Aesthetic Views of S. I. Taneyev in a Context of Philosophy of the 19th – Beginning of the 20th Century

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Abstract—The article is based on an analysis of records, letters, diaries of Taneyev invites to consider the composer’s ideas about the future of Russian music in the context of the national philosophy of the 19th – beginning of the 20th century. Special attention is given to disclosing of the contents of the notion ‘national’ in Taneyev’s views the sights which maintenance specifies in accord of its esthetics to Russian religious idealism.

Keywords—Sergey Taneyev; Russian music; notion ‘national’; Russian style; Orthodox Christianity

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1880’s many Russian philosophers remarked that European people’s minds were influenced by the ‘progress’, that the national diversity of human existence was neutralized, and the idea of nation is substituted by the so called ‘society’. The ideas of Taneyev directed on development of Russian style and strengthening the national consciousness of musicians-compatriots are perceived by reaction to materialistic and positivistic esthetic representations, an esthetics style universalism. For him, similar to many Russian thinkers of that time, the root of the crisis that took place in European culture is the result of the pathological transformation of human intellectual values of ‘the crisis of spirit’.

II. TANEYEV: WHAT IS A RUSSIAN COMPOSER SUPPOSED TO DO?

In Taneyev’s opinion, ‘the high human aspirations’ in creative work and life give way to the cult of earthly comforts [1].

In this context, the pathos of Taneyev’s words from his notes What Should Russian Composers Do?, dated back to 1879, becomes clear. He writes: ‘Every Russian musician’s task is to contribute to creation of the national music’. It’s the reinforcement of the idea of nation that efforts of many Russian artists and philosophers of the 19th century were directed to.

However, it’s important to differentiate between Taneyev’s understanding of the national form, for example, V. V. Stasov’s vision of this notion. These are two conceptually different methodological positions on the way of creating the national.

Stasov considered that ‘generally recognized authorities … do not exist’ [2] for the new Russian school; moreover – ‘the artist has neither right nor possibility to represent centuries that he himself didn’t see and didn’t study from life’ [3]. That’s why, apart from the nationality, another major characteristic of Russian style according to Stasov’s theory is realism based on ‘denial of ideality’. Such understanding of realism is close to N. G. Chernyshevsky’s teaching that sees the aim of art in reproducing reality, explaining and judging it. It should be noted that such influence of the ideology of positivism and materialism is not observed in the philosophy of Taneyev’s music. Taneyev sees the aim of artistic creative work in augmenting spiritual existence, its creation, attachment to the eternal world. Taneyev promotes realism in its higher sense – spiritual realism, which speaks for the ontologism of the aesthetic ideas of the Russian musician.

Now then, let us distinguish the principal aspects of the contents of the notion ‘national’ in Taneyev’s views.

Firstly, Taneyev doesn’t intend to reproduce what is immediately seen in Russian life or to directly quote musical folk themes.

Taneyev considered that the Russian nationality gradually beings to grows within an artist; an artist acquires a national temperament, mentality, way of thinking under the natural influence of impressions of the whole, including the land, the people, and the world that surrounds them throughout the whole life. Here is an abstract from Taneyev’s letter to Tchaikovsky from August 18, 1880: ‘...the fact that you were born in Russia, heard the songs, lived among the nature that influenced the temperament of the Russian people, – these and many other reasons make your music often have a special, different from European character’.

This brings to mind A. S. Khomyakov’s words that are congenial with Taneyev’s utterance: ‘The artist doesn’t create with by his own forces, but the spiritual power of the
nation creates in the artist’ [4]. We find a similar statement in
the writings of the Russian philosopher S. N. Bulgakov,
Taneyev’s contemporary: ‘Nationality is identified in the
intuitive experiencing or reality. <...> The national spirit is
not limited to any of its demonstrations, doesn’t fuse with
them, doesn’t stiffen in them’ [5].

'The high human aspirations’ is the principal indicator of
the Russian national character for Taneyev. That’s why as
the basic reference criterion of Russian art he proposes above
all the ethos, the focus on ‘the inner man’.

CONCEPT "NATIONAL" OF ESTHETIC VIEWS OF TANEYEV

Secondly, the national for Taneyev is the principal
dimension in the composer’s identity. He is looking for the
Russian idiom or the traces of what is implied in the phrase
‘think Russian’.

The basic aim of Taneyev’s creative and experimental
work with folk songs [6] is not so much to accurately
preserve the melody source in his interpretation as it is to
obtain imaginative sensibility to the national stylistic features,
national music language with its free, flowing constructs,
asymmetrical metric, absence of express theme contrasts,
long breath and freedom of melody development, melodious
singing of words. These are features that are associated with
a specific genre of Russian song, different from the archaic
layer of folk culture: the long drawn lyrical song. Taneyev
felt that the melodic long drawn, or chanting basis is a
very distinctive feature of Russian thinking. In his letter to P.
I. Tchaikovsky he writes: ‘...I repeat, Russian melodies must
be put on the basis of music education’ (dated September 18,
1880) [7]. Gradual implantation of national melodic material
in the composers’ musical conscience and formation of
respective arrangement methods can, in Taneyev’s opinion,
contribute to the nascence of Russian style.

