

Reading Shakespeare: the Character of Ophelia in the Works by Valery Gavrilin

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Abstract—This article analyses the dramatic structure of Valery Gavrilin's song cycle *Three Songs of Ophelia*. His personal understanding of this Shakespeare's character is placed in the context of interpretations offered by other Russian composers, such as Varlamov, Tchaikovsky, or Shostakovich. We also identify genre-related transformations of themes and, more globally, the composer's personal interpretation and development of genre models in European music. Ophelia's emerging and maturing character is explored through the dramatic logic of Shakespeare's narrative, but also through other works by Gavrilin displaying tragic female love.

Keywords—*Ophelia; character; play; dramatic structure; plot; tragedy; genre*

I. INTRODUCTION

Russian music knows many interpretations of the immortal Shakespearean stories, including the music for *King Lear* by Miliy Balakirev, *The Tempest* Symphonic Fantasy and *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy Overture by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, and also *Romeo and Juliet* as a ballet by Sergei Prokofiev, that has been running without interruption for over 80 years now. Vissarion Shebalin composed the comic opera *The Taming of the Shrew*, while Aram Khachaturian created music for the 1955 film *Othello*, commissioned by its director Sergei Yutkevich.

Hamlet and its characters have enjoyed an exceptional attention of Russian composers. In 1837, the play was staged with the music by Alexander Varlamov, a century later with that by Sergei Prokofiev. In October 1888, Pyotr Tchaikovsky completed his famous *Hamlet* Fantasy Overture, dedicated to Edward Grieg. Dmitri Shostakovich turned to *Hamlet* three times, composing for the productions of 1932 and 1954 (by Nikolay Akimov and Grigori Kozintsev, respectively) and creating a new score in 1964 for a film by Kozintsev. Scores for namesake ballets were composed by Nikolai Chervinsky (1970) and Revaz Gabichvadze (1971), while *Hamlet* as an opera was created by Sergei Slonimsky in 1991.

This list of the eternal story's interpretations by different composers is far from being extensive. Valery Gavrilin, who turned to *Hamlet* in early 1971, also offered one of his own. On January 12, Natalia Gavrilina wrote in her diary:

"Korogodsky is staging *Hamlet*. He invites Valery to compose music". [1] Back then, the cooperation with Zinovy Korogodsky did not work out, therefore the composer chose not to write down the themes he had created. (Incidentally, this was neither the first nor the last case when Gavrilin did not put his music on paper because preliminary agreements with performers or directors had failed. Overall, he never intended to be a "closet composer".) As a result, out of the whole score meant for the 1971 performance in the Youth Theater, Gavrilin only wrote down two songs of Ophelia.

II. GAVRILIN'S MAIN SUBJECT AND ITS SUBSTANTIATION IN THE SHAKESPEAREAN CYCLE

A question naturally arises: why did the composer decide to come up with Ophelia's songs, bypassing the main character's storyline? The answer is obviously rooted in the very nature of his talent. Gavrilin had a deep understanding of female hearts, which ultimately led him to telling the story of *Hamlet* through Ophelia. As a stage director of his vocal cycle, he introduces us to the tragedy of the Prince of Denmark through the feelings of the girl he left.

The same technique is used in his other creations. For instance, the central character of the Vocal and Symphonic Poem *War Letters* is the widow of a soldier whose death is only revealed in the light of her tragedy, through a genre synthesis of a lyrical song and a lament. The *Russian Notebook* is also a retrospection into the male character's death that is conveyed by the rich and expressive narration of his female counterpart, through the genres of lament and 'grieving ditties'. What Gavrilin himself said about this cycle may be easily transferred to Ophelia's songs: "I decided to talk about unfulfilled love on behalf of a girl, I wanted to write a poem about love and death <...> The utmost exposure of feelings was necessary in the *Russian Notebook*, as well as immediacy in expressing emotions, no matter how ridiculous or stupid they may seem at first glance. Hence the composition of the cycle, and the retrospection technique, and the mixture of the real and the surreal in the story of the character, and even her telling nonsense, like in a 'cruel romance'"[2].

