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Total Music in the Creative Experiments of Composer Alexander Manotskov

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Abstract. The article discusses the oeuvres of Russian composer and conductor Alexander Manotskov with a particular focus on the musical component of dramatic performance, which appears to play a more significant role in the formation of his works than other stage production elements. This observation refers to a musical totality, which not only sounds from within the performance, but also shapes it from the outside. Such "vertical-horizontal" saturation of a dramatic performance with music allows us to consider it as comprising an ensemble, a harmonious set of parts forming a single whole in which words, gestures, and acting serve to reveal the depth of the musical discourse. Relevant to this consideration is the composer's own remark that theater is nothing more than a "special case of music." The article describes a number of stage productions on which the composer worked in collaboration with such contemporary directors as Andrei Moguchy, Kirill Serebrennikov and Andrei Yakovlev. This study sets out to evaluate the composer's creative experiments carried out within the framework of a synthesis of arts and in which the stage serves as the artist's laboratory. The research is carried out according to an interpretative methodology based on the principles of intertextuality and art history analysis.

Keywords: Alexander Manotskov, Andrei Moguchy, Kirill Serebrennikov, Andrei Yakovlev, total music, music for dramatic performance

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Introduction

When entering into an open dialogue with other dramatic elements, music can serve a special role in the formation of a stage work. For example, many performance-related decisions can depend on the composition and character of the music. Inspired by the musical image revealed through the composer's work with sound, the total music present in such creative projects forms the basis for their claim upon audience attention. Among such works are the theatrical experiments of the composer Alexander Manotskov, who brings to life the musicality implicit in each of the series included in the synthetic whole — primarily verbal comprising and visual elements (the so-called music of prose, music of the body, or otherwise, body percussion). "Total music" here refers to the central role played by music at all levels and stages of the performance's development, penetrating all its structures and melting the boundaries between theatrical genres, thus constituting a complex and deep process of integration that clothes all aspects of the theatrical solution with a sonic aura.

As Yulia Semenkova writes, "it is impossible to speak of his music as simply music for a performance, since its role carries not only semantic, but also formative significance."
[1] Indeed, the music written for stage productions, as a rule, becomes the basis for the development of dramatic action, establishing the rhythm according to its tempo and thus the atmosphere of the production. At the same time, the composer inspires the director, artist, and actors with his open and versatile creativity. A similar experience was formed at the very

beginning of the composer's creative path. In particular, speaking about one of his early works of music for the play *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1995), the composer mentions an imposing score for cello and two violins. The sounding of the string trio throughout the entire performance underlined its main concepts: "cyclicality and eternal return." [2]

During the process of creating a performance, the composer's multifaceted musical interests saturate the semantic space of the synthetic artistic whole. His unique musical and dramatic talents are expressed in vivid experiments in the field of modern music and the revival of ancient baroque genres. An example of such combinations is his chamber opera 52 based on Lev Rubinstein's conceptualist poem Further and Further On. Its premiere took place in 2018 on the Small Stage of the Bolshoi Drama Theater. The composer notes that it is "written on the cantus firmus Ut queant laxis of Guido of Arezzo. That is, each part of the opera corresponds to a certain line of this cantus firmus and a corresponding central note." [3]1 Added to this motif, as the author testifies, are various stylisations of modern music. In particular, when using the text in the Estonian language, associations with the music of Arvo Pärt arise. Also noteworthy is the homage to John Cage's sound experiments.

Thus, the key to the successful implementation of Manotskov's ideas in the space of the dramatic theater consists in his broad musical horizons. In general, his work combines both academic sources and folklore material, thus developing neofolklorism. the mainstream of in

¹ Monakhova M. V. "V kakoi-to moment ya ponyal, chto v teatre mogu delat' tol'ko vse". Interv'yu s Aleksandrom Manotskovym ["At some point, I realised that I can only do everything in the theater." Interview with Alexander Manotskov]. *Classical Music News*. 16.11.2018.

URL: https://classicalmusicnews.ru/interview/alexander-manotskov-2018/ (accessed: 11.10.2024).

