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Contemporary Russian Poetry and the Musical Avant-Garde: Performative Intersections²

*Dedicated to the memory of
Elizaveta Arkadievna Mnatsakanova (Netzkowa)*

This paper is focused on a relatively new phenomenon: joint performances by poets and avant-garde (primarily electronic) musicians in contemporary Russia. In part, these performances are reminiscent of performances by American and Western European poets with jazz ensembles in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time in the Soviet Union, this practice was almost unheard of: when intermedial experiments did take place, poets – particularly the so-called “official” poets – turned not to music but to theatre. The most important elements of these performances were their emphases on virtuosic improvisation, the theatrical immediacy of what was taking place, and creating a community around the performer. In contrast, contemporary collaborations between poets and musicians largely demonstrate the non-self-sufficiency of their respective media and, in doing so, deconstruct the

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very premise of the poetic (lyric) subject. My contention is that intermediality as such – in this case, the interaction between music and poetry – could thus be the most important tool available for creating a “poetry without a subject.” Moreover, in practice, it has acquired a salient social and political meaning in modern Russia: depicting culture as a space of individualized dialogues and polylogues.

Keywords: Russian poetry of the 2010s, intermedial poetry, poetry and music, Stanislav Lvovsky, Dina Gatina, deconstruction of the poetic subject.

1

In today’s Russia, joint performances of poets and musicians are gradually becoming more and more commonly encountered, most often with representatives of jazz or contemporary electronic music. In the United States, such practices are already widespread. There, they have obviously been helped along by the intensive development of rock music and improvised forms of folk poetry that can be traced back to African-American sources.³ Some poets of the “sound wave” of the 1960s and 1970s were also musicians, like Clark Coolidge. Even today, Coolidge from time to time reads his poems accompanied by a jazz ensemble, or he drums with other jazz musicians. Analogous performances by Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka and other American poets are also well-known. However, since the end of the 1990s, such practices seem to be becoming even more in demand: thus, in 1999, poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen performed the poem “Villanelle for Our Time” by Canadian Frank Scott (1899-1985) accompanied by a jazz orchestra. The track was included on his 2004 album “Dear Heather” (Columbia Records); until that time, his albums had only featured ‘songs’ in the more conventional sense.

In Germany, a similar practice most likely stems from the tradition of *Sprechstimme*, a recitative reading accompanied by music that was developed by Engelbert Humperdink, Arnold Schönberg, and other composers at the beginning of the 20th century. The most famous example of music composed for *Sprechstimme* is Schönberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire,” set to the verses of the francophone Belgian poet Albert Giraud. However, in employing this technique, composers assumed that the words would be read not by the poet him / herself but by a specialized singer or reciter. In today’s Germany, the combination of music and original poetry is more often encountered in the form of ‘slam poets,’ such as Jessy James LaFleur,⁴ who strike a balance between poetry ‘proper’ and rap.

³ Gates Jr. (1988).

⁴ See, for instance, recordings of her performance on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymL4sxz-I6c> [06/07/2020].

In Russia, slam is relatively widespread but nonetheless not as popular as in Germany or the United States. Experiments on the border of ‘pure’ poetry and rap have only recently taken hold among Russian audiences. Throughout the 2010s, poet, playwright, and art manager Andrei Rodionov (b. 1971) practiced exactly this manner of reading when performing with the electronic group “Christmas Tree Toys.”⁵ In 2020, high-profile journalist Sergey Yakovlev (b. 1966), who previously had published a collection of poems, recorded an album of poems to trip-hop accompaniment by Dmitry Shumilov “My Legions.”⁶ On the album, Yakovlev chants his poems with an emphatic or exaggerated rhythm – a declamatory manner common enough to Russian poets to be unsurprising were it not for the trip-hop in the background. This action by Yakovlev shows that practices of poetic performance in the spirit of Rodionov are becoming more fashionable and influential.

On the whole, practices combining poetry and music in Russia are not associated with slam and are more broadly distributed across styles. Rodionov and Yakovlev’s practices, for instance, differ quite strongly from songs in which lyrics and music are synthesized; rather, in performances of this kind, poetry and music remain partially independent and are engaged in dialogue. This kind of interaction could also be defined as a form of *intermedial poetry*.⁷ Here, my understanding of intermediality is in agreement with that of Aage A. Hansen-Löve – i.e., the interaction of distinct artistic media within the frame of a single work or intermedial system⁸ – and Dirk Uffelmann, who observes that elements of different artistic media in such a system coexist but do not combine. In the case of a synthetic union of media or the imitation of the hallmarks of one art by means of another, we should talk about other types of cross-mediality.⁹

In other words, intermedial poetry is fundamentally different from songwriting. The 1960s marked the blossoming of the Soviet ‘songwriters’ and the genre of ‘bard songs,’ which were often intellectualized and based on contemporary trends in literature.¹⁰ Since the 2010s, Russian culture has seen an increase in the

⁵ See, for instance, “Architecture” (2010), one of their best collaborations, available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EdiJ7ehztU> [06/07/2020].

⁶ The title track to the album can be viewed on YouTube as of this writing: https://youtu.be/wGc_Ze9-HZs [06/07/2020].

⁷ Mikhail Rodin writes that a new field is currently emerging that he proposes to designate as media poetry [Родин (2016)]: it embraces video poetry, sound poetry and other new practices, like flurf poetry – verses based on results of accidental Web search queries when the search line of a browser gives hilarious or strange ‘hints.’ All of these forms, especially video poetry and ‘sound-music’ poetry, have grown and developed quite quickly in Russophone poetry.

