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The History and Development of the Musical *Romans* as a Genre

A Short Overview

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to trace the lines of evolution of the Russian romance, which found fertile ground for its development from the mid-18th century. The genre was firmly embedded in a tradition that had originated a century and a half earlier, but its roots lay in the oral production of ancient Rus'. Despite this strong historical-anthropological imprint, the diachronic development of Russian romance, as a hybrid genre of dual nature—poetic and musical—addressed to both elite and mass audiences, is marked by a series of revivals and contaminations (mainly in 19th-century Europe, especially in Italy). The article, based on culturological, literary and historical studies, presents a brief overview of the development of the genre

and its various sub-genres, such as *bytovoi romans*, *romans-ballad*, *romans-elegii*, up to contemporary songs and melodies.

Keywords

Russian romance, *romans*, opera, song, history of music

Abstrakt

Historia i rozwój muzycznego romansu jako gatunku: Zarys

Celem eseju jest prześledzenie ewolucji rosyjskiego romansu, który znalazł podatny grunt dla swojego rozwoju od połowy XVIII wieku. Gatunek był mocno osadzony w tradycji, która powstała półtora wieku wcześniej, ale korzeniami sięgał oralnej kultury starożytnej Rusi. Pomimo tego silnego historyczno-antropologicznego piętna diachroniczny rozwój rosyjskiego romansu, jako hybrydycznego gatunku o podwójnej naturze – poetyckiej i muzycznej – przeznaczonego dla zarówno elitarnej, jak i masowej publiczności, naznaczony jest serią odrodzeń i kontaminacji (głównie w XIX-wiecznej Europie, zwłaszcza we Włoszech). Artykuł, oparty na badaniach kulturoznawczych, literaturoznawczych i historycznych, przedstawia krótki zarys rozwoju gatunku i jego różnych podgatunków, takich jak *bytovoi romans*, *romans-ballada*, *romans-elegii*, aż po współczesne pieśni i melodie.

Słowa kluczowe

rosyjski romans, *romans*, opera, piosenka, historia muzyki

It is an arduous task to give an exact definition to Russian romance (*rossiiskii romans*) since it is a hybrid genre characterized by a dual nature—one part poetical and one part musical. This dual nature makes any analysis difficult that tries to take both the musical and the literary component into consideration without privileging the first over the second or vice versa, as very often happens in specialist studies. However, a much easier task is to define when the romance appeared on the Russian scene: although firmly rooted in a tradition that had already begun a century and a half before, the romance started to flourish from the middle of the 18th century.

Other than an interruption in the immediate post-revolutionary period, essentially due to an ideologically oriented militant coterie, there has been a consistent development of the Russian romance since its appearance in the 18th century. Over the course of the centuries, the romance has gone through a series of revivals and enrichments from outside influences, all while maintaining its popularity among a rather broad and heterogenous public, despite its stereotypical themes and motifs. This essay aims to trace the lines of development of the Russian romance, a genre rooted in the oral tradition of ancient Rus' with authentically national motifs but, at the same time, open to outside influences. The genre itself has undergone various transformations and modifications over time, and I will briefly describe the development of the various forms of Russian romance.

The earliest systematic research on the Russian song took place at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century; the works of high-caliber philologists and folklorists such as Vladimir Peret's (1870–1935)¹ and Vasiliĭ Chernyshëv (1867–1949)² may be considered the canonical points of reference. Additionally, Nikolai Findeĭzen (1868–1928)³ and Igor Glebov⁴ (the pseudonym of Boris Asaf'ev (1884–1949)) approached the romance from a specifically musicological perspective. In the years immediately prior to the October Revolution, they directed their studies to the identification of the moment when poetry was

¹ Vladimir Nikolaevich Peret's, *Istoriko-literaturnye issledovaniia i materialy*, vol. 1–3 (Sankt-Peterburg: Tip. F. Vaĭsberga i P. Gershunina, 1900–1902). Well-established Russian and Ukrainian names are given in the most popular versions, while others are transliterated according to ALA-LC system.

² Vasiliĭ Chernyshëv, *Izbrannye trudy v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moskva: Prosvet'shenie, 1970).

³ Nikolai Findeĭzen, *Russkaiā khudozhestvennaiā pesniā (romans): Istoricheskiĭ ocherk ee razvitiia* (Moskva: Direkt-Media, 2014); Nikolai Findeĭzen, *Ocherki po istorii muzyki v Rossii s drevneishikh vremen do konf's'a xviii veka*, vol. 1–2 (Moskva: Gos. izd-vo, Muzsektor, 1926–1929).

⁴ Igor Glebov, *Russkaiā poeziia v russoi muzyke* (Peterburg: Gosizdat, 1921).

transferred into musical expression, into songbooks, and even into the first publications of folk music addressed to the masses.