The importance of ethnic elements in the work of Alexander Manotskov is confirmed by his use of folklore principles in organising material within the musical structure of his compositions. Thus, in 2019, the chamber opera Er-Tostik based on the plot of a Kazakh folk tale was staged on the small stage of the independent theater ARTiSHOK (Alma-Ata) in the creative union of Kazakh theater workers headed by director Galina Pyanova. The musical part was performed by the Kazakh contemporary music ensemble *Igeru*. Discussing the opera score, it is noted: "The pitch organisation of the opera is strung on the same 'axes' and according to the same laws. Each vocal part is assigned to a specific tone; the performers recite their text at the same pitch throughout the entire performance." [4] A distinctive feature of the manifestation of the national character is the recitative-declamatory structure based on the rhythmic formula of the Kazakh verse form known as "zhyr." The musical accompaniment refers to the national Kazakh instrument, the kyl-kobyz. It was used in ancient times by steppe bakshees (shamanhealers) for various rituals. The body of this traditional instrument is held between the knees while playing it with a short bow. The large number of overtones produced by the instrument gives it a rich timbral variety.

The composer also employs the captivating polyphonic verticality of ancient Georgian chants; the mysterious sound of the Indonesian gamelan is evoked along with ancient Russian music. Such diverse instrumental and cultural influences make the task of musical generalisation impossible without also acknowledging

the significant amount of spiritual culture that the composer has absorbed. Hence the multi-component hierarchy of musical layers in his scores that gather into a unity all the material of the performance, in which "music permeates both time and distance."²

In Manotskov's work, folklore traditions are combined with an experimental approach characteristic of modern music. Similar interactions are noted in a description of Manotskov's early opera *The Journey*, staged in 2008 and performed by the *Elion* ensemble: "The score here is exclusively vocal; the composer combines folk singing techniques with classical ones." [5]

As evidenced by his chamber opera, however, the work reveals a tendency towards brevity and aphoristic statement in line with current tendencies. When describing the contemporary features of Manotskov's music, we should also mention his significant interest in percussion instruments, which he uses with variety, imagination and skill. An example is the aforementioned opera *Er-Tostik*, which uses not only all sorts of traditional percussion instruments, but also household items and newly designed devices for noise production.

The composer also involves himself in working decisions involving space and sound design options for theatrical productions. Such considerations become relevant given the active, moving character of immersive performances and site-specific musical events. The musicians are also active figures, adding a certain emphasis to the development of the production. One of his works has been described journalistically as "an audio-visual performance in the movement format." [Ibid.]

² Dmitrevskaya M. "Vse, chto imeet vremennuyu protyazhennost', yavlyaetsya muzykoi". Beseda s Aleksandrom Manotskovym ["Everything that has a Temporal Extension is Music." Conversation with Alexander Manotskov]. *Peterburgskii teatral'nyi zhurnal* [*Petersburg Theatre Magazine*]. 30 July, 2014.

URL: https://ptj.spb.ru/blog/vse-chto-imeet-vremennuyu-protyazhennost-yavlyaetsya-muzykoj/(accessed: 11.10.2024).

Creative Tandem of Alexander Manotskov and Andrei Moguchy

Although not every director is ready to engage with such creative daring, the collaboration of Alexander Manotskov and Andrei Moguchy is just such a happy circumstance. In his productions, Moguchy strives to use musicality of various kinds to sharpen contradictions and emphasise paradoxes, as well as exploding texts, mise-en-scènes and actions.

Music sounds as a foundation and formative impulse from the very first scenes. By setting the mood and character of the mise-en-scène, it involves the audience in a particular state. Following such provocative logic, the director uses the forms of installation, happening, and performance, in which the tone of speech of their participants changes accordingly. The latter refers more to a non-verbal (rhythmic, emotional, timbral) than a verbal construction. On the contrary, words in such cases often create only the background, remaining independent, initiating the effect of surprise or retaining the status of fellow travellers in the musical discourse (for more details, see: [6, p. 28]).

In general, the creative tandem of Manotskov and Moguchy is based on common approaches to the creation of a work: an appeal to primordial sources, ancient forms of ritual, sacred rites; the recreation of syncretic forms. At the same time, the spectacular aspect is important for both, despite being determined by the musical component. In this case, there is a tendency towards the revival of mystery, not so much as a religious theme, but more in terms of serving as a syncretic genre that can accommodate the diversity of life. The composer realises this aspiration in the mystery *The Return of the Dokh*, which is created on the basis of the legends of the peoples who lived on

the banks of the Yenisei River. The premiere took place in Krasnoyarsk on a sailing ship.