⁸ Hansen-Löve (2008).

⁹ Uffelmann (2011; 2014).

¹⁰ Djagalov (2013).

importance of intermedial poetry, which interacts with other art forms but, crucially, ‘does not combine’ with them.

It begs mention that in contemporary Russian culture, the popularity not only of poetic-musical performances but of all forms of intermedial practices is growing. Since 2006, a festival of video-poetry, «Пятая нога» (“The Fifth Leg”), has been held every two years in Moscow.¹¹ Since 2008, the “Poetronica” festival («Поэтроника») has been organized annually in Moscow by poet, composer, electronic musician, and producer Pavel Zhagun, and his wife and co-author, Elvira Zhagun. During this festival, poets, predominantly innovative and anti-traditionalist, present their works accompanied by electronic music and the video improvisations of VJs. In 2019, Russian artist Alexandra Sukhareva presented, in Venice, her new installation “Ligeia,” based on the distiches of poet and artist Evgenia Suslova, written specifically for this installation. It consisted of four wells or huge vessels, whose inner walls were covered with Suslova’s two-line poems.¹²

Beginning in 2012, well-known Russian poet Andrei Sen-Senkov has regularly been recording albums on which his poems are accompanied by musical works, usually written by up-and-coming or prominent avant-garde composers. Sen-Senkov recorded two such CDs in collaboration with Kirill Shirokov, in 2012 and 2013, respectively; a third disk was recorded in 2015 with Andrei Kireev, Alexei Borisov, Olga Nosova, and Italian composer Alessandro Bosetti. Here, Sen-Senkov’s works were recited by an ensemble of female voices, predominantly young poets themselves; this CD is ironically entitled “Boys Are the Majority.” A fourth disk, “Snow,” was issued in 2017, with music by Aleksei Sysoev; Sen-Senkov’s poems were read in Russian by the author and in Serbian translation by Mirjana Petrovich. Sen-Senkov regularly performs at the “Poetronica” festival¹³ and generally endeavors to include his poems in intermedial contexts: thus, he has several cycles in which poetic texts are presented as captions to photographs; at live readings, Sen-Senkov projects these images on a wall like slides. However, his collaborations extended to include composers in the 2010s.

In 2012, the same year in which Sen-Senkov recorded his first record, Moscow hosted “From Zero to One,” the first big joint evening of young poets and composers. The director of the poetry program was poet and publisher Dmitry Kuzmin, and composer Kirill Shirokov was responsible for the musical program. The evening consisted of alternating performances by musicians, poets, and translators, but twice during the event, composers Denis Khorov and Kirill Shirokov

¹¹ The best videos of this contest are regularly screened at the annual Moscow International Film Festival. The organizer of this festival was and now is Andrei Rodionov, mentioned above as a poet.

¹² Contessanally (2019).

¹³ His performance (3.54-4.45) at the festival in 2018 was recorded by Elvira Zhagun and is accessible on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZSElFDTjr0> [06/07/2020].

accompanied poets Aleksandr Skidan and Dina Gatina with improvisational music (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Dina Gatina and Kirill Shirokov.

Joint performance at the event “From Zero to One.”

Conference Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, March 22, 2012. Photo: Dmitry Kuzmin.

Soon afterwards, Gatina wrote the poem “Silk” specifically for Shirokov to respond to in music. Shirokov’s resulting composition was intended to be performed not by Gatina but by a professional singer¹⁴ with a capella accompaniment. “The intonational structure of the composition, its inner space, is inspired by the author’s way of reading and, of course, is somehow connected with collaboration but is not a direct result of the performance of ‘Silk’,” commented Shirokov in a personal communication. The “direct result of the performance,” it seems, was further collaboration with Dina Gatina.

¹⁴ A recording of Sasha Elina’s performance of this work is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VRKSAw35rc> [06/07/2020].

In the mid-2010s, poet, prose writer, historian, and political analyst Stanislav Lvovsky, now living in the UK, began creating electronic compositions for his own poems, recording them at home and publishing them on Soundcloud.¹⁵ In April 2020, during the COVID-19 epidemic, Lvovsky published his own 14-minute musical composition in the ‘ambient’ genre, composed of fragments from the sermons of three American Evangelicals (one of whom was the famous Billy Graham), over which he set electronic music.¹⁶ For this remix, Lvovsky selected fragments in which the preachers warn that the End of Days is already upon us and that their listeners should choose sides between good and evil. One of the leitmotifs of his composition is the rhythmic repetition of the word “righteous.” Clearly, his work is aimed at calling into question the manifold examples of apocalyptic rhetoric employed in public speech during the period of March to April 2020 – the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemics.

All of these publications demonstrate that collaborative projects between poets and musicians – and, perhaps, poets and video artists – in contemporary Russia are definitional to intermedial aesthetics. In this article, fundamental attention will be paid to clarifying why the collaboration between poets and musicians is currently enjoying such a particular vogue in Russia and why, moreover, from a theoretical standpoint, such a social-cultural trend appears so paradoxical.

The theorists of postmodernism indicate that “monologic” (to use the term of Mikhail Bakhtin) discourses are in decline and that the spoken word is becoming less culturally significant than the written one – but also that writing itself is less important than the visual image. Today, according to researchers, we are witnessing “the displacement of symbolic and linguistic verbliness by new multimedia technologies (radio, television, video, internet, etc.)” and “the transformation of medial genres into artistic works or, more precisely, aesthetic processes”.¹⁷ However, the spoken word in contemporary poetry is hardly monologic – it is either drawn into dialogue (e.g., with music) or itself becomes a polylogue of several voices (on this, see below). This performative verbliness extends to its dialogue with the performative deployment of music. We can say that in contemporary Russian poetry, intermediality is, for the most part, connected with performativity.

