

## “AGENTS OF INFLUENCE” IN THE ARTS

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### Reading between the Lines: The “Musical Subtext” in Venedikt Erofeev’s Works\*

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This paper studies the works of the late-Soviet writer Venedikt Vasilyevich Erofeev (1938–1990) with the aim of determining, based on the types, quantity, and hybrid characteristics of the musical references present in them, if it is possible to speak of a consistent “musical subtext” as one of the *filis rouges* in his creative writing. In fact, similarly to what has been investigated by scholars about the religious and literary domains, the pages of this author *sui generis* are scattered with hidden references to several popular works and protagonists of the Russian, Soviet, and international music scene. Drawing upon the methodological point of view on the conceptualization of Lotman’s semiosphere theory, the article intends to recreate the peculiar semiotic atmosphere in which Erofeev’s works were born, considering also memoirs of contemporaries, critical materials and a recent biography of the writer. The interdisciplinary approach of the research relates to the principle of dialogue between the literary and the artistic, the musical and the semiotic discourses. Among the manifold allusions in the author’s texts one can find famous arias from operas and various pieces of classical music from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of which, despite his modest means and his life on the margins of society, Erofeev was a passionate and fine *connoisseur*. This was mainly possible thanks to Soviet radio programmes, which between the 1950s and the late 1970s constantly broadcast classical music and operatic arias: with their universal themes, celebrated heroes and vocal virtuosity these musical motifs were intensely present in the daily life of the Brezhnev era. According to a lot of testimonies, along with alcohol, they were among the few elements able to “shake out” the greyness and immobilism of those years, indelibly marking even the imagination of ordinary

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people. After a biographical contextualization of the author, the main areas of interest will be the musical elements present in the famous prose-poem *Moskva – Petushki* (1970) and in the tragedy *Val'purgieva Noch', ili "Shagi Komandora"* (*Walpurgis Night, or "The Steps of the Commander"*, 1985). Secondly, some passages of the *Notebooks* from the collection *Bespoleznoe iskopaemoe* (*Useless Fossil*, 2001), of the writer's youth diary *Zapiski psichopata* (*Memoirs of a Psychopath*, 1956–1957) and of the unfinished rhythmic prose *Blagaja Vest'* (*The Gospel*, 1962) will be also taken into consideration.

**Keywords:** Venedikt Erofeev, musical subtext, classical music, Soviet songs, Brezhnev era

Представлено исследование произведений позднесоветского писателя Венедикта Васильевича Ерофеева (1938–1990) с целью определить на основе типов, количества и гибридных характеристик музыкальных отсылок, присутствующих в его творчестве, можно ли говорить о последовательном «музыкальном подтексте» как одной из ключевых его тем. Действительно, аналогично тому, что исследовали ученые в области религиозной и литературной тематики, страницы этого уникального автора насыщены скрытыми отсылками к нескольким популярным произведениям и фигурам российской, советской и международной музыкальной сцены. Методологически автор опирается на концепцию теории семиосферы Ю. Лотмана и намеревается воссоздать специфическую семиотическую атмосферу, в которой родились произведения Ерофеева, принимая во внимание также мемуары современников, критические материалы и биографию писателя. Междисциплинарный подход исследования связан с принципом диалога между литературными и художественными, музыкальными и семиотическими дискурсами. Среди многочисленных аллюзий в текстах автора можно в первую очередь выделить известные арии из опер и различные произведения классической музыки XIX и XX вв., которыми, несмотря на скромные средства и жизнь на обочине общества, Ерофеев был увлечен и тонким знатоком которых он являлся. Это было возможно в значительной степени благодаря советским радио-программам, в которых постоянно транслировалась подобная музыка, эти музыкальные мотивы интенсивно присутствовали в повседневной жизни людей брежневской эпохи. По многим свидетельствам, наряду с алкоголем, они были среди немногих составляющих жизни, способных скрасить серость тех лет. Основные объекты исследовательского интереса автора статьи – музыкальные образы, присутствующие в знаменитой поэме в прозе «Москва – Петушки» (1970) и в трагедии «Вальпургиева ночь, или «Шаги Командора»» (1985), а также в «Записных книжках» из сборника «Бесполезное ископаемое» (2001), в юношеском дневнике писателя «Записки психопата» (1956–1957) и в незавершенной ритмической прозе «Благая весть» (1962).

**Ключевые слова:** Венедикт Ерофеев, музыкальный подтекст, классическая музыка, советские песни, брежневская эпоха

Музыка – средство от немоты.  
Может быть, вся наша немота —  
от неумения писать музыку.  
В. Ерофеев<sup>1</sup>

The first part of this essay is devoted to a brief historical and cultural contextualization of Venedikt Erofeev, aimed at placing his life and works against the backdrop of the “counterculture” fuelled and disseminated through the phenomenon of *samizdat*, as well as the peculiar traits of his existential marginality during the Brezhnev era (1964–1982).

The most significant musical references in Erofeev’s works will then be examined, in line with the tendency towards *tsitatnost’* (citationism) typical of the modernist literature of the Soviet period (and of the following Russian postmodernism). The authors and musical pieces most frequently present in the texts will be identified, taking into account the writer’s musical competence and his heterogeneous personal preferences. The analysis will focus on foreign composers as well as on Russian and Soviet ones, also considering the cultural insights and commentaries provided in the annotated editions of the prose poem *Moskva – Petushki* [see: Левин, 1996; Ерофеев, 2003; Erofeev, 2004] and in the recent biography of the author [Лекманов, Симановский, Свердлов]<sup>2</sup>.

Based on Lotman’s semiosphere theory, the different modalities through which the manifold musical references appear between the lines of Erofeev’s works will then be investigated, in order to determine some continuity elements that support the hypothesis of a “musical subtext” as one of the keys to the interpretation of the texts. In fact, from intertextual allusions to comic-parodic downplaying, one can talk of an “inner musicality” of the writer’s language even on the formal and stylistic level.

As a conclusion, based on the interdisciplinary (and intermedial) dialogue between music and literature, attention will be concentrated on some contemporary musical reinterpretations of the prose poem *Moskva – Petushki*: the song *Moska valza* (2005) by the Italian songwriter Vinicio Capossela (b. 1965), and the symphonic fragment based on the motifs of the work (2014) by the Russian composer Rodion Konstantinovich Shchedrin (b. 1932).

<sup>1</sup> [Ерофеев, 2004, с. 470]. “Music is a remedy for silence. Perhaps, all our silence comes from our inability to write music”; unless otherwise indicated, all the English translations in this work are by the author of the article. In the context of Erofeev’s work, this poetic statement from the *Notebooks* could reflect his view on the limitations of language and the power of music (or art) to express what words cannot. The idea that silence stems from an inability to “write music” suggests a longing for an expressive medium beyond the constraints of prose or speech, a theme that resonates deeply with the writer’s use of language.

<sup>2</sup> O. A. Lekmanov has been added to the register of foreign agents by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.