This research was continued and further developed in the Soviet era thanks above all to Ivan Rozanov (1874–1959), who created a compendium of earlier research and a synthesis of it with the results of on-site research.⁵ The abundance of information, combined with the accuracy and vividness of the observations on the artistic nature of the songs, make Rozanov's critical studies still authoritative today, despite the fact that some passages reflect the sociologically-oriented bias of his time. Moreover, alongside Rozanov, there are other scholars, such as Nikolaï Andreev (1892–1942), ĪŪriĭ Sokolov (1889–1941), Vladimir Chicherov (1907–1957), Alekseĭ Pozdneev (1891–1975) and more recently ĪĀkov Gudoshnikov (1924–1994)⁶ and Fëdor Selivanov (1927–1990),⁷ who carried out research in the field of songs and romances whose origins are found in literature. Finally, musicologists such as Boris Vol'man (1895–1971), Evgeniĭ Gippius (1903–1985), Aleksandr Glumov (1901–1972), Tamara Livanova (1909–1986), Vera Vasina-Grossman (1908–1990), and many others have conducted specific studies to clarify both the role played by Russian vocal lyrics and the works of Russian poets and composers in the musical repertoire targeted at a mass audience.

Beginnings

Attempting to trace the evolution of the Russian romance, even in the sonorities and themes that characterize it, one immediately notices that it maintains a close affinity with poetry—particularly evident in the fluidity of rhythm, intonation, and expressiveness. On the other hand, poetry naturally fed into the romance as well. Songs and romances often appeared as poetry in spite of the attitudes of their authors—for example, the works of Aleksandr Sumarokov (1717–1777), ĪŪriĭ Neledinskiĭ-Melefskiĭ (1751–1828), Alekseĭ MerzliĀkov (1778–1830), Nikolaĭ ŤŤyganov (1797–1832), Alekseĭ Kol'tsov (1809–1842) all crossed work crossed from song to poetry. The other direction of transfer happened often as well, i.e. the transfer of poems into the musical forms of popular songs or romances despite not having been composed for such purposes:

⁵ Ivan Rozanov, "Ot knigi—v fol'klor: Kakie stikhi stanoviat'sia populĀrnymi pesniĀmi," *Literaturnyĭ kritik*, no. 4 (1935): 192–207; Ivan Rozanov, ed., *Pesni russkikh poětov: xviii–pervaĭa polovina xix veka* (Leningrad: Sovetskĭĭ pisatel', 1936).

⁶ ĪĀkov Gudoshnikov, *Russkiĭ gorodskoĭ romans* (Tambov: TGP, 1990).

⁷ Alla Kulagina and Fëdor Selivanov, eds., *Gorodskie pesni, ballady, romansy* (Moskva: Filologicheskiĭ fakul'tet MGU im. M. V. Lomonosova, 1997).

Every one of the great Russian poets, regardless of how they themselves defined the genre of their works, has had many poems transposed into music that have been resounded in concert halls or musical chambers, in salons, in the townhouses of the admirers of song or in a peasant *izba*, on the street or in the fields Particularly surprising and enviable is the fate of those authors whose names are forgotten in the history of Russian poetry and whose verses are lost in old almanacs or musical publications, and of everything that was written by them, only those that have become songs are preserved in the memory of posterity, passed on from generation to generation. Sometimes this is just one song, but so a song so popular that the author deserves to be named gratefully. Meanwhile, in modern musical collections of songs and romances, such works are often printed with designations: “words of an unknown authors” or even “folk lyrics.” Only scholars and researchers know that such “folk songs” (and some of them have really become popular!) have a real authors, such as the lyrics of Евген Pavlovych Hrebinka (1812–1848) (*Ochi chërnye; Pomniû, iâ eshchë molodushkoï byla*), Semën Ivanovich Stromilov (1810–1862) (*To ne veter vetku klonit*), Ivan Makarov (1820–1852) (*Odnovzuchno gremit kolokol’chik*), Aleksandr Nikolaevich Ammosov (1823–1866) (*Khas-Bulat udaloï*), Dmitriï Pavlovich Davydov (1811–1888) (*Slavnoe more—sviâshchennyï Baïkal*), Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Navrotskiï (1839–1914) (*Est’ na Volge utës*), Dmitriï Nikolaevich Sadovnikov (1847–1883) (*Iz-za ostrova na strezhen’*).⁸

An infinite number of scenarios would therefore open up if one only tried to investigate which Russian poems have been given a second life in song, either in performances intended for a small niche of connoisseurs with a musically refined ear, or in more widely circulated contexts, thus becoming popular songs, sometimes with patriotic overtones. For example, in the collection, *Pesni russkikh poëtov (XVIII–pervaya polovina XIX veka)*,⁹ Ivan Rozanov claims the first Russian poet whose poems were made into songs was Mikhail Lomonosov, since his poem *Nochnoiû temnotoiû*, an example of a fable published in his *Rhetoric* (1748), was transposed into a song and included in the songbooks in the same century. More recent studies have shown that this tendency had manifested itself much earlier, even in medieval Rus’, where popular poetry in oral form and written literary compositions frequently had common contact points.