According to Manotskov and Moguchy's collaborative ethos, movement, and scenography are born from music. uniqueness of the projects lies in the common interest of the composer and director in the interplay of mysterious forms, which are designed to ensure the unreality of what is happening on stage due to the sonic atmosphere arising from the relationships of sound points in space.

Various sounds are fused into a single compositional which unique style, in the features of academic music with its multistyle projections, early music, and diverse folklore material are syncretically intertwined. All this is superimposed on a multi-layered action that also represents a fused unity of dance, pantomime, acrobatics and other forms of theatrical movement, in which music and drama go hand in hand. Here the principle of total penetration of one element into another, i.e., the interconnectedness and interdependence of all the constituent parts of the performance, is of central importance. The action cannot exist without music, which represents itself as the soul of the performance. Sound cannot be separated from movement, which in its nakedness will become dead and soulless, losing its nerve and dying from the loss of sound energy; thus, music permeates every pas. A kind of audiovisual polyphony emerges, leading to "total multi-layeredness of levels and types of artistic information."3

Due to Moguchy also building his directorial concept on the level of musical images, his performances appear compositionally as independent, complete musical works, whose integrity is achieved by the sonic decisions, which are an organic part of the performance.

³ Manotskov A. P. Aleksandr Manotskov o sovremennoi opere [Alexander Manotskov on Modern Opera]. *Sine Fantom.* 2015. No. 10. June 15–30. URL: https://electrotheatre.ru/theatre/article/188 (accessed: 11.10.2024).

As the director admits, "any artistic whole seems to me to be a variety of a musical whole. It seems to me that music is the most general subject of all: of all, in general, of all — of all the humanities, non-humanities, or any other disciplines whatsoever. This is simply objectively so because the limit of our understanding is time."

Among the artists' joint works is *Petersburg*, which became the centre of musical and happening principles in which "street theater, open-air, and the intimacy of a dramatic performance" came together in a single space.5 This creative experiment, which is based on the novel of the same name by Andrei Bely, was carried out in the Mikhailovsky Castle. It is clear that for the authors, who were both born in Leningrad, the setting of the performance was important due to its provision of a special vision and hearing of the material. Features of the performative action include the actions of the actors pouring sand into the water in order to drain the swamp, their affected modes of speech, as well as the background ringing of bells, ancient Russian chants and melodies of the street orchestra, which permeated the rhythmic concept of the spectacle with a single intonation.

In this case, we are talking about "speech, facial expression, plastic, behavioural, musical intonation, the specific content of which is the excess of the heart," or alternatively spiritual experience of comprehending meaning. The latter presupposes overcoming the natural

limitations of human existence, whose marker is the acquisition of "the indivisible integrity of the natural (matter) and the supernatural (spirit), the rational and the irrational, the verbal and the non-verbal." [7, p. 191] An audio-visual space organised in this way eliminates the possibility of considering the audience member as an outside observer of what is happening; instead, the space is initiated as "being in activity." [Ibid.] The focus on the spiritual dimension of man is also actualised through a certain "timbral risk," which determined the unique sound solution of the performance. This refers to "an ensemble of three tubas, vibraphone, timpani, bells and a female vocal septet." [8]

From the idea that music permeates and subordinates everything to its rhythm and form, we can draw the following inference. Quantitatively, music forces us to reckon with its possibilities; from its individual fragments, which are typically heard in a dramatic theater, it moves to the totality of horizontal deployment—that is, to constant sound, thereby approaching the principles of construction and development characteristic of musical theater. Since such quasi-operas are still unusual for the academic tradition, they mostly exist in the space of dramatic theater, which is generally more accepting of radical experiments.

However, since penetrating all levels of the performance, Manotskov's music is not only horizontally total, but also vertically total. According to Manotskov, this is a unique "way of *thinking with music*." In this

⁴ Monakhova M. V. Op. cit.

⁵ Karamaikina O. Rezhisserskii portret Andreya Moguchego [Director's Portrait of Andrei Moguchy]. *Teatr"* [*Theater*]. 21 October 2012. URL: https://oteatre.info/rezhissyorsky-portret-andreya-moguchego/ (accessed: 11.10.2024).

