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**FROM ALEXANDER IZOSIMOV'S VOCAL CYCLE  
"SONGS OF THE WONDERFUL STRANGER"  
TO PAINTINGS BY SVETLANA AND SABIR GADZHIYEV\*<sup>1</sup>**

Saint-Petersburg composer *Alexander Izosimov* (b. 1958)<sup>2</sup> composed the "Songs of the Wonderful Stranger" for four solo vocalists – *soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and bass and piano*. The cycle consists of eighteen parts. At present, it is possible to consider this work to be the sum total of the composer's artistic reflections and searches, a presentation of his living and artistic credo. This work accumulates the composer's most typical imagery and his preferences of genre, structure and musical language. In addition, the cycle reflects the details and stages of the long creative process of writing it, which took twenty-five years (1979–2004). The role of the verbal text is extremely important in these "Songs". The composer's sense of the text, revealing subtle aspects of meaning, emotional gesture and general atmosphere "encoded" by the poems he set to music, generated the entire texture of the "Songs". Thereby, the combination of the vocal and piano parts is so integral and organic here, and the very genre, notwithstanding the composer's title, should be defined as *poetry with music* rather than merely *songs*.

The selection of the literary sources for this cycle could hardly be called trivial. The focal point of the cycle is formed by the poetry of Arseny Tarkovsky (thirteen movements out of the eighteen), joined with poems by German Romantic poets – Novalis (№1 "Hymns to the Day", № 18 "Hymns to the Night"), Ludwig Uhland (№ 5 "Song of the Flute"), Eduard Moerike (№ 2 "My Sweet Land") – and Alexander Blok (№ 16 "The

Song of Daybreak"). The points of unity here are presented by a pantheistical perception of Nature, admiration for its beauty and variety, prevalence of spirituality (not necessarily of the religious type) over earthly materialism, and a positive, noble, poetical outlook, even towards the dark sides of life. In addition, the "German motives" in Arseny Tarkovsky's poetry provide an intertextual type of communication between the verses, which can be described as moving and, in some ways tragic, as can be seen in the movement titled "Rumpelstilzhen" (the gnome from the German fairy tales, № 7) and the tragic movement "The Artist Paul Klee" (№ 17).

The cycle has no plot. Izosimov does not focus on the world's outward changes; he rather immerses into the depths of the human soul, exploring both its responses to the beauty of the external world and the labyrinths of the inevitable tragic reflections caused by life. Therefore, with a predominance of the atmosphere of intense musical meditation, the composition lacks either fast tempi or active motor rhythms. This music causes us to listen and reflect.

The "Songs of the Wonderful Stranger" represent a unique genre – a vocal relay for four soloists with piano. According to the composer's concept, *'the soloists seem to pass a baton from one to another'*<sup>3</sup>. With the diverse voices (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and bass) creating a drama of timbres, the entire composition presents a psychological meditative performance.

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\* Translated by Galina Ovsyankina and Alexander Dyachkov, edited by Dr. Anton Rovner.

The eighteen “Songs” form a unified type of action and reflection, which can be divided into two large parts, where the first one (from № 1 “Hymns to the Day” to № 10 “The Spelling Book of the Summer Months”) celebrates the Daytime and blossoming of Nature.

1. *Hymn to the Day* (Novalis)
2. *My Sweet Land* (Eduard Moerike)
3. *Under the Heart of Grass* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
4. *The Poor Fisherman* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
5. *Song of the Flute* (Ludwig Uhland)
6. *Grasshoppers* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
7. *Rumpelstilzhen* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
8. *The Cricket at Home* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
9. *The Cradle* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
10. *The Spelling Book of Summer Months* (Arseny Tarkovsky)

People (“The Poor Fisherman” and “Cradle”) appear inseparable from the landscape. Even the fantastic Rumpelstilzhen acts primarily as a child of nature. As for the second part (from № 11 “The Sugakleja River” to № 18 “Hymns to the Night”), it concentrates on inner reflections on human destiny, which is mostly burdensome and dramatic where Arseny Tarkovsky’s confessional triptych forms its lyrical culmination (№ 13 “I was Born so Long Ago”, № 14 “Wherein is my Guilt”, № 15 “The Rainy Day”).