However, it should be pointed out that when we speak of chant in ancient Rus’, we are referring to a spiritual hymn, i.e. a psalm, performed *a cappella* by

⁸ Viktor Gusev, ed., *Pesni i romansy russkikh poëtov* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1963), 5–6.

⁹ Rozanov, *Pesni russkikh poëtov*.

a choir usually of three voices without the accompaniment of musical instruments concerted according to a precise rhythmic score. The influence of the Orthodox Church tradition in the Russian lands was so significant, that it also conditioned the development of singing. Suffice it to say that even in the 17th century, despite the growing importance of secular music in Russian society, instrumental orchestration was banned from religious ceremonies because it was considered a demonic form of expression. Thus, Russian vocal music takes a diametrically opposite path to the Western one from the 17th century onward¹⁰: it does not undergo the European-style evolution that develops from monodic music (troubadours and minstrels) to polyphony and eventually to single-voice singing. Ancient Byzantine and Russian chants are the expression of a crystallization of specific monophonic conduits, as were the Gregorian chants and medieval paraliturgical chants, such as the Italian *laudas*, the Spanish and Portuguese *cantigas*. Thus, in the 17th and 18th centuries, musical-theoretical reflection, following the criteria of the Orthodox Church, placed vocal music in the first place, relegating instrumental music to a mere accompaniment of poetic texts.

It was precisely in the 17th century that secular songs started to make their appearance alongside the sacred psalms, comparable in some aspects to rudimentary love lyrics, if one considers the translations of the *Song of Solomon* by Frantisk Skorína in 1518 and Mardariï Khonykov in 1679 in this regard. Broadly speaking, these are compositions distinct from the traditional motifs of ancient East Slavonic poetry and linked to the most varied “worldly” themes, such as descriptions of battles, praises to monarchs for victory over the enemy, exaltation of salient historical moments, and the advantages of education. There are also convivial songs, those extolling freedom, fortune, and love—the latter sometimes characterized by rather intense romantic notes and attributed in most cases to unknown authors and even to a brilliant poetess from the Petrine era.¹¹ While the profane songs constitute a quantitatively scarce production, they were highly appreciated by a middle class located in the city, i.e. precisely that democratic urban circle that would not only prove to be the most sensitive audience to the lyricism of Feofan Prokopovich (1681–1736), Antiokh Kantemir (1708–1744), Vasiliï Trediakovskii (1703–1768), and

¹⁰ Johann von Gardner, *Canto liturgico russo: Culto e innografia ortodossi* (Milano: La Casa di Matrona, 2013); Ivan Aleseevič Gardner, *Bogoslužebnoe penie russkoï pravoslavnoï tserkvi* (Sergiev Posad: Moskovskaiā dukhovnaiā Akademiā, 1998), 460–580; Nikolai Dmitrievich Uspenskii, *Drevnerusskoe pevcheskoe iskusstvo* (Moskva: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1971).

¹¹ Alekseï Pozdnev, *Rukopisnye pesenniki xvii–xviii vv. Iz istorii pesennoï sillabicheskoï poezii* (Moskva: Nauka, 1996).

Lomonosov (1711–1765). The same middle-class listeners would also become the ideal instrument of transmission of the new musical and compositional sensibility among the peasants. It is worth noting that the intense “secularization” of poetry and the consequent replacement of psalms with songs began in the Petrine period, under the influence of Peter I himself. Peter favored vocal music over instrumental and encouraged the development of choral singing, especially of *vivats*, which eulogized people or celebrated military victories and were performed at ceremonies or festivals.

At the same time, there was also a proliferation of salon songs, i.e. romances and love songs, including those created by Kantemir. He devoted himself to this genre, as he highlighted in the *IV Satire*,¹² and with his entire oeuvre, he dealt the *coup de grace* to the Ancient East Slavonic prosodic system. It should not be forgotten that, in his gilded, *de facto* exile in London that he was later confined to by Empress Anna Ioannovna, who ascended the throne in 1730, the poet became acquainted with the Italian theatre and music:

Kantemir immediately established friendly relations with the most brilliant Italian intellectuals active in the English capital, many of whom were in some way related to the world of theatre: with the poet Paolo Rolli, master of Italian at court and prolific librettist; with Nicola Porpora, composer and vocal teacher of great fame, who at the time directed the Italian company of the Haymarket Theatre; with Carlo Broschi (Farinelli), Gaetano Caffarelli and Francesca Bertoli, considered to be among the greatest singers of their time; with Giovanni Bononcini, a famous cellist and composer, who as an opera composer even rivalled George Frideric Händel.¹³

It is no coincidence that Gavrila Derzhavin (1743–1816) referred to this epoch as “the century of songs”¹⁴; in fact, the manuscripts collecting the poetic compositions of the first half of the 18th century show how Russian lyric poetry became radically anchored in the musical *byt* (everyday life) of the time, being disseminated among increasingly broader audiences.