⁶ Pesochinsky N. Andrei Moguchii pochti bez avangardnogo konteksta [Andrei Moguchy Almost Without an Avant-garde Context]. *Peterburgskii teatral'nyi zhurnal* [*Petersburg Theatre Magazine*]. 1999. No. 17. URL: https://ptj.spb.ru/archive/17/the-petersburg-prospect-17/andrej-moguchij-pochti-bez-avangardnogo-konteksta/(accessed: 11.10.2024).

⁷ Kandaurova L. Aleksandr Manotskov: U menya net nikakogo "samo", kotoroe trebuet "vyrazheniya". Interv'yu [Alexander Manotskov: I don't have any "self" that requires "expression". Interview]. Snob. 03.07.2024. URL: https://classicalmusicnews.ru/interview/aleksandr-manotskov-lyalya-kandaurova-snob/ (accessed: 11.10.2024).

concept, the composer puts his ideas about the possibilities of music in dramatic theater. An example of such vertical-horizontal musicality is the play Ivans, brought to stage at the Alexandrinsky theater. In this creative experiment by Manotskov and Moguchy, the music determines the mise-en-scène, space, character of movement, rhythm of development, and scenography. Musical principles are applied to the entire space of the performance. The production begins with an actor performing the Ukrainian folk song Solntse nizen'ko, vecher blizen'ko [The Sun is Low, Evening is Coming] without accompaniment. In an analogy with the ancient tradition, the chorus takes part in many scenes and reacts to what is happening. The actors' monologues, which take the form of recitatives, are set to the backdrop of simple folk violin melodies. The production employs long musical interludes performed by a string ensemble. In scenes having a more ritual nature, the string ensemble is reinforced by a flute and percussion instruments.

Director Andrei Moguchy admits that it was the composer's ideas in the area of the musical concept of the play that became the basis for the dramatic solution, when even the verbal discourse turned out to be secondary to the musical and rhythmic pulsation. In essence, the director's guide to action was the musical scheme initially proposed by the composer, consisting in a so-called compositional score of the performance, to which the entire dramatic action is to be subordinated. "Almost all performances with Manotskov's music are operas, they are musical performances. When Manotskov works everything becomes music." [9]

The music creates the atmosphere that accompanies the entire performance. At the heart of the play *The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarrelled with Ivan Nikiforovich* by Nikolai Gogol, the music concentrates both the initial impulse and the basis

of the theme of discord, when a minor disagreement turns a negative image into an uncontrollable hurricane of passions. Just like in Gogol's story, the masterfully developed musical theme and sound image grow proportions, destroying fantastical the boundaries of reality and going beyond their limits to transform the world into an infernal mystical fantasy. Everything is spinning in a chaotic maelstrom of voices, sounds, movements and objects. But it is here, oddly enough, that the unity of music, space and action arises. The performance appears as a complex score of diverse sounds. With the development of the action, it is not so much musical themes that begin to prevail, but uncontrollable dissonances and sound clusters, at times descending into outright cacophony, to create an atmosphere of paranoia and obsession. The hum and noise absorb everything humane to reveal the raw mechanism of uncontrollable chaos.

The premiere of the play *The Trial*, based on the novel of the same name by Franz Kafka, may also be considered a significant event in the Manotskov — Moguchy creative tandem. The composer and director revealed their joint "brainchild" in 2012 in the German city of Dusseldorf. The complex philosophical ideas of the German writer are reflected in the musical plan of the performance, which is woven from the instrumental music of Oleg Karavaichuk and the choral music of Manotskov, not forgetting the participation of professional performers.

In this regard, the vocal suite, consisting of five parts, is especially interesting:

- Aria:
- Dialogue;
- Fräulein Bürstner;
- Many Shadows;
- Actor.

It is noteworthy that all parts are written in the native language of their respective author, each thus containing the quintessence of a separate fragment of the narrative. The introduction of choirs helps to create a special atmosphere of stillness, while the action simultaneously takes on an epic character. Resembling leitmotifs in terms of their dramatic function, the repeated musical formulas on the words "This is the law of life" organise the musical development. The detachment of the deep bass melodic line and the human voices in the choir speak of the conflicting opposition of humanity and impersonal fate, which enhances the epic character of the narrative.