The suffering Ophelia gets organically integrated into the entire gallery of female characters offered by Gavrilin. It includes the "girl" from *The Russian Notebook*, the soldier's

widow from *War Letters*, female characters from the vocal and symphonic cycle *The Earth* and the vocal and symphonic miracle-play *Chimes (Upon Reading Vasily Shukshin)*, but also the female character of *House on the Road*, ballet about World War II after Alexander Tvardovsky, and the elderly lady from the song cycle *In the Evening*, who skims through an album of photographs and sadly dialogues with her past, turning either to herself or to her beloved once-gone, while the old clock keeps striking. This also includes numerous female faces of Gavrilin's songs and romances, such as *In Autumn* (verses by T. Kalinina), *Girl's Song (Make Me a White Dress, Mother)* (verses by A. Shulgina), *Once There Was a Dream* (verses by V. Maksimov), *Floating Branch* (verses by I. Myatlev), *I Don't Know...* and *A Bird Cherry* (verses by O. Fokina).

Valery Gavrilin himself, in his interviews and notes, repeatedly emphasized that female loneliness and the suffering female heart were the main subjects of his work. They came from his wartime childhood, filled with unconditional women's grief day in day out: "Female loneliness, female deprivation is a great national misfortune <...> I keep remembering the cry of widows, their bitter, inconsolable songs that I heard in the Vologda countryside. <...> I think that the female line is always leading in Russian art. Even if the title of a work carries a male name, you can be sure that women will play a decisive role in it. Look at Tolstoy's novels: *Resurrection* is about a woman, and so is *Anna Karenina*, and when you hear *War and Peace*, you first remember Natasha Rostova. <...> The majority of my works, whether those are songs, vocal cycles, or large vocal and symphonic or choral scores, are somehow related to women and display women as either the main character or the main driving force of the composition. I believe that women give men everything they need for creativity, just as they give life. Women keep the roots and the juice of life itself. We all feed on this. So if you remember your nature, your origins, you must start with a woman". [3]

Therefore, Gavrilin's *Hamlet* is also about a woman. In 1993, he created the second edition of the cycle, adding a vocalise titled *I hear the voice of dear Franz* — to the two existing songs (*To-morrow is St.Valentine's Day* and *He is Dead and Gone, Lady*), and partially modifying the song *To-morrow... Three Songs of Ophelia* were first performed by Natalia Gerasimova in 1994, in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The Moscow premiere was attended by Georgy Sviridov, Gavrilin's great contemporary who got immediately fascinated with this composition and sought to purchase the score.

III. DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF THE SONG CYCLE

The mystery of Ophelia in Shakespeare's tragedy and in Gavrilin's songs:

Alexander Tevosyan was the first musicologist to take an interest in this work after the verses by Shakespeare. He referred to this cycle as *The English Notebook*, continuing the line of the Russian and German notebooks. He also advanced an interesting and rather plausible assumption regarding its dramatic structure. According to it, the structure

of *Three Songs*, along with *The Russian Notebook*, *Chimes*, and *War Letters*, is markedly retrospective.

Let us look at the development of Shakespeare's tragedy: having lost his father, Ophelia mourns him in the song *He is Dead and Gone, Lady...* In a further dialogue with the king and queen, she sings about a certain love affair that happened on St.Valentine's Day, then returns to her father and leaves upon wishing everyone a "good night" several times. This is exactly how the storyline is displayed in Gavrilin's cycle, but the songs follow the reverse order: *St Valentine's Day* first, and then *He is Dead and Gone...*

In the final scene of the Fourth Act, the Queen relates Ophelia's death:

"...and herself

Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide

And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;

Which time she chaunted snatches of old tunes,

As one incapable of her own distress,

Or like a creature native and indued

Unto that element; but long it could not be

Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,

Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay

To muddy death". [4]