### **The author: Biographical Profile and Cultural Background**

Venedikt Vasilyevich Erofeev was born on 24 October 1938 in Kandalaksha, a small town on the Kola Peninsula. This is still a remote location situated in Murmansk Oblast, beyond the Arctic Circle, at the northwestern edge of the Russian Federation. The family was not originally from the area, but from the Volga region, having moved north in 1925 due to the father's work. In fact, Vasily Vasilyevich (1900–1956) oversaw the small station at Chupa, on the Kandalaksha-Murmansk railway line. Venedikt was the couple's fifth child. The writer did not like to talk about his childhood, which was quite tough even if considered in the dramatic context of his generation; when forced to do so, he would invent stories and fanciful details, not grounded [Благовещенский].

From the accounts of his older sisters, Tamara Gushchina (1925–2017) and Nina Frolova (1931–2020), it can be inferred that before the war, the atmosphere was quite peaceful, that numerous records of popular songs at the time were played at home, that their mother, Anna Andreevna Gushchina (1898–1972), was an excellent storyteller, and that their father loved to sing revolutionary songs [Лекманов, Симаковский, Свердлов, с. 35–38]. Like many others, however, Anna Andreevna and her five children were evacuated at the outbreak of the Second World War. Having no other options, they returned to the village of the parents' hometown (Elshanka), but even there, after various hardships and difficulties during the journey, they suffered from hunger and cold. Following his return from military mobilization in 1945, the writer's father was detained in a labour camp under the provisions of Article 58, due to the alleged use of an anti-Soviet allusive joke. After a second arrest, he would return home only in 1954, severely ill and addicted to alcohol; he would die in 1956.

The negative stigma of being relatives of an "enemy of the people" gradually deprived the family of all means of subsistence, as well as the support of friends and acquaintances in the area, especially after the arrest of his brother Yuri for theft. As a result, in 1947, Anna Andreevna decided to go to Moscow secretly to one of her sisters, leaving her two youngest children in the Kirovsk orphanage, where they spent six years. While living there, they attended the local school, where they found some prominent teachers from the capitals, confined to that remote land for political reasons; despite everything, those brilliant intellectuals provided the children with a first-rate education. As reported in various sources, notwithstanding the traumas he carried within [Трощинская-Степушкина, с. 43–44], Venedikt initially managed to escape the atmosphere of violence and oppression at the *detskii dom* because he possessed a prodigious memory and a great talent in his studies. In fact, he completed his compulsory education with a gold medal as the best student in his school, which allowed him to go to Moscow in September 1955. There, not yet seventeen, he was admitted to the Faculty of Philology at the prestigious Lomonosov University. After performing exceptionally well on his first-semester exams, he experienced a personal breakdown during the winter holidays in Kirovsk, where he

learnt of his father’s fatal illness: he began to drink and smoke heavily, he completely stopped attending classes and was subsequently expelled from the university (February 1957)<sup>3</sup>. In 1959, he enrolled in the Faculty of Philology at the Pedagogical Institute in Orekhovo-Zuyevo, where he also set up a literary almanac, but was removed a few months later for “lack of discipline”. He tried again in 1961 at the Pedagogical Institute of Vladimir, but despite positive beginnings, he was expelled from there as well when a copy of the Bible was found in his bedside table (1962).

From that point on, Erofeev undertook a series of odd jobs to make a living, in the Moscow region and in other locations: from fireman to handyman, from construction worker to night watchman, from bottle collector to other modest tasks, until he found more stable employment laying cables for the national telephone company. Despite his first marriage to the teacher Valentina Vasilevna Zimakova (1942–2000) and a son born in 1966, for years he had no permanent address. According to Olga Sedakova, he often slept at his friends’ homes, near his workplace, or wherever he could find shelter: ‘He could have left, got lost along the way, or spent the night in a stairwell. By this time, all his documents were completely invalid, or he had none at all. His situation in life could hardly be called even marginal. A man without a passport, without registration, without a military ID...’ [Седакова, с. 359]. This condition allowed him to avoid potential summons from the secret police, as there was no specific address where he could be traced, and he did not possess the infamous *propiska* (the registration document tied to stable employment at a place of residence). During those years, Erofeev represented a rare case of an “internal exile”, which did not officially exist in the Soviet system<sup>4</sup>. Although the content and style of his clandestine works were clearly misaligned with the ideological dictates of socialist realism, he cannot be classified as a “dissident”; he was more of an outsider, a stranger on the human level even before the political one, a vagrant in a context where it was officially forbidden to be homeless and a sporadic worker in a regime that did not tolerate unemployment.

Amid *neustroistvo* (existential instability) and an ambiguous addiction to alcohol and smoking, which he attempted to cure several times, in the 1960s and in the early 1970s Erofeev wrote for a small circle of trusted friends and

<sup>3</sup> In those months, Erofeev constantly listened to a record of Ravel’s *Boléro*, which deeply influenced his mood. It is precisely in this period of dissipation before the actual expulsion from MSU that he wrote the youth diary *Zapiski Psichopata* (*Memoirs of a Psychopath*, October 1956 – January 1957). The idea of “madness”, worn and exhibited as a sort of “mask” of sheer irrationality by the first-person narrator, is a theme which would also come back in his more mature works and lead to the comparison of the character with certain traits of a *yurodivyi*. As it is known, this Russian term refers to a “holy fool” (or “God’s fool”), a popular figure in Russian medieval culture then incorporated into nineteenth-century literature.

<sup>4</sup> The author’s existential circumstances of those years reflect the sense of alienation and disintegration of identity often present in *Moskva – Petushki*, where the protagonist Venichka grapples with a profound lack of personal stability and societal recognition. The imagery of having no documents points to his disconnection from the formal structures of society, a theme the writer also explores in relation to the disillusionment and fragmentation of life in Soviet Russia.

drinking companions, without any thought of official publishing channels. From 1975 onwards, with his second wife Galina Pavlovna Nosova (1941–1993), the writer reached a somewhat more stable situation, at least in terms of ID documents and housing. His closest friends, recognizing his unique literary talent and the depth of his erudition, tried to encourage him to write through various strategies and incentives. In 1985, he was diagnosed with throat cancer, which led to a severe operation that deprived the writer of his voice, forcing him to use a laryngophone to speak. Later, the authorities denied him permission to travel to France at the invitation of a specialist who had offered targeted treatment. Despite a certain level of fame and the theatrical production of the tragedy *Walpurgis Night* in the capital (1989), Erofeev wrote little in his final years. Neither a second operation, nor several cycles of radiotherapy could halt the progression of the disease: he passed away in Moscow on 11 May 1990<sup>5</sup>.

