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Aspects of Mikhail Bronner's Creativity*

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Abstract. The article presents a critical analysis of the music of Mikhail Bronner, who is presently one of the leading figures in contemporary Russian music. As a multifaceted artist and musical thinker, he has managed to create an unique, individual style that incorporates classical traditions to attract the attention of wide audiences and professional music critics alike. The composer's music is marked by its exceptional originality of genres. Considering his aesthetic views concerning issues in contemporary art alongside the stages of his musical and professional development, Bronner's creative path is demonstrated in terms of the peculiarities of his compositional process. Special attention is paid to the programmatic aspect of the composer's music, as well as its national component, the specificities of musical language and form-construction, and his interest in various combinations of timbre. The author of the article identifies three leading themes in the composer's work: the theme of the Book, the theme of Romanticism, and the theme of Childhood. Selecting examples from a number of his works, the author reveals in his article features of the composer's implementation of each of them.

Keywords: Mikhail Bronner, theme of the Book, theme of Childhood, theme of Romanticism

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Лики творчества Михаила Броннера

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена творчеству Михаила Броннера, который является сегодня одной из ведущих фигур современной отечественной музыки. Многогранный художник и мыслитель, выступающий наследником классических традиций, он сумел создать неповторимый индивидуально-авторский стиль, неизменно привлекающий внимание как широкой аудитории, так и профессиональных музыкальных критиков. Творчество композитора отмечено исключительным жанровым своеобразием. В статье рассматриваются этапы профессионального становления музыканта, его эстетические взгляды, касающиеся проблем современного искусства, вопросов композиторской профессии, особенностей процесса сочинения. Отдельное внимание уделяется таким аспектам музыки Броннера, как программность, национальный компонент, специфика музыкального языка и формообразования, интерес к разнообразным тембровым сочетаниям. Автором статьи выделяются три ведущих темы в творчестве композитора — тема Книги, тема Романтизма и тема Детства. На примере целого ряда сочинений раскрываются особенности претворения каждой из них композитором.

Ключевые слова: Михаил Броннер, тема Книги, тема Детства, тема Романтизма

Introduction

Having established notability as a prominent Russian composer during the 1970s, Mikhail Bronner has been described as being “one of the most respectable, one might say, key figures <...> of the Russian school of composition.” [1, p. 216] Unlike the generation of avant-garde composers that preceded him, in his work he relies on traditional means of musical expression for developing an individual style within the established laws of harmony, melody and form-generation. However, this does not imply any hostility to innovations on his part; on the contrary, his work is characterised by a search for new timbres and their combinations, as well as fanciful rhythms and original harmonic solutions. He also skilfully applies the possibilities of new sounds achieved in

the works of composers during the 1960s. One of his contemporaries, the composer Mikhail Kokzhaev characterises Bronner as “a multifaceted artist, a virtuoso of orchestral writing, a philosopher endowed with the talent of seeing the true essence of beauty.” [Ibid.] The Bronner’s first biographer, Inna Romashchuk, notes in his music an unique fusion of the composer’s individual style with a profound generalisation of the most important ideas of our time: “His tone colours are thickset, in many of his works from the turn of the millennium — with an obligatory ‘strip of light’, which sometimes recedes, and sometimes becomes an unreal reality.” [2, p. 3] These and other statements in their entirety testify to the monumentality, depth of psychological content, sincerity, strength and integrity of the composer’s music.

Bronner's Creative Development

Prior to Mikhail, there were no musicians in the Bronner family. The composer's grandfather, Wolf Bronner, was a prominent Soviet physician who received his education in Europe. He became the founder of the Institute of Venereology in Moscow, which bore his name until 1937. During the latter year, he fell victim to the repressions of the Stalin era; however, in 1956 he was posthumously rehabilitated. According to the composer, his grandmother, Elena Bronner, fully shared her husband's revolutionary convictions. Before the Second World War, she was the director of one of a sanatorium in Kislovodsk in the Russian Caucasus, where many of the academic and creative intelligentsia of those years gathered to recuperate their health.

The composer's parents were also representatives of the cultured elite of Soviet society. His father, Boris Bronner, was an engineer and one of the leading specialists in the field of communications, while his mother, Slava Beskina, survived the Great Patriotic War as a military field surgeon and afterwards worked as an operating oncologist.