Tevosyan rightly correlates this episode with the *Vocalise* that Gavrilin added to the cycle in 1993: "The meaning of the *Vocalise (I Hear the Voice of Dear Franz)* might be explained by the retrospective rearrangement of parts. It relates Ophelia's death, and the queen's story helps to explain the dramatic structure of the music, combining calm singing and a turbulent (river-like?) accompaniment flow; then a piano break and the rhythmic formula of a funeral march depicting the soul flying to heaven". [5]

Thus, Gavrilin begins unfolding the story from its final episode, depicting the death of the singing Ophelia. *Vocalise* follows the line of Franz Schubert's renowned compositions, which is why, most probably, it is titled "I Hear the Voice of Dear Franz". The confirmation of this assumption is offered by the film critic Yakov Butovsky and related by Gennady Belov, a composer, Gavrilin's close friend a considerate researcher of his work: "Judging by a brief mention by Yakov Butovsky and the overall proximity of Gavrilin's music to the Viennese Classic's vocal compositions, this part is effectively inspired by Franz Schubert in terms of melody (intonational sources) and manner, and the title obviously implies a dedication to him". [6]

Moreover, Shakespeare's tragedy has no character named Franz. There is a soldier Francisco guarding Elsinore but he only appears at the beginning of the story and has no interaction whatsoever with the daughter of Polonius. In Scene 5 of Act IV, however, she mentions a certain Robin while talking to Laertes returning from France: "For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy", she sings. [7] These lines might

puzzle modern readers, but not those of Shakespearian times who knew that every Ophelia's verse was taken from old folk songs, and the one mentioned, in particular, came from a ballad of Robin Hood. This character may emerge in her confused mind just as "dear Franz" does in Gavrilin's interpretation, for Ophelia refers to the collective image of someone dear to her, either a former lover or the deceased father who seem to merge in her fantasies and are called different names.

Incidentally, Gavrilin's cycle with its reverse sequence of songs does not convince us that the only reason of Ophelia's suffering is the death of Polonius. Gavrilin's pieces, while retrospectively structured, have an obvious *crescendo*-like evolution, as the second song relates scolded love and the third is a farewell to the deceased lover,

"Which bewept to the grave did not go,

With true-love showers". [8]

Not bewept, because he died later than herself.

Indeed, Ophelia's personal life is not so unambiguous, and researchers still argue about how to understand her songs that are effectively far from madness. There are many interpretations of her famous 'herbarium' and of the folk legend about the baker's daughter turned into an owl (traditionally considered a harbinger of death, which means that Ophelia's speeches and songs predict a prompt death to the others and not only refer to the past). According to many Shakespeare scholars, the daughter of Polonius, rejected by Hamlet, became an innocent victim of King Claudius, from whom she got pregnant, and ended up committing suicide. Some blame Gertrude for her death, others blame Claudius, others insist on an accident. Every assumption has indirect confirmations, which are deeply encrypted in the Shakespearean text filled with different kinds of symbols and hints.

Debates over the famous tragedy as a whole and over the interpretation of Ophelia's character in particular have been going on for over 400 years, and will obviously never stop. Researchers only agree on one thing: Ophelia is one of the most tragic and, at the same time, most mysterious characters in the world literature, painting and music.

The mere listing of different musical genres incarnating this eternal image would probably take several pages.

IV. OPHELIA AS REFLECTED IN RUSSIAN MUSIC: GAVRILIN'S INDIVIDUAL INTERPRETATION

Ophelia's songs from the tragedy *Hamlet* (music: Alexander Varlamov, verses: Nikolay Polevoy) are a large-scale cross-cutting operatic piece encompassing declamation, recitation, and cantilenas. Ophelia's theme (for solo oboe) from Tchaikovsky's Fantasy Overture is inspired by Russian lingering laments.