¹² Antiokh Kantemir, *Sobranie stikhotvorenii* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1956), 113, v. 157–158.

¹³ Marialuisa Ferrazzi, “Le teorie riformatrici di Luigi Riccoboni nella Russia del xviii secolo,” *Drammaturgia* 13, no. 3 (2016): 44–45, <https://doi.org/10.13128/Drammaturgia-22031>.

¹⁴ “The century of songs’ was called the reign of Elizabeth [Petrovna] by the poet Gavrila Derzhavin. Indeed, these 20 years were remarkable in the history of Russian musical culture,” Evgenii Anisimov, *Zhenshchiny na rossiiskom prestole* (Sankt-Peterburg: Norint, 1997), 241.

Rossiiskaia pesniā

In the second half of the 18th century, the *rossiiskaia pesniā* (Russian song), called also *bytovoi romans* (the everyday romance) emerged, which was intended as a single-voice song accompanied by a musical instrument such as harpsichord, piano, psaltery or guitar (the latter became well-known in Russia at that time). The term *rossiiskaia pesniā* first appeared in the magazine *Muzikalnoe uveselenie* in 1774, although the romance as a genre originated in Russia somewhat earlier. However, it was referred to as *aria* because the term *romans* was not in use until the end of the 18th century; in fact, among the first to use it to define their poems were Khovanskii (*Aonidi*, 1796) and Derzhavin (*Muza*, 1796).¹⁵

The term *rossiiskaia pesniā* embraced a wide variety of vocal lyrics, ranging from folk songs and their imitations to bourgeois and urban poetry, pastoral poems composed by classicist poets, and sentimental love songs of the late 18th-century poets. But this apparent vagueness of the term reflected a real diversity of types of Russian romance. The tradition of chants, Slavonic sacred music, merged with the folk-song repertoire, intensified by the influence of Russian urban folklore that served as grounds for transforming them in the spirit of the prevailing 18th-century aesthetic system in literature and music—first classicist, then sentimentalist and pre-Romantic. These songs were acclaimed as revelations and satisfied the spiritual needs and aesthetic tastes of the nobility, the urban bourgeoisie, and, in part, the peasantry.

The focus on social motifs and themes of private life after centuries of the domination of church ideology, a peculiar affirmation of the right for personal happiness, interest in one's inner life, gallant attitude towards women, reflections on joy and the pains of love: all this was new and exciting. Although the themes of the romances were monotonous and the contents perhaps superficial, in these songs, the audience found the possibility of expressing thoughts and feelings that were new for the time and that nowadays may seem obvious.

Although in the early 19th-century the traditions of the 18th-century musical song culture were still very firmly settled and a sentimental romance remained the predominant form, the lyrics of 1800–1810s clearly show features of an emerging romantic attitude. Gradually, the stylistically variegated *rossiiskaia pesniā* transfigures into different kinds of romance. While the distinctive genre of *bytovoi romans* was formed in the first decades of the 19th century, its first expression can be traced to the end of the 18th century, if we consider, for

¹⁵ Nikolai Findeizen, *Ocherki po istorii muzyki v Rossii*, 297–298.

example, Aleksei Merzliakov *Iā ne dumala ni o chēm v svete tuzhit'* (1805) and Pētr Shalikov's *Rossiiskaiā pesniā* (1801). If the authors of *rossiiskaiā pesniā* did not aim at mastering a genuine folklore tradition (which did not exclude a possibility of folklore stylizations), the *rossiiskaiā pesniā* was the result of a conscious and intentional reference to the national folk poetry.

Undoubtedly, the clash with Napoleon's France and the dramatic events of the Patriotic War of 1812 contributed significantly to the development of Russian society's interest in its roots and national culture. It is no coincidence that theoretical studies were published in this period, such as *A Brief Guide to Russian Literature*¹⁶ or *An Essay on Russian Versification*,¹⁷ in which the authors, Ivan Born and Aleksandr Vostokov, highlight how the specificity of "Russian spirituality" resides precisely in "simplicity" and "purity," in a national originality that finds its full expression in popular poetry. Although their artistic and aesthetic conceptions differed, they agreed on the importance of the folk heritage and the need to return to folk songs, folktales, and legends in order to create a true Russian national poetry.

