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Music, Answerability, and Interpretation in Bakhtin's Circle: reading together M.M. Bakhtin, I.I. Sollertinsky, and M.V. Yudina

Analysis of the artwork by members of the Bakhtin Circle is turned to highlighting such aspects as artistic specificity and historicity, answerability, otherness, dialogism. Semiotics is an area Bakhtin and the members of his Circle related to directly, as well as the other human sciences, always present in the background, though Bakhtin never employed the specific term "semiotics". Instead, he used the expression "philosophy of the language" - also in the title of a book of 1929, co-authored in collaboration with V.N. Voloshinov and published under the latter's name – in order to indicate his own research that unwinds in liminal spheres and on the borders of all the disciplines that deal with languages and signs, on their points of contact and intersection. Therefore, we may assert with Augusto Ponzio (1994: 7-11) that Bakhtin was interested in semiotical issues from the perspective of the philosophy of the language. Or we can observe, with Umberto Eco, that general semiotics is philosophical by nature (Eco 1984: XII), and that both the special semiotics and the philosophy of language are engaged in the search for the essential characteristics of meaning, interpreting, communicating, independently from the fact that such operations are expressed by means of verbal or nonverbal signs.

On the other hand, Bakhtin's sign theory is closely connected with literature – not in the sense that it is applied to literature, but that literature is its point of view – and, at

the same time, his writings also reflect philosophical problems of our time, exercising their influence on an extremely wide field of disciplines, from history to philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, anthropology, the arts. Bakhtin's approach is “philosophical” because it is conducted “on the border” of multiple and complementary interests:

> Our analysis must be called philosophical mainly because of what it is not: it is not a linguistic, philological, literary, or any other special kind of analysis (study). The advantages are these: our study will move in the liminal spheres, that is, on the borders of all the aforementioned disciplines, at their junctures and points of intersection. (Bakhtin 1986: 103)

Among Bakhtin's interlocutors and the members of his Circle, we find not only poets, men of letters, philosophers and linguists, but also scientists, biologists, painters, sculptors, musicians and musicologists. The members of the group shared a passion for philosophy and the debate of ideas, and they organized “philosophical” evenings. The Circle of Nevel'-Vitebsk-Leningrad covered numerous spheres of interests and professions. The musicologist Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinsky (1902-1944) was also interested in literature and philosophy. During the 20s-30s, his library included many books in philosophy in different languages, including the classics of marxism-leninism, works by Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Solov'ev etc. The pianist Marya Veniaminovna Yudina (1899-1970) was also attracted by literature and architecture, and she studied philosophical books by Vygotsky and Florensky too.

Analysis by Bakhtin, Sollertinsky, and Yudina of the artwork is not limited by strictly literary or musicological borders, but always leads into other fields and into the

context of the other arts: philosophy, painting, sculpture. Their method can be defined as a “detotalizing” method (see Petrilli 1995: 13-23), which proceeds by breaking the inner borders of the arts. For Yudina and Sollertinsky a complete *understanding* of a musical work, for example, demands a continuous shift outside music, towards literature, philosophy and the other arts. In their writings, they often highlight the ties between the musical and extra-musical world, the connections between the artwork and external cultural universe. And, even if Bakhtin focused his philosophical theories on literary creation and on the verbal text, his concept of dialogism can be applied to any artwork intended as a nonverbal text.

In fact, in *The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis* (Bakhtin 1986: 103-131), Bakhtin affirms that the text is "the primary given", "the point of departure" (*Ibidem*: 113) for all human and philological sciences. He also specifies that, if we mean “text” in a broad sense, as a coherent complex of signs, then even "the study of music" deals with texts (works of art):

> [...] The text is the unmediated reality [...], the only one from which these disciplines and this thought can emerge. [...] If the word “text” is understood in the broad sense – as any coherent complex of signs – then even the study of art (the study of music, the theory and history of fine arts) deals with texts (works of art). (*Ibidem:* 103)

According to Bakhtin (*Ibidem*: 105), a text is always part of a "textual chain" of a given sphere and reflects in itself other texts of that sphere. There are "dialogic relationships" among texts and within the text. Each text presupposes an intelligible (that

is, conventional within a specific community) system of signs, a language, even if a "language of art". "If there is no language behind the text, it is not a text, but a natural (not signifying) phenomenon" (*Ibidem*). Therefore,

> behind each text stands a language system. Everything in the text that is repeated and reproduced, everything repeatable and reproducible [...] conforms to this language system. But at the same time each text (as an utterance) is individual, unique, and unrepeatable, and herein lies its entire significance" (*Ibidem*).