For the play *Hamlet* of 1932, Shostakovich created "A Little Song of Ophelia" in a deliberately mocking manner. *To-Morrow is St.Valentine's Day*, op. 32, is probably one of the composer's most striking musical jokes. Ophelia's further

evolution in his work (including in the score for the film) mainly consists in the utmost exacerbation of her internal conflict. In the first part of the 1967 vocal and instrumental suite *Seven Romances on Poems by Alexander Blok*, her character is revealed through an equal dialogue of cello and voice, a duo full of mournful, fading intonations and altered tones that enhance dramatic expression. Here, Shostakovich depicts Ophelia as one of Gavrilin's female characters, a woman mourning their beloved.

There are also a number of modern interpretations. For instance, the album *Kukly (Dolls)* released in 2015 by Irina Bogushevskaya includes an amazing blues composition dedicated to the one that Hamlet loved more than forty thousand brothers. Nevertheless, Bogushevskaya's lyrics tend to translate the collective image of an abandoned and disappointed woman, an eternal wanderer, rather than the specific character of Polonius' daughter.

Valery Gavrilin chose not to paint a Russian portrait of Ophelia, avoiding any alien feature in her character. One can only guess how it could have been reflected in Gavrilin's music if, following Tchaikovsky, he had created for her an insightful lyrical theme appealing to his favourite folklore intonations. However, this time the composer turned to European traditions that inspired not only the first 'Schubertian' vocalise but also the two subsequent songs.

To get an idea about the musical tunes accompanying the productions of *Hamlet* in Shakespearean times, we may have a look at the famous Furness edition of late 1877, containing music fragments (A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, edited by Horace Howard Furness, *Hamlet*, v. I. Philadelphia & London. J.B. Lippincott & Co). While Gavrilin did not directly quote ancient European sources, even an inexperienced listener would understand that the music he wanted to offer Korogodsky was meant to revive the times of Shakespeare's *Globe* (both on stage and in the audience's imagination), and even earlier times when Amleth, King of Jutland and Hamlet's prototype, feigned madness to avenge the murder of his father, King Horvendill. According to some versions, this happened in the 9th century.

The medieval Danish city of Helsingør (Elsinore) and the castle of Kronborg are attributed deliberately gloomy colors in Gavrilin's music. Passionate intonations start intervening in a serene picture at the middle part of the barcarole which generally follows the musical traditions of romanticism. The moment of Ophelia's death, which Gertrude relates as follows: "her garments, heavy with their drink, Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay To muddy death", is marked by the gradual immersion in a low register, the emergence of an imperative intonation, contrasting dynamics, and a sharp change in texture and key, as A-flat-major arpeggios (*pianissimo*) go along A-minor triad (*sforzando*). This said, Gavrilin would never have allowed Ophelia to untimely sink into oblivion, be it in the waters of the Øresund or those of Avon, in which Katherine Hamnett, a possible prototype of Polonius' daughter, drowned in 1579. In the final bars of the Vocalise, the arpeggios soar to the high register and dissolve in the A-flat major triad (*pianissimo*), as the soul of Hamlet's beloved ascends into

heavens. This is exactly the moment when the story begins unfolding.

In the setting of *St. Valentine's Day*, the colors are darkening, immersing the audience in the morning twilight, when the girl accepts the role of Valentine. Her account of events is plain and simple, reduced to the sequence of facts. The intonation Gavrilin chooses for it is stylistically close to English folk song and dance tunes that usually rely on one capital tone (especially in the period of the crystallization of tonality, dating back to late 17th and early 18th centuries), have an unornamented melodic line and many repetitions, reflecting the overall periodic structure.

In the second verse, increased anxiety is emphasized by the transposition from B minor to C minor. However, this technique alone would not be enough to convey the gloomy ambiance of a medieval castle. Therefore, the composer opts for a deliberately low register of the piano part as a key feature of *St. Valentine's Day*.

