as far as we know, have never been discussed in the professional musical literature. They should be studied in at least three directions

1) In broad context of Mussorgsky's artistic heritage historical role, his creative activity, personal qualities, esthetics, poetics, genre and style peculiarities etc. (B.Asafyev, G. Bakaeva, R. Berchenko, E. Braudo, D. Brown, A. Vasilyeva, C. Dahlhaus, R.Dobrovensky, V. Karatygin, M. Calvacoressi, N. Kravchenco, C. Cui, E. Levashova, M. Sokolsky, P. Solovyov, A. Solovtsov, O. Solomonova, V. Stasov, N. Teterina, P. Trifonov, N. Tumanina, S. Tyshko, S. Fedyakin etc. )

2) in the context of historic cultural, esthetic theoretic investigations devoted to the composer's chamber vocal music (works by V. Agavu, O. Vasilenko, V. Vasina-Grossman, P. Veber – Bokholdt, N. Vyshinskaya, L. Gerver, E. Durandina, E. Nesterenko, Y. Keldysh, G. Linford, A. Ogolevets, R. Oldani, M. Rass, O. Rudneva, V. Fedorov, G. Walker, ( Woker), K. Emerson, V. Yakovlev etc. )

3) in connection with the psychological and methodic teaching problems of chamber vocal performing art.

The main purpose of the article is to find out the objective difficulties and set the corresponding tasks for Mussorgsky's chamber vocal creations performing.

First of all the attention should be paid to the Russian chamber vocal music properties, which always present certain difficulty for the performers from China and other countries.

The main and the, probably, the greatest specific difficulty for performers consists in the vocalist's ability to reproduce the verbal text correctly. This problem has nothing in common with the so called "language barrier". The performer can understand both the text as a whole and even the separate words. But the insonification of the foreign text is always a challenge, as each language possesses its own phonetic system. If to compare the Russian and the Chinese languages, for instance, it will turn out that among the approximately fifty phonemes in these two sound complexes (the exact number of phonemes is still under discussion) some sounds will be identical, some of them will be similar, and some will be absolutely different. The process of any foreign language studying always demands the adjusting of our hearing and articulation to the new phonetic system. The performer's capability and speech experience play the crucial role here. In any case the text of each new foreign language musical composition is of great special difficulty for the vocalist. That is

why it's common practice with the professional singers' concert activity to be trained by the linguist coach and master the verbal text pronunciation.

Mussorgsky's creations may be of special difficulty from this point of view.

The fact that the verbal text in them carries great author's message is not the only reason. The same messages are carried by verbal texts of romances and songs written by other Russian composers for the verses of the outstanding Russian classic and romantic period poets (Alexander Pushkin, Mihail Lermontov, Aleksey Tolstoy, Nikolay Nekrasov etc.). The verbal text is important in all of them. Its pronunciation should be utmost distinct. Besides the text in Mussorgsky's songs can be characterized by the two main peculiarities;

a) it serves not only as the logic and syntactical foundation but also the intonation one for melody formation (modeling);

b) it carries the acute individual features, speech characteristics; by delicate specific means of speech nature it creates the character's vivid image in the audience's imagination.

Thus the vocalist has to fulfill more complex task than just distinct and clear words articulation. He has to show the unrepeatable individual speech manner intrinsic to the definite character of Mussorgsky's song. Here the vocalists deal not with the everyday or even orator's speech, but with the actor's artistic one. According to Vasina-Grossman "The songs from "The nursery" cycle as well as the songs-sketches... require quite special actor's performing manner, which is complicated by the situation when the grown-up singer has to portray a child" [1, c. 196 ].

This peculiarity was also noted not only by the composer's chamber creations investigators but also by the critics writing about Mussorgsky's song concert performing ( for instance, V. Stasov [2] and Y. Engel [3] about the concerts of M. Olenina-d'Algeim, F. Shaliapin and other singers).