The sense of a text consists precisely in its uniqueness. This singularity, uniqueness, then, is not bound to the repeatable elements of the language system, but to other *unrepeatable* texts, through *dialogic* relationships (cfr. also Voloshinov-Bakhtin 1999: 225 - 233; Ponzio 1992: 164-167; Petrilli 1995: 13-73. On dialogism see. also Petrilli 2001: 116-127).

Two texts that enter in a reciprocal contact in the field of a "common theme" or of a "common idea" create, for Bakhtin, a dialogic relation (Bakhtin 1986: 115). Thus we can affirm that musical compositional elements create dialogic relations within a single musical composition as well within the entire musical production of an epoch or of a style. In fact dialogic relations are, according to Bakhtin, semantic relationships between utterances, between elements of a work of art, or between two or more works of art. Languages, dialects, and styles can enter into this kind of relationships, that is they can "speak with one another" (*Ibidem*: 119).

Bakhtin underlines that "dialogic boundaries" intersect the entire field of human thought (*Ibidem*: 120). A relation with sense, with *meaning*, "is always dialogic"; even "understanding itself is dialogic" (*Ibidem*: 121). Comprehension has in fact an essentially responsive character, it is always a "response"; therefore, comprehension of a text, of a work of art, is always in someway dialogical, as a dialogue between two subjects, two consciousnesses. In the case of a conscious plurality of styles in a work of art, "there are always dialogic relations among the styles" (*Ibidem*: 111-112).

In *From Notes Made in 1970-71* (Bakhtin 1986: 132-158), according to this theory, Bakhtin affirms that it is very difficult to understand a text, a work of art, in the same way the author himself understood it or, at least, it would require the use of "an immense amount of material" (*Ibidem:* 144). Artistic creativity is "largely unconscious and polysemic". "Through understanding [...] the multiplicity of its meanings is revealed. Thus, understanding supplements the text: it is active and also creative by nature" (*Ibidem:* 141-142).

Bakhtin distinguishes then understanding as recognition and identification of repeatable discourse elements from understanding as production of meaning within unrepeatable texts. "The exclusive orientation toward recognizing, searching only for the familiar (that which has already been), does not allow the new to reveal itself (i.e., the fundamental, unrepeatable totality)". Explanation and interpretation are often reduced to the "disclosure of the repeatable, to a recognition of the already familiar, and, if the new is grasped at all, it is only in an extremely impoverished and abstract form" (*Ibidem:* 142-143).

Meanings are *answers* to questions, for Bakhtin. The meaning of a work of art is potentially infinite, but it can actualize only entering in contact with another meaning. We cannot find a unique meaning, neither a first nor a last meaning: meaning "always exists among other meanings as a link in the chain of meaning […]. In historical life, this chain continues infinitely, and therefore each individual link in it is renewed again and again, as though it were being reborn" (*Ibidem:* 145-146).

Therefore, in *Methodology for the Human Sciences* (Bakhtin 1986: 159-172) Bakhtin underlines that the analysis of a work of art cannot be restricted only to one given text. Each sign of the text "exceeds its boundaries". "Any understanding is a correlation of a given text with other texts", "dialogic" correlation, and reinterpretation in a new context. The "dialogic movement" of understanding unwinds in two directions: from the point of departure, the given text, a movement goes backward, to "past contexts", and a movement forward, to the beginning of a "future context" (*Ibidem*: 161-162).

"The text" - we can add: literary or musical - "lives only by coming into contact with another texts" (*Ibidem*), coming in touch with other texts, in *intertextuality* (see Ponzio 1992: 169-173). "Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue". This contact is a “dialogical contact” between texts (Bakhtin 1986: 162). From this point of view, the artwork cannot live outside the network of its intertextuality; it does not necessarily find its interpretants exclusively in the immediate contest: it may receive meaning from a distant part of the sign network, with which there is no immediate

relation. Artistic practice is essentially “dia-logic” (see Lomuto and Ponzio 1997: 9; 29): there is a dialogical relationship between artwork and interpretation, and artistic material is always inter-subjective and impregnated by otherness.

