

DAWID BOVIE – PHILIPP GLASS: THE DIALOGUE OF MUSICAL TRADITIONS

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*Abstract:*The article is devoted to the analysis of collaboration of two outstanding modern musicians Philip Glass and David Bowie who have always been at the cutting edge of musical art. Philipp Glass worked in experimental field of academic music, David Bowie is known as one of the most eminent rock culture leaders – a composer, a poet, a singer, a “man-carnival” changing masks of theatrical characters, also as an actor, a stage director and a painter. Ph. Glass’ *Symphony № 1 (Low-symphony)* and D. Bowie’s same name album on which the symphony is based are analyzed as a result of their creative partnership.

Keywords: David Bowie, Philip Glass, Low Symphony, rock, Warszawa.

David Bowie’s creations became the base of Ph. Glass’ **Symphonies № 1 and № 4**. Strictly speaking the collaborators of the symphony are David Bowie and **Brian Eno** who is also his partner in creating of original albums *Low* and *Heroes*. Their collaboration lasted many years and was interrupted only by D. Bowie’s death. Ph. Glass often took part in D. Bowie’s performances as a keyboardist – multi-instrumentalist. In our opinion speaking about Ph. Glass’ work it’s rather difficult to distinguish the features of rock as a certain stylistic direction. It’s as difficult as to define the composer’s place in minimalism. His scores are often written down according to different traditions – they are too expanded, colourfully orchestrated, sometimes in the grand manner, and the thematic invention though minimalistic exists under the mixed principles which include both pattern modelling and the traditions of academic symphonic and chamber music. However, in some of his pieces the influence of rock works can be guessed, for example in the polyphony of rhythms and in the abruptness of dynamic “collapsing” in the main theme of the first movement of the Violin Concerto № 1 or in the intonations of the opera “Voyage”.

The composer’s symphonies can be faultlessly determined as being under the essential influence of rock. Almost all of them contain references to rock music. Symphonies № 1 and № 4 are written on the material of D. Bowie’s albums and co-authored by D. Bowie and B. Eno. The Symphony № 2 was inspired by the *Beatles’* record *Sergeant Pepper Lonely Heart’s Club Band*. In the Symphony № 3 rock runs through rhythmic and intonation texture. Rhythmic ostinato of the beginning of the first part (*Before the Creation*) of the Symphony № 5 – *REQUIEM, BARDO, NIRMANAKAYA*¹, tutti passage at the 20th minute of the Symphony № 9 are evident marks of interaction of rock culture and academic symphonic style². In this article we will focus on symphonies № 1 and № 4 as the best samples of studied interinfluence.

The Symphony № 1 is called *Low-symphony* after the original D. Bowie’s album (1976 - 1977)³. The three movements of the symphony are respectively *Subterraneans* – the final part of *Low*, *Some Are* – the composition which is not in the album *Low* but that appears later in several

¹ Requiem, Death, Rebirth (one of three appearances of Buddha)

² We should mention that Ph. Glass learnt a lot from his teacher R. Shankar.

³ The first part of “Berlin Trilogy”: *Low* – the reference to depression from which the musician suffered at that time *Lodger*. D. Bowie often said that his creative work of this period was influenced by German culture especially expressionism (album cover “Heroes”) and German kraut rock.

D. Bowie's albums in Ph. Glass' symphonic version and legendary *Warszawa* – one of the best results of B. Eno, D. Bowie and Ph. Glass collaboration.

Let's compare the original works and their symphonic versions. *Subterraneans*. The symphony begins with the composer's favourite "vibrant" on the background of seconds and thirds, a peculiar feature of Ph. Glass' compositions. Such "introduction into the music" with random overgrowing intonation steps in contrapuntal voice parts we hear both in "Kepler" and "La Belle et la Bête" and "In the Upper Room"⁴ and in Piano Concerto № 2 after the "Indian" passage and in many other of his works. It should be mentioned that such constructions are closely related to rhythmic models *motorik (apachi-beat)* which are characteristic for kraut rock bands. (*Kraftwerk, NEU!, Faust*) In our opinion they are additional contact points of Ph. Glass' symphonic style and Bowie's music of this period.

The beginning of the movement presents urban landscape that is full of highly "depressive" musical colours. Expressionistic "sound colours" prevail in minimalistic brushworks spreading over the big space of texture keys. The patterns of drop-dead gorgeous melody expand in slow conjunct motion and suddenly overgrow into "opposite" key spaces revealing the factor of complementation in intonation registration thus loosing the idea of conflict dramaturgy from the very beginning of the development.

Like in many other minimalistic opuses the development here is slow and constant, its "unwillingness" of action goes back to oriental musical practices connected with specific timbres of the culture the composition exists in.

As the introductory material unfolds it turns into of one of the thematic contents and creates the field of not contrast, more outward timbre intonation that is building many new corpuscles inside the theme. It's this theme that together with introductory material leads to emergence of more efficient, rhythmically active thematic invention that "anticipates" changing of the motion in the second part building evident link with its content. Musical progression causes associations with changing dawn whose light though not very joyful fills the whole space with its beauty. The first "depressive" theme also is getting under the influence of changes. And it lays the base for the last emotional "breakthrough" of the first movement.

Timbre differences and timbre-texture tracings of heterophonic vertical structure break seeming identity of two variants. Almost pointillistic "additional work" of register sections differs by the choice of timbre "initiator" in creating similar impression. In the album *Low* the main timbre colours are sound patterns of synthesizer creating sounding of strings. "Live" strings have become the main timbre of the first movement of *Low* – symphony. They imitate post tactual sound activity by sonic lines and acoustic matching (without electronic "winding-vibration" of close steps).