11. *The Sugakleja River* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
12. *The First Meetings* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
13. *I was Born so Long Ago* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
14. *Wherein is my Guilt* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
15. *The Rainy Day* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
16. *The Song of Daybreak* (Alexander Blok)
17. *The Artist Paul Klee* (Arseny Tarkovsky)
18. *Hymns to the Night* (Novalis)

The central idea, similarly to a magnificent epigraph, stands out as early as in the first “song”, “The Hymn to the Day” where the mystical symbolist verses by Novalis hint at the Savior – “*the wonderful stranger*”. However, this idea is only outlined and not presented in a traditional religious manner. Novalis depicts the bearer of light and spirituality, whose mission

is to show people the beauty of the world, as concentrated in Nature: “*But above all is the wonderful stranger with his Divine look, light step and marvelously closed lips. As the Lord of the terrestrial nature, he calls Force for uncountable changes... He gives his heavenly appearance to every living being*”<sup>4</sup>. Novalis’s “Hymns to the Night” concludes the cycle as an antipode to the opening song. The literary, stylistic and semantic interchange between the two juxtaposed “songs” creates a dramaturgic arch in the context of the entire composition, forming its prologue and epilogue, respectively.

However, the entire set features no excess of laments or pathos. The “Songs” stand out, when sung *a cappella*, as they make a special emphasis on lyrics and voice color. These “songs” seem to form two micro-cycles in the context of the entire cycle (№ 2 “My Sweet Land”, № 5 – “Song of the Flute”, № 11 “The Sugakleja River” and № 12 “The First Meetings”). The occurrence of the micro-cycles within both of the respective parts resembles the compositional structure of epic literature (we shall recollect the fairy tales of “The Thousand and One Nights” or the ancient Russian epos).

One of the main features of this musical composition is that it combines many different vocal genres to express a profound semantic meaning. Here we can find monologues conveying lyrical confessions (the aforementioned Arseny Tarkovsky triptych), the objectivity of an epic story (“The Daybreak Song”), a song (“Grasshoppers”), a melody (“Song of the Flute” and “The Sugakleja River”), a dance song (“The Artist Paul Klee”), a hymn, and a recitative.

In its melodic and harmonic aspects, the musical language of the “Songs of the Wonderful Stranger” is complex, at the same time, featuring an elevated kind of simplicity. As typical of Izosimov, each sound, as well as each pause is significant, both in the vocal and the piano parts. At times, the principal melodic line is highlighted (“The Domestic Cricket” and “Grasshoppers”), at times presenting a self-sufficient language monad (in the “songs” sung

*a cappella*), at other times dissolving into a sophisticated multilayered texture (“The Rainy Day” and “The Song of Daybreak”). At times his music charms by its color, at other times – by its graphic conciseness and clearness of its lines. Nonetheless, the composer always avoids congested texture and does not emphasize dissonant musical vertical sonorities. Hints of the Austro-German Expressionistic musical textural patterns (in “The Song of Daybreak” and “Hymns to the Night”) are organically combined with melodically rhythmic features characteristic of Mussorgsky, as well as with Russian melodic outlines in the “songs” that are sung *a cappella* (“Under the Heart of Grass” and “Song of the Flute”).

The piano part features a richness and diversity of texture. At times, it functions as a traditional accompaniment; however, it can grow to be so thematically self-sufficient as to make the vocal part appear as merely another component of the integral score (“Hymn to the Day”, “I was Born so Long Ago”). The *A cappella* episodes introduce marked contrast of timbre and dramaturgy, highlighting the beauty of the voice, as its texture transforms into an infinite horizontal line. Nevertheless, the composer’s sophistication always aims at expressing a particular moral concept.

According to the composer, the “Songs of the Wonderful Stranger” narrate: «...About the best aspects of each human being, when his or her radiant center of spiritual forces opens like a small sun, presenting its love to the world and revealing its own, True, Eternally Good Essence. At this moment, an angel-like consciousness is obtained, and everyone, at least for a short while, becomes Human with a capital H”<sup>5</sup>.

Having been generated from the literary texts, the ‘Songs of the Wonderful Stranger’ inspired the creation of a number of paintings, thereby generating a trilateral alliance of the arts. Saint-Petersburg-based artists Svetlana and Sabir Gadzhiev created their paintings after hearing Izosimov’s vocal cycle. It is difficult to attribute those paintings to a particular

stylistic trend. They feature a light palette with a prevalence of tints of yellow and gold color, in correspondence with the atmosphere of Izosimov’s musical composition, and also a transparency of colors and illusiveness which make the imagery elements appear as if through the veil of time or dreams (“The Song of Daybreak,” depicting the serene portrait of a prince). They are permeated with various symbols (“The Sugakleja River”). The Gadzhievs’ artistic manner suggests the spontaneity of children, in portraying such images as, for instance, “Rumpelstilzhen”.

