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"I NEED FEW" BY RODION SHCHEDRIN: ON THE QUESTION OF SEMANTICS AND PERFORMANCE FEATURES

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Abstract

This article discusses one of Rodion Shchedrin's last choral works, the miniature *I Need Few*, from the *Khlebnikov-Triptych* cycle created in 2020. The piece is analyzed in the context of the composer's choral compositions and the poetic legacy of Velimir Khlebnikov. Particular attention is paid to the semantics, expressive means, and pedagogical value of this opus.

Objective: To find out the primary expressive means that contribute to the composition's philosophical depth and to demonstrate the value of the miniature from a teaching and performance perspective.

Methods: Structural-analytical and intonation-semantic methods, value analysis, and cultural studies.

Results: The primary expressive means and semantics of the work are identified and described, examined in the context of the composer Rodion Shchedrin's creative work and style.

Scientific Novelty: This composition by R. Shchedrin is relatively new in the composer's legacy and has not yet received sufficient attention in musicology. This is the first comprehensive analysis of this work from the perspective of semantics and expressive means.

Practical Application: The key provisions of the article can be used in performance and teaching practice.

Keywords: Rodion Shchedrin, the composer's works, choir, choral works, the chorus *I Need Few*, Velimir Khlebnikov

Introduction

Dedicated to the memory of Rodion Shchedrin

Rodion Shchedrin (1932–2025) is an outstanding modern composer. His music reflects diverse musical styles, combining the simplicity of folk melodies with complicated jazz rhythms, dramatic montage

with the continuity of polyphonic lines. The avant-garde artist, in some of his works he could do solely with classical means, and he always considered the aesthetic side of an artistic work, its musicality. Stylistically diverse and semantically vast, Rodion Shchedrin had a significant influence on the development of musical culture

throughout the 20th and first quarter of the 21st centuries.

The composer developed many genres and elevated them to new level. One of the most profound areas of his work is choral music. The composer wrote numerous a cappella choruses, oratorios, cantatas, and choral poems, and even created a new genre: choral opera. Many of the choral works he wrote over the roughly 20 years of his work in the 21st century were collected and published under the title *The Twenty-First Century* (2021). Among the pieces in this collection, we highlight *Triptych* with lyrics by Velimir Khlebnikov.

Main Content

Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922) was one of the most iconic Futurist poets, a contemporary of Alexander Blok, Nikolai Gumilev, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. He worked extensively in various poetic genres and is known for his “boffinry,” his creative use of words and neologisms – unusual poems with new words and sound combinations.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the attitudes toward Khlebnikov were various. N. Gumilev wrote that “...His images are convincing in their absurdity, his thoughts in their paradoxicality” (Gumilyov, 2000, p. 17), while R. Jakobson recalled experiencing “an admiration for Khlebnikov that defies all comparison” (Jakobson, 2000, p. 83). But already in

the 20th century—and especially in the early 21st—the poet began to be perceived as an outstanding innovator, whose work is now the subject of books and numerous studies.

Let’s take a closer look at the first chorus *I Need Little* of the Rodion Shchedrin’s cycle. It is based on a short, literally aphoristic poem by Khlebnikov. Written without neologisms, it is imbued with the philosophy of asceticism and thoughts about the true values of life.

The entire text of the chorus consists of the following lines:

I need few!	And this sky,
A crust of bread,	And these clouds.
And a mug of milk,	I need few!

The first and last lines in Shchedrin (unlike the original) are repeated – the composer did this intentionally in order to give the work compositional integrity and completeness, in addition, he repeated the line “And a mug of milk” several times, placing a certain semantic emphasis on it.

The researcher E. Krivitskaya considers the symbolism of this work by R. Shchedrin as a “call for ‘voluntary poverty, asceticism, and merging with nature’” (Krivitskaya, 2020). This idea is clearly confirmed by the presence of the culmination of the work, which begins with the words “And this sky,” and is emphasized by the thickening of the choral texture and the intensification of the dynamics up to *ff*:

1 a tempo pp rit. a tempo ppp legato allarg. ff a tempo ppp eco

S. да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо,

A. да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо,

T. да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо,

B. да круж - ку мо - ло - ка, да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо, да э - то не - бо, не - бо,

2 in tempo ppp

S. да э - ти об - ла - ка. Мне ма - ло на - до. да э - ти об - ла - ка. Мне ма - ло на - до.

A. да э - ти об - ла - ка. Мне ма - ло на - до. да э - ти об - ла - ка. Мне ма - ло на - до.

The piece *I Need Little* is written for a mixed four-part choir in 4/4 time at a slow Andante lento tempo. Let's consider the composer's primary expressive devices in this composition.