The choral numbers also contrast with one another. Some are emphatically emotional and dramatic, while others are reserved, strictly confined to a unison texture and static melody. This is connected with the composer's desire to provide an opportunity to appreciate the depth and seriousness of the images, which are rich with philosophical content. All parts of the vocal suite are written using the atonal idiom. The composer consciously rejects tonal gravitations, colouring the invariably repeating motifs with vivid strokes and rhythmic experimentations that juxtapose its various patterns within the dissonant two-part music. This partly serves to justify the dramatic climax of the performance, when the deformation of the melody recorded by the ear is also fixed at a visual level at the moment of the destruction of the musical instrument, representing a conventional source of such "sick" music. Thus, the wanton smashing of the black piano can be perceived not so much as a gratuitous act of vandalism, but rather as a metaphor for the destruction of the protagonist's consciousness.

These extreme states are initially conveyed by the musical side of the performance, which then develops through harsh dissonances into anti-musical cacophony and unpitched sounds. The movement develops with increasing dynamics; the avalanche-like sonority is interrupted only by the endpoint, which is marked by dead silence. Darkness and emptiness thus become the main "personalities" of what is happening. Thus the loud crescendo gives way to quiet.

Another paradoxical work by Manotskov is the music for the play *Happiness*, which is also staged under Moguchy's direction. The search for the ideal here is carried out ex contrario since it appears as the result of something that cannot be connected with happiness. The composer turns to such signature moves as working according to a genre model, using leitmotifs, and repeating phrases. In this case, the good and bright are obscured by the everyday, a deliberately crude, popular form taken to the extreme to embody self-sufficient cruelty.

Here we encounter an interesting dramatic technique, which consists of a gradual crescendo of sonority, personifying cruelty and evil. The musical lines grow and disintegrate in a cascade, capturing ever greater volume, transforming from the genre of the everyday sphere into an abstract sound painting of a catastrophe. The multi-layered nature of the text carried out in both horizontal and vertical dimensions is directly reflected in the score of the performance. Such sound states that layer ever new images and meanings dramaturgical the development dynamics. While the finale of this performance is devoid of musical accompaniment, as Yulia Semenkova admits, the resulting silence acquires the status of being different from the music that sounded before. "Such silence is a rarity, possible, perhaps, only in a fairy tale. It is where birth takes place. And therefore it turns out to be alien to the real world, which has long lost its harmony, which continues to creak, hum with ultrasound, drown in the chaos of voices and crumble before our eyes." [1]

Collaboration of Alexander Manotskov with Kirill Serebrennikov and Andrei Yakovlev

Manotskov's creative experiments with other directors are no less interesting. The play The Golovlyov Family (2005), staged in collaboration with Kirill Serebrennikov. is also marked by its immersion in universal musicality. Its sound environment is also intended to convey the state of the world today — disharmonious, in a state of discord. Despite the fact that the performance does not include professional musicians, it is permeated with live music. In addition to rustling and other sounds that create sound effects, the main characters also reproduce actual music. Among the actors who heroically mastered musical instruments for the purposes of their performance are Evgenia Dobrovolskaya (violin), Evgeny Mironov (harmonium), Sergei Sosnovsky (Indianharmonium). [8] In turn, the kalimba, an African instrument, acts as a symbol of death in the performance. "The dead play kalimbas here," Manotskov explained in an interview. "Since everyone dies in the play, but does not disappear, continuing to communicate with the living, Charon gives them kalimbas, and this is the means by which they communicate with the living." [Ibid.]

The play *The Kreutzer Sonata* by Andrei Yakovlev, the music for which was also created by Manotskov, was staged in 2008 on the stage of the Moscow Art Theater named after Anton Chekhov. As a sign of special musicality and involvement in high art, musicians are present on stage before the start of the performance, moving around and tuning their instruments.

"There are stands for music notes everywhere, and Pozdnyshev (Mikhail Porechenkov) holds the notes in his hands all the time. Throughout the performance, musicians are hidden behind a black translucent tulle, their moving silhouettes creating an unsettling feeling. Music becomes a fully-fledged actor, to which the entire space is completely subordinated." [1] At the same time, the vocal line of the play is brought to life: a female voice behind the scenes begins to sing a drawn-out song in the genre of spiritual verses about Eve, who plucked the forbidden fruit from the tree. The actress picks up the melody and sings it polyphonically in a duet with the violin.