The author's most famous work, first published in *tamizdat* in Israel in 1973, is the prose poem *Moskva – Petushki*, a dreamlike literary journey inspired by the real suburban route the writer actually took on a local commuter train (*elektrichka*) to visit his young son and his tormenting love of a lifetime, the biologist Yulia Nikolaevna Runova (1940), whom he had met in 1959 at Orekhovo-Zuyevo Pedagogical Institute. The longed-for destination, ironically depicted as an “Eden-on-Earth”, is the suburban town of Petushki, an anonymous peripheral location 125 km east of the capital. The chapter titles consist of the individual segments of the suburban journey, and the first-person narrator, Venichka, in many ways represents a fictional *alter ego* of the author, through whom the writer engages in a sort of “mirror game” with the readers, along the lines of a weird life-narrative account [Calabrese]. From the continual resort to alcohol in Rabelaisian proportions to surreal discussions, from allusions to real events to the eccentric characters the narrator meets on the train – who in turn are fictional transfigurations of real people – the text converses with angels and the Scriptures [Бравин], hurls invective against the system, and laughs at the caricatural recollection of collective labour processes and the “do-it-yourself” cocktails of Soviet alcoholics. The grotesque tone, the surreal satire that empties and mocks the meaning of the regime's slogans through incongruous word pairings, highlight the muffled, subterranean yet constant boycott by the population, which sought to “escape” at least through humour from the greyness and lack of prospects in daily life [Левин, 1996]. The commuter journey does not lead to the concrete destination indicated in the title: in a crescendo of cultural references and expressionist images connected to the protagonist's growing alcohol intoxication, the path circles back to Moscow, the dark and hostile centre of power,

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<sup>5</sup> There are two small museums devoted to the writer in Russia [Bravin, p. 38–39]: the first is the *Chibinskii literaturnyi muzei* (Chubin Literary Museum) in Kirov, opened on 24 October 2001; the other one is in Petushki public library. Besides, since 2000 some bronze statues have been created that depict the main characters of *Moskva–Petushki* in the Russian capital (Ploshchad' Borby).



concluding tragically and violently on the steps of a hall – essentially the same symbolic place where the narrative began<sup>6</sup>. This text widely circulated in *samizdat*, influencing the underground literary subculture of the capital with its peculiar tragicomic tone [Caramitti, 2010, p. 74–84]. Given its ambivalent nature, which reflects the ambiguous relationship with alcohol present in all Russian culture, *Moskva – Petushki* can also be interpreted as a late-Soviet reworking of Gogol’s famous formula of *smezh skvoz’ slyozy* (“laughter through tears”).

Erofeev’s works are known for their intricate layering of language and their subversion of conventional narrative forms [Пермяков], so exploring their potential “musical subtext” can reveal some fascinating insights. Given that the prose poem has an intrinsic, almost “lyrical” quality, it is of interest to analyse how music – whether in a literal or metaphorical sense – is embedded in the texts. The idea of a coherent and pervasive “musical subtext” can encompass aspects like:

- Explicit (and often parodic) references to music or sounds: Erofeev’s works directly allude to songs, composers, musical works, and instruments. His writing often blends the mundane with the incongruous, so another aspect of the examination regards how musical references intersect with the themes of the absurd, the tragic, and the surreal.

- Musical metaphors and imagery: it is also worth analysing how the writer uses musical metaphors or imagery [Pulcini, p. 170–171], particularly in relation to the ways his characters experience their lives, travels, and drunken states, in order to establish whether music plays a role in their inner worlds.

- Tone and dissonance: the interaction of harmony and dissonance in both his narrative contents and prose style also appears relevant. In fact, it could be interesting to investigate how Erofeev’s use of language, – whether we consider the stark contrasts between sections, or the blending of philosophical musings with absurd humour – creates “musical effects” within the pages [Бравин, с. 67–70].

## Composers and Musical Works More Present in the Texts

In a note from his 1965 *Notebooks*, Erofeev wrote:

Я в последнее время занят исключительно прослушиванием и продуцированием музыки. Это не обогащает интеллекта и не прибавляет никаких позитивных знаний. Но, возвышая, затемняет «ум и сердце», делая их непроницаемыми ни снаружи, ни изнутри [Ерофеев, 2005, с. 249]<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Up to now, three English translations of the work have been published: [Moscow to the End of the Line; Moscow Circles; Moscow Stations]. On the Italian translations, see: [Remonato, 2013].

<sup>7</sup> “Recently, I have dedicated myself exclusively to listening to and thinking through music. This does not enrich the intellect and does not add any positive knowledge. But while it elevates, it obscures ‘mind and heart,’ making them impenetrable from both the outside and the inside”. See also: [Лекманов, Симановский, Свердлов, с. 14].

As is often the case with the author's diary entries, this reflection appears complex and profound: it highlights a privileged, necessary, and "prioritized" inner relationship with musical language. In fact, the writer loved and "felt" classical music in an almost visceral way; he was an eager and passionate listener, and read various books on the subject [Бравин, с. 68]. According to the testimonies of friends and acquaintances [Мурavyev, с. 92], as revealed in some interviews, in the *Notebooks*, and in the 2019 *Biography*, music from Romantic composers onwards had a great influence on him, perhaps even more than literature:

Музыка, пожалуй, даже большее влияние оказала, чем и поэзия, и проза. И многие почему-то находили в этом следы... Но музыка не манеры XVIII века. <...>. А вот уже понемногу, начиная с позднего Бетховена, через Шопена, Шумана, Мендельсона [Ерофеев, Скиллен, с. 48]<sup>8</sup>,

– said Erofeev in a recently retrieved 1982 interview on the topic.

For Erofeev, classical music was even more important than alcohol, as this phrase from the *Notebooks* shows:

Если бы я вдруг откуда-нибудь узнал с достоверностью, что во всю жизнь больше не услышу ничего Шуберта или Малера, это было бы труднее пережить, чем, скажем, смерть матери. Очень серьезно [Ерофеев, 2005, с. 452]<sup>9</sup>.

A friend (Viktor Kulle) similarly recalled that music had a truly "narcotic effect" on him, and that the writer got more pleasure from it than from vodka. Even music store clerks, who initially looked at the modestly dressed Erofeev with disdain, ended up spending a lot of time with him choosing records, and in the end would send him off with shining eyes and the comment that customers like him were rare [Лекманов, Симановский, Свердлов, с. 165–166]. As Senkevich remarks, one cannot overlook the author's love for classical music: it seemed as though he had been born "with an orchestra in his head". When it came to choosing composers, he had his own preferences and firm criteria, and he never changed them until his last hour. In general, he was steadfast in his likes and dislikes. However, in the latter case, it was not to the point of hating anyone to death [Senkevich, p. 22–23]. Among his favourite musicians, Erofeev repeatedly mentioned Dmitri Shostakovich (1905–1975), Jean Sibelius (1865–1957), Gustav Mahler (1860–1911), called "the Dostoevsky of music" [Sollertinskij, p. 122], and Anton Bruckner (1824–1896):

<sup>8</sup> "Music, perhaps, has had even more influence than poetry or prose. And for some reason, many found traces of this... But not music in the manner of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. <...> Then, little by little, starting with later Beethoven, through Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn..."

<sup>9</sup> "If I were to suddenly learn that I will never again hear anything by Schubert or Mahler for the rest of my life, it would be harder to bear than, say, the death of my mother. Very seriously". See also: [Захарева].



Если уж любимцев называть, так Густав Малер, Ян Сибелиус, ну, в какой-то степени, Брукнер, Дмитрий Шостакович... Из советских еще, когда попадет удачно под расположение духа – Прокофьев. Да иногда даже Кабалевский [Ерофеев, Скиллен, с. 53]<sup>10</sup>.