However, their son's musical abilities were discovered early, so he was sent to a music school. As Romashchuk aptly notes, Mikhail Bronner was "from a family of ingenious natural talents and... hard workers." [Ibid.] After finishing school, he began his studies at the Moscow Conservatory, majoring in composition and piano, "where the seventeen-year-old youth was noticed by Tikhon Nikolayevich Khrennikov, who took him as one of his composition

students." [3, p. 19] It was under Khrennikov's tutelage that the developing composer eventually graduated from the conservatory and subsequently finished his postgraduate studies.

Mikhail Bronner often recalled the respected professor in terms of his contribution to Soviet culture and the decisive significance of his personality during the years of repression in his interviews: "Khrennikov is a remarkable composer, <...> a bright, gifted musician. A man in whom professional and human qualities were combined in a completely exceptional way."¹ Another Teacher with a capital letter for Mikhail Bronner was Professor Yuri Fortunatov of the Moscow Conservatory, an unrivalled master of orchestral and choral instrumentation. According to the composer, "he was a great man and a professional, whose opinions I trusted infinitely! Our communication was not limited to the years of my studies; he led composition seminars in Ivanovo, which we all looked forward to with impatience. Until his death in 1998, he was always the one to whom I showed all my works first."²

The name of Mikhail Bronner appeared in the press at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s in connection with the premieres of his first choral works, as well as the production of the ballet *Optimisticheskaya tragediya* [Optimistic Tragedy], which evoked an immense quantity of reviews in musical journals and newspaper publications. The first article to examine Bronner's music was written by musicologist Yuri Semenov, who, in particular, noted the "bright musical language, combining melodic and harmonic laconicism with rhythmic force and sophistication, a dramatic logic

¹ Dusaev O. "The year 2007 may go down in the history of our country..." (Interview with composer M.B. Bronner). (Дусаев О. «2007 год может войти в историю нашей страны...» (интервью с композитором М.Б. Броннером)). *The New Times*. 2007, no. 28. URL: <https://newtimes.ru/articles/print/10798/> (accessed: 01.06.2025).

² From a personal conversation between the author and Bronner, March 25, 2011.

of musical form.” [4, p. 94] The principles of personal expression that came to the forefront in Bronner’s work in those years would remain significant for him up to the present day.

Although the peak creative development of the artist coincided with the difficult period of the Perestroika, when the profession of a composer was not in great demand by society, Bronner did not change his calling. Answering questions on this topic, he explained: “I believe that composing music is an illness. But it’s not contagious. Moreover, as life has shown, a lot of people have ‘recovered’: now the number of people writing notes has sharply decreased <...> My freedom has been earned through suffering. After all, in order to write my music, I must have the opportunity to do so, because a free artist is not free from various obligations, including those to his family.” [5, p. 7] In any case, the composer noted, no one forced him to make such a life choice, and the state is not in the least obligated to support artistic people. It may rather be said that, since this is his favourite occupation in life, he is happy that he has the opportunity to carry it out.

The Composer’s Aesthetic Position

Having reached the state of creative maturity, Bronner has frequently reflected on the development of contemporary music and its effect on the wide circle of educated people interested in it. When asked whether contemporary music is difficult to appreciate, he answers: “When one of my compositions is performed in one concert together with music from the Baroque era, I assure you that my music is simpler and closer to the listener. By the way, the alternation of classical and contemporary music highlights the most the merits of both.” [6, p. 8]

According to Bronner, a composer’s “sole salvation” these days is extreme universalism. A contemporary composer must be able to write different types of music. On the one hand,

it becomes simply boring to write the same thing, but on the other hand, it turns out to be absolutely necessary in our changing world. He himself follows this postulate: “I am a principled eclectic and cosmopolitan. I am interested to an equal degree in different types of music and different instruments.” [7, p. 14] At the same time, according to Anna Amrakhova, the composer’s style is characterised by an amazing “harmony of self-sufficiency.” He does not join any of the mainstream musical directions, always remaining on the fringes: “Any ‘ism’ suits me so long as it is devoid of ideology, which I hate. And I have compositions that even my friend Ekimovsky is ready to tolerate (joke!): *Sodom i Gomorra* [Sodom and Gomorrah], *Strasti po Iude* [The Passion According to Judas] <...> I am confident that even in the 21st century it is possible to write music that would be interesting to play and listen to.” [8, p. 13] In terms of his advice to his students, the main guidelines for their compositional experiments are: possession of diverse interests, application of new knowledge, and experimentation with new sounds.

