

The Magic of Sound Chaos: East Slavonic "Borona" (Harrow) Ritual

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Abstract—The article focuses on the ritual “harrow”, well documented for the Eastern Slavs. It is enacted by the participants as the simultaneous performance of all calendar song genres with strong seasonal association, which are known in the tradition. Folk singers believe that the performance of ritual songs out of their allotted time period could lead to negative consequences. However, in this ritual such rule is usually intentionally violated. Musical sound — a powerful magical tool that can be used to work on time, and this property is deliberately used to achieve a particular result in critical situations. The ritual “harrow” was conducted in a drought in order to invoke rain, or to neutralize a witch who can deprive cereals of their crop yield. The term “harrow” here is not associated with utilizing harrow as a ritual object. The verb “harrow” is often used by folk singers in the sense of “sing inaccurately”. The simultaneous sound of all calendar genres leads to the intentional ritual collapse of time, its “contraction” to a single point at the performance of the ritual. Employment of such unusual audio technique is connected with the requirement for an exceptional magic force applied only in extraordinary circumstances. The chaos of sounds produced in the ritual was complimented by a certain pattern of actions, which varied depending on the pragmatic purpose of the ritual.

Keywords—*East Slavs; folk music; seasonal ritual songs; “Borona” (Harrow) Ritual; musical sound magic*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the folk culture of the Slavonic peoples until now there are early layers of the ritual musical folklore and mythological beliefs connected with the sound and human’s voice. Analysis of these beliefs and different ritual behaviors can enable to reconstruct and specify sound and voice archetypes.

The main part of the acoustic sphere consists of sounds produced by a man with the help of vocal chords-speaking, shouting, whispering, singing etc. or through other ways-playing musical instruments, knocking, using arrows, shooting, etc. In general, in Slavonic culture there is a sophisticated system of such means which can transmit the complexity of ideas about the world structure as well as influence the world and serve as a guarantee to keep and save the world conditions [1].

Sounds of nature and humans are attributes of life, while silence and muteness are attributes of the after death world and it has been proved by the ethnographic findings (to this day it is customary to remember the dead a minute of silence). A sound, thanks to its universal meaning, is one of the main means of communication not only inside the human society but between the two worlds as well. The zone of the sound is much more wider than the one of the visual or tangible or any other communicative means. A sound carries some imperative source as well. The man can willingly keep from seeing, tangling or tasting but cannot keep from hearing either silence or sounds. According to folklore ideas it is typical not only of the alive nature but of the other world as well thanks to its anthropomorphous structure. Different sound texts and signals in ritual situations are directed to maintaining contacts with the other world.

Therefore the usual means of communication in the rite are not used. It is connected with the necessity to achieve maximum understanding with the other world forces-according to Baiburin [2].

Any sound, especially human’s voice, has a magic power. The louder the sound the stronger its influence. Therefore the ritual songs in Russia are sung loudly to its full strength counting on the big open space.

A sound in the folk culture is capable of intensifying the negative and positive processes of nature. It explains why some songs are not allowed to sing in certain situations. For instance, in the eastern areas the Slavonic traditions recommend singing during floating of the ice on the river as it is believed it can speed up the ice floating [3]. Folklore performers presume that folk songs can promote the growth of the plants so the vegetation period of the plants is full of ritual songs. The Russian saying also proves it: “Sing more to make the wheat thicker” [4].

The sound of the voice can serve as a protective means against troubles and negative influence. Thus, in Smolensky region at night of Ivan Kupala people went round the fields singing and screaming special songs and texts in order to save the fields from witches who could harm the sowings. Besides, folk performers believe that the sound can organize time.

II. BACKGROUND

At the Russian — Belarusian border, there is known a ceremony called Borona, or Harrow¹. It falls into a group of calendar cycle occasional ceremonies, i.e. those that are not strictly linked to a particular festive event and celebrated in spring or summer period as required.

The Harrow ceremony is unusual in its musical format. In the context of the whole calendar — singing cycle, its analysis brings to an idea that an acoustic code of a folk culture can both express the existing conceptions of time and be a vehicle for manipulation with time for magical purposes. But it might pose some difficulty in understanding the very idea, forming the sound filling of the Harrow ritual, without proper knowledge of musical format principles of the whole yearly cycle.

In a calendar cycle, one of the most important roles of ritual songs is to regulate and organize time. A study into calendar — singing genres provides unique information for reactivation of an archaic structure of the yearly cycle and ancient interpretations of time.

In the yearly cycle, calendar songs flag key, crisis mileposts, thus marking inter-seasonal transitional periods. The Eastern Slavs describe such periods with sets of ceremonial acts, like, Shrovetide, mid-spring, late-spring (Pentecost to John the Bather Day), harvesting and autumn. All those ritual systems, one to two weeks long, are based on a single scenario of meeting and seeing off various mythological characters, seasons, etc. Having a common strategic goal — to ensure soil fertility, cattle productivity, prosperity of a human society — each of these ceremonially marked periods address own local objectives, which have been reflected in associated musical and poetic texts. Besides time regulatory functions, certain musical genres, used in the yearly calendar, perform some specific functions, related to a certain phase of both yearly and production cycles and characterized by a rather narrow area of operation. Thus, Pentecost songs were sung during rye flourishing periods to guarantee good crops while Shrovetide songs were performed for "long flax", etc. That's why folk singers believe that every song should be played at its time.