In the case of the great Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who, as it is known, was one of the most significant and prolific figures in the musical landscape of the twentieth century, one could speak of a sort of “elective affinity.” His music indeed includes strong tonal contrasts, with a very prominent rhythmic component. Some traits that characterize his musical output, such as “tragically satirical” and grotesque elements, the presence of chromatic melodies, notable rhythmic harshness, and sudden modulations [Sollertinskij, p. 103–108] closely resemble the stylistic and lexical shifts between high/low registers and the surreal hyperboles which distinguish Erofeev’s writing. The Soviet composer skilfully integrated various influences, creating a very personal symphonic language [Riley]; moreover, as has been noted by various scholars, his human and musical parabola is emblematic of the relationship between the artist and totalitarian power [Pulcini, p. 140–143]. In fact, Shostakovich described himself as “a paper puppet hanging by a thread” [Volkov, p. 31]. He was well-acquainted with Soviet rhetoric and its bureaucratic style, rich in empty *clichés*, and, like Erofeev, he played with and deconstructed it “from the inside” through his visionary musical language, fully aware that it took little to go from being considered a “patriotic glory” to being blacklisted [see: Shostakovich, p. 16–18]. In 1972, Erofeev wrote a satirical novel entitled *Dmitri Shostakovich*, which he regarded as his best work. According to him, the manuscript, composed of several notebooks, was taken from him on a local train inside an *avos’ka* (a mesh bag), which also contained two bottles of vermouth. This gave rise to a sort of “mystery”: after the writer’s death, one of his acquaintances (Slava Lyon) published a chapter from this “retrieved” work set in a liquor store in Vladimir [see: Erofeev, 1999]. However, the origin of the fragment remains dubious, and Erofeev’s actual authorship has been called into question.

Between the serious and the playful, the writer often referred to the wild nature of the Far North, his native land, which he deeply loved and returned to visit several times. He considered some Scandinavian authors and artists “his compatriots” and was well-acquainted with the twilight atmospheres of Hamsun, Ibsen, and Strindberg, about whom he also wrote some essays, which were rejected by the censors. Thus, it is likely that he appreciated certain aspects in the compositions of the Finnish musician Jean Sibelius [Генис, Волков]; in fact, for the latter, nature represented the place of the soul from the very beginning, and he

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<sup>10</sup> “If we’re talking about favourites, then Gustav Mahler, Jean Sibelius, well, to some extent, Bruckner, Dmitri Shostakovich... As for Soviet composers, if the mood is right – Prokofiev. And sometimes even Kabalevsky”.

felt the land as a second skin: “The music of the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius evoked in Venedikt Erofeev’s memory images of the nature of his native Kola Peninsula: rocky hills with trees growing on them, lakes, the northern lights, and the rustling of the wind. He loved everything Sibelius composed: his symphonic poems and suites, his choral music” [Сенкевич, с. 22]. Sibelius’s music, composed in absolute silence, reflected a profound, pantheistic surrender to the ethereal sensations of the Nordic landscape, with its wild beauty and extreme seasons, following the intense influence of the national folkloric heritage [Zignani, p. 4]. In his scores, the rhapsodic themes, the tension of dissonant chordal overlaps, and the thick, arcadian timbre represent the musical transposition of images of eternal landscapes. Among his compositions, the symphonic poem *The Swan of Tuonela* (Opera 22, no. 2, 1893), and the famous *Valse Triste* (from Opera 44, *Kuolema*, 1903) are especially permeated with themes of death and melancholy. The motif of the dance with death is a powerful and evocative image that appears across various musical, literary, and artistic traditions. In Sibelius’s works, the motif of the dance with death serves to explore the metaphysical connection between life and death, often emphasizing a quiet, solemn, and sometimes eerily beautiful acceptance of mortality, as it also happens in his *Valse Triste* [Zignani, p. 22]. Adding to these aspects, it is possible to detect some biographical affinities with the writer: the composer’s dedication to alcohol and cigars, his nearly thirty-year creative silence, and the fact that in 1907 he was diagnosed with throat cancer, from which, unlike Erofeev, he recovered after an operation in Berlin the following year.

a) As for the references to authors and musical works most present in Erofeev’s texts, among foreign composers, whose music was often prohibited in the USSR, the most noteworthy are:

- Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809), with the so-called *Farewell Symphony* (Symphony no. 45, 1772);

- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827), with the *Fifth Symphony in C minor* (Op. 67, 1804–1808), the *Ninth Symphony in D minor* (Op. 125, 1824), and the apocryphal letter to B. Brentano (1812);

- Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868), with *La regata veneziana*, Duet No. 9 for two sopranos and a piano *Voga, o Tonio benedetto...* (from the collection *Soirées Musicales*, 1835) and the aria of the Count of Almaviva from *The Barber of Seville* (1816), an opera buffa in 2 acts;

- Fryderyk Chopin (1810–1849), with *Ballade no. 3 in A-flat major* for piano (Op. 47, 1841);

- Richard Wagner (1813–1883), with various arias from the romantic opera in 3 acts *Lohengrin* (1845–1848);

- Franz (Ferenc) Liszt (1811–1886), with the *Étude in C-sharp minor Forest Murmurs* (part of *Zwei Konzertetüden*, 1863);

- Charles Gounod (1818–1883), with arias (tenor) from the lyric drama in 5 acts *Faust* (1859);

– Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904), with *Symphony no. 9 in E minor*, Op. 95, also known as the *New World Symphony* (1892–1893);

– Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857–1919), with the final phrase from *Pagliacci* (1892), a lyrical work in a prologue and 2 acts [see: Левин, 1996, с. 33–34; Ерофеев, 2003, с. 154–158, 184–185].

b) Considering Russian authors and musical works, a place of absolute prominence in Erofeev’s pantheon is reserved to Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky (1839–1881), to whom various references are made regarding the epic drama in four acts and a prologue *Boris Godunov* (1874) and *Khovanshchina* (1872–1880), an unfinished opera in five acts described by the author as a “national drama in music” (the orchestration, with a series of cuts and modifications, was completed by Rimsky-Korsakov: [see: Tedeschi, p. 78–114]). The composer wrote the librettos for both works, drawing subjects from various turbulent episodes of Russian history and the literary sources that narrated them. In line with the other members of the Balakirev circle, but in a more original and extreme way, his production – especially his complex musical exploration – was characterized by a national identity, representing a rediscovery and valorisation of the traditional Russian heritage, termed “ethnophonia” by musicologists [Ibid., p. 37–77]. Both in terms of content and musical language, Mussorgsky aimed to transpose the rhythms and prosody of ancient Russian tales and legends, moving away from European models and seeking to adapt the intonations of spoken Russian into music [Emerson, p. 10–12]. Among the common aspects with Erofeev, we can highlight the desperate melancholy of Mussorgsky’s heroes, doomed to defeat; the pervasive theme of death; the “authenticity” of the composer’s musical language; and the “realism through imagery” that characterizes his scores: in fact, a vivid gallery of figures drawn from the everyday life of the people unfolds before the listener. In the poem, the narrating voice ambiguously refers to Mussorgsky’s troubled biography, to his solitude and his dependence on alcohol, which, along with nervous disorders and depression, led him to an early demise [Ibid., p. 20–26]:

– А Модест-то Мусоргский! Бог ты мой, а Модест-то Мусоргский! Вы знаете, как он писал свою бессмертную оперу «Хованщина»? Это смех и горе. Модест Мусоргский лежит в канаве с перепоем, а мимо проходит Николай Римский-Корсаков в смокинге и с бамбуковой тростью. Остановится Николай Римский-Корсаков, пощекочет Модеста своей тростью и говорит: «Вставай! Иди умойся и садись дописывать свою божественную оперу “Хованщина”!» И вот они сидят – Николай Римский-Корсаков в креслах сидит, закинув ногу за ногу, с цилиндром на отлете. А напротив него – Модест Мусоргский, весь томный, весь небритый, пригнувшись на лавочке, потеет и пишет ноты. Модест на лавочке похмелиться хочет: что ему ноты! А Николай Римский-Корсаков с цилиндром на отлете похмелиться не дает. Но уж как только затворяется дверь за Римским-Корсаковым – бросает Модест свою бессмерт-

ную оперу «Хованщина» – и бух в канаву. А потом встанет, и опять похмелится, и опять – бух!.. [Ерофеев, 2003, с. 63–64]<sup>11</sup>.

This parodic passage, based on a famous anecdote by the critic Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906), is written in a very informal, humorous style, and it pokes fun at the creative struggles and eccentricities of the Russian composer: it may be considered as a specimen of Erofeev's style, with its peculiar blend of sorrow and resilience. The lines reflect the often chaotic and contradictory nature of Mussorgsky's life and creative talent, especially in contrast to the more composed and elegant figure of Rimsky-Korsakov<sup>12</sup>. With its irony, this excerpt represents an effective example of musical reference from the prose poem: in fact, Erofeev's *povest'* has often been interpreted as a commentary on the absurdities of Soviet life, exploring themes of isolation, despair, and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent world [Vaingurt, p. 168–169]. As Eskina remarks, in *Moskva-Petushki* a comic "musical background" accompanies Venichka's solo voice, and the objects of parody for the author are, as with Bulgakov, primarily Romantic works and episodes from Romantic musical historiography [Эскина, с. 45–46].

Other Russian composers often referred to in a caricatural light in *Moskva – Petushki* are:

- Nikolai Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908), with *Sadko* (1895–1896), an opera in seven scenes based on the epic legends of the *bylinas* and the famous *Flight of the Bumblebee* from the opera *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (1899–1900);

- Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893), with the aria of Lensky from the opera *Eugene Onegin* No. 24 (1877–1878) [see: Erofeev, 2004, p. 159–163].

c) Personalities from the Soviet musical world mentioned:

- Fyodor Ivanovich Shalyapin (1873–1938), a lyric singer, regarded as the most famous bass of the first half of the twentieth century. He possessed

<sup>11</sup> "And Modest Mussorgsky! My God, and Modest Mussorgsky! Do you know how he wrote his immortal opera *Khovanshchina*? It's both laughter and sorrow. Modest Mussorgsky is lying in a ditch, drunk, and passing by is Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, in a tuxedo with a bamboo cane. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov stops, taps Modest with his cane and says: 'Get up! Go wash your face and sit down to finish writing your divine opera *Khovanshchina*!' And here they are sitting – Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov sitting in a chair, with his leg crossed over the other, top hat at a jaunty angle. And opposite him is Modest Mussorgsky, all languid, unshaven, hunched on the bench, sweating and writing notes. Modest wants to drink to recover from his hangover: what does he care about notes! But Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, with his top hat at a jaunty angle, won't let him drink. But as soon as the door closes behind Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest throws aside his immortal opera *Khovanshchina* – and thud he falls into the ditch. Then he'll get up and drink again, and again – thud..."

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that in 1958, Shostakovich proposed his own orchestration of *Khovanshchina* based on Mussorgsky's original score, and his version was used in the 1959 Soviet film *Khovanshchina* directed by Vera Stroeva. It is the same edition in which the opera was first performed at the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad in 1960, and it is also the one mainly performed nowadays [Pulcini, p. 48–49].

a powerful and versatile voice, a strong stage presence, and remarkable acting abilities [Левин, 1996, с. 37].

– Ivan Semyonovich Kozlovsky (1900–1993) was a renowned Soviet tenor, an award-winning soloist at the Bolshoi Theatre from 1926 to 1954: he performed various opera arias directly (or indirectly) related to the text of the poem. According to various testimonies [Ерофеев, 2003, с. 153–154], pieces from the operas mentioned in his interpretations were regularly broadcast on the Soviet radio from the 1950s to the 1970s. Especially in the pre-television era, these arias were part of the “soundtrack” of daily life and formed a true “cultural semiosphere”: in fact, many people of humble origins recognized them and discussed their performances just like the most passionate music lovers [Эскина, с. 46–47].

– Olga Georgievna Erdeli (1927–2015), a noted Soviet harpist known for her brilliant technique and great artistic charisma, who taught for 45 years at the Moscow Conservatory [Там же, с. 47–48].

– Vera Georgievna Dulova (1909–2000), a very popular harpist and concert artist, a friend of Shostakovich, founder of the Dulova method for the harp, and a long-time teacher at the Moscow Conservatory.

– Georgy Vasilievich Sviridov (1915–1998), a well-known composer and pianist during the Soviet era, ironically referenced in *Valpurgieva Noch’* (*Walpurgis Night*) for his “square” glasses.

– Oskar Borisovich Feltsman (1921–2013), a Soviet Ukrainian composer of Jewish descent, author of operettas and song lyrics.

– Jan Abramovich Frenkel (1920–1989), a Soviet composer known for songs, light music, and film scores.

– Daniil Yakovlevich Pokrass (1905–1954), a composer and lyricist (on these last figures, see: [Schwarz]).

In the 1950s and 1960s, opera arias were widely known and appreciated by the public in the Soviet Union, as they were frequently broadcast on the radio [see: Ерофеев, 2003, с. 154–155]; the various interpretations had become an integral part of discourse, sources of commentary and wordplay among intellectuals. In several passages, the dense and allusive language of the poem reflects the cultural atmosphere and the most listened-to musical pieces of the period, as demonstrated by the semiotic analyses of Levin and Bogomolov [Левин, 1996; Богомолов, 1999; Богомолов, 2000].

d) In addition to opera and classical music, Erofeev’s eclectic personal tastes and prodigious memory also included folk Russian songs and romances [see: Ерофеев, Скиллен, с. 53–54], some patriotic songs that were continuously broadcast on the Soviet radio, as well as soundtracks from popular films of the time. The fact of being well-versed in folk songs is probably one of the reasons why his prose has a certain degree of musicality to it [Орлицкий]; in a parodic play of allusions and references, the text of *Moskva – Petushki* is woven with musical fragments and more or less hidden quotations from the contemporary cultural context. In fact, considering also the presence of other everyday sounds (the train, announcements from loudspeakers, etc.), one can detect a “musical weave” in the prose poem:

– The Soviet patriotic song *Zhit' stalo luchshe* (*Life Has Become Better*, 1936), based on a famous slogan by Stalin, music by A. V. Aleksandrov, lyrics by V. Lebedev-Kumach (1898–1949)<sup>13</sup>.