Bronner professes the principles of cosmopolitanism and tolerance not only in his musical works, but also in life. This is evidenced by the fact that, in his role as chairman of the Admissions Committee at the Moscow Composers’ Union for an enormous number of years, he accepts composers who are representatives of the “utmost left” and “utmost right” contemporary musical movements into the Union, regardless of whether their creative principles are close to him or not. At the same time, the composer’s attitude towards avant-garde music is of considerable interest. Bronner believes that radicality of this music is inversely proportional to its complexity; in other words, excessive complication of the laws of the musical process paradoxically leads to its impoverishment, since interactions

cease to work and often turn out to be inaudible for the listener.

While the composer is convinced that the rational principle plays an important role in artistic work, the impulse for creativity still lies in the sensitive-emotional sphere. Thus, the composer's creative laboratory is aimed at comprehending the issues of life not from the standpoint of rationality, but from that of the "life of the human spirit." In this connection, it becomes significant that Bronner turns to religious themes, ambiguous psychological situations, strong passions, and philosophical questions for the subject matter of his musical compositions.

Aspects of the Composer's Creative Process

All the composer's music is programmatic; in other words, the program is expressed, on the one hand, in the titles of his compositions, and at the same time it is also often concealed in their vivid genre-related basis. Thus, it is the program that largely determines what means of expression the composer chooses to implement it. Bronner's musical space presents an amalgamation of different cultural worlds. Examples of this may be demonstrated in a large number of works: a concerto for mixed chorus set to verses by English and Scottish poets: *Vereskovyi med* [Heather Honey], *Pesni lyubvi, smerti i vechnosti bytiya* (*Missa Humanus*) [Songs of Love, Death and the Eternity of Being (*Missa Humanus*)] set to verses by 17th century German poets for mixed chorus and orchestra, a concerto for children's chorus *Iz russkoi poezii* [From Russian Poetry] set to poetry by Alexander Pushkin, Anton Delwig, and Evgeny Baratynsky, *Iz cheshskoi narodnoi poezii* [From Czech Folk Poetry] for children's

chorus and piano, a concerto for violin, young musician and chamber orchestra *V poiskakh Graalya* [In Search of the Holy Grail], *Psaltyr'* [The Psalter] for children's chorus *a capella*, *Molitva svyatogo Frantsiska Assizskogo* (*Pamyati materi*) [Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi (In Memory of the Composer's Mother)] for mixed chorus *a capella*, *Zadumav didochok* [Grandfather Had an Idea] for mixed chorus *a capella*, the Concerto for Cello and Chamber Orchestra *TSAVT TANEM* (*Voz'mu tvoyu bol'*) [TSAVT TANEM (I will Take your Pain)], *Belorusskii kontsert* [Belarusian Concerto] for cymbals and chamber orchestra, and numerous other works.

A very important component in Bronner's music is the national element.³ In addition to the composer's interest in a wide variety of cultures, epics and religions, his work is also inspired by Jewish folk melodies and dance. Thus, an extensive corpus of his works is dedicated to the *People of the Book*, i.e. the Jews, and contains many characteristic moments at the level of both musical language and national mentality, philosophy and religion (for more details, see: [9]).

The nature of Bronner's musical language is almost always vocal, melodic and tuneful, which characterises not only his vocal and choral compositions, but also his instrumental works. The primary role of melody in his musical works is also apparent. "Intonation – motive – melody." Inna Romashchuk appropriately observes that these concepts, which are sometimes forgotten or transformed in our days, "work" actively in Bronner's music. "They often contain echoes of other styles; they are 'reread' by the composer and appear in a different form or in a new context. They are almost always bright

³ Translator's note: the use of the adjective "national" in a Russian context often refers to distinct cultural traditions rather than to nation-state entities. Given that the composer states he has never used a single folk theme in all of his works, the use of the English adjective "ethnic" in this context would be incorrect.

and artistically strong.” [10, p. 112] Bronner himself emphasises that the overwhelming majority of his works are based on his own original themes and that this represents an important value for him. He refers to these original melodies as “motives.”