Numerous statements of folk singers prove that. For instance, that is how a resident from the village of Stayki Khislavichskiy District, Smolensk Region, described that: "If I may put it this way, earlier every song — whether harvest, or field, or spring — was performed at its own time". Calendar songs work as acoustic indicators for ceremonially marked time periods, quite frequently coinciding with natural sounds like cuckoo or nightingale calls, or frog croaking. Consequently, expeditions are often faced with reluctance of folk singers to perform songs, not matching the season. They either refuse to sing at a wrong time once and for all or do it but not in full voice as it should be. Interestingly, it is

much easier to convince folk singers to perform songs, which time in the yearly cycle has not yet come, for instance, harvesting songs in spring, rather than those that have already been played since the start of the year. It might happen because folk singers see it as upsetting the natural flow of time, turning it backwards, and endangering with negative consequences.

In calendar — ritual songs, folk singers attach special attention to a timbre, defined by height, loudness, and intensity of a sound. They probably think that only the timbre could add magical force to their singing. That is why there are certain bans on a ceremonial timbre. Thus, in the Eastern Polesye at Lent, spring calls were performed quietly and indoors as loud sounds could disturb a still sleeping land. Only at Annunciation, when land has revived, woken up, they start singing calls loudly, in an intense voice, and outdoors. The fact, already mentioned above, that tradition bearers, forced by folklore collectors into performing calendar songs at an inappropriate time, following long persuasion, sing those songs in a low voice, only proves that. By doing that, they try to negotiate negative effects of their singing.

However, in the calendar cycle, a musical code can be used more than just as a time regulatory tool. A musical sound is the most powerful magical means that one can influence time, manage it, and change its run. In dramatic situations, people used that very nature of the sound deliberately for ceremonial purposes. Thus, in the South Eastern Belarus, at outbreaks of measles or smallpox, the elders said that winter carol singing at Pentecost was one of the ways to stop its spread [5].

Also, singing can help to achieve time compression, shrink it to a point for certain magical purposes. Borona, or Harrow, is a shining example of that.

It is exercised at a bordering spring to summer period, between Pentecost and John the Baptist Nativity Day, to call rain or neutralise witches. The ceremony envisages simultaneous performance of all known traditional calendar singing genres by its participants. Here, an action row of the ceremony, i.e. acts, performed by its participants, is adjusted to a pragmatic purpose on a case by case basis. If it did not rain for a long while and drought endangered the land, unmarried ladies were to work — or harrow — river with a plough and then dig a furrow around their village. While doing that, they sang a song like the one from the village of Skoblyanka, Monastyrshchinskiy District, Smolensk Region, describing things, practiced locally: Some do it in spring. Some do it in winter. And that's how we used to. Unmarried ladies furrow and sing. Furrow and sing. And a plough goes on in a curvy line.

To disarm witches, stealing milk from cows, the ceremony envisaged a different set of acts. Boys and girls got together, stole a harrow from one of local peasants, placed a milk bucket on top of it, and made three circles around their village, dragging the harrow and singing a song, similar to that in the village of Klyapin, Kormyanskiy District, Gomel Region, as follows: "One sings for marriage, One for harvest, One for autumn, One for spring, Everybody

¹ This article is based on material provided by teaching staff and students (including the author) of the Gnessin Russian Academy of Music. All recordings are kept at the phonographic archive of the Laboratory for the study of traditional musical cultures of the Gnessin Russian Academy of Music.

sings for own, And all together call it harrow". Wedding song got into that category too because, in the past, marriages were only celebrated in particular periods of a calendar year. For folk singers, marriage songs were often seen as musical markers of such periods, thus partially joining a system of calendar genres. Finally, they burned the harrow to ashes at a crossroads, and that crowned the ceremony.

III. CONCLUSION

A sound chaos, accompanying a harrow ceremony, was a result of a combination of some factors of the following, working at a time. Firstly, singers pronounced various verbal texts simultaneously, which led to flattening of individual meanings. Secondly, at the same time, various song tunes were heard, differing from each other in both rhyme and melody structure. Moreover, those tunes could be performed at various pitch levels, lacking any synchronisation at all. Thirdly, during the ceremony they sang ceremonial songs, which were usually firmly linked to certain calendar periods. The latter brought to a kind of an intentional ceremonial collapse of time, its compression in the course of the ceremony performance. We think that such an unusual sound pattern was caused by a necessity to produce a magical impact of a particularly great force in extraordinary circumstances.

It is worth noting that the term *Borona*, or *Harrow*, refers only to the musical (constant) part of the ceremony and has nothing to do with using a harrow as a ritual tool. At the Russian — Belarusian border, folk singers use the term “*to harrow*” in the meaning “*to sing incorrectly*”. Thus, if a singer confounds words or sounds sour, others tell that person to “*Stop harrowing!*” In its name, the Harrow ceremony bears the same idea of a so-called “*incorrect*” singing because in the course of the ceremony, songs, separated in time in a yearly cycle, are performed all at once.

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