In the beginning of the 1830s, several collections of folk songs were published, summing up the pre-Romantic and Romantic period of folklore experiments in Russian music, among these two volumes of *Sobranie 12 natsional'nykh russkikh pesen* (*Collection of 12 National Russian Songs*, 1831–1833) and *Sem' narodnykh russkikh pesen* (*Seven Folk Russian Songs*, 1836) of Ivan Rupin,¹⁸ three volumes of *115 russkikh narodnykh pesen* (*115 Russian Folk Songs*, 1833–1834) of Danila Kashin (1770–1841).¹⁹ In these compilations, composed by outstanding Russian musicians, the folk songs were published in a kind of romance arrangement, reflecting the manner in which they were performed in the urban environment. The emergence of such arrangements stimulated a considerable development in the *rossiiskaiā pesniā*, intended as a characteristic type of Russian romance of the Pushkin and Glinka period. Merzliakov and Kashin, who produced their masterpieces in close and direct creative collaboration, can be considered the precursors of *rossiiskaiā pesniā* genre. Both of them consciously followed the folk-song tradition of their time and created patterns that determined the trend in the development of Russian romance for a long time. Though Merzliakov was

¹⁶ Ivan Born, *Kratkoe rukovodstvo k rossiiskoi slovesnosti* (Sankt-Peterburg, 1808): 140–141.

¹⁷ Aleksandr Vostokov, *Opyt o russkom stikhoslozhenii* (Sankt-Peterburg, 1817).

¹⁸ Ivan Rupin, *Sobranie 12 natsional'nykh russkikh pesen, aranzhirovannykh na f.p. s peniem i khorami, izdannoe uchitelem peniā I. A. Rupini* (Sankt-Peterburg, 1831–1833); *Sem' narodnykh russkikh pesen, polozhennykh na odin golos s variatsiiami i akkompānimentom fortepiano* (Sankt-Peterburg, 1836).

¹⁹ Daniil Kashin, *115 russkikh narodnykh pesen, dliā peniā i fortepiano, sobrannykh Daniilom Kashinyim* (Moskva, 1833–1834).

relatively moderate in his literary conception, the songs he created contributed to the transformation of the sentimental romance into a song of everyday life, marked by the features of genuine folk idiom.

The genre of *rossiiskaiā pesniā* was consolidated in poetry thanks to the efforts of Anton Del'vig (1798–1831), whose lyrics, with musical settings by Aleksandr Aliāb'ev (1787–1851), Ivan Rupin (1792–1850), Mikhail Īākovlev (1798–1868), a very young Mikhail Glinka (1804–1857) and Aleksandr Dargomyzhskii (1813–1869), represent a special stage in the history of Russian poetic-musical culture. In historical and literary criticism, there is sometimes a highly sceptical attitude towards Del'vig's songs, and they are often defined as artificially folkloric.²⁰ However, the historical significance of Del'vig's songs can be truly comprehended if we consider that he created his songs on the basis of Russian urban song tradition (*gorodskaiā pesniā*), already established in the 18th century. Alongside that, the composers who set music to Del'vig's lyrics, in full accordance with their literary style, were also oriented towards the urban song-romance. This created a peculiar type of *rossiiskaiā pesniā*, differing from the songs by Merzliākov, but still quite popular not only among Del'vig's literary friends and supporters, but also in broader social circles. Del'vig's poem *Ne osennii melkii dozhdichek* (*Not the Autumnal Fine Rain*, 1829), written for Glinka, firmly entered the musical and poetic scene and became one of the favorite songs of *intelligentsia* and student community.

Rossiiskaiā pesniā as a genre was an artistic imitation of a folk song. Some formal features of folklore music tradition underwent profound reworking according to the rules of versification and composition techniques developed by professional poets and musicians between the 18th and 19th centuries. Generally, choric, dactylic, anapestic, and amphibrachic rhythms were preferred for the *rossiiskaiā pesniā*, but there was above all the use of simple rhyme, sometimes replaced by assonances or consonances that generated melodic folk song trends.

In terms of themes, recalling the *clichés* of folk poetry, the Russian song frequently lingers in parallelisms, similarities, repetitions, references, and rhetorical interrogations to nature, especially to rivers, forests, birds, etc. For example, strong symbolism is recurrent of the hero becoming a falcon and the heroine a dove, the river representing separation, while the bridge being emblematic of a meeting. We also observe recurring combinations of noun–noun or noun–adjective pairs (mother earth, raging winds, red sun, green/silky grass, a good man, beautiful maiden, clear eyes, etc.) and the abundant use of hypocoristic

²⁰ Rozanov, ed., *Pesni russkikh poetov (xviii–pervaya polovina xix veka)*, z63; Nikolai Andreev, "Fol'klor i literatura," *Literaturnaia uchēba*, no. 2 (1936): 76–81.

suffixes. The most popular songs of this genre were characterized by intimate, sincere feelings, but many of them were idyllic, sentimental, or melodramatic, especially when they were arranged in the style of so-called *tsyganskaiâ pesniâ* (gypsy song).