Thus to master Mussorgsky's chamber vocal poetics every vocalist must learn to be an actor of the original monodrama without the theatre conventions : without a stage, wings, scenery, costume, stage properties, make-up and –the main thing – there is no drama action context. This context should be created by the vocalist himself (the piano accompaniment can be of great help, but not always). The main condition of this monodrama is the artistic insonification of the phonematic system and text articulation, which are strengthened or weakened by the musical intonation structure of the vocal part. Such skills mastering

demands the help of both experienced linguist and acting technique teacher. Therefore theatre stage director's assistance is really of great importance while preparing for Mussorgsky's creations concert performance.

The second specific difficulty in working on the non-native musical culture composition is in the knowledge of its musical language. Here the musical language is seen as the system of regularities and the sound forms organization norms ( grammar) and the stable intonation elements complex ( vocabulary) .The musical languages of different nations as well as their verbal languages can coincide in some aspects, be similar in something and be significantly different in other properties.

We can say that The Chinese traditional culture language is significantly different from the Eastern European folklore music language. The main differentiating features are in pitch organization, metric systems, scales and modes (tonalities), in articulation principles, melodic and rhythmic formulae, in types of texture and syntactic musical speech organization.

Last century the European musical language mastering was complicated by their cultural isolation. There is no such a problem today. The modern mass media means have provided each Chinese with the popular and classic Western music since his childhood. The classic foreign music is studied at secondary schools. In this way the obligatory knowledge of the classic European music is not a problem for a Chinese vocalist today, including those who wish to perform Mussorgsky's compositions.

At the same time the musically expressive language of Mussorgsky's creations still presents the definite difficulty for each performer whose musical thinking is developed on the classical European tradition samples . The composer's language is distinguished by its originality, singularity, peculiarity from other contemporary composer's music. It was noted by the most authoritative European musicians of that period, such as F. List, K. Debussy, M. Ravel etc. who were familiar with Mussorgsky's creations. A lot of investigations are devoted to the peculiarities of the composer's musical language and they emphasize the singularity of the meter rhythm, mode organization, intonation lexicon, cords complex, texture, syntactic structure of the musical speech. ( works by T. Bershanskaya, g. Golovinsky, I. Zemtsovsky, O. Rudneva, P. Solovyeva, E. Trembovelsky, Y. Kholopov etc.)

In order to get used to the unusual elements and Mussorgsky's musical language regularities it's advisable to listen to as many his creations as possible and more than once. It's still more helpful to train a number of his songs, opera fragments just for getting acquainted with them. The effective method of the composer's musical language mastering is analytical reading of the chamber music creations texts. It should be done basing on the special literature ( theoretical works, analytical excursus in monographs, articles on history etc.)

Special attention should be paid to the mode organization which is often approximate to the modal sound system principle as well as to the harmony conditioned by it. The dissonance and rigid melody motion unusual for our hearing become more understandable with the special voice and hearing adjusting to the reference mode scale, typical melodic patterns and harmony.

This part of the vocalist training in the process of Mussorgsky's chamber vocal music mastering demands the teacher's purposeful efforts and in connection with it, the serious methodic development of the stated musical vocal problem is required. The publishing of Mussorgsky's compositions fragments collection, including not difficult ones but the most characteristic for his musical language can be of great help.

The third, and as we think, the utmost difficulty is connected with the understanding of the artistic image-bearing contents of the compositions.

We proceed from the following theoretical condition: any musical creation is always apprehensible for every person to some extent. Absolute incomprehension of the piece of art contents is theoretically impossible. This phenomenon manifests the main specificity of the artistic image-bearing way to represent the reality [S.Shyp ГерМЕНЕВТИКА]

Alongside, the comprehension and, correspondingly, the piece of art interpretation depend on how namely and to what extend the creation is intelligible to the performer. The quality and the level of this intelligibility ( sometimes they can be differentiated from the outside, sometimes can't) depend on the number of factors. The most important of them is the performer's life and artistic experience. We won't refer to the student vocalist's life experience as it's impossible to be classified, besides it not so important. All the same the life experience, required for Mussorgsky's creativity comprehension, can't be purposefully formed, directed, supplement in the process of professional vocal training.

The artistic experience is the other way round. It can and it must be created purposefully in the chamber vocal training process.