– The famous “unofficial anthem” *Pesnja o Rodine* (*Song about Motherland*), from the film *CIRK* (*The Circus*, 1936, directed by G. Aleksandrov), also known by its first line of the chorus *Shiroka strana moja rodnaja*, music by I. O. Dunayevsky (1900–1955), lyrics by V. Lebedev-Kumach [Piretto, p. 251–252]<sup>14</sup>.

– A very popular children's song in the USSR in the 1960s, *Raz-dva-tufli naden'-ka...* (*One-Two-Put on Your Little Shoes*), music by G. Padelsky and lyrics by D. Ivanov, set to the rhythm of the famous Finnish dance *Letkajenkka*<sup>15</sup>.

A special place in Erofeev's preferences was also occupied by his contemporary poet-singers (*bards*) Bulat Okudzhava (1924–1997) and Vladimir Vysotsky (1938–1980), whose works and views he felt as part of his inner world:

Высоцкий, Окуджава – само собой. Это настолько каждодневная любовь к ним, что прямо об этом не говоришь. То есть настолько привычная любовь, как к ближним людям, без которых невозможно. То есть клясться в любви к ним не станешь, поскольку это излишне, как не делаешь это в применении к людям, без которых не обойтись... И меня очень радует, что и русские их любят [Ерофеев, Скиллен, с. 53]<sup>16</sup>.

It is important to underline that for the writer, music operates as a semiotic code that interacts with the verbal language. This ties into Lotman's concept of the semiosphere [Lotman, p. 113–115], where different semiotic systems overlap and interact, producing new meanings. The frequent allusions to operatic and classical music in Erofeev's works are not just aesthetic flourishes: they reflect the cultural significance of music in Soviet society, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, when opera arias were deeply ingrained in the cultural consciousness. Therefore, the musical references which dot the pages can be read as part of the cultural “inventory” that constitutes the Russian semiosphere. In this sense, Erofeev is engaging with a cultural code that has specific connotations in the Brezhnev time, and by manipulating

<sup>13</sup> On the historical and cultural background of this popular song, see: [Piretto, p. 182].

<sup>14</sup> This triumphalist song, initially written to celebrate the new Stalinist constitution, in the late 1930s had become so popular that it replaced the national anthem in the hearts of Soviet citizens [Piretto, p. 251–252].

<sup>15</sup> The song is still well-known in Russia, as show some contemporary children's versions on the Internet. For some cultural and historical information on how the original Finnish dance by P. Lehtinen spread in the URSS (and in the whole world) in the 1960s, see: [Исапоров, Паперно, с. 390; Ерофеев, 2003, с. 261–262].

<sup>16</sup> “Vysotsky, Okudzhava, sure thing. It's such an everyday kind of love for them that you don't even need to talk about it. It's a love so familiar, like the love for those close to you, without whom life is impossible. You wouldn't swear your love to them, because that's unnecessary, just as you wouldn't do so for the people you can't live without... And it makes me very happy that the Russians love them too”.



it, he adds depth to themes such as alienation, loss, and the absurdity of life. This choice not only enriches the literary experience but also reflects the cultural and historical context in which the works were written. The interaction of music and literature, seen through the lens of Lotman’s semiosphere, reveals how different semiotic systems – literary, musical, and cultural – can blend to produce a complex and multi-layered narrative.

### The Musical References Within the Works

It is possible to identify different modalities in which musical references appear in Erofeev’s works:

a) references and interpolations of citations in the texts, complete or not, that give rise to recognizable allusions or intertextual openings positively oriented towards the musical works or themes in question. An effective example is represented by the opening line of *Moskva – Petushki* “проходил по Москве” (“I went through Moscow”), which is reminiscent of one of the most famous songs in the history of Soviet *estrada* (ballads), *А я иду, шагаю по Москве* (*And I’m Walking, Strolling through Moscow*, 1963: lyrics by Gennady Shpalikov, music by Andrei Petrov). The motif was popularized as the soundtrack of the homonymous film (1964, directed by Georgy Daneliya, story and screenplay by G. Shpalikov), in which it was performed by a very young Nikita Mikhalkov (b. 1945). The insistence on the term *rassvet* (dawn) in the early chapters of the prose poem also evokes the overture of Mussorgsky’s *Khovanshchina*, with which the text shares a tragic, expressionist ending.

b) Specific paratextual indications about actual musical pieces to be listened to, serving as a commentary or accompaniment to the events of the plot. In the author’s view, the musical works selected give the possibility to grasp the literary text’s meanings in a deeper, “amplified and elevated” way. In the tragedy *Walpurgis Night*, for instance, – which, in several respects, recalls *Ward No. 6* by Chekhov – it is suggested to listen at low volume to some Russian folk songs, to the first part of Mahler’s *Third Symphony* (Act I), and to something from the more sombre passages of Bruckner’s *Andante* (Act V) [see: Ерофеев, 2004, с. 261–342]. Between the IV and the V acts, the paratextual indications evoke a surreal and visionary musical setting, which blends different elements:

Между четвертым и пятым актами – пять-семь минут длится музыка, не похожая ни на что и похожая на все, что угодно: помесь грузинских лезгинок, кафешантанных танцев начала века, дурацкого вступления к партии Варлаама в опере Мусоргского, канканов и кэкуоков, российских балаганных плясов и самых бравурных мотивов из мадьярских оперетт времен крушения Австро-Венгерской монархии [Там же, с. 322]<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> “Between the fourth and fifth acts, there is music lasting five to seven minutes, unlike anything and yet resembling everything: a mixture of Georgian *lezginka* dances, café chantant tunes from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the silly overture to Varlaam’s aria in Mussorgsky’s opera, cancan and *kekuok* dances, Russian carnival-style jigs, and the most virtuosic motifs from Hungarian operettas of the time following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire”.

The conclusion of part IV of Sibelius's *Second Symphony* is then referred to as the most suitable commentary to the final scene<sup>18</sup> in the third ward of the psychiatric hospital [Reich, p. 210–216]. Finally, in the *Minuscule Postface* to the dark play, Erofeev writes that “it’s over to music”, implying that in his view and artistic conception music is an indispensable component in the performance and reception of the work:

«За музыкою только дело», без этого нельзя. Кроме уже рассованных по тексту авторских указаний, можно использовать (совсем негромко) русские народные песни вроде «Позарастили стежки-дорожки», «На Муromской дорожке», лучше оркестровые вариации на эти темы (в 3-м акте). Русскую песню «У зари-то у зореньки» (в 1-й половине 4-го акта). 1-я часть 3-й симфонии Малера, совсем засурдиненно, в 1-м акте. Какое-нибудь из самых мерных и безотрадных *Andante* Брукнера в 5-м. Ну и так далее [Ерофеев, 2004, с. 342]<sup>19</sup>.

c) Fragments from the musical context in the form of citations often become part of wordplays, parodies and of that stylistic mechanism of “devaluation” produced through the incongruous juxtaposition of high and low registers, which is one of the distinctive features of Erofeev’s writing. Here are two eloquent and exhilarating examples from *Moskva – Petushki*:

...Нет ничего спиртного!!! <...> и вот я сюда пришел: съесть бефстроганов и послушать Ивана Козловского или что-нибудь из «Цирюльника». <...> Нет ничего спиртного! Царица небесная! Ведь если верить ангелам, здесь не переводился херес. А теперь – только музыка, да и музыка-то с какими-то песьими модуляциями. Это ведь и в самом деле Иван Козловский поет, я сразу узнал, мерзее этого голоса нет. Все голоса у всех певцов одинаково мерзкие, но мерзкие у каждого по-своему. Я потому легко их на слух различаю... Ну, конечно, Иван Козловский... «О-о-о, чаша моих прэ-э-эдков... О-о-о, дай мне наглядеться на тебя при свете зве-о-о-озд ночных...» Ну, конечно, Иван Козловский...