However, Bronner also has compositions based partially or entirely on the “diminished mode” or the octatonic scale, in which, at first glance, there is no clearly expressed thematic element present in “his grandfather’s understanding” (in the composer’s definition). Such are his numerous instrumental compositions, among which are the chamber ensemble works — *Avraam i Isaak* [Abraham and Isaac] for bayan and soprano saxophone, *Adam i Eva* [Adam and Eve] for violin and bayan, *Sodom i Gomorra* [Sodom and Gomorrah] for two saxophones, voice, bayan, harpsichord and drums, as well as the instrumental concertos *Strasti po Iude* [The Passion According to Judas] for bayan and chamber orchestra, *Transformatsiya dushi* [Transformation of the Soul] for viola and chamber orchestra, *Deti strakha* [Children of Fear] for piano and symphony orchestra, *Odinokii golos* [Lonely Voice] for violin and chamber orchestra, and a number of others. Commenting on these works, the composer highlights the primacy of musical thought and the determination of the type of development according to the respective underlying concept.

The composer’s unconventional thinking also manifests itself in the sphere of the metrorhythm. Here he demonstrates amazing ingenuity. The variable time signatures utilised to demonstrate his rhythms indicate to us that they are filled with energy, never letting either the audience (for whom they seem quite natural) or the performers pass into the state of boredom.

One of the main features of the composer’s expressive form is his predilection for an extended narrative. Typically, his works (regardless of genre and ensemble) last

for at least twenty minutes. In such cases, the individualisation of form plays an important role for the composer. In Kokzhaev’s opinion, Bronner’s music is based “on the natural beauty of sound combinations, which are brought together by means of non-standard form-generation that arises from the peculiar nature of the original musical material.” [1, p. 216]

The genre range in Bronner’s music is extremely broad. Up to the present time, it is difficult to find a genre in which the composer has not distinguished himself. He has written outstanding choral concertos, vocal cycles, and instrumental ensembles. He is the composer of over 25 concertos for various instruments and orchestra (not including alternative versions of existing concertos for other groups of soloists). At the same time, his work in cinema, as well as music for television and radio productions he has occasionally engaged in, is well known.

Perhaps the only genre that is difficult to detect in his work is that of short solo works. In most cases, such elements only appear in parts of larger cycles. As examples of the latter, it is possible to cite *Vremena goda. Venok Chaikovskomu* [The Seasons. A Wreath to Tchaikovsky] and 12 pieces for piano, violin, violoncello, flute and clarinet, *Letnyaya muzyka* [Summer Music] for children’s chorus, bayan and chamber orchestra set to poems by Joseph Brodsky, *Detskii ugolok* [Children’s Corner] for chamber orchestra, knockers, whistles, rattles, sighs, moans and one balloon, *Sem’ evreiskikh pesen* [Seven Jewish Songs] for violin, tuba and chamber orchestra, *Dalekoe — blizkoe* [Distant — Close] (based on Russian romances) for balalaika, alto domra and piano, and various other compositions.

Mikhail Bronner did not remain aloof from the peculiar trend in compositional practice at the turn of the century associated with the various discoveries in the sphere of timbre and the study of the properties of new sonorities, the interest in rare instruments and their

combinations in ensembles, and the invention of new playing techniques. Thus, the saxophone, tuba, marimba and vibraphone appeared as soloists in his music, as also did folk instruments of various cultures, including the bayan, the domra, the balalaika, and the cymbals. Timbre, according to Bronner, is of decisive importance to every composer, since it carries the sound idea of any respective composition in progress. Having been asked about the question of the primacy of the composition's theme or the performer's timbre, the composer answers that the underlying musical idea is primary for him, but the question of how it can be manifested is always present. Each timbre is individual for the composer and conveys its own psychological characteristics. In this regard, the orientation towards any particular timbre yields a certain figurative sphere. Thus, in compositions for children's chorus, light, joyful music, saturated with theatrical imagery, would tend to prevail, while in works for symphony orchestra, the composer turns to universal issues bearing a deep dramatic and philosophical subtext, while works incorporating the bayan present themes related to the People of the Book.

The fact that many of the composer's works exist in different timbre variants can be explained, on the one hand, by a certain universality of the musical material, and on the other, by the attention paid to his works on the part of performers of different specialities for whom this music is written. Here we emphasise that the versions developing new timbral varieties of already existing compositions are not limited to a simple mechanical transfer of the musical

text into the environment of a new instrumental sound, but that, with the appearance of a new timbre, the respective work also acquires new musical outlines. The changes concern many elements, from options of instrumentation to alterations of various sections in the overall form, the addition of solo cadenzas, and the use of new sound media.