The artistic experience as the most essential for perception and interpretation Mussorgsky's chamber music image bearing contents should include, first of all, the knowledge of the life in Russia in the XIX century in its various manifestations, namely: the history of the nation, the society structure, the everyday day life and problems of peasantry, petty bourgeoisie, aristocracy, and commons.

It's necessary to have at least general notion of Eastern European Christianity, of the church and the laymen, of the main Orthodoxy dogmas and rituals. The knowledge of the folk and professional art, musical mainly, is of special importance.

Secondly, Mussorgsky's song comprehension demands knowledge of the XIX century classical romantic chamber vocal tradition (not necessarily profound knowledge but the one based on specific experience) in its brightest manifestations (chamber cantatas by I. S. Bach, songs by J. Haydn, W. Mozart, L. Beethoven, F. Mendelson, R. Wagner, F. List, E. Grieg, romances and songs by M. Glinka, C. Cui, N. Rimsky-Korsakov, F. Borodin, P. Tchaikovsky)

While preparing for Mussorgsky's songs interpretation special attention is worth paying to the creations of the authors who solved the analogical creative problems and drafted the special kind of chamber vocal compositions, namely lyrics with music. It considers creations by F. Shubert, R. Shuman. G. Wolf, A. Dargomyzhsky.

Thirdly, the knowledge of the author's personality is highly appreciated, in particular of his life way, of steps in the musical art mastering, of his character, world outlook, mentality, ideas; of his teachers, friends, co-workers, enemies, critics and so on.

But the information of this kind can't be based on facts and scientifically proved ideas. The complexity of the problem is in the necessity of concrete sensible, image bearing, emotionally coloured, personally felt and appraised knowledge.

Not the amount but the quality of this knowledge matters. The knowledge of this kind can be found in the art itself and in the belletristic literature. This sets the special teaching methodic task for the Musical Colleges teachers – to select the recommended literature and artistic sources, which promote the cultural horizon broadening and directly prepare for Mussorgsky's chamber vocal compositions interpretation. For instance, these didactically

expedient sources of the necessary information, recommended for the young performing musician, should include monographs about the composer's life and activity in the adapted variant (by E. Abyzova, A. Alshvang, A. Orlova, G. Khubov, E. Frid etc.); the feature film "Mussorgsky" ( G. Roshal, 1950); critical articles ( by B. Asafyev, C. Cui,

V, Stasov, Y. Engel etc.), in which there are both estimations of the author's creations and the opinions of their performing by the outstanding musicians. The musicians- interpreters, specially foreign ones, are advised to get acquainted with the reproductions of the paintings by V. Perov, I. Repin, I. Kramskoy, I. Pryanishnikov, N. Nevrev, V. Maksimov, G. Myasoyedov, N. Yaroshenko, V. Surikov, N. Ge, V. Makovsky, M. Nesterov. The sculpture works by M. Antokolsky and S. Kononov also deserve the special attention as well as the graphic works by N. Gertman and the illustrations to the "Physiognomics" by Johann Lavater , as we know that Mussorgsky showed great interest to this work.

And, finally, the fourth difficulty for the performer to overcome in order to achieve the artistically valuable interpretation. We mean the conception and artistic mastering of the unique Mussorgsky's poetics. To make it clear, we should state the meaning of the term "poetics".

Today this word is mainly used by philologists and it denotes "the literature theory section, studying the poetical composition structure, its poetical form, the poetical art tropes, its analysis principle. The term "poetics is often transported to the studied object, as "Pushkin's poetics" [2, c. 241]. This word received its general scientific meaning due to Aristotle and after him we will treat "poetics" as the complex of knowledge of how the piece of art is built up; which means, methods, tropes are used to create the ability of the form, created by the author, to influence the people's consciousness, the ability to generate the emotional response, to provoke the esthetic estimation, to awake the associations, to stimulate the thinking process.