As Susan Petrilli underlines, Bakhtin places otherness “at the very heart of the sign's identity” (Petrilli 1996: 101), which calls for an “interpretant of answering comprehension” and not only of “identification”. Reciprocal alterity between interpreted and interpretant confers the character of a dialogical relation on interpretation. When interpretation becomes “responsive understanding”, signs turn out to be a dialectical relationship between interpreted and interpretant, a dialectical relationship based on the category of alterity. Therefore, we may understand interpretation as a dialogical relationship and consider the interpretant as a “response”. The interpretant answers a question posed by the interpreted; the interpreted and interpretant are the question and answer of a dialogue internal to the sign (see Ponzio 1995: 101, see also Petrilli and Ponzio 2003: 41).

Augusto Ponzio also underlines that, according to Voloshinov-Bakhtin (1929), the identification interpretant permits the recognition of the sign, while the respondent comprehension interpretant does not limit itself to identifying the interpreted, but installs a relation of involvement, of participation with it: it “responds” to the interpreted. The respondent comprehension interpretants of a single interpreted are multiple and cannot be predetermined by a code as, instead, happens for identification interpretants. An

unspecified number of interpretative routes branch out from a single interpreted and here the plurivocity of the sign fully manifests itself. Ponzio (1995: 81) underlines that, in a Bakhtinian perspective, the interpretation of a text may consist in the same text expressed either orally or mentally, in a paraphrase, in its translation into another language, in its graphic representation, or in the image it recalls to one's mind.

In his writings, also Ivan I. Sollertinskij points out that the interpretation of a musical work has a creative and respondent character, since it is always the "translation" of the nonverbal text into another text, in the mind of the listener; on the other side, the musical composition itself is always the result of an interpretive process which involves the composer in a dialogical relationship with the musical style and, in a broad sense, with the culture of the past. In his short essay *Hector Berlioz* (Sollertinskij 1932a), translation is understood by Sollertinskij as transposition of pictorial or literary language into the language of music or vice versa. He underlines that numerous literary masterpieces have been translated into the language of music by composers, in different ages; think of Faust, a character that has been interpreted in music by great composers, such as Wagner, Liszt, Schumann, Mahler, and Berlioz. In their works, the character of Faust has been "translated" from the literary-philosophical level of Goethe's masterpiece to the musical one, but Sollertinsky underlines that each translation implies a different *interpretation,* so that these musical works are all different from each other, even if they deal with the same subject; each "musical translation" has become an "independent" work of art (Sollertinsky 1935b: 29, my trans.).

In his essay *Shekspir i mirovaya muzyka* [Shakespeare and the music], Sollertinsky (1962) points out that also many tragedies and comedies by Shakespeare have also been re-elaborated and transformed into operas, symphonies, ballets: *Romeo and Juliet, King Lear, Julius Caesar, Falstaff,* and so on. Nevertheless, each composer gives his own "individual understanding" of a literary masterpiece, according to his own *Weltanschauung* and to his own creative method (*Ibidem*: 38, my trans.).

Fine arts may be translated into music as well. Marya V. Yudina (1978b) dedicates an article to the analysis of the musical composition *Pictures of an Exhibition* by Modest Mussorgsky. Here she underlines that this work for orchestra constitutes the composer's individual *interpretation* of the series of paintings by Viktor A. Hartman, a translation of the general atmosphere of each picture in sound, and a transposition of the picture's characters in musical themes.

Also Yudina underlines the responsive character of interpretation achieved by performers and listeners of music. In her view, listening to music is not a "pleasure"; it is an "answer", a response both to the great work of the composer and to the "extremely responsible" work of the performer (Yudina 1978a: 277, my trans.).

Yudina points out that we should "read" and "interpret" musical works in the "two-level symbolic system" of signs: what we concretely hear – that is the level of identification interpretant – and what our imagination tells us – that is the level of answering comprehension (Yudina 1978c: 299, my trans.). She exhorts music performers to catch "the spirituality of the symbolic meaning" of a composition, and not merely

“photograph musical signs” (*Ibidem*); in other words, we may say that she invites performers to *interpret* music rather simple decode it.

Anyway, Judina reminds us that we can only “try” to describe by words the richness of nonverbal arts: “When we speak about arts [...], then we unavoidably meet the imperfection of our concepts and the poverty of our speech”; and we nevertheless speak and write about the arts, “because we hope to understand the perfect laws of art” (*Ibidem).* According to the theory expressed by Bakhtin in *Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences* (1986: 159-172) - where he underlines the evaluative aspects of understanding -, Yudina emphasizes that the understanding of an artwork comes about by reflecting upon it, evaluating it, and evaluation may help understanding.