Existing studies of intermediality in literature focus on the interaction between literature and spatial or visual arts¹⁸ or literature and film.¹⁹ Efim Etkind’s study²⁰ applies exclusively to poetic texts that are clearly – in one way or another –

¹⁵ His Soundcloud recordings are available at:

<https://soundcloud.com/search?q=stanislav%20lvovsky> [06/07/2020].

¹⁶ See <https://soundcloud.com/semio-1/14-eschatological-minutes-with-two-american-evangelicals-preaching-on-11730-khz-255-meter-band> [06/07/2020].

¹⁷ Hansen-Löve (2001: 35-36).

¹⁸ Ders. (1983; 2008).

¹⁹ Witte (1999); Корчагин (2019).

²⁰ ЭТКИНД (1978: 367-492).

already close to music (rather than the interaction of poetry and music) and is limited to poems written up to and including 1947. The question as to the forms of interaction between poetry and music is also discussed in the section “Poetry and Music” of the collective work “Poetry. A Textbook.”²¹ However, this section is forced – due to limitations of volume and scope – to be a general sketch. The collective monograph edited by Gabriele Rippl includes chapters on the parallels between poetry and music, such as where poetic form recalls music and other important issues²², but not on intermedial systems that include both poetic and musical elements. It seems that exploring such systems in contemporary culture requires the creation of new methodological tools.

I believe that the most important of these would require a shift in emphasis from the semiotic aspects of poetry and music to their communicative and performative properties. Poetry, just like music, can be understood as a performative model of communication or auto-communication unfolding in time. The intermedial interaction between the two can thus be described as a second-order model of the same.

2

In 2007, poet and essayist Aleksei Parshchikov claimed that the interaction of poetry with other arts is becoming an internationally recognized cultural practice that allows authors who write in different languages to communicate – and that even those authors fluent in this cosmopolitan language within Russia were alienated from the general development of Russian culture.

На западных фестивалях – и музыкальных (джазовых, саунд-арта), и поэтических – можно встретить поющих или подыгрывающих поэтов; они обычно пользуются особым расположением аудитории и не нуждаются в переводчиках. Наверняка на памяти у всех Аллен Гинсберг, аккомпанирующий на пенджабской пианоле. А может быть, поющий и пританцовывающий Кларк Кулидж? Это “фестивальное” общество перманентного всемирного мероприятия, где все находится в обмене со всем (языки и гендерные различия, музыка и поэзия, религиозные практики), кажется, постепенно приходит и на российские площадки. И если это так, то Д.А. был одним из создателей этой новой артистической сцены.²³

In Western festivals dedicated to music (jazz, sound art) as well as to poetry, one can find poets singing or performing; they usually enjoy a special stage and do not need interpreters. No one can forget an Allen Ginsberg accompaniment on the Punjabi piano. Or perhaps a singing and dancing Clark Coolidge? This ‘festival’

²¹ Азарова / Корчагин / Кузьмин и др. (2016: 655-665).

²² The chapter by Werner Wolf (2015) included in this book contains an extensive bibliography on the topic of ‘Literature and Music,’ but new forms of intermediality such as those discussed in this article are not present in these works. Cf. Rippl (2015); Scher (1984).

²³ Парщикова (2007).

society of the permanent global event, where everything is exchanged (languages and gender differences, music and poetry, religious practices) seems to be gradually coming to Russia as well. And if that is true, then D.A. Prigov was one of the creators of this new artistic scene.

It seems, then, that in the 2000s and 2010s, this cosmopolitan language began to exert increasing influence even on the less radical forms of poetry – at least in Russia. Even those poets who are more conventional in their aesthetics can participate in intermedial poetic performances.

Intermedial poetic performances arise at the intersection of two evolutionary lines of cultural development: sound poetry and musical-oral performances, which imply a dialogue between poet and musician-performer. These two traditions are connected with different aesthetic tasks: sound poetry is aimed at undermining ready-made meanings and transgressing (or transcending) pure linguistic forms, while musical-oral performances are aimed at strengthening the emotional expressiveness and suggestiveness of a poetic work.

Before discussing what happens as a result of connecting these two lines, I will briefly describe them separately.

Steve McCaffery describes the tradition of sound poetry in his excellent essay of 1978, that seems to have retained its academic relevance even today. According to McCaffery, sound poetry was a new kind of poetry emerging in the late 19th century, and using “language’s non-semantic, acoustic properties” as well as the “phonematic aspect of language.”²⁴ In other words, this type of poetic utterance consists not of sequences of grammatically and rhythmically ordered meanings, but of intentionally deconstructed elements of language: particular words or even sounds, the clash of grammatical constructions, presented at an author’s (or at an actor’s) live performance, embodied by an author or an actor. However, this new type of poem could also include elements of common language or could consist only of ‘transrational’ (that is, using a term of the Russian Futurists: «заумные») elements. In any case, the foremost element of sound poetry is the author’s reading. McCaffery separates the contemporary stage of the development of sound poetry (represented by such authors as Henri Chopin, Bernard Heidsieck, Paula Claire, and others) from groups working with sound recordings, collages, artificially transformed voices, mixtures of words and non-human natural sounds, etc., in that the authors of the first group act as performers and vehicles for a physical vocalization – as was the case of the Dadaists.