The *rossiiskaiâ pesniâ* was predominant, but not the only type of Russian romance formed in the early 19th century. Along with the *pesniâ-romans*, oriented towards folk poetry and intended for an easily accessible accompaniment or performed even without it, other forms of Russian romance evolved in the first decades of the 19th century. They expressed the various tendencies of Romanticism first and then of Russian realism. Here, a significant role was played by the musical accompaniment, which often substantially complemented the lyrics, revealing the deeper aspects of its philosophical-psychological core.

Romans-ballada and romans-elegiâ

Russian Romanticism, a movement that expressed, among other ideas, the emergence of an authentic national consciousness, was fruitfully influenced by the best examples of European Romanticism in both lyrical and musical spheres. In this perspective, Vasilii Zhukovskii (1783–1852) played a decisive role as a poet but above all as a translator of the European poetic heritage, which thus permeated Russian national culture so deeply that it also influenced the music. Zhukovskii's poetry impressed his contemporaries and inspired Russian composers, many of whom succeeded in the challenge of setting his verses to music.

A remarkable episode in the history of Russian musical and poetic culture of the early 19th century was the close collaboration of Zhukovskii with the talented amateur composer Aleksandr Pleshcheev (1778–1862). Pleshcheev was the first Russian composer who made use of Zhukovskii's verses: he set a number of the poet's poems to music, creating the first examples of a new kind of Russian romance—*romans-ballada*. The notes of romances using the poet's verses resounded in the private houses of people close to Zhukovskii and in literary salons starting from the mid-1810s, but they became particularly popular in the second half of the 1820s, thanks to the contribution of young Glinka, Alekseï Verstovskii (1799–1862) and Aleksandr Aliab'ev (1787–1851), followed by Aleksandr Varlamov (1801–1848) and Aleksandr Dargomyzhskii. Pleshcheev's earlier romances have been forgotten and replaced by more successful arrangements of these composers.

The *romans-ballada* experienced an entirely new popularity due to the dramatic intensity of the fast-paced action that characterized it. The narrative

combined monologic and dialogic parts, gloomy, fantastic, threatening elements, and, frequently, a tragic epilogue. The music, perfectly adhering to the text, was characterized by scores aimed at imaginative and expressionistic representations *ante litteram*, with impetuous movements as if to render the pathos of the action. An example is the ballad-romance *The Black Shawl* or *Moldavian Song*, written by Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837) in Chişinău in October 1820, and transposed to music ten years later by Verstovskii. The piece, composed for piano, presents a tempo that passes from *non troppo lento* to *moderato* and is combined with a compositional dynamic oscillating between *piano*, *mezzo piano*, *moderatamente forte*, *forte*, *fortissimo*, *fortississimo* in correspondence with the most dramatic peaks of the narrative, i.e. the cruel instigator who instils the bug of jealousy in the protagonist, the discovery of the betrayal, the murder of the two lovers, the grief for the tragic loss. It is evident that the *romans-ballada* is shaped according to the taste of the Romantic era, where the undisputed protagonist is the wild man who “breathes, feels joys, expresses feelings, perceives pains, and is always consumed in passions with great intensity and strength.”²¹

The most successful songs of the *romans-ballada* genre competed in popularity with *rossiiskaiā pesniā* without opposing it. It represented indeed another, distinctively romantic version of the *bytovoī romans*. Later, during the crisis of Romanticism, the works of epigones contributed to the decline of this genre and its transformation into a melodramatic *zhestokii romans* (cruel romance).

In the first half of the 19th century, another genre of romans appeared on the Russian scene: the *romans-elegiā* (elegiac romance) from Zhukovskii's lyrics *Bednyi pevets* (*The Poor Singer*) and Batyushkov's *Pamiāť serdtsa* (*Oh, Heart's Remembrance*), both with the music composed by Glinka, emerged and quickly became quite famous. Some poems by Del'vig were also close to the elegiac romance, however the heyday of this genre is associated with the names of Pushkin, Evgenii Baratynskii (1800–1844), Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841) and Fëdor Tiūtchev (1803–1873). The greatest poets and composers of the first half of the 19th century created pieces that became classical examples of Russian romance, such as *IĀ pomniū chudnoe mgnoven'e* (*I remember the wonderful moment*) by Pushkin/Glinka, *Ne iskushai meniā bez nuzhdy* (*Do Not Tempt Me Needlessly*) by Baratynskii/Glinka, *Mne grustno* (*I am sad*) by Lermontov/Dargomyzhskii, and others. The lyrics of the poets of this period were used not only by their contemporaries but also by the composers of the second half of the 19th–early 20th centuries who created such wonderful Romances-elegies as *Dliā*