The emergence of these versions may be simply explained in terms of Bronner often writes music for his friends, among whom are many famous performers, including accordionist Friedrich Lips, violinist Levon Ambartsumyan, balalaika player Andrei Gorbachev, saxophonist Alexei Volkov, violist Mikhail Bereznitsky, and many others. In such cases, it is often the performer who creates the direction for the composer's work by suggesting the ideas for new compositions. If these ideas turn out to be close to the composer's, a new oeuvre appears.

The Creative Themes

Bronner's creative path is difficult to divide into periods based on stylistic or temporal principles. Thus, it will be more convenient to systematise it according to its various subject material. One of the main themes in the composer's music is the *theme of the Book* (the author himself defines it in this way). This area includes a large number of works in a wide variety of genres: from solo and chamber-ensemble oeuvres to large-scale symphonic works and instrumental concertos. These can be divided into two groups:

- works related to the images of the Book (*the sacred aspect*)⁴;

⁴ This group includes: *Ave Maria* for soprano, oboe and organ (1991), *Psaltyr'* [Psalter] for children's chorus *a cappella* (1991), *Evreiskii rekviem* [Jewish Requiem] for soloists, mixed chorus and children's chorus (1992), *Stabat Mater* for solo voice, children's chorus, and orchestra (1993), *Lestnitsa Iakova. Angel lyubvi, Angel pechali* [Jacob's Ladder. The Angel of Love, the Angel of Sorrow] for four cellos (1996), *Evangelie ot saksofona* [The Gospel of the Saxophone] for saxophone and chamber orchestra (1997), *Soter Ponim* [He Who Forgot Us] for symphony orchestra (1997), *Iz knigi proroka Isaii* [From the Book of the Prophet Isaiah] for children's chorus and piano (1998),

– compositions related to the People of the Book (*everyday aspect*).⁵

Let us dwell in more detail on *the sacred aspect* of the theme of the Book. The composer's interests in this area coincide with the creative direction of many of his colleagues. It is well-understood that the turn of the century was marked by a renewed interest in religion on the part of a significant number of composers. [11] Attention to the spiritual realm is typical for the artists of the late 20th century: as Natalia Gulyanitskaya writes, "compositions with spiritual and sacred themes have become a kind of sign of the times." [12, p. 207] A return to the topic of religion, which had been "closed" for decades under the Soviet regime, became a point of attraction for many people in the post-Soviet space. However, the degree of sincerity of each such appeal is more a question of the individual artist's conscience, rather than merely following the fashion of the times. Indeed, after more than half a century of official atheism in the country, this is not just a matter of displaying an

open commitment to any particular religious branch. When speaking about his sacred work, Bronner emphasises that he is the creator of works applying to all the major religious denominations — that is, the Book in its sacred aspect is understood by him as a kind of cathedral complex, "the unfading light," the centre of the eternal spiritual truths. This point of view on the part of the composer has much in common with Yuri Kholopov's statements about the original, genetically embedded spirituality in Russian contemporary music. [13]

Here it is the composer's psychological orientation towards eternal subjects that is noteworthy. In his music dedicated to the images of the Book, it is not the "spiritual" principle that prevails, understood as a detached static striving for God, that has been canonised and is parsimonious in the manifestation of feelings, but rather the "spiritual" principle — close to human passions, active, elemental, tragic, questioning God, striving to find the divine element in man.

Strasti po Iude [The Passion According to Judas] for bayan and chamber orchestra (1998), *Avraam i Isaak* [Abraham and Isaac] for bayan and soprano saxophone (1998), *Kaddish po ukhodyashchemu veku* [Kaddish for the Departing Century] for cello and piano (1998), *Adam i Eva* [Adam and Eve] for bayan and violin (1999), *V nachale. Iz Knigi "Bytie"* [In the Beginning. From the Book of Genesis] for children's chorus, two pianos and string orchestra (2000), *Vrata nebes* [The Gates of Heaven] for violin and string orchestra (2000), *Vremya Kaina* [The Time of Cain] for bassoon and chamber orchestra (2001), *Katuv (Tak zapisano)* [Katuv (Thus It Is Written)] for bayan, piano and symphony orchestra (2004), *Sodom i Gomorra* [Sodom and Gomorrah] for two saxophones, voice, bayan, harpsichord and drums (2004), *Desyat' vzglyadov na desyat' zapovedei* [Ten Views of the Ten Commandments] (collective work, 2005), *Izgnanie iz raya* [Expulsion from Paradise] for alto, bass clarinet, vibraphone and bayan (2008), *Vavilonskaya bashnya* [The Tower of Babel] for folk instruments orchestra (2011).