Melodeclamation, in contrast, was a fashionable form of art in early 20th century Russia²⁵; however, this practice was based on an actor’s / actress’s reading of a poem or prose fragment accompanied by a chamber orchestra or a piano, similar to the *Sprechstimme* developing in Germany at the same time. In the 1920s,

²⁴ McCaffery (1978).

²⁵ Ольшевская (2015).

melodeclamation was ‘sovietized’ in the practice of so-called «ритмодекламация» [‘rhythm-declamation’], but gradually faded later in the same decade.²⁶

In the 1950-60s, ‘official’ («подцензурные» or ‘censored’) poets frequently performed in public, but rarely collaborated with musicians. These legally sanctioned poets were more interested in working with the theatre. The most vivid example of such collaborations was the play “Anti-Worlds,” staged at Moscow’s Taganka Theatre in 1965 and based on poems by the then very fashionable poet Andrei Voznesenskii; the play was directed by Iurii Liubimov, and the production was designed by Enar Stenberg.

The emergence of truly intermedial forms combining poetry and music became possible first of all due to the development of independent – or, as Russianists say, ‘unofficial’ («неподцензурная» or ‘uncensored’ and therefore illegal) – poetry.

At the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s, sound poetry first took hold in Moscow through the practice of the repetition and transformation of words. Here, one could mention the unofficial poets Elizaveta Mnatsakanova (1922-2019) and Andrei Monastyrskii (b. 1949), the latter of whom would also become a well-known conceptual artist but began essentially as the disciple of the former.²⁷ Later, collaboration with musicians became a significant part of Mnatsakanova’s art – she was a pianist herself – and of the Moscow conceptualists. This applies especially to one of the leaders of Russian conceptualism Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, who performed many times with avant-garde jazz bands like «Три О» (“The Three Os”) or «Поп-механика» (“Pop Mechanics”). Jazz trumpeter Sergei Letov performed throughout the 1990s-2000s with an astonishing number of poets from the same milieu, including: Nina Iskrenko (1951-1995), Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov (resulting in two joint albums),²⁸ Lev Rubinstein, Andrei Bitov, Viacheslav Kupriianov, Andrei Bychkov,²⁹ Anna Al’chuk, Vladimir Druk, Nikolai Baitov and Sveta Litvak, Erkki Lappalainen (Finland-Sweden), Valère Novarina (France), Michel Houellebecq (France), Marina Kniazeva, Sergei Biriukov (with whom Letov also recorded a joint CD),³⁰ Maksim Amelin, and others. For her part, Mnatsakanova emigrated to Vienna in 1975, where she jointly recorded an album with avant-garde musicians Martina Cizek

²⁶ Presently, ‘rhythm-declamation’ is also being revived (not accidentally, in my opinion, but rather in keeping with the trend described in this paper) and is considered a useful means of ‘aesthetic education’ in Russian kindergartens (propagated as a ‘new’ practice on professional pedagogical websites).

²⁷ Kalinsky (2018).

²⁸ Prigov and Letov’s joint recordings are available at: <http://conceptualism.letov.ru/Prigov.html> [06/07/2020].

²⁹ Bychkov and Letov’s joint performance is available at: <https://youtu.be/fqJF52BH0YE> [06/07/2020].

³⁰ Letov and Biriukov’s joint performance is available at: <https://youtu.be/hTZGr4LmrYs> [06/07/2020].

and Wolfgang Musil in the early 2000s. However, in Russia such collaborations were not widespread outside unofficial avant-garde circles.

Intermedial poetic performance has remained one of the main idioms of the group “Orbita,” based in Riga, Latvia.³¹ They have performed their (mostly Russian-language) poems with DJs and VJs and have at many festivals in Europe very successfully presented their performance “FM Slow Show,” where the members of the group recite their works interspersed with electronic sounds emanating from antique radio sets. Since the late 1990s, they have performed many similar experiments.

These practices have been developed and received primarily in Latvia. Experts and visitors from Russia to such literary evenings generally perceived these experiments to be elements of an avant-garde show rather than a manifestation of a new form of poetic expression. Despite Sergei Letov’s impressive energy, in Russia of the 1990s, his numerous experiments were ‘read’ as an element of his personal musical style. One would often hear that “Letov can play with anyone,” but today, such forms of collaboration have rightfully earned recognition as a harbinger of a more general and universal spirit in aesthetic trends.

In 1997, Lesia Tyshkovskaia, a Russian-speaking poet from Kiev, performed in Moscow. During her performance, she alternated between reading and singing, accompanying herself on piano and guitar and performing her poems together with Sergei Letov. In a review of her performance published in “The Literary Life of Moscow,” the author asks: “Does verbal art, so comprehensively integrated into a musical and theatrical complex, retain the possibility of its autonomous existence and, thus, the status of literature?”³² Today, the very formulation of the question would be revised. Intermedial poetry is both autonomous – because it “does not combine” with other media – and non-autonomous – because it is included in a broader medial context.

In the current culture, intermedial forms of poetry tend to emerge from experimentation in local and well-established aesthetic forums. At the “Poetronica” festival, for example, a good number of poets have presented works representing a broad stylistic – and musical – range. In the early 2000s, comparable forms of collaboration existed in Russia but would have been considered contrary to the status quo. Thus, when in 2003, the “May Poetic Opera” festival was organized in Moscow, it included an evening of poetry and music. Critic Aleksander Privalov later commented in his review:

[...] в большинстве выступлений, надо сказать, идея музыкально-поэтического диалога была предьявлена сугубо формально — вплоть до

³¹ Platt (2014); Маурицио (2019).