The paintings by the Gadzhievs combine reality with fantastic phantomlike images. Their style is colorful and decorative; it features unusual techniques such as, for instance, the use of *kneaded paper* or white paper *glittering through* oil paintings. Svetlana and Sabir described their artistic manner as “*the interior design*”<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, with a subtle psychology placed onto the foreground, each of their art works, whatever the imagery may be, spurs our reflections and various interpretations of that imagery to a greater degree than endowing us with purely visual pleasure. All the above constitutes a strong feature of the Gadzhievs’ paintings, which proved to be concordant with the imagery of Izosimov’s vocal cycle.

Personal interpretation of classical works of literature demonstrates one of the chief aspects of the artists’ creative work. Notwithstanding this, their works in the field present psychological fantasies on the subject matter introduced by the writers or poets who influenced them, rather than meticulously precise depictions of their literary plots. The paintings inspired by Izosimov’s compositions are interpretations of music and poetry in their combination. The poems by Novalis, Arseny Tarkovsky and other poets set to music by Izosimov did not present a direct inspiration for the Gadzhievs. Nonetheless, the aforementioned poems selected by the composer in accordance with his individual concept, arranged in a certain order and interpreted in the genre of *poems with music*, provoked their imagination.

One of the unique features of the expressive language in Izosimov's cycle is the use of an innovative modal structure – “*the breathing mode*,”<sup>7</sup> as the composer calls it. He discovered it in 1993 as a means of reflecting a positive view of the world and expressing the opposition of *light* and *dark*. The anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, which created a great impact on the composer's perception of the world, played an important role in this process. This modal structure is based on combinations of major and minor seconds within a fifth. An increased number of major seconds (MMMm, MmMM, MMMM etc) typical of perfect and augmented fifth produces the ‘light’ set on intervals. In the case of diminished fifths, there appears a greater number of minor seconds (MmMm and mmMM), producing the “dark” set. In other words, the “dark” set is dependent on minor seconds, while the major intervals provide for the aspect of light. Within a composition, the composer gently leads the listener forth from “darkness” to “light”. As he himself expressed it, “the breathing mode is the result of a synthesis of pentachords with a rotation of minor and major seconds” (A. Izosimov [2, p. 42]). The confrontation of “darkness” with “light,” expressed by means of this mode, “provides the maximal tension of the modal elements in their lightest and darkest, dismal versions” (A. Izosimov [2, p. 43]).

In our opinion, it was the modal color of the “Songs of the Wonderful Stranger” that gave the Gadzhiiyevs an impetus to create their paintings. As the result of “the breathing mode”, the world-perception of the composer appeared to be akin to the imaginative world of the artists. That is why the transitions from dark to bright colors are so expressive in their paintings, bringing, finally, the exuberance of light and bright tints.

Despite the prominent figurative component in the Gadzhiiyevs art, their colors often function independently from other elements. In the music of Izosimov we observe similar processes. Despite the presence of the melodic horizontal line, the coloristic functions of textural and

modal-harmonic complexes sometimes acquire a self-sufficient imaginative significance. Thereby, the composition becomes a symbol of a triple concordance of poetry, music and art, with the philosophy of Steiner serving as the unifying factor.

The history of art has witnessed numerous examples of illustrations made by artists to musical compositions, especially programmatic ones (it suffices to mention the drawings made for publications of Liszt's “*Les annees du pelerinage*” or Berlioz's “*Symphonie Fantastique*”). In the given case, the artists' original idea was not to provide a visual representation of the music. The impressions received by them from the music activated the synesthetic mechanisms of their psychology, urging them to create a high-quality set of paintings.

As a result, color provides the principal expression for the composer's and the artists' world-perceptions, namely, the modal play of musical colors in the music and the palette of colors in painting. The process of connecting music with painting or, more generally – with visual element – became especially characteristic for the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reflecting *the cultural turn* (*F. Jamison's term*) in the artistic consciousness of both composers and listeners.

Modest Mussorgsky's outstanding cycle, *Pictures at an Exhibition* was composed as the result of the composer's impression of the paintings of A. F. Hartmann. In this case we observe a recurrence of the selfsame phenomenon. Having been generated from the artists' perception of a musical composition, the Gadzhiiyevs' paintings become inseparable from their favorite stylistic palette. They possess an independent depictive world, inseparable from the fanciful palette of their artistic style.

The similarity between the artistic impulses of Izosimov and the Gadzhiiyevs will most likely give way to a subsequent new combined project: the composer has requested Svetlana and Sabir to act as scene designers of his opera “*Paradise Lost*” based on the famous long poem by John Milton.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article was written on the basis of a report read on 15 November 2014 at the International Conference *Music and Figurative Arts in the Twentieth Century*. Italy, Lucca, Complesso monumentale di San Michele.