Yudina, aware of the difficulty of developing a metalinguistic discourse about music, does not give up, but seems to be even more attracted by this goal. Yudina supports the plurivocality of the interpretation of all artworks, the possibility of creating multiple interpretative routes beginning from a single artwork: in her view, the concept of “correctness” does not assess the “vitality” of the creation, but on the contrary often contradicts it. “The imaginary subjectivity of human thought confirms the plurality of reality, while the tendency towards a unique 'correct' interpretation is particularly mortal” (Yudina 1978c: 299-303, my trans.). In her view, our approach to understanding the musical work is “infinite” (*Ibidem*: 304): she highlights that musical practice is characterized by polylogism and that the digression of musical signs is the basis for artistic creativity.

Bakhtin, Sollertinsky, and Yudina underline, each of them in a different way, that artistic practice is characterized by digression, polylogism, escape of interpretants. The digression of artistic signs, their capacity for endless significance are the basis of artistic creativity: if the artistic sign respected a meaning fixed by a code, without shifts and without autonomy, artists would not have anything to say but only, maybe, something to bequeath. Artistic material, to express itself, must be in a condition to transcend its own limits. The semiotic materiality of artistic material is transcendence with respect to identity and the possibility of the endless generation of sense.

On the other side, from a Bakhtinian point of view, artistic material is impure, already known in “another” context, and the work of art, even the most original, always carries traces of past choices. In fact, Bakhtin affirms that the author of a literary work creates a unified and whole speech work by "heterogeneous", "alien" utterances (Bakhtin 1986: 115); this is a consequence of the fact that all that concerns the human being reaches his consciousness from the external world, through "the mouths of others" (*Ibidem*: 138). In the same way also a word, a musical interval, a color, used in a certain context, will always have an irreducible surplus, because it will carry with it all the contexts in which it has already appeared.

In their writings, Sollertinsky and Yudina point out that creative process - in music as in the other arts -, involves the composer in a dialogical relationship with the musical patrimony of his or her culture; creation springs then from an interpretation of the compositional possibilities available to the composer, and musical text is by nature intertextual. Even more in the case of a style that is parodic, serious-comic or

manneristic, musical language is based on the recognition that *my* words, *my* sound, are not taken from a dictionary, from a code, from a normative system, but from the musical traditional context and from the intentions of the *other*. In this perspective, Michele Lomuto and Augusto Ponzio (1997) compare the musical citation to free indirect discourse, in which the *other* is considered in a dialogically, and continues to “speak” from the inside of *my* word, of *my* sound.

According to Lomuto and Ponzio, in a Bakhtinian view, sound too is first listened to through *the instrument of the other*, through the musical composition of *the other*. Musical material is however impure, already listened to through the instrument of *the other*, in *another* context. Musical instruments carry traces of past choices too: the material of musical instruments, before being wood or brass, is semiotic material, endless reserve of sense. Musical instruments offer a space of inter-subjectivity, precisely because all sounds, all music that have been listened to are embodied in them, in a process of dialogical sedimentation. Each musical instrument has a history to tell, it has individuality, and power of seduction; it is the concrete repository of choices made in the continuity of history, it has a “memory”.

The work of art can be defined, with a platonic term, "chora", or repository of sense, a repository that the reader, the interpreter, the listener, or the observer can every time fill with possible senses. The artist does not have a great authority over the artwork, because he is the producer of a complex device in which the sense is transformed with each reading and re-reading of the artwork, in an endless process of interpretation. The work of art is always unaltered, but always new; it preserves a secret, an uninterpreted

sign-residue, a semiotic materiality that remains outside the circuit of actual interpretation.

According to Bakhtin, Sollertinsky, and Yudina, the artwork always *awaits* its sense: it is the repository of manifold senses in the interpretative process, it can also respond to demands not anticipated by the author himself, taking on a new value, in the Bakhtinian “great experience”, extraneous to the epoch in which the author lived. The artwork becomes an intersection of signifying paths, of interpretations, in dialogical relationships between senses and points of view that are always new, and even music can *signify* without having a strictly referential meaning, but finding its significance in ever new stratifications of sense.

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