³² Text available at: <http://www.vavilon.ru/lit/nov97.html#611> [06/07/2020]. Author anonymous.

умудрившегося сыронизировать над заданной рамкой Константина Рубахина, читавшего стихи с не издавшим ни одного звука аккордеоном на шее.³³

[...] in the majority of presentations, the idea of dialogue between poetry and music was presented very formally, right up to point when poet Konstantin Rubakhin contrived to make a mockery of the theme and recited his poems with an accordion hanging from his neck without emitting a sound.

This sort of rejection of musical collaboration on behalf of a poet would be unthinkable in today's poetic scene, at least in Moscow.

All of the works mentioned above could be said to aim at a rather sophisticated audience. However, one can find equivalents in Russian pop culture. One of the brightest examples is Vera Polozkova, a pop poet and one of the very few authors in contemporary Russian poetry who can easily fill a hall of approximately 1,000-2,000 people in almost any major city. Usually, she recites her poems accompanied by a chamber orchestra, or a piano, or a rock group.³⁴ We can assume that Polozkova presents herself as a pop star – and the status of a 'star' in contemporary mass culture is much higher than that of a poet, who is a rather marginal figure unless he or she can write satirical or erotic poems that are easily converted into Internet memes. In the past, pop poetry in Russia – such as Evgenii Evtushenko, Dmitrii Bykov, or Andrei "Orlusha" Orlov – did not collaborate with musicians to enhance contact with their audience; the main form of intermediality available to them was some variant of poetic theater, which situated the figure of the subject or subjects of poetic speech on stage, front and center. In the case of Dmitrii Bykov and Andrei Orlov, such a theatricalized project found its apotheosis in the television program "Citizen Poet" and its successor "Citizen Good."³⁵ Through these broadcasts, one can see the cross-medial theatrical development of official poets in the 1960s. The musical component of Polozkova's work can likewise be read as an element of a larger theatrical project; however, I find it important to place it in a different context – the intermediality associated with music. It seems that Polozkova, although a poet, also associates herself with rap, a practice that is intermediate in status between poetry and music. On November 26, 2018, the Moscow club "Glavklub" held a large concert of rappers in solidarity with the rapper Husky shortly after he was arrested in Krasnodar for *de facto* political reasons. For the finale of the concert, leading Russian rappers came on stage in support with Polozkova among them.³⁶

³³ Привалов (2003).

³⁴ See, for example, her poetic-musical video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GVIDslpLBA&t=54s> [16/04/2020].

³⁵ For more on "Citizen Poet" see Barkovskaya (2014); Hodgson / Smith (2017).

³⁶ For a full recording of the concert, see YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wR7nQc4BJII> [06/07/2020]. Polozkova is on stage at 2:36:18 in the center of the frame.

Consequently, the question arises as to why poetry and music in Russia should meet precisely in the first two decades of the millennium. One might suppose that the aesthetic and social goals undertaken by poets and composers, or the interaction between poetic and musical works (in Lvovsky's case), have been covertly changed.

3

In the period before the millennium, poets collaborated with musicians primarily in the mode of performative estrangement («остранение») of the established concept of poetry. Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov or Lev Rubinstein reading with a jazz band could be perceived as 'singers and non-singers' at the same time. Their performance and their very poems were a form of transgression; namely, the deconstruction of clichés of Soviet consciousness, as well as the consciousness of their contemporaries who believed in the authenticity and uniqueness of the self.

In 1990s Latvia, the members of the "Orbita" group presented their poems in an atmosphere in which the mutual distrust between Latvian-language and Russian-language communities was on the rise, if not at the levels seen today. The "Orbita" poets have never associated themselves with the Soviet past or with Russian nationalism; they style themselves as representatives of westernized culture who have elaborated different versions of *minor writing*, to use the term of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.³⁷ In a case of intermedial performances of "Orbita," minor writing transfers the burden of meaning from a text as an autonomous semantic system to a text in a musical environment, a text as an element of a complex cultural 'force field' that includes non-linguistic elements. Even in non-literary circles, this form of poetry can be perceived as 'contemporary,' as opposed to 'traditionally Russian,' in spite of its multithreaded connection with Russian modernist (*not* Soviet) poetic tradition.³⁸ Moreover, the poetry of "Orbita" is highly medialized in its distribution and therefore transgresses every habitual context of state-supported Russian literature.

I believe that a breaking point in the development of dialogue between Russian poetry and music took place in 2003 – not in Moscow but in Berlin. In that year, a new work by the Russian-German composer Sergej Newski was performed in the Staatsoper as one of a series of location events. This 'music play,' called "Invasion," included a reading by poet Kirill Medvedev. Sergej Newski was one of the first contemporary composers – if not the very first – who brought Russian poetry of today onto a stage hitherto reserved for music and, hence, to the

³⁷ Deleuze / Guattari (1986).

³⁸ For example, in one of the early poems of Sergei Timofeev, «Приходит человек, его костюм измят...» ("A man is coming, his suit is wrinkled..."), one can discern the references to poetry of the unofficial, semi-underground writers Konstantin Vaginov (1899-1934) and Alexander Vvedensky (1904-1941).

attention of contemporary musicians. Henceforth, diverse forms of collaboration and interaction have developed quite quickly; however, in the late 2000s, and later, this evolution would become even more intense. (Kirill Medvedev later performed songs of the left by forming his own rock band, “Arkadii Kots,” named after the first translator of “The Internationale” into Russian³⁹.) Thus, all of these features can enjoy a high demand in the contemporary poetry of Russia, but for reasons other than those found in the works of the “Orbita” group.