The melody which by definition "...is the primary focus of a work's intonation and upon which all the functional relationships of the whole are condensed" (Kholopova, 2002, p. 17), in this work by Rodion Shchedrin is distinguished by its melodiousness, philosophical unhurriedness of

unwinding, and a certain meditative quality. The consistent emphasis on female and male voices as leading voices (with the female predominating) imbues the texture with a sense of multi-layeredness, a living breath, and even polyphony, evident in the introduction of heterophonic supporting voices. Elements of dialogic quality can also be observed, evident already at the beginning of the chorus, where the two initial phrases are performed first by male, then female voices:

Ich brauche wenig Rodion Shchedrin
*1932

Andante lento (♩ ca. 48-50) *pp*

Sopran Кра - юш - - ку хле - ба,
Кра - уш - - ku khle - ba,

Alt *mp pp legato*
А М (закр. рот / b. ch.)

Tenor *f pp*
М (переходя на закр. рот / change to bocca chiusa)

Bass *f pp*
М (переходя на закр. рот / change to bocca chiusa)

Мне ма - ло на - до!
Мне та - ло па - до!

From a tonal perspective, the key note is the reference tonal, but the abundance of chromaticisms (including the sounds "as" and "es" in the first bar, and "es" and "fis" in the third) suggests the use of an extended tonality within a single-third major-minor system (H-dur – b-moll) in this chorus. The appearance of the sound "b" as an alternative foundation several times throughout the piece also supports this interpretation.

Harmonically, with the predominance of consonant consonances (which form the basis of horizontal movement), dissonances, including tritones, are often used. The tritone, as the characteristic interval for this work, appears as early as the first bar in the bass and tenor parts.

If we talk about the metro-rhythmic structure of this chorus by R. Shchedrin, then, despite a certain sacredness of the sound of the work, from which we intuitively expect a free metric which is often found in such music (for example, it is very characteristic of church hymns, with which this choir is very consonant in style), in this composition Shchedrin

relied entirely on a strict metric, using the 4/4 time signature and only once replacing it with 3/4, thus making a rhythmic accent in the composition (bar 9):

This choir, as part of the entire *Triptych* with lyrics by Khlebnikov, has already entered the repertoire of many choral groups. A high level of performance was demonstrated by the choir of the A. A. Yurlov Russian Chapel which presented an interpretation of this work under the baton of People's Artist of Russia G. Dmitryak (Performance of *Triptych* by R. Shchedrin, 2024). The chapel fully preserved and conveyed the sacred philosophical semantics of the work, clearly following the author's instructions, including the dynamic ones, which imbued the performance with dramatic integrity.

The chorus *I Need Few* by R. Shchedrin is an excellent example for teaching practice and will be useful for aspiring conductors and choir singers. The composition offers a wealth of material for detailed analysis and development.

The musical score is for a four-part vocal setting. It begins with a Soprano (S.) and Alto (A.) part, followed by Tenor (T.) and Bass (B.) parts. The tempo starts with a *rit.* (ritardando) and then returns to *a tempo*. Dynamic markings include *mp* (mezzo-piano), *pp* (pianissimo), *f* (forte), and *dolce*. The lyrics are in Russian and English. A note in the Tenor and Bass parts indicates a change to *bocca chiusa* (closed mouth) during a specific passage.

Working on this piece will be useful for a student choir in terms of practicing closed-mouth singing technique (used repeatedly, and first heard in the opening bars of the piece); the sustained piano which must be maintained while varying dynamic nuances with clear diction; and the rapid adjustments during dynamic changes – referring to the abrupt transitions from *pp* to *f* in bars 6–7 and from *ppp* to *ff* in bars 16–17. Furthermore, the piece presents a number of intonation difficulties, including tritone passages, as well as an abundance of chromaticisms and deviations.

A look at this composition reveals Rodion Shchedrin's profound understanding of choral practice. He masterfully highlights the choir's diverse capabilities, employing various techniques and means to convey the work's semantics more precisely and expressively. The composer himself, a graduate of the Moscow Choral School, also devoted great attention to the pedagogical aspect of working with a choir, considering it the most beneficial form of musical activity for any aspiring musician: "I think choral training is fantastic. It is the best way to learn, because when you study the violin or cello, for instance, you usually do not see results immediately. In choral music, you get immediate feedback. It is also excellent ear training. I really think it is the best form of

musical education for someone who wishes to become musical, a real musician" (Stuhr-Rommereim, 1992, p. 8).

Conclusions

In the chorus *I Need Little* from Rodion Shchedrin's *Khlebnikov-Triptych*, the composer addressed the eternal philosophical theme of understanding human needs, spiritual freedom, and the importance of unity with nature. The contraposition of the material and the spiritual components is reflected in the music through dynamic contrasts, alternating male and female voices, and elements of dialogism and heterophony. From a teaching perspective, this piece can help develop intonation precision and practice various vocal and choral techniques.

This choral miniature can be seen as a philosophical and aphoristic statement by Rodion Shchedrin. The work displays many characteristics of the composer's late style, such as minimalist use of instruments while maintaining profound semantics and an appeal to sacred themes. It is no coincidence that the chorus was chosen for this work – familiar and close to the composer since his youth, he always considered this performing instrument one of the most expressive timbral instruments for conveying profound and spiritual themes.

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