<sup>18</sup> As Reich observes, in this work, madness is a “mask” with multiple semantic layers: “Having long cultivated his own mask of madness, Erofeev subjected it to trenchant critique in his 1985 drama *Walpurgis Night, or The Steps of the Commander*. Set in a psychiatric hospital and centered on a hero, Gurevich, who is arguably also pretending to be insane, the play depicts the erosion of the line between theatricality and reality and the loss of reason that ensues. Erofeev’s mask of madness may be characterized as one writer’s take on two increasingly common phenomena: ‘dissimulation’, or the feigning of mental health, and ‘simulation’, or the feigning of mental illness” [Reich, p. 187].

<sup>19</sup> “‘It’s over to music,’ this is indispensable. Besides the author’s notes already included in the text, you can use (very quietly) Russian folk songs, such as *Pozarastali stezhki-dorozhki* (*The Paths and Roads Have Overgrown*), *Na Muromskoy dorozhke* (*On the Murom Road*), preferably orchestral variations on these themes (in Act III). The Russian song *U zari-to u zorien’ki* (*At Dawn, at Little Dawn*) (in the first half of Act IV). The first movement of Mahler’s III Symphony, very muted, in Act I. Some of the most measured and hopelessly melancholic *Andantes* by Bruckner in Act V. Well, and so on”.

«О-о-о, для чего тобой я околдо-о-ован... Не отверга-а-ай...» [Ерофеев, 2003, с. 21]<sup>20</sup>.

In the above passage, the parodic devaluation is generated by the juxtaposition of the opening lines of *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy and the mockery of the “dog-like modulations” in the voice of the well-known Soviet tenor Ivan Kozlovski. As we have already seen, the singer from the Bolshoi Theatre referred to was one of the most famous tenors in the Soviet firmament of the time; the narrator mocks him through the vividness of an artfully manipulated formula, so well-known and part of literary tradition that it has entered everyday language as a common expression [Remonato, 2015, p. 152]. Another vivid example is connected to the surreal evocation of the red-haired figure of the loved woman:

Эта девушка вовсе не девушка! Эта искусительница – не девушка, а баллада ля бемоль мажор! Эта женщина, эта рыжая стервоза – не женщина, а волхование! Вы спросите: да где ты, Веничка, ее откопал, и откуда она взялась, эта рыжая сука? И может ли в Петушках быть что-нибудь путное? [Ерофеев, 2003, с. 44]<sup>21</sup>.

In this second case, the deforming reference is to the famous *Ballade No. 3 in A-flat major* by F. Chopin, which in the Russian phrase referring to the lover may form both an anagram and an acrostic, suggesting “b” + “lya” = *blyad* (prostitute, whore)<sup>22</sup>.

### From Literature to Music: Some Examples of Intermedial Transposition

Following the thread of intertextual dialogue between literature and music [Russi, p. 19–26], two compelling musical reinterpretations of *Moskva – Petushki* are taken into account; in our view, they represent effective examples of intermedial transpositions:

<sup>20</sup> “...There is no booze!!!” <...> and so, I came here: to eat beef stroganoff and listen to Ivan Kozlovsky or something from *The Barber*. <...> There is no booze! Holy Queen of Heaven! If we are to believe the angels, there has always been sherry here. And now – only music, and even that music has some dog-like modulations. It really is *Ivan Kozlovsky singing*; I recognized that voice right away, there’s nothing worse than it. *All singers have equally disgusting voices, but each is disgusting in their own way*. That’s why I can easily distinguish them by ear... Well, of course, it’s Ivan Kozlovsky... “O-o-o, cup of my ancestors... O-o-o, let me gaze upon you in the light of the night stars...” Well, of course, it’s Ivan Kozlovsky... “O-o-o, why have I been enchanted by you... Do not reject me” (italics mine. – I. R.).

<sup>21</sup> “This girl is not a girl at all! *This seductress is not a girl, but a ballad in A-flat major!* This woman, this red-haired vixen, is not a woman, but witchcraft! You may ask: where did you, Venichka, dig her up, and where did this red bitch come from? And can there be anything good in Petushki?” (Italics mine. – I. R.).

<sup>22</sup> This famous melancholic piece is present more than once in Erofeev’s works, from the prose poem to the *Notebooks*; in fact, in the last years he often asked to some of his pianists’ acquaintances to play it for him [see: Ерофеев, 2003, с. 265; Лекманов, Свердлов, Симановский, с. 167–168].

a) the symphonic fragment *Moskva – Petushki*, based on some themes of the text (2014) by the prominent Russian composer Rodion Konstantinovich Shchedrin (b. 1932). The central motif of the composition, distinguished by ironic undertones and expressive harmonies, is the sound of a moving train in the background, which sets its rhythm. Shchedrin's transposition channels the absurd, existential and fragmented nature of Erofeev's work into a musical language that seems to mirror the protagonist's psychological and emotional states. The affinities with the literary text include the repetition of themes, the circularity of the narrative and the chaotic flow of thought, expressed by combining traditional symphonic elements with more modern and dissonant sounds. Through repeated images, sudden shifts and reflective moments, the musical fragment not only deeply reflects the mood of the prose poem, but also adds a layer of theatricality and existential meditation, creating a "sonic landscape" that brings a new dimension to the writer's exploration of Russian life.

b) The song *Moska valza* (part of the visionary album on religious themes *Ovunque proteggi, Everywhere You Protect*, 2006), by the Italian singer-songwriter Vinicio Capossela (b. 1965). The rock ballad has a hypnotic and frenzied pace, aimed at echoing Venichka's monologue on the melodic plan. It features a waltz rhythm, a classical dance form that adds to the score a kind of ironic and melancholy feeling, especially as it contrasts with the grim and chaotic image of the Russian capital [Caramitti, 2023]. The Italian lyrics show numerous phonetically transliterated intertextual fragments in Russian, which create intense cacophonous and alliterative effects emphasized by rhymes and repetitions:

Lichiu	I denti di Stalin
Harasciò, harascià, harasciò, harascià	Mordono la notte
(venecka lichiu)	Torri babiloniche
C'tirie, tri, d'va, adin, pajehali	Nel cielo fanno fiaccole
Moska valza, moska nella vodka	Sui talami pensili
Moska valza, moska sulla vodka	Dell'hotel Ararat
Moska nella valza, vaska nella moska	Ararat, Ararat, Ararat
Vodka nella vaska	Rimbombano nelle cupole
Megalopolis	I dettami degli tzar, zar, zar
Per l'Asia decollano	Nelle cripte discotecniche
Le cupole d'oro	Si fracassano gli zar, zar, zar, zar, zar
Woland che si invola	Tar, tar
Sui banchini dell'arbat	Two Rome are fallen
Libellule ronzano	Citviortaja nie budiet
Sulle punte carillonanno	Busgatov sigtagatov
Nel velluto del bolscioj	Busgatov sigtagatov
Bolscioj, bolscioj, bolscioj	Busgatov sigtagatov
Lenin come una mummia	Busgatov sigtagatov
Inuma dentro il marmo	C'tirie, tri, d'va, adin, pajehali
Rubino del cremlino	Gagarin nello spazio
Mavskosky faraon	Sovietsky superman

Il cosmo dentro il casco	Nelle nuove catacombe
A spasso va in sojuz	Aspettando la bomba
Gagarin nello spazio	Nelle nuove catacombe
Sovietsky superman	Aspettando la bomba
Il cosmo dentro il casco	Russian roulette metro
A spasso va in sojuz	Russian roulette metro
Occhi di matrioska	Russian roulette metro
Sogno suprematista	Cecenzi ciorni
Sorriso da ginnasta	Uzbeki ciorni
Sorriso socialista	Grusinzi ciorni
Arriva fino in cielo	Armiani ciorni
L'eterna primavera	Ciorni, ciorni, ciorni, ciorni
Starajo starajà	Cavkavki ciorni, ciorni crna schopi
Starajo starajà	Propiska niet
Davai tavarish, davai	Propiska niet
Davai tavarish, davai	Propiska niet
Dove volan le cicogne	Milizia control spasiba
Davai tavarish, davai	Milizia control spasiba
Dove volan le cicogne	Milizia control spasiba bum, bum
Davai tavarish, davai	Tutto in una notte, tutto l'ultima notte
Vitosky ha lasciato le cucine	Paradiso artificiale
In testa ha per aureola una chitarra	Aperto per ventiquattro ore
Majakowsky ha sparso a terra le cervella	Tutto in una notte, tutto è l'ultima notte
Piotor ora regna su una caravella	Succhiano la notte
La ziguli è finita	Le vampire del night fly
Kurkskaja in rimont	Two hundred dollars
La ziguli è finita	Chiavare veramente
Kurkskaja in rimont	Two hundred dollars
Idi venecka idi	Chiavare veramente
Idi venecka idi	Four hundred dollars
Sibirskaja korona	Chiavare veramente
Staraj a'maskvà	Nei visoni tartari
Moskaskaya cristall	Chiavare veramente
Kakaya krassatà	Nei talami pensili
Sibirskaja korona	Tutto in una notte
Staraj a'maskvà	Four hundred dollar
Moskaskaya cristall	Chiavare veramente
Kakaya krassatà	Five hundred dollars
Inimiedlina vipiò	Chiavare veramente
Dalle nuove catacombe	C'tirie, tri, d'va, adin, pajehali
Megalopoli eurasiatica	Moska valska moska nella vodka
Dai cunicoli elettrici	Vodka nella vaska vaska nella volga
Dai fregi ciclopici	Moska valska vodka nella vaska
Scalinata dinamo	Ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi
Respiro di uno milione	Col suo nero colbacco
S'impenna nei saloni	Col suo nero colbacco
La piena del popol	Ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi, ahi
Nelle nuove catacombe	Pajehali.
Aspettando la bomba	

We are faced with a “text mixed” with strongly postmodern elements, characterized by code switching, circularity and short circuits between sound and meaning. Capossela’s song and *Moskva – Petushki* share certain thematic and stylistic similarities: while one is a contemporary Italian piece and the other a Brezhnev-era work, they both explore a world of absurdity and disillusionment, characterized by the struggle for meaning in a harsh, often surreal reality [Шталь]. The connections between the two are deeply rooted in musical and literary influences, as well as common motifs of alienation, existential reflection, and the cultural context of Moscow. The songwriter’s evocation of the Russian capital has both a romantic and dystopian quality; in fact, Moscow is depicted as both fascinating and oppressive, a theme that recalls Erofeev’s portrayal of it as an uncanny place filled with contradictions – grandiose yet decayed, vibrant yet suffocating. The song blends Italian musical traditions with Slavic ones, creating a kind of “musical bridge” between the West and East, much like Erofeev’s text combines high culture (literature, opera, religious allusions) with the gritty Soviet everyday life. Besides, the usage of a waltz rhythm suggests a sense of cyclical despair, which parallels the rhythmic and repetitive nature of the writer’s prose. Both works mix cultural references, melancholy, and irony, forming a musical subtext that enriches the emotional and philosophical depth of the respective pieces<sup>23</sup>.

In conclusion, as the analysis has demonstrated, Erofeev’s writing appears structurally intertwined with echoes and musical references that create continuous stylistic shifts: from operatic arias to children’s rhymes, from symphonies and concertos by well-known composers to popular film songs, including even funny or irreverent parodies of patriotic songs and folk melodies. If *Moskva – Petushki* incorporates a variety of auditory elements, blending them into a cohesive, almost symphonic structure, there is a sense that a constant musical motif also resonates between the lines of his other works, whether hypnotic, lyrical and enchanting, satirical or mocking. Similarly to the masterpieces of modernist literature, Erofeev seems to have learned to convey on the page, even beyond the objective meaning of words, what musicians call the “inner ear”. It is not a coincidence that, as he wrote in the *Notebooks*, he was most fascinated by the creative process of music: “музыка хороша в высшей мере и не исполнена, а приведена в исполнение” [Ерофеев, 2004, с. 433]<sup>24</sup>. If we consider the various allusions to authors and musical works present in his texts, we can notice a wide array of citations that, despite their apparent heterogeneity, generate internal symmetries both formally and content-wise, giving life to a common “Subtext”. This complex inter-semiotic web of references can be interpreted as a possible key to better understanding Erofeev’s poetics; in fact, as noted

<sup>23</sup> As Russi underlines [Russi, p. 37–38], it is important to keep in mind that the place where literary and musical language meet should not be sought in the domain of intrinsic structures, which remain specific and distinct, but in the realm of perceptive strategies, i. e. the “metaphorical listening” and the references that readers are able to project onto the text.

<sup>24</sup> “Music is truly great not when it is performed, but when it is brought into performance”.



in some studies on his works [Левин, 2022; Богомолов, 1999; Богомолов, 2000; Lipovetsky, Wakamiya], the author employs famous classical pieces, popular songs, and even sounds from daily life as musical motifs to echo, accompany or “expand” his literary themes. This thick layering of music and sound contributes to the impression of a “musical weave” in his writing and creates a texture that extends beyond the linguistic level to encompass, in Lotmanian terms, a broader cultural atmosphere.

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