A key aspect of the transition to properly intermedial forms later in the 2000s and 2010s, however, is that the poetic elements in the compositions of Lvovsky, or Sen-Senkov, or even Vera Polozkova are represented as *non-self-sufficient*. Polozkova comes closest to traditional melodeclamation, but the music accompanying its reading does not underscore its dominant affect – these are jazz compositions in which there is no such emotional dominant. The voice of Polozkova, reading the poems, is perceived in such compositions as a figure emerging from a musical background (to recall the terminology of Gestalt psychology) and perceived in relation to this background.

This non-self-sufficiency is slightly different in more experimental intermedial systems, such as readings performed at the “Poetronica” festival or the musical-poetic works of Sen-Senkov and Lvovsky. Scholarship shows that in contemporary Russian poetry – as in majority of other European literatures – the most important elements of experimental aesthetics are the dissociation of discourses and the disintegration of the poetic subject, which has become fragmented and divided between several voices.⁴⁰ In complete contradiction of Bakhtin’s theory, today’s poetry is polyphonic no less – and perhaps *far more* – than its novels, at least of the ‘traditional’ narrative variety. This is certainly true of poets such as Lvovsky and Sen-Senkov, in whose works the authoritative ‘ego’ of the speaking subject is minimized. Sen-Senkov’s poems often look like narrative, although this narrativity is fictive: as Mikhail Iampolski has suggested, the most important element of Sen-Senkov’s poetry is its use of “prefiguration,”⁴¹ which anticipates future events, and many of his poems consist of a series of such “pre-figurations.” The texts of Lvovsky are also most often deprived of a single, consistently acting ‘subject of speech’⁴² – rather, they are constructed as a complex collage of statements belonging to different voices.⁴³

The dialogical nature of Russian intermedial poetry is also noticeable if we take into account the multiplicity of speakers in Sen-Senkov’s albums. In “Boys

³⁹ See, for instance, this performance of a poem by Briton Adrian Mitchell in Medvedev’s translation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VhB2ICK21g> [06/07/2020].

⁴⁰ Лехциер (2013); Бочавер (2019); Кузьмин (2019); Шталь (2019); Житенев (2019) etc.

⁴¹ Ямпольский (2003).

⁴² Regarding terminology see Вестстейн (2019).

⁴³ Kukulin (2010); Бочавер (2019).

are the Majority” («Мальчиков больше», 2015), each poem is recited by a different voice, and in “Snow,” the author is recorded in dialogue with Melina Panaotović, who reads Sen-Senkov’s poems in Serbian.

From 1958 to 1962, Umberto Eco wrote the essay “The Open Work.”⁴⁴ According to Eco, works of art contemporary to his time leave much more room open for the reaction and ‘reflection’ of the reader. Many of the poetic works with which we are concerned can also be described as ‘open,’ but in a sense different from that intended by Eco: a very large role in them is played by intentionality, or the idea of turning the poem outwards – towards external world and to a reader. Sen-Senkov’s “prefigurations” can be understood as a thematicization of this intentionality, its transformation into an element of plot in the poem.

Dmitry Kuzmin suggests a trend in which contemporary poetry is undertaking a “restoration of the subject,” possible only after its preliminary destruction. Thus, he considers the most important feature of Aleksander Skidan’s poems to be the “multivalent disintegration of the text as an active practice aimed at restoring the subject to its rights”⁴⁵ and concludes that one of the central strategies for working with subjectivity in the poetry of the 2010s is “gathering oneself in the act of dissemination.”⁴⁶

I beg to differ with this interpretation. In my opinion, the “restoration of the subject” did indeed take place in postconceptualism, which Kuzmin aptly described in 2001,⁴⁷ but, in the poetry of today, a different process is underway: the separation of intentionality from the individual subject, which in lyric until now had been united ‘by default.’ The single subject is not restored, but *its intention*, the ability of the text to address and be addressed, is restored. However, it addresses itself outward not as a monological voice but as a chorus in which none of the constituent ‘participants’ are privileged. The collaboration of contemporary poets with musicians or their own musical experiments give one form to this intentionality, announcing it aesthetically.

An example of such ‘intentionality without a subject’ is a recent poem by Stanislav Lvovsky, to which he composed his own electronic music:

всё что понял понимает-человек
всё забудет забывает-человек

Отцветает ветхий человек

*Не введи себя во человек
Если ты неловкий человек*

⁴⁴ Eco (1989).

⁴⁵ Кузьмин (2019: 210).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁷ Кузьмин (2001).

Заступает новый человек

Истекает ветхий человек

*Не ходи вагонный человек
Стороной бессонных человек*

Прицветает новый человек

Уезжает ветхий человек

*Отходи уже не человек
Отводи своих нечеловек*

Припадает новый человек

Ничего не понимает человек.
Ничего не забывает человек⁴⁸.

everything he understood understands-a-person
everything will be forgotten forgets-a-person

A frail old person is fading

*Don't introduce yourself into a person
If you're a clumsy person*

A new person is on the rise

A frail old person is dying

*Don't walk, wagon person,
To the side of sleepless persons*

A new person is in bloom

A frail old person is departing

*Step away already not a person
Lead away your unpersons*

A new person is coming

A person understands nothing.
A person forgets nothing.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Text available at: <https://snob.ru/entry/153276/> [06/07/2020].

⁴⁹ Trans. David Hock.