Poetics is the system quality of the creative activity and artistic consciousness. First, poetics covers and unites all the sides and levels of the form construction. If we deal with the musical poetics it includes all the numerous hierarchically organized properties of the form: sound material, musical language ( sound pitches, meter rhythm ,mode, articulation and dynamic systems). Musical composition (syntax, texture organization , the thematic formation logic). Secondly, poetics includes the composition technique and technology, the



complexes of creative methods ( for instance, the technique of counterpoint, of the chords figuring etc.). Poetics depends greatly on the esthetic and ethic peculiarities of the composer's consciousness, on his world outlook and mentality.

Finally, poetics is defined by the regularity of musical and general artistic styles and genres.

Why is Mussorgsky's poetics, in particular the poetics of chamber vocal compositions, is so difficult for understanding and interpretation? This question requires thorough investigation. Here we'll mention only the most obvious factors of this difficulty.

First of all Mussorgsky's chamber vocal creations are characterized by their original attitude to the esthetic vocal qualities. The composer naturally and sometimes deliberately limits the performer's abilities to demonstrate the best qualities of his voice: the range, brightness, power, lightness, "timberness".

It seems that Mussorgsky isn't interested at all in the musical text properties developed in the world composers' practice for the vocal virtuosity demonstration. There are practically no melismatic ornamentations, bright passages, or the pathetic sound holding on fermata. There is nothing to make the mass audience admire or to allow the performer to reveal the unique advantages of his voice. It's enough to discourage the performer, to confuse him and generate antipathy towards Mussorgsky's music.

The next composer's poetics feature provoking serious performer's difficulty is the depriving the musical form of its usual vocal beauty. Furthermore, Mussorgsky dares to more radical action. In a number of creations he treats the images beyond the concept of beauty. He intrudes into the artistic semantic area of the scary, ugly, disgusting, and psychically abnormal ( we mean his images of the death, painful illness, extreme depression, hallucinations, maniac psychosis etc.) We can find just few examples of this kind in the world musical culture.

Another feature of Mussorgsky's poetics is its paradoxicality. His images are often marked with the incompatible, mutually exclusive duality.

The obvious example: the image of the Death as a character in the cycle "Songs and Dances of Death". In this image (at least in the three songs) the opposing senses were inseparably united: death as absolute evil, aborting the highest gift of life , and the death as

the act of kindness and mercy, as the deliverance from the life suffering. This antagonism is hard even for logic. And what about representing it in vocal interpretation?

The problem of Mussorgsky's paradoxical poetics comprehension and practical mastering arises for the performer of each of the composer's chamber vocal creations. The contradictory combination of the pessimistic mood and optimism, naturalistic world outlook and mysticism, lyrical tenderness and epic rudeness, romanticism and critical realism increase the exceptional complicatedness of master's poetics.

It's obvious that Mussorgsky's poetics understanding demands the mature mind, ability to philosophical reflection. There is hardly any hope that this poetics can be completely understood and practically mastered by the beginner vocalist.

However the persistent inquisitiveness and the experienced teacher's assistance can encourage the future singer to start his way to the comprehension of Mussorgsky's poetic world from the first steps of his chamber vocal training.

And he will be awarded with the understanding of the deep and rich composer's world of images. He will be able to achieve the highest mastering level, the one in which the performer gains the gift to carry the audience away not just by the sounds beauty, but by showing the beauty of images and the depth of the senses.

Certainly, Mussorgsky's chamber vocal works peculiarities and the methods of its mastering still require further investigation and separate published representation.

### ***REFERENCES:***

1. Vasina-Grossman V. Russkiy klassicheskiy romans XIX veka / V. Vasina-Grossman. – M. : Izd-vo AN SSSR, 1956. – 352 s.
2. Stasov V. Izbrannyye sochineniya v treh tomah. Zhivopis, skulptura, muzyika / V. V. Stasov. - Tom 3. – M. : Iskusstvo, 1952.
3. Engel Yu. Glazami sovremennika. Izbrannyye stati o russkoy muzyike 1898-1918 / Yu.D. Engel. - M. : Sov. kompozitor, 1971. - 534 s.
4. Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar. V 2-h tt., t. 2, - M.: Sov. Entsiklopediya, 1964.