⁵ This group of works includes: *Nam zhit' i chuvstvovat' dano* [We are Given to Live and Feel] — a vocal cycle for bass and piano set to poems by Igor Guberman (1994), *Evrei. Zhizn' i smert'* [The Jew. Life and Death] for cello and piano (1995), *"A zavtra budet luchshe, chem vchera..."* ["And Tomorrow will be Better than Yesterday..."] for violin, cello and piano (2002), *Muzyka mestechka* [Music of the Shtetl] for saxophone and symphony orchestra (2003), *Kolybel'nye pesni* [Lullabies] for voice, solo cello and chamber orchestra (2004), *Bol'shoi Freilakhs dlya Bol'shogo orkestra* [Big Freylachs for Large Orchestra] (2009), *Dolgoe vozvrashchenie (Kniga pesen)* [The Long Return (Book of Songs)] from Jewish Folklore for Choral Theater (2009), *Shchuka po-evreiski* [A Pike in Jewish Style] for children's chorus, bayan, double bass, clarinet and tenor (2009), *Sem' evreiskikh pesen* [Seven Jewish Songs] for violin, tuba and string orchestra (2010), *Evreiskoe schast'e* [Jewish Joy] — tango for violin and accordion (2011), *Oj, Mame* — three Jewish songs for piano quintet (2012).

Indeed, the musical material of Bronner's sacred works often contradicts the narrative character of the sacred texts. The composer is put off by a certain "obviousness" of the Book's plots, the certainty and predetermination of what is happening, the absence of reasons and logic of the events, and the impossibility of any other interpretation of what happened. Thus, in order to experience everything anew together with the characters in the events, it is necessary to resurrect the stories of the Holy Scriptures. Having chosen a subject for a new work, the composer attempts to explain the inherent contradictions of the biblical stories by means of his music and without resorting to previously discovered solutions.

Thus, in his concerto *Strasti po Iude* [The Passion According to Judas], the last line uttered by the orchestra is the question: "Judas?"; in *Avraam i Isaak* [Abraham and Isaac], the entire composition recounts the story of the father and son's journey to the place of the sacrifice; *Katuv* [Katuv] is filled with reflections on the theme of fate as a divine premise. Rather than provide ready-made unambiguous answers, the composer chooses the path of understanding and revealing the plot through his music. In this way, each listener is presented with the opportunity of experiencing what they heard and draw their own conclusions.

In connection with the sacred aspect of the theme of the Book, the sheer volume of Bronner's work makes it possible to identify some general provisions characteristic of any particular group of works. According to our observations, the following features become essential for the composer.

1. The presence of a conflict. All the plots in the composer's works derive their paradoxicality precisely from the "human" point of view. Such plots include the betrayal of a teacher by a student (*Strasti po Iude* [The Passion According to Judas]), the sacrifice intended by a father of his own son (*Avraam i Isaak* [Abraham and

Isaac]), and the relationship between the very first people in the world (*Adam i Eva* [Adam and Eve]). The composer makes use of his music in order to explain what is occurring in the plotline, to excuse and to understand the real reasons behind the actions of the respective protagonists. The composer repeatedly emphasises this in his oral statements, interviews and various annotations to his works.

2. History as occasion for reflection. According to Bronner, none of his instrumental works inspired by the Book take a literal interpretation. Instead, he seems to attempt to comprehend what happened by recreating a musical picture of it. The result of the composer's re-experiencing of the Scriptural episodes through their protagonists becomes the musical composition in which each listener is free to find their own answer. On the other hand, in compositions where vocalists are involved in singing or reciting the texts, there is a clear connection between the storyline and the musical content. Here the music illustrates the plotline rather figuratively in order to reflect the character of the verbal content. Thus, the presence of the Biblical text significantly narrows the field of "possible meanings" of the musical material. Nonetheless, even in this situation, it is not possible to speak of the complete subordination of the music to the text, nor of any secondary meaning on its part.