The entire performance is accompanied by sharp, heightened intonations of the violin, accentuating all the turning points in the development of the action, sometimes as a foreshadowing of the tragedy, sometimes as a reference to it, sometimes as a musical conclusion or afterword. Similar violin phrases sound when Pozdnyshev tells about his meeting with a girl, but here the sounds are filled with warm feelings, tenderness, and fragility.

The theme of art and contact with it sounds not only in the melodies of instruments and the singing of actresses, but also in conversations, where it develops parallel to the plot in the lines of the characters. Thus, the main character's sister Polina says about her: "Liza is crazy about music," and this makes her soul feel warm and joyful, despite all the hardships of life. The violin, with its phrases, marks all the turns in the fate of the heroes.

Even more complex relationships are again reproduced by the violin with its trembling intonations: for example, the moment of realising a mistake in choosing a life partner, the search for an opportunity to build a life without love, and the realisation of defeat; here, in the music — as in a taut emotional string — there is mental pain, despair, suffering, resentment. Each time arising as a question, the violin melody becomes a kind of leitmotif of the entire performance.

At the culmination of the development of the musical performance, the musician himself appears in the form of violinist Troukhatchevsky. Being an excellent pianist, Lisa could not refuse the pleasure of rehearsing and playing the famous sonata by Beethoven. The music captures them with its piercing sounds that express their deep feelings, it hypnotises and paralyses the protagonists, transforming them and making them understand the essence of what transpired in their lives. The *Kreutzer Sonata* is a work of the highest mastery, the highest expression of the most intense feelings and experiences. The original author of the story — Leo Tolstoy — considered music to be the most powerful art in its impact on a person, calling it a terrible art due to the irresistibility of its power.

In musical terms, the performance is based on opposing timbres. On the one hand, the warm, human sounds of the violin, although tense, and on the other the harsher more metallic tones of the tuba. In the finale, she ends up in the hands of the devastated Pozdnyshev, who slowly plays on her sounds that are not connected by a single melody (here we may remember Pushkin: "but love is also a melody"). If at first, they are "taken up by the strings", then later they "turn into frantic groans, the voice of human loneliness..." [Ibid.] Violin and tuba — what could be more incompatible? String instruments are associated with everything bright and sublime, dreams and desires; while the tuba produces heavy, clumsy, gloomy sounds, as if pointing to the all-consuming and joyless round of quotidian existence. With this juxtaposition, the directors make us think about the essential theme of the play, what was Tolstoy actually writing about? By musically emphasising the insurmountable boundary in the relationship of close partners in married life, the director and composer thereby help to realise the need to strive for understanding as the destiny of all humanity. Why is misunderstanding dangerous? This is the source, after all, of conflicts, lack of freedom, enslavement, and ultimately crime. Therefore, it seems entirely justified

to entrust music with the task of conveying the subtle nuances of the various states of the human psyche, as well as the distribution of actions according to timbres.

Conclusion

In concluding the study, we cannot help but acknowledge the universal features of Alexander Manotskov's music, which encompass numerous aspects and possibilities of dramatic narrative. The music enters organically into the performance, inspiring it, breathing life into the action and making it more effective. Music is the strong point of performance, whose totality is the latter's source and foundation, and without which it becomes unthinkable. In other words, Manotskov's performances are unique works in which the musical component acquires a dominance that is carried into the entire development of the performance, which becomes subordinated to the life of sound forms.

As a leading light in the theatrical world, Manotskov opens up new forms of coexistence between music and dramatic theater, which are based on a synthesis of its leading components. In essence, the composer is a representative of an avant-garde process that is fundamentally transforming the genres of both dramatic and musical theater, opening up new paths and approaches of implementing such a synthesis on a novel basis. From this point of view, the idea of comparing Manotskov's experience of working in a dramatic performance with the work of representatives of the older generation seems very promising. In this connection, one of the possible figures that presents itself is that of Alexander Bakshi. Like Manotskov, this composer demonstrates in his installation works a musicalization of the stage space, which relies on the principle of intertextuality [10] and the processes of synthesizing all components of the spectacle under the sign of the sonic art. [11]

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