One more difference that changes not only the timbre interpenetration of the content but its graphic substance is the appearance of D. Bowie's voice at the end of the composition in the album. This part is in compositional and psychological accordance with other material and sets a mark for sudden painful exit out of depressive-meditative state fundamentally changing the idea of the composition's final. Perhaps it's connected with that fact that for D. Bowie, the collaborator of *Low*-symphony, in 1992 the depression of 1976 – 1977 was only a recollection.

Some are. The musical score begins with a fragment that is remarkable by its graphical tracing and seems separated from the whole composition. It lights up deceptive scherzo activity of the main part with uncertain slightly creepy light. This fragment appears from time to time in the development of the main part absolutely reforming the original idea of the composer. This is a cascade of descending scale compositions on the base of synthetic modality (the Phrygian mode, Rimsky-Korsakov's scale) orchestrated by "crystal" timbre. This cascade forms the middle passage of the central part with its "fatality of cold sun light" (see the contents of the original). Here several different almost contrastive thematic structures are formed. While

⁴ The first Afro-American generations called *upper room* the supposed Jesus Christ's place of living. Widely known the spiritual performed by Mahalia Jackson is *In The Upper Room*.

comparing the original with symphonic transcription of the piece despite emotional coincidence there appears devastating, unexpected contrast. The symphonic variant of *Some Are* doesn't belong to the "depressive" music. It presents active intermezzo, full of humor or even of intentional scherzo. Its orchestrating is rich, sometimes elaborate. The original vocal-instrumental opus, written during the creation of the album but not included in it, produces quite a different impression. Unlike symphonic variant it contains a voice. Like in *Subterraneans* it is split in several imitating complementary parts. It's slightly creepy, mystically unclear narration about "sailors in snow" for some of them "the cold sun" is awaiting and death is waiting for others. As death is inevitable we see not too happy image-symbol of the man in general. In the music we hear controversial connection of long-drawn-out-deadly timbre of the synthesizer with "doomed", in some way airborne vivacity of the intonation that creates the unique image, which reminds of "new wave" and punk characters appearing at that time.

And finally, *Warszawa*⁵. The composition was inspired by impressions of one of David Bowie's trips around Eastern Europe.

The third part of the symphony is twice longer than the original. Due to this the musical plot of the composition has undergone some changes. We suppose that when the symphony was written (1992) its authors didn't associate the word "Warsaw" with totalitarianism and it didn't cause the fear D. Bowie wrote about in connection with the original piece. We can see it in the changes of the plot and some intonation and harmonic key signatures and in the variety of modifications of composition techniques.

Here the material of the album presents a reflective and cognitive concept, without any nostalgic colours.

The original *Warszawa* begins with a la *Pink Floyd* "freezing" introduction fragment, its frightening timbre is giving rise to an introductory theme – the dialogue of two connected fourths which are interrupted by the third – resolution and "howling" descending minor third. The first makes a bone-chilling impression, prima seems to be main and dominating. Melodious and plangent Slavic intonations are heard. The natural tonal system appears from different sides of heterophonic vertical. The melody of this part is based on tuneful Slavic songs. The intonational plot is characterized by reliance on fifth step. Inflections of natural minor seem to be endless in their dialogue. It seems that depression is able to fill the whole world with its endless expansion.

The second part begins with hardly visible deviation of modus. Its second section bears some resemblance with Silesian folk song *Helokanie*⁶ performed by the folk ensemble *Sljask* ("Silesian"). Diversity of Silesian folk tunes intonations and their specific phonetics are nontrivial enough.

In our opinion one of their peculiarities is the author's simulation of Silesian phonetics. Here is the "text" of the vocal section:

Mmmm-mm-mm-ommm

Sula vie dilejo

Mmmm-mm-mm-ommm

Sula vie milejo

Mmm-omm

Cheli venco deho

Cheli venco deho

Malio

Mmmm-mm-mm-ommm

⁵ "Unconscious" material for the main theme was Gino Visconty's (co-producer of the trilogy) son's half-conscious playing the piano. He pressed A, B and C keys in a non-systematic way. This Dadaism instrumental babbling inspired creation of composition.

⁶ Is translated as "emotionally active, strong call to go to the mountains"

Malio

Malio

These phonemes have no sense in any language. However D. Bowie belonged to the people convinced of possibility to pass information and even a message through “pure” phonetics. The imagery of the second part of *Warszawa* is complex: here is love of freedom, clarion call, depression and a kind of special narrative introversion. Thus all elements both musical and phonetic contribute to the creation of imaginative complex.

The shrill clarion call of Silesian choral piece is “suppressed” by rigid ominous urbanistic timbre producing an effect of groan-call. These colours fill the whole space. The part is a peculiar introduction of composer’s mood and intentions.

The third same-name part of the symphony looks a bit different. It seems that the impressions that generated such complex image pass through reflective will of the authors’ tandem of Ph. Glass and D. Bowie and turn into distant recollections. The music of this part doesn’t produce depressive impression, it is perceived as an independent composition with reference to the original. In this variant of *Warszawa* there is no expressive beginning – a groaning, suppressive sound that brings about associations with some fantastic press destroying the man’s last hope of rebirth. The second perhaps involuntary change of the whole music paradigm is caused by the absence of D. Bowie’s voice which created its independent image. As a result, the symphony has lost its amazing Dadaism emotional scale which created additional unique colours in the original opus. And finally, the symphony receives a certain “objective” quantity which leads to the development of some enlightened solemn sounding that though not joyful, in some passages reminds of fanfare (the final part).

The creative dialogue of two outstanding representatives of modern musical culture led to the creation of a classic symphony based on the rock album material. The symphony “*Heroes*” is written as an independent composition in which the music of the same name album is reinterpreted by the author in a concordant dialogue with the original. This case is a bright illustration of collaboration of two musicians in the epoch of cultural globalization.

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