3. The ontological and anthropological nature of the statement. The composer emphasises the deeply personal and timeless nature of the statement in the music that reflects the stories about Biblical characters, their deeds, and the ensuing fates of millions.

4. The attitude to the theme of the Book as a genre of composition. This determines the tendency towards an expanded narrative form, a one-movement (poem-like) form, which presupposes the continuous development of the musical material with many sections,

the presence of dramatic collisions, and the transformation of the nature of the musical themes.

The *everyday aspect* of the theme of the Book includes compositions imbued with the national flavour of klezmer music, the characteristic features of which include variable modes and a special type of development of the musical narrative in which the character of the thematicism in the process of development is transformed into its opposite. For example, this may consist in a transition from a major key dance motive to a more dramatic mood in a minor key.⁶ Although the composer often emphasises that he has never used a single folk theme in all of his works, his reliance on national modal approaches is reflected in many of his compositions.

Concurrent with the approach to Jewish motives in Bronner's music is the approach of Mikhail Gnesin, who indicated in his diaries that when a composer is immersed in the sphere of national music, its elements began to appear in his music sometimes against his will.

Several works from the group of *the people of the Book*, despite the obvious reference in their titles, can only be indirectly classified as adhering to the "folk" idiom. We may conventionally designate them as "essays-reflections." Such national colouring is reflected more in the names, the ensemble of instruments, or the general nature of the development of the musical material, rather than affects the modal features of the music. Such are, for example, the works *Evrei. Zhizn' i smert'* [The Jew. Life and Death], where Life passes as a leisurely narrative in the klezmer style, while Death is presented as a picture of the other world with nails being driven into a coffin and the howling of the wind over a grave. Among other similar

works are *A zavtra budet luchshe, chem vchera* [And Tomorrow will be Better than Yesterday], where the composer invites each listener to answer the question of whether or not it is necessary to put a question mark at the end of the title of this work, and *Kaddish po ukhodyashchemu veku* [Kaddish for the Departing Century], a deeply tragic work, which is devoid of any hints of national flavour, despite its title. It is, rather, a farewell to the 20th century, a memorial prayer (kaddish) for the people and the events that have passed away.

Thus, in developing the theme of the Book, Bronner realises himself not only as a dramatic artist and philosopher, but also as a composer who has not forgotten his national roots.

An extensive body of Bronner's compositions is devoted to the *theme of Romanticism*. Here Romanticism stands for a subjective attitude to what was happening, its perception through the prism of personal experiences to serve as a kind of framework for the composer's internal creative organisation. By comparing the sounding reality with his inner spiritual "tuning fork," the composer understands his main achievement to be the response he creates in the soul of the listener. As has been already noted, all of the composer's music, without exception, is programmatic; moreover, this program is always non-standard. The frequently polemical character of the titles emphasises that the protagonists of the musical works are extraordinary individuals.

Bronner can be confidently classified as an artist of the subjective (romantic) type, among those who, according to Ekaterina Tarakanova, "...again and again dive into the depths of their own 'I', reflecting the world through their undisguised emotional perception..." [14, p. 15] In his interviews, the composer often

⁶ Mikhail Gnesin characterises this technique as an extrapolation of expressive means.

associates himself with the romantic, reflective type of artist, choosing complex dramatic plots and “fatal passions” for his compositions, and living through situations that are problematic from a psychological point of view. But he shows himself also to be no stranger to the world of subtle motions of the soul, beauty and nature, love and harmony. In accordance with this ethos, the composer defines his task in terms of evoking an emotional response in the listener. It is no coincidence that Bronner names Tchaikovsky as his favorite composer.

The group of works related to the theme of Romanticism includes a large number of vocal and choral works. Bronner, for whom individual personal expression and psychologism in music presents a significant driving force, finds creative support in the poetic texts he turns to for his musical settings. The means of musical expression in the works of Romantic orientation differ in many ways from the category of works expressing the Book. For example, the characteristic sound of the octatonic scale turns out to be more on demand in his sacred works. The love for constant transformation and stage action is most clearly manifested in the Romantic works and those pertaining to the People of the Book, which directly connect with the composer’s works for the theatre and *theatricality* itself as an expressive device in his music.