"Ascetic texture and monotonous accompaniment in a gloomy low register with a second beat limping into deep bass invoke a procession of knights or a slow ritual dance, depicting either the dark times, or the tragedy itself, or the ominous interiors of Elsinor, notes Alexander Tevosyan. <...> Follows the unexpected 'crazy' ending in... in F major. Also unexpected, almost out of place (except for the correlation of rhythm), but understandable in the context of the tragedy, is the contrast between the theme and the playful intonations of the vocal part. [Tevosyan means the quasi-refrain repeating the 'ye' syllable, K.S.] <...> There are several seemingly independent action plans: a song, a 'performer of the song' and a dark background". [9]

The overall picture of a fateful date is enhanced by the medieval sequence *Dies Irae (Day of Wrath)*, the theme of fate in triplets to be played in a *lugubre* (gloomy, sad) way, and a markedly dotted rhythm. Those three lexical units, placed in the bass, or 'trombone', piano register, have been long known in music as related to terrible omens and thus stand as an obvious contrast to what Tevosyan calls the 'playful' Ophelia's narrative.

Seeking to preserve the syllabic rhythm of the music, the composer somewhat changes Boris Pasternak's translation, replacing the lines "И та, что в дверь вошла, уже не девушкой ушла из этого угла" [10] with his own version: "И из его хором, тук-тук-тук <...> вернулась девушка в свой дом не девушкой потом". Moreover, he changes some of the wording of the first verse, while completely preserving its meaning. Such adjustments were probably dictated by the author's special requirements to vocal articulation. Here, let us mention that Valery Gavrilin was a brilliant writer and often authored lyrics for his vocal compositions. This cycle, emerging from the music for *Hamlet* production is yet another example of how finely the composer worked with poetic sources. This time he dared become Shakespeare's co-author to create his own version of Ophelia singing in the face of death.

For the third song, the composer chooses the translation by Mikhail Lozinsky. The entire melody of *He is Dead and*

Gone, along with some fragments of the accompaniment, are woven from the tunes of *Dies Irae*. This may be seen as a reference to Shostakovich's music for the 1932 *Hamlet* production (Op. 32), where the choral part (*Requiem*) of the episode of Ophelia's funeral quotes both music and text of the medieval sequence.

In the second verse, the descending *lamento* intonations of the piano get replaced by bell chords, as if Gavrilin offered a clear stage-setting with the funeral bell ringing and the funeral procession slowly moving. All of a sudden, however, Ophelia starts a new song. As if forgetting herself, she is quietly (mouth closed) singing a melody of the most delicate beauty, soaring into the high register at its climax, but finally turning into a heartbreaking cry. When the sobs cease, she wishes the audience good night three times and then laughs out loud. The last remark says: "Laughter breaks off". Gavrilin's tragedy ends with the madness of the main character, an outcome which was already predicted by her introductory vocalise.

Globally, we can trace the sequence of genre and theme transformations of the cycle, as the lyrical and cantilena-like first part moves to a gloomy and grotesque scherzo-like lied, then to a tune recalling the medieval sequence of *Dies Irae*, before turning into a sharp cry. The dense palette of tragic genres in the finale reflects the last phase of the character's mental suffering which ends up driving her into madness. It is worth noting that the Vocalise, composed much later than the other two songs, became the first, and not the last part of the cycle, for Valery Gavrilin, acting as an experienced stage director, sought to end his performance at its culminating point to achieve the greatest effect. Indeed, Ophelia's mad laughter keeps moving our imagination long after the last notes have resounded.

V. CONCLUSION

Ophelia both integrates into, and stands out of, the gallery of Valery Gavrilin's female characters, as she represents a country and an era which Gavrilin might not have covered in his music if he had not received a proposal from Zinovy Korogodsky. Here, the unachieved work for the theater turned into yet another story of female love, a story expressed in a miniature cycle instead of a large-scale work, which is perfectly in line with the logic of Shakespeare who paints Ophelia with but a few colourful touches. To embody the famous tragic character in music, Gavrilin chose the most accurate palette, following his motto: 'scarcity of means, richness of music'. [11] He only needed three songs to make the listener imagine Ophelia's bottomless eyes, slender waist, her gait and her voice. Three songs are enough to immerse us into the sincere feelings of this girl and her bitter madness, to help us unravel the secret meaning of Ophelia's vague speeches and to take to our hearts her image, so morbid and unsteady, but still so utterly attractive.

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