The music in this intermedial composition consists of the hissing noise produced by old radios searching for the right frequency, a rhythmic ‘ringing’ motif, again without any pronounced affective coloring, and then quickly appearing and disappearing excerpts from jazz works from the first half of the twentieth century. I would remind the reader that radio receivers are also used in the performances of the “Orbita” group. It is tempting to believe that the noise and crackling, which arise from the inaccurate choice of wavelength, could be understood as a sound metaphor for the poem’s immersion in a modern medial and cultural context and the incomplete autonomy of the work, as opposed to the emphasized autonomy and insularity of the modernist work.

This music is set to the author’s reading. Some lines are recorded by Lvovsky in a ‘natural’ voice, while others are quietly intoned and repeated as if by another voice and its echo. The single character of the poem – “person” («человек») – breaks down into a series of images by the same name but with different epithets: “new person,” “frail old person,” “clumsy person,” and man as a space of temptation (here, Lvovsky transforms the Church Slavonic text of the “Our Father”: “Do not lead us into temptation,” as adopted in the Russian Orthodox Church). However, from the very start, the single “person” mutates into separate personae under the names “understands-a-person” and “forgets-a-person,” and later – into an “unperson / non-person,” who as such threatens other “persons.”⁵⁰

For all its fragmentation, however, the poem has a single intention, underscored by reflexive repetition (as in the monorhyme “person” [«человек»] on which every line ends in Russian) as well as a single pattern in the accompanying musical composition. This intention constructs a fragmented and simultaneously unified image of the “person.” This “person” is not an allegory, but rather an analogue of “someone,” a generalized contemporary consciousness that “understands nothing” and “forgets nothing.” Variation in the compulsive repetition dematerializes the very possibility of building such a unified image. However, the voices speaking in the poem do not “complete” this image, do not say “the last word” about it (again, to use Bakhtin’s terminology), but address it directly without knowing the outcome of that address. It is as if the inchoate image of the “person” were a real addressee: “*Step away already not a person / Lead away your unpersons.*” In such appeals, the image of the addressee is constructed as a possible interlocutor; procedurally – and performatively – it is affirmed as ‘half-existing.’

In his ‘apocalyptic’ composition of 2020, Lvovsky estranges (*остраняет*) not his own word but the word of another: the speech of radio preachers, threatening the end of the world. In general, in modern culture, electronic remixes can

⁵⁰ Similar language experiments in the creation of new words by combining existing ones with a hyphen have been previously undertaken by Andrei Poliakov in the 2000s; the similarity and differences between his strategy and the work of Lvovsky requires a separate discussion. On Poliakov, see: Кукулин (2002); Бочавер (2019).

be used to defame and ridicule authoritative discourse. In 2015, the Russian postmodern rap band “Krovostok” (“The Blood Groove”) recorded a remix of the extremely right-wing and highly aggressive preacher, Father Dmitrii Smirnov (1951–2020), presenting his sermon as a purely artistic phenomenon in the spirit of the aestheticized aggression of the group itself.⁵¹ It should be mentioned that the band members seemingly have more or less liberal views (at least they performed at the liberal opposition rally in Moscow in 2019) and therefore position themselves as political opponents of Smirnov. But Lvovsky, unlike the members of the “Krovostok” group, does not select ridiculous quotes from his sources but rather the most characteristic ones. For this reason, his composition does not seem to satirize a particular person or worldview but rather ambiguously distorts and estranges apocalyptic rhetoric as such.

I already cited the example of Kirill Shirokov’s collaboration with Dina Gatina. Here, it deserves further analysis. Commenting on their joint performance at “From Zero to One” in 2012, Dmitry Kuzmin writes in the journal “Vozdukh”:

[...] фрагментарная структура гатинской поэзии, акцентированная ускользающим, угасающим авторским интонированием, находилась в гармоническом резонансе с пуантилизмом широковского аккомпанемента [...] однако за этим фасадом был совершенно явственен устойчивый лирический субъект с отчётливым месседжем.⁵²

[...] the fragmentary structure of Gatina’s poetry, accentuated by the author’s elusive, withering intonation, harmonized with the pointilism of Shirokov’s accompaniment [...] but behind this facade was a completely explicit, stable lyrical subject with a lucid message.

The recording of that performance was not available to me at the time of work on this article, so I cannot say whether I could agree with Kuzmin’s idea of a “stable lyrical subject.” However, the poem “Silk,” which followed from that performance, as well as the way it was interpreted by Shirokov, clearly demonstrates the lessons both authors learned from their first, improvisational experience of collaboration. There is no “I” in this text. Its composition draws precisely upon the tension between the deconstruction of the subject and the unity of its intonation. This work consists of short melodic phrases: fragments that the singer half-declains, half-sings, largely reproducing the intonation of Gatina herself. The individual fragments are separated by very long pauses, noticeably longer than the intervals of singing and reading. As a result of these pauses, the resumption of musical movement is always perceived as a surprise.

Несколько вперед
некролог
хвостик

⁵¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zek9F1CqVvM&t=3s> [06/07/2020].

⁵² Text available at: <http://www.litkarta.ru/projects/vozdukh/news/2012-03-21-0-1/> [22/04/2021].

[...]
 Это история
 истерика
 вся в белых стихах
 по мышинному следу
 день серый
 например
 на этикетку
 в глубь серого
 где прошли
 ли
 на воде
 и остальных продуктах.⁵³

A little way ahead
 obituary
 rat tail
 [...]
 This is history
 hysteria
 everything in blank verse
 across the track of a mouse
 a grey day
 for example
 on the label
 into the deep of the grey
 whether
 they walked through
 on water
 and on other products.⁵⁴

“Silk” is not intermedial poetry in the strict sense of the word, but we can consider it *in the context* of intermedial poetry, as it was written under the influence of collaboration between Shirokov and Gatina. In this work, we can see the interaction of two factors: the deconstruction of the self and the musical reconstruction of its vocal intonation, which supplants the displaced subject.