²¹ Luigi Magarotto, *La conquista del Caucaso nella letteratura russa dell'Ottocento: Puškin, Lermontov, Tolstoj* (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2015), 47.

beregov otchizny dal'noi (For Distant Shores of Homeland) by Borodin–Pushkin, *Redeet oblakov letuchaiâ griâda* (The Flying Ridge of Clouds is Thinning Out) by Rimsky-Korsakov/Pushkin, *Gornye vershiny* (Mountain Peaks) of Dargomyzhskii/Lermontov, *Ty znaesh' kraï* (Do You Know the Land) by Tchaikovsky/Tiûtchev, *Fontan* (Fountain) by Rachmaninoff/Tiûtchev, and others.

The *romans-elegiiâ* lacks specific formal and stylistic features that distinguish the *rossiïskaiâ pesniâ* or *romans-ballada*. In this genre of vocal poetry, the creative personality of the poet and composer manifested itself particularly freely and diversely. That is why the elegy provided the most favorable conditions for the development of realism. On the whole, an elegiac romance is characterized by the tendency towards psychological and philosophical depth, concentration of thought and feeling, intimacy in expressing lyrical, mostly mournful content, seriousness and intensity of musical language, rhythmical harmony, tense gradualness of melody development and emotional richness of accompaniment that often becomes a “subtext.”

Due to its intrinsic characteristics, the *romans-elegiiâ* could not be as widespread as the *rossiïskaiâ pesniâ* and *romans-ballada*, but this does not mean that it remained exclusively the domain of professional performers. Many elegiac romances were an indispensable element of home entertainment, while others became popular songs, such as the ones mentioned above. The elegiac romance has a prominent position in Russian musical and poetical tradition in the first half of the 19th century, and the importance of this type of vocal lyric poetry only increases as we approach the present day. While *rossiïskaiâ pesniâ* and especially *romans-ballada* tend to decline after the middle of the 19th century, the *romans-elegiiâ* is experiencing a fruitful and productive development in the works of composers and poets of the second half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries.

Influence of opera

There was an evident evolution in the romance tradition from the middle of the 19th century onwards since “professional” (*professional'nyi*) and “domestic” (*bytovoï*) romance becomes sharply differentiated and their relationship changes considerably.²² Indeed, in the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries all romances were accessible to any amateur musician and were widely used in

²² Vera Vasina-Grossman, *Russkii klassicheskiï romans XIX veka* (Moskva: Izd-vo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1956), 140.

everyday life, especially among the *intelligentsia* and the nobility. However, some of Glinka's romances can be regarded as the first examples of "professional" romance requiring the vocalist to have profound technical mastery and special training.

In this cultural atmosphere, there is another important element to consider: Glinka's acquaintance with 19th century Western opera, in particular with Italian opera. Despite his controversial relationship with it, he is nevertheless emblematic of the synthesis between European and Russian music:

The works of Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka represent a foundational shift for Russian musical culture: traditionally the composer is considered the musical equivalent of the poet Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, the founder of original literary genres and the codifier of the linguistic idiom in which they found expression. It was with reference to this "myth" that musicologists of the Soviet period sought, within the same socio-cultural context, a figure around whom they could build an analogue in the field of music. . . . Glinka gathered elements belonging to the Russian tradition and inserted them into the Western *koiné*, which in music translates into respect for the so-called "Rossini code."²³

We know for certain that Glinka became acquainted with the musical panorama of Italian Romanticism.²⁴ His work to synthesize Western music with the Russian tradition also involved the form of Russian romance, although the core remains deeply anchored in the national cultural heritage. After all, an essential characteristic of Romanticism is exoticism, which composers enthusiastically embraced because it allowed them to convey the national specificities of the musical discourse of other national contexts and to give voice to sentiments of love and freedom. Specifically, the love arias of Italian opera found reverberations in the elegiac romance of which Glinka, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908), Artur Rubinstein (1829–1894), Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840–1893), and Sergey Rachmaninoff (1873–1943), are the highest expression of the transposition to music of verses of Russian poets.

Thus, the so called *kamernyi romans*, i.e. a romance performed with chamber music, appeared on the Russian scene:

²³ Anna Giust, "Glinka e l'Italia: Un rapporto controverso," in *Italia—Russia: Quattro secoli di musica*, eds. Margherita De Michiel and Natalya Vlasova (Mosca: ABC design, 2017), 206–207.

²⁴ Giust, "Glinka e l'Italia: Un rapporto controverso," 206–225.

