

The 18th – Early 19th Century Russian Romance Song as a Precursor of M. Glinka's Works

Elena Klimenko

Russian State Specialized Academy of Arts

Moscow, Russia

E-mail: klimenko.ev@gmail.com

Abstract—The article covers the Russian composer M. Glinka's musical and aesthetic thinking in view of development of 18th-19th-century Russian romance song. The author researches the phenomenon in the context of musicology and vocal performance, discussing the historical background and basic elements of the above period's romance song which eminently influenced Glinka's musical stylistics.

Keywords—Russian folk singing; romance song; historical background; composer; performance; aesthetics; interpretation; Russian school of singing

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Over two centuries of Russian romance song has justifiably occupied an honorable place in world music culture. Masterpieces created by our great fellow-citizens, such as Michail Glinka, Petr Tchaikovsky, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Sergei Taneev have, for many years, been in the lead in Russian and foreign music literature, meeting the requirements of both experts and music lovers in face of changeable aesthetic preferences.

As any creation of art, romantic songs embody their authors' thoughts and feelings, as well as aesthetics and stylistics of the time. Accumulated over the years fact-based materials, including memoir and epistolary heritage of composers, public figures, performers, connected with development of romance song and the history of its interpretation, preserve the spirit of the gone age and can be quite appealing to those coming in touch with this distinctive phenomenon.

The word romance originates from Spain and initially meant secular Spanish song. Along with song genres the immediate predecessors of romance song were text underlays for dance, i.e. minuets, sicilianas, etc. [1]. Development of romance song as a specific genre blending music and poetry began in the second part of the 18th century and is inextricably connected with the infancy of the Russian art of singing. In her book, *The Russian School of Singing*, researcher A. Yakovleva outlines that, in Russia, the most significant roots of secular singing by professional musicians came from Russian folk song, folk performance and choral excellence.

M. Glinka considered that music is created by people, while composers just arrange it. A well-known Russian

music critic, V. Stasov, wrote: "The role played by folk song for our people is unique, having preserved its richness and diversity. This made it distinctive and led to its special function" (as cited in A. Yakovleva, 2011). In Russian folk song the word and its meaning play a leading part, defining musical character. The strong bond between word and music, as well as deep emotional feelings are its hallmarks. A folk song melody was influenced and emotionally colored by the meaning of lyrics. Each song embodied real-life emotions and feelings. Having become a part of professional aspect of music art, these folk singing traditions formed the backbone of artistic and aesthetic fundamentals of both Russian music and performing style. "Russian folk song along with its talented creators, sometimes being unknown, was the very essential contribution, which to a large extent determined the ways of developing the Russian art of singing" [2].

II. RUSSIAN ROMANCE SONG

In 18th-century Russia, the main cultural messenger and communicator was the Russian imperial court, imposing on high aristocracy its customs and fashion. The court nobility forced upon overseas art, but progressive Russian public figures championed the national art, contributing to national identity consolidation. For example, the eminent Russian scientist and writer Mikhail Lomonosov appealed to the Russian society, asking it to evaluate the greatness and infinite richness of the Russian language, combining "magnificence of Spanish, vivacity of French, firmness of German, tenderness of Italian, as well as gorgeousness and laconism in description of Greek and Latin" [3]. At that time a Russian opera house staged *Cephalus and Procris*, an opera composed by Francesco Araja to the Russian libretto by Alexander Sumarokov, based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Its premiere on the 2 May, 1755 received wide acclaim from critics and public. The newspaper *Sankt-Peterburgskiy Vedomosti* ("St. Petersburg News") told its readers about six young Russian people who had never been abroad but performed *Cephalus and Procris* in Russian so skillfully that those having a good understanding of art considered the performance to be after the fashion of the best European operas. Everybody was as well greatly impressed by 50 marvelous choral singers performing in intervals. The audience in the boxes and stalls showed appreciation giving the performers universal applause.

The reviews on the opera traced the first Russian performers' characteristics which at a later stage of development of art of singing became distinctive for the Russian school of singing and for the performing style of its representatives.