We should not forget to mention the composers who are involved in these projects, who could be considered “dialogical” as well. Pavel Zhagun and Kirill Shirokov are not only composers but also poets themselves. Most of the other musicians involved in media poetry projects are interested either in contempo-

⁵³ I was unable to find this text in a published version, so this represents a transcription of the performance on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VRKSAw35rc&t=274s> [05/04/2021].

⁵⁴ Trans. David Hock.

rary poetry or in combinations of music and spoken words, like Olga Nosova⁵⁵ or Alessandro Bosetti.⁵⁶ In 2005, soon after the project with Medvedev had been performed, Sergej Newski presented his work „Und dass der Tod nicht fern bleibt“ (for speaker and string quartet), performed together with German poet, composer, and artist Michael Lentz.⁵⁷ Today’s Russian composers have become increasingly dialogue-oriented, relative to musicians of the previous generation.

The reasons for the intermedial interaction between poets and musicians becoming so widespread in the 2010s deserve a separate discussion. The cultural and medial foundations of this new practice are obvious. First of all, in the 2010s, technological access allowed even non-specialists to write music on a computer and overlay poetic readings, and the convenience of digital communication made it easy for authors living and working in different cities and even countries to collaborate. In addition, multimedia narratives – for example, in media itself – have become very common in the last decade, and multimedia performances have become an important art form. All these innovations encourage poets to collaborate with musicians and lend the practice more and more culturally legitimacy.

However, there is probably another reason that is socio-cultural. The collaboration of poets and musicians, or the interaction of poetry and music within one work (as in Lvovsky) opens spaces for unpredictable creative interplay. A poetic word in such a space becomes unfinished, open to new meanings and associations – precisely because musicians select or compose music that is not affective and does not enhance the dominant emotive tendency of a text but rather problematizes it. Music here ‘shakes down’ the conventional flow of affect and emotional expectation – to an even greater extent than poetry does – but also preserves and even enhances our understanding of the poem as a communicative act addressed to an interlocutor. Performances by poets at the “Poetronica” festival are organized in an emphatically ‘collaborative manner’: participants are seated next to each other and pass on the microphone. Paradoxically, this multimedia performance visually acquires the features of joint, collective work.

The first to import this approach to Russia were poets and DJs Igor Davletshin (1967-2002) and Dmitrii Kravchuk (b. 1967), who then lived in the city of Kemerovo in southern Siberia. Their experiments were part of the collective project “Siberia Nova Kultura” [sic!]. Like the members of “Orbita,” they read poems to their own DJ music, and the poems were printed not only in the

⁵⁵ See <https://polymus.ru/ru/events/exhibitions/ian-douglas-moorepaul-rothaleksey-borisov-i-olga-nosova/> [06/07/2020].

⁵⁶ See <http://www.melgun.net/about/> [06/07/2020].

⁵⁷ A recording of this quartet is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B20iL2T7cbY> [06.07.2020]. References to Lentz’s audio-plays (Hörspielen) and CDs could be found here: <http://www.michaellentz.com/audio/> [06/07/2020].

form of traditional books or booklets, but also in the form of unusual visual compositions (Figure 2). All of these experiments in the works of Davletshin and Kravchuk, I believe, were connected with the experience of non-self-sufficiency and openness of the poetic word.



Figure 2: Igor Davletshin. The visual-poetic composition “Solidarity” (late 1990s).
From the personal archive of the author.

Since 2005, the “Festival of Spoken Verse” has been held in Moscow every two years as part of the “Moscow Poetry Biennale.” According to this anonymously authored description available on the “Literary Map of Russia” website:

[...] [участников фестиваля] объединяет их отношение к поэзии не только как к письменному слову, но и как к слову устному: произносимому, декламируемому. Исполнение стихотворения предстает своего рода новым произведением, не тождественным письменному тексту, – в нем, благодаря тембру, высоте, силе голоса, манере авторского исполнения, интонирования, аранжировки, возникают дополнительные эстетические измерения.⁵⁸

[...] [Festival participants] are united in their attitude towards poetry not only as written word but also as oral: spoken, recited. Each performance of a poem represents a new work that is not identical to the written text – in it, new aesthetic dimensions emerge through the timbre, height, and power of the voice, the manner of the author’s execution, the intonation, and the arrangement.

From the point of view of Hansen-Löve or Uffelmann, the performances presented at the Festival of Spoken Verse are not intermedial but synthetic. But even in

⁵⁸ <http://www.litkarta.ru/projects/msk-biennale/programs/golos/> [22/04/2021].

these performances, sustainable meanings and sustainable forms of representation are undermined, and the subjectivity represented in the works is obviously performative: it is created and maintained only in the moment of its execution.

In contemporary culture, such practices collectively take on the meaning of *utopian projects*. Private communication is increasingly concentrated in social media and, in this sense, ‘devoid of physicality,’ while public communication is colored by the influence of ‘ready-made genres’ born from the fields of politics, media, or corporate relations. New examples of public communication are emerging, aimed at undermining these ready-made genres, ranging from inter-medial poetry to the experimental stand-up comedy showcased on the series “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” (Prime Video, written and produced by Amy Sherman-Palladino, 2017-present). In Russia, such “utopian collaborations” are even more important because of the alienation of intellectuals from the social majority and the highly developed ritualization of public life.⁵⁹

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⁵⁹ Дубин (2006).

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