It is a romance “in tails and bow ties,” created to be performed by professional singers in chamber concerts and not intended for everyday singing or amateur music. The sophisticated structure of the chamber romance places an insuperable gap between the performer and the audience, firmly anchoring the singer to the stage and the spectators to their seats. Rarely, very rarely does the high romance, having taken off its tails, move on to everyday performance.²⁵

In contrast to the *kamernyi romans*, the *bytovoi romans* became the domain of minor composers: it weakened its ideological and psychological content and was often marked with the stamp of formal epigonism in relation to the masterpieces of *bytovoi romans* of the first half of the 19th century. However, in the mediocre production of this period, there were also romances of high artistic value that could be equated with those of the beginning of the century.

A number of poems of the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries became remarkable examples of Russian vocal lyricism, such as the works of the poets Alekseï Tolstoï (1817–1875), Apollon Maïkov (1821–1897), Afanasiï Fet (1820–1892), ĪĀkov Polonskiĭ (1819–1898), Alekseï Apukhtin (1840–1893), and Lev Meï (1822–1862). Meanwhile the verses of such poets as Arseniĭ Golenishchev-Kutuzov (1848–1913), EvdokiĭĀ Rostopchina (1811–1858), NikolĀi Minskiĭ (1855–1937), Daniil Ratgauz (1868–1937), Konstantin Romanov (1858–1915) still exist today mainly as romances. Together with the music of major composers, the verses of the above poets became firmly embedded in the cultural consciousness of the Russian *intelligentsia*, and as the cultural level of the masses increased, they become the domain of an ever wider range of classes. Therefore, in assessing the contribution of Russian poetry to the national culture, we cannot limit our attention to the heritage of the classics, but we should also take into account the greatest examples of *bytovoi romans*, especially those that are included today in the repertoire of popular vocalists, constantly broadcasted in concert halls, on the radio, and in modern mass artistic amateur performances.

Longevity

Without claiming to exhaust the analysis of such a complex and vast topic here, we can conclude by observing that starting from the second half of the 19th century Russian vocal lyricism underwent significant changes, in relation

²⁵ Miron Petrovskĭĭ, “Il fascino discreto del Kitsch, ovvero che cos’è la romanza russa,” trans. Anna Cavazzoni, *eSamizdat* 15 (2022): 279. <https://www.esamizdat.it/ojs/index.php/eS/article/view/174/158>.

to the ideological content, the relationship between genres, and the stylistic means of musical and poetic representation. The democratization of Russian culture, the blossoming of realism, and the even more incisive reference to the folk heritage in various art forms had a strong impact on the development of song, leading authors (both composers and poets) to borrow from the national heritage in a more independent and free manner, thus distancing themselves from the stylistic features of the *rossiiskaiā pesniā*, which no longer responded to the interests of the artists themselves, of the critics and of the public.

In the transition from the second half of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, major composers turned their attention more to poets whose role seems modest compared to the luminaries of Russian poetry. Curious, for instance, is the case of Konstantin Bal'mont (1867–1942) whose more than one hundred and fifty poems were set to music in about twenty years (almost as many as Pushkin's in a century), a far greater number than for Anna Akhmatova, Aleksandr Blok, or Valerii Briūsov. In this context, the change of register, or rather a certain lowering, with the revolutionary song in its most varied expressions, extolling freedom, democracy and the emancipation of the Russian people, is not surprising either.

We can therefore affirm that the verses of the greatest poets and the music of the greatest composers are firmly rooted both in the consciousness of the Russian *intelligentsia* and in a mass audience that, over time, became increasingly broader and more sensitive not only to the heritage of the classics, but also to a non-elitist repertoire. In this perspective, a certain type of romance should be considered today as a direct expression of an easily comprehensible everyday life, of an authentic sentimentality, which is frequently performed at singing events, in theatres or broadcast on the radio. As examples, *Moscow Nights (Podmoskovnye vechera)*, written in the immediate post-war period by the Soviet poet Mikhail Matusovskii (1915–1990) and the composer Vasilii Solov'ev-Sedoï (1907–1979), translated into many languages, still benefits from great popularity today. And let us not forget *I'll Drop a Word at Last (A naposledok iā skazhu)*, a *romans-ballada* on a poem by Bella Akhmadulina, entitled *Proshchanie* (1960), included in El'dar Riāzanov's film, *A Cruel Romance (Zhestokii romans)*, 1984), based on Aleksandr Ostrovskii's play, *Bespridannitsa*.

These latter examples demonstrate, once again, that the success of the Russian romance, in its various expression, can be attributed to multiple factors, such as narrative fluidity of the text, a certain innovation in the topics treated while retaining a traditional structure, the ability to reflect contemporaneity but also to evoke a mythical past, a musical and poetic language that is accessible but

not banal, and the capacity to arouse emotions, to enthuse, to involve a wide audience of different age groups.



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