At that very time, a new type of secular lyrics appeared which reflected changes in lifestyle and thoughts of the Russian society. Aristocratic salons of St. Petersburg became the cradle of fashion for performing maudlin romance songs or light courteous sentimental "arias". Amateur poets created love poems which, at those times, were always meant to be set to music. The collection of songs of such a kind named "Idleness at Odd Moments" was published in 1759. Intended for home leisure activities, it was authored by a well-known Elizabethan nobleman and one of the most educated people of his day Grigory Teplov. In St. Petersburg's society he was also known as an amateur composer, violinist, harpsichordist and singer. The lyrics of the most songs featured in the collection were written by the renowned poet of the nobility Felix Sumorokov. The popularity of the song book grew rapidly. Simplicity of expression and sincerity being peculiarities of the 18th-century lyric poetry, poems in the spirit of sensibility selected by Teplov charmed his musically educated female contemporaries. Many of them started to sing the mournful and elegiac song in the manner of the French minuet "My Time Has Already Gone" ("Uzh Proshol Moi Vek Dragoi"). For some time lyrical songs successfully competed with folk songs. But little by little Russian song integrated into professional musical life. Its golden age is associated with two composers – Osip Kozlovsky, called by contemporaries "a creator of a new type of Russian songs", and the outstanding romance song writer Fedor Dubyansky, his book "Six Russian Songs" being considered by many people the top of this genre's development.

III. MIKHAIL GLINKA — THE FIRST PROFESSIONAL RUSSIAN COMPOSER

Development of romanticism in Russian literature extremely diversified the genre characteristics and content of national poets' lyrics (e.g. Russian song being followed by a folk-based genre – romance song). Folklore became a source of the realistic style making music language and literature filled with folk poetic characters. Due to new chamber, operatic and symphonic music other music elements gradually assimilated in Russian people's minds. At that very time there appeared romance songs by Ivan Dmitriev, Yuri Neledinsky-Meletsky. F. Dubyansky's song to I. Dnitriev's lyrics "Rock Pigeon Is Moaning" ("Stonet Sizy Golubotchek") won the hearts of noble young ladies and became widely spread among common people.

Lyrical song was greatly influenced by Alexander Pushkin's works. The marriage of his poetry and vocal chamber music made romance song a crucial phenomenon. Pushkin's epoch gave birth to talented romance song composers, such as Alexander Alyabyev, Petr Bulakhov, Alexander Varlamov, Alexei Verstovsky, Alexander Gurilev, and Nikolai Titov. In time, romance songs with deeper meanings replaced early sentimental ones, moving in singers' repertoire and becoming widely performed in salons,

circles and houses of people of different classes. Works of those gifted composers, so-called "dilettants", paved the way for the first professional Russian composer Mikhail Glinka, who had brought together the best things done by his forebears and contemporaries and perfectly shaped the genre. Glinka's musical language was based on perceiving of folk music style, his being a virtuoso composer. "These songs which I heard in my childhood, might later have influenced my developing mainly folk Russian music", Glinka said [4]. The beauty of clear and expressive melodies, perfection of musical forms and rich harmony are featured within his musical language. His romance songs opened a new era in Russian lyrical song and were inimitably performed by their author and set the pattern for the next generations of Russian composers.

The Russian composer and music critic Alexander Serov wrote: "Natural blessings essential for elegant singing lived in Glinka together in perfect harmony – a good voice (at least, rather beautiful, strong and flexible), a talent to manage it (which is a skill developed by deliberateness and study), and lastly, deep perception of music, its atmosphere, functions, means" [5]. Many of Glinka's contemporaries considered that only those listeners were familiar with his romance songs, who had heard him sing them.

Glinka's works are filled with the aesthetics of Russian folk singing. Being realistic by nature, they are remarkably harmonious and vivacious.

It's difficult to overestimate Mikhail Glinka's role as a composer and performer, as well as a vocal coach in the Russian art of singing. He fostered a number of prominent performers of the Russian opera stage, such as Osip Petrov, felicitously called by Modest Musorgsky "the grandfather of the Russian opera", Anna Vorobyeva-Petrova, Darya Leonova, Semen Gulak-Artemovsky and others. Having pioneered a new, distinctive direction in development of Russian music and professional singing, Mikhail Glinka became generally acknowledged as the founder of the Russian school of singing.

REFERENCES

- [1] Musical encyclopedia. Vol. 10. Moscow, 1978, pp. 694-695.
- [2] A. Yakovleva, The Russian school of singing. A historical essay on development from the beginnings to the early 1990s. Moscow: InformBuro, 2011, pp. 5-6.
- [3] M. Lomonosov. Selected prose, 2d ed. Moscow: Sov. Rossiya, 1986, p. 420.
- [4] V. Bagdaurov. M. I. Glinka as a singer and vocal coach. Collected works. Moscow: Nauka, Leningrad, 1950.
- [5] A. Serov, Selected articles. Vol. 1. Moscow, Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1950.