Thirdly, Taneyev, unlike Stasov, finds essential the
Russian composers’ receptivity to everything really valuable
in European music. He declares the composers’ attention to
the treasures of European past to be ‘the direct way forward’.

In Taneyev’s interpretation, the idiosyncratic quality of
Russian style should be the harmonious combination of
national Russian and European classical principles, possible
in, for example, the form of ‘the Russian fugue’ or ‘the
orthodox cantata’.

In his day, M. I. Glinka strained after ‘espousing the
western fugue with the norms of our music’ (from the letter
to K. A. Bulgakov dated November, 1856) [8]. The same
way Taneyev calls the countrymen to become familiar with
‘the experience of the early contrapuntists’ (from the
notebook, February, 1879) [9]. Taneyev considered himself
to be as good as a successor of the work started by Glinka
who put together a ‘program’ of creating national music in
accordance with the rules, unique for different peoples.

After Taneyev’s perspective, European forms perform
the function of a kind of source in the process of
development of Russian style. But their value is apparent
only in case Russian art preserves the national rootedness.
Being an adherer of Pochvennichestvo, Taneyev writes: ‘It
shouldn’t be forgotten that only what’s rooted in the nation
is strong. <...> On this condition, acquaintance with
European art will do us inestimable service, the same as it
did to Pushkin, Turgenev’ [10].

Such productive openness to the values of European
culture was interpreted by V. F. Odoevsky and the
Slavophiles as the ‘all-encompassing’ or ‘all-embracing’
multilaterality of Russian spirit’, by Dostoevsky as the
Russian person’s ability to ‘understand people of all nations’,
the capability of ‘universal responsiveness’ [11]. I. S.
Turgenev called it ‘the force of specific appropriation’ [12].
These expressions largely correspond to the framework of VI.
Solovyov’s philosophy of vseединство, or ‘all-unite’.

It’s the yearning of the creative ego to unite with the
‘universal whole’ that explains Taneyev’s ‘delving’ into the
depth of the history of European and Russian culture.

However, Taneyev leaves the leading role in the Russian
synthesis for the proper, authentic basis: the experience of
Russian music, mentality, and orthodox Christian devoutness.
Taneyev gave special importance for the national culture to
development of the style of Russian church music. This is
another distinctive feature of Taneyev’s understanding of the
national.

Searching for the ideal kind of national Russian music,
Taneyev relies mostly on theconstal genres that inherit the
vocal choir tradition, in particular the tradition of Old
Russian cult singing. It’s natural that Taneyev’s thoughts of
the future of national music drive him to the idea of the
genre of the orthodox cantata within the framework of Russian
church singing.

III. CONCLUSION

In search of the ideal of national Russian music Taneyev
primarily relies on choral genres, inheriting vocal and choral
tradition, particularly the tradition of old Russian religious
singing. Naturally, Taneyev’s thoughts about the future of
Russian music lead him to the idea of the cantata genre in the
mainstream of Russian Church-singing art. In his letter to Ya.
P. Polonsky from the 8th of January 1881, the composer
writes: "As the basis I want to take <...> the cantatas of
ancient melodies of our Church and therefore to write an
Orthodox cantata. <...> I don’t want <...> to write the cantata
on the opening of the exhibition and on the anniversary of
the Emperor, namely, on the opening of the Cathedral of
Christ the Savior" (underlined by S. I. Taneyev) [15].
Cantata “John of Damascus”, in its full meaning, was the
realization of idea of the Orthodox cantatas. The idea of
reconstruction of Old Russian singing, searching for the
original national style of church music, systematically
working at the creation of znamenny chants transcriptions,
committing the implementation of the ‘program’ of
developing melodic thinking in his educational work with
the composers of Moscow school (the results of which are
works by Taneyev’s students S. V. Rakhaminov, A. T.
Grechaninov, A. D. Kastalsky and others), and participating
in the events that took place in the sphere of orthodox choral
singing – all this points out Taneyev’s definite involvement
into the process of formation of the so called ‘New
Direction’ in spiritual music of the turn of the 20th century and, on a broader scale, of the cultural movement known as the Russian Spiritual Renaissance.

REFERENCES


[13] See the article by S. Frank Ethical, Philosopho-Juridical and Socio-Philosophical Tendencies in Contemporary Russian Philosophy outside the USSR (1936)
