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On the Technique of Canon in Russian Baroque Music (on the Example of Polychoral Works by Vasiliy Titov)

ABSTRACT

Background

According to filologist and medievalist Dmitry Likhachov, 'Baroque in Russia took over some functions of Renaissance Art' (Likhachov 1987, 356). The principal Renaissance feature in Russian part-singing style is the imitative polyphony. In the middle of the 17th century, when monody still dominated in Russian liturgical singing, the latter began to assimilate the standards of polyphonic writing generally accepted in European music. In the late 17th and early 18th century, the imitation forms, especially canon, determined the style of part-singing (*partesnïe*) compositions with their powerful space effects and juxtapositions of large choral masses. The highest achievements in this domain can be found in the works by Vasiliy Titov and Nikolay Diletsky.

Vasiliy Titov (c. 1650 – c. 1715) was an outstanding Russian composer and musician, the Tzar's singer ('pevchiy dyak') at the court of the Tzar Feodor, then at the court of Peter I (Peter the Great). The main part of his musical heritage consists of polychoral concertos and eight Divine Services (Sluzhby Bozhii) for 8, 12, 16 and 24 parts or 2–6 choirs (The Divine Service is a music composition in 5 movements on texts from The Divine Liturgy). Titov's compositions, included in church repertoire all over Russia, were of an utmost importance in the foundation of national music school. Contemporaries considered Titov to be 'the tzar of singers' 'overwhelming everybody by his wisdom'.

Canon is the basis of antiphonal singing in polychoral compositions. Such antiphonal episodes have their origin in Renaissance music and in the works by the composers of the Venetian school. The technique of polychoral imitative writing was described by Diletsky in his treatise *Musikiyskaya Grammatika* ('Music Grammar') as **'Khoralnoe pravilo'** (**'The Choral's Rule'**). The main feature of this technique is the canon in the lower parts of texture, usually in unison (Diletsky 1979, 199, 304, 312, 350–51, 431–4). 'The Choral's Rule' was used in various ways in part-singing concertos and Divine Services.

The quadruple canon for 3 choirs (12 parts) in *Alleluia* (after reading the "Apostle") from the Divine Service *Sigmovaya* is an example of strict interpretation of the 'Choral's Rule' in all singing parts. This canon is in the centre of the composition of *Alleluia*, it takes 14 of 18 bars of this chant and ends with cadence.

In the double concerto '*Gotovo serdtse moe*' ('Ready is my heart', Psalm 56:8, Sept.) Titov constructs a chain of 3 groups of canons with the triumphant text of Ps. 56:8–9: 'I shall sing and chant in my glory. Awake, O, my glory'. In each group, the double (based on two subjects) perpetual canons in tenors and basses alternate with quadruple canons sung by full choirs. Gradually, the subjects are becoming more and more lively, their ambitus grows, the register space enlarges, leading to the jubilant culmination of the whole movement.

Titov often uses octave counterpoint, delivering the music material from one part to another (most often from trebles to tenors and vice versa). This method breaks the strictness of the canon structure, but it makes an effect of timbre renewal: the composer eschews exact repetition for the sake of bright and vivid sound. This 'technique of varying chord complexes with the help of polyphonic devices' (Dubravskaya 1996, 332) was widely used, in particular, by Orlando di Lasso. In examples from Titov's three-choir compositions 'Lord, Now Lettest Thou' (from 'All-Night Vigil') and the Concerto on the Poltava Victory, one can discern features of canon-rondel, based on the principle of part-changing (*Stimmtausch*). The vertical permutation was done between two layers (trebles – tenors), each of them being an ordinary three-part canon.

Canon receives a special 'visual' interpretation in the three-choir concerto 'Today Christ came to the Jordan to be baptized': here music illustrates the words 'The sea saw it and fled' from Psalm 113 (Sept.), producing an effect of waving sea. Strict canon is observed only between the 2nd and 3rd tenors, while in other parts strict imitation is interrupted twice.

In his polyphonic subjects, Titov doubles some voices with imperfect consonances. Perpetual canons and canonic sequences with doubled subjects or, more often, answers result in the enlargement of texture in his polychoral concertos.

The device of doubling in thirds is well-known in part-singing. But Titov's is one of the rare examples of using the doubling technique in canonic sequence. The question is of the double concerto 'The Goldenforged Trumpet', dedicated to St John Chrysostome/Goldenmouthed (Kholopova 1999, 314). The chain of canonic sequences appears in the concerto's fourth movement. It is connected with the text's visual moment, when the Saint is compared with the golden cup, 'streaming the rivers of mellifluous teachings and giving a drink to all the creatures'. Various transformations of the structure of sequences result here in polyphonic micro-variations. Polyphonic variations represent a peculiar feature of Russian polyphony. They can be found in choral works of the second half of the 18th century, including those by Maxim Berezovsky and Dmitriy Bortnyansky, as well as in the oeuvre of such classical composers as Mikhail Glinka and Pyotr Tchaikovsky. Vasiliy Ti-

tov's compositions allow us to consider him as one of the pioneers of these polyphonic forms in Russian music.

The particular feature of Titov's polyphonic technique is the combination of canon and fugue principles. The special example of such synthesis is *Alleluia* from the 24-part Divine Service. This composition is unique among Titov's works and the Russian baroque in general as regards its idea and formal perfection. A rather short piece, it is characterized by an unusually close interplay of canon and fugue principles.

The work's texture consists of four canons with identical beginnings and different developments. Each of four canons embraces six parts. The parts enter in unison at a distance of two bars. The first and the third subjects begin with *c–d–e–c–g*, while the second and the fourth subjects – with *g–a–h–g–c*. Thus, the even beginnings are peculiar tonal answers to the odd ones, and this is the piece's 'fugue' aspect. The interrelations between subject and answer form the texture of *Alleluia*. (Plotnikova 2014, 120–24). The five-note theme, which unites all these canonic constructions, enters every half-bar. At first, it appears in all the first parts in descending order (treble I–alto I–tenor I–bass I), then in the second, third, and fourth parts; only after replacing trebles with altos this explicit structure gets somewhat disrupted. Such a modification of the order of entries is quite widespread among Titov's canonic structures. The third canon is given to tenors, the fourth – to basses; the parts enter in succession from the first to the sixth. The number of imitated sections diminishes in every next part. The present paper's aim is to demonstrate Titov's brilliant polyphonic technique in using various imitative forms.

Aims and repertoire studied

Presentation and analysis of 8-, 12-, 16- and 24-part choral compositions by the Russian baroque composer Vasiliy Titov, whose oeuvre is all but unknown in the West. A number of his works has been discovered and published by the present author.

Methods

Investigation of polyphonic techniques employed in Titov's choral works.

Implications

Demonstration of Titov's unusual polyphonic skill in building diverse imitative forms.

Keywords

National or regional character
Counterpoint
Polyphony
Vocal music
Texture

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