<sup>2</sup> *Alexander Izosimov* was born on 15 September 1958 in the Central Russian region in the picturesque vicinities of Tambov city – in Kochetovka village. He studied at the Tambov Musical College, the Saratov State L.V. Sobinov Conservatory and The Leningrad (Saint-Petersburg) State N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory with the famous composer, Professor Boris Tishchenko. His music presents a creative contribution to the traditions of the classical composers: Modest Mussorgsky, Claude Debussy and Dmitri Shostakovich, and to his outstanding contemporaries: Alfred Shnittke, Galina Ustvolskaya and Boris Tischenko. Izosimov's musical thinking was influenced by the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. His musical compositions include the ballet: *The*

*Chosen One*, Images for mezzo-soprano and symphony orchestra, *Gratitude to the Giver of Life* for chorus, organ and chamber orchestra, *When my Soul was a Cloud* for six instruments, a Sonata and *Transformations* for piano, a Cello Concerto, a Piano Concerto, a Violin Concert and numerous other works.

<sup>3</sup> From conversation of the author of this article with the composer in 2005 in St. Petersburg. The subsequent footnotes do not make any reservation.

<sup>4</sup> These words of the composer are quoted in the summary to the *Songs of the Wonderful Stranger* written by the author of article [4] and in his dissertation *Light as a Spiritual Paradigm of the Musical Works by Composer Alexander Izosimov* by N. V. Klimova [3].

<sup>5</sup> Epigraph by Alexander Izosimov to the edition of the vocal cycle *Songs of the Wonderful Stranger* [1, p. 4].

<sup>6</sup> From a conversation with Svetlana and Sabir Gadzhiev. 2011, October, St. Petersburg.

<sup>7</sup> In Russian – *дышащий лад* [*dyshashchiy lad*].

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### From Alexander Izosimov's Vocal Cycle "Songs of the Wonderful Stranger" to Paintings by Svetlana and Sabir Gadzhiev

"Songs of the Wonderful stranger" by Saint-Petersburg composer Alexander Izosimov (1958) represent itself a special genre – the vocal relay for four soloists with piano. By the plan of the author "soloists as though pass a baton one to another". The performance of various voices (a soprano, a mezzo-soprano, a tenor and a bass), creates timbre drama, making related a whole compositions with psychological performance-reflection.

The cycle was created twenty five years (1979–2004). Eighteen songs form unified action-reflection, which divides on two large parts. The central point is a poetry of A. Tarkovsky (thirteen parts) which made the ensemble to the verses of German – romanticists poets – Novalis, L. Uland, E. Moerike – and A. Blok poem.

Having arisen from a word, "Songs of the Wonderful Stranger" brought to life some paintings, thus generating a trilateral alliance of arts. Saint-Petersburg artists Svetlana and Sabir Gadzhiev created paintings after the Izosimov's vocal set. It is hard to attribute those paintings to a particular stylistic trend.

**Keywords:** vocal genre, vocal cycle, the song, poetry with music, the ensemble, creates timbre drama, the musical language, the painting, stylistic trend

### От вокального цикла «Песни прекрасного пришельца» Александра Изосимова – к полотнам Светланы и Сабира Гаджиевых

«Песни прекрасного пришельца» петербургского композитора Александра Изосимова (1958) представляют собой особый жанр – вокальный цикл-эстафету для четырёх солистов и фортепиано. По замыслу автора, «солисты как бы передают друг другу слово», а исполнение различными по тембру и tessiture голосами (сопрано, меццо-сопрано, тенор, бас), создаёт тембровую драматургию, сближая цикл с психологическим спектаклем-размышлением, рассказом.

Цикл создавался в течение двадцати пяти лет (1979–2004). Восемнадцать «песен» образуют единое действие-размышление, которое делится на две крупные части. Центром является поэзия А. Тарковского (тринадцать частей) и в ансамбле с ней стихи немецких поэтов-романтиков – Новалиса, Л. Уланда, Э. Мёрике – и стихотворение А. Блока.

Зародившись из слова, «Песни прекрасного пришельца» вызвали к жизни живописные полотна, породив тройственный союз искусств. К циклу-эстафете петербургскими художниками Светланой и Сабиром Гаджиевыми созданы картины. Их стилистический облик трудно отнести к какому-либо одному творческому направлению. Они перекликаются с вокальным циклом светлой гаммой красок, своеобразной символикой, радостным мировосприятием.

**Ключевые слова:** вокальный жанр, вокальный цикл, песня, стихотворение с музыкой, тембровая драматургия, музыкальный язык, живопись, стилистическое направление

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