As the composer of two ballets and six operas, Mikhail Bronner can uncontroversially be described as a theater composer. His love for the theater had manifested itself already at the very beginning of his compositional career. One of the first works that received significant responses in the press was his ballet *Optimistic Tragedy*, which was staged at the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Theater. Inna Romashchuk defines the title of this ballet as the “Anti-Seagull” because “...the internally contradictory image of the main character (a collision of the duality of human nature

involving deep psychological clashes) was in the foreground.” [10, p. 117] Here Bronner demonstrates his mastery of the specifics of musical dramaturgy, skilfully working with the system of leitmotifs, as well as applying the principle of genre-style switches and timbre personifications.

Among the composer’s latest theatrical works are the operas *Dolgoe vozvrashchenie (Kniga pesen)* [The Long Return (Book of Songs)] and *Russkii Dekameron. Vecher vusad'be* [The Russian Decameron. An Evening at the Estate]. Although these works cannot be described as operas in the classical sense of the genre, they have many of the defining features of this genre. Rather, according to critics, the definitions “musical performance” and “theater in person” are more appropriate for them. This aspect bears its own explanation, since the composer was inspired to create these works by Boris Pevzner, the organiser and conductor of the first choral theater in modern musical history (for more information on the creative contacts between the musicians, see: [15]). Its troupe consists of singers and actors, all of whom are active soloists who perform their own concert programmes. The theater is multi-genre in its approach. Each number features a small self-contained performance. Based on the classical traditions of chamber ensemble singing, the theater performs musical miniature numbers that immerse the performer into a special emotional world. With the help of this type of cast, Bronner freed himself from many of the standard operatic conventions. The age of synthetic genres and the composer’s penchant for open psychological expression, which sometimes does not fit into the framework of “pure genres,” has contributed to the emergence of a peculiar entity that is unusual in form and very sincere and timeless in content.

In terms of their musical language, both works present a kind of “mystification.” In the title of *Dolgoe vozvrashchenie* [The Long Return]

the composer indicates his return to Jewish national folklore. However, in his interviews following the world premiere, he emphasises that all the musical themes are entirely his own; there is not a single folk motive in the play. The simple songs, which recreate the life of a Jewish shtetl, play out various scenes from the lives of ordinary people. At the same time, the entire action is enveloped in a special poetic mood, in many ways akin to the paintings of Marc Chagall.

In *Russkii Dekameron* [The Russian Decameron], Bronner faced a more difficult task from the start. The work emerged from Pevzner's suggestion that the composer make arrangements of several traditional Russian romances for his new theatrical programme. Bronner initially refused this job, stating that this limited form of musical creativity was unacceptable for him. Together with librettist Mikhail Gorevich, they came up with the idea of incorporating the romances into a new common plotline, where they would sound completely different, thereby creating a common dramaturgy rather than a numbered concert programme. This is how the story emerged about a noble estate somewhere in the Russian hinterland, where bad weather had delayed a group of youthful guests. The latter play a game in which each recounts various love stories from world literature: the answer is given in the form of a romance. In this work, the composer managed to combine in an organic form various stylistic directions into one whole.

The specific use of musical material in Bronner's theatrical works creates a kind of theater within the theater. These compositions are characterised by the love of transformation in music, which is expressed in terms of changing

masks in order to become many characters and composers at the same time.

Theatricality is also characteristic of many of the composer's instrumental works, wherein internal imagery is often expressed in external forms. Thus, in the instrumental composition *Dalekoe i blizkoe (po motivam russkikh romansov)* [Far and Near (based on Russian romances)], which was also created "based on" the *Russkii Dekameron* [The Russian Decameron] and exists today in two instrumental versions,⁷ musical theater appears in the finale of the composition, wherein two performers from the trio put down their instruments, waltz and sing the romance *Zvezdy na nebe* [Stars in the Sky] in a duet to the accompaniment of a third performer (it is assumed that the dancing couple is a man and a woman). In the instrumental duet for bayan and violin, *Adam i Eva* [Adam and Eve] the performers are required to move around the stage and sing while the music is playing. The duets *Adam i Eva* [Adam and Eve] and *A due* must be performed by musicians of different sexes; however, the instrumental parts are not personified and may be interpreted from either a male or female perspective.

In the finale of the Concerto for violin, tuba and chamber orchestra *Sem' evreiskikh pesen* [Seven Jewish Songs], the orchestra members are directed to talk loudly to each other, in order to create a cheerful hum in the crowd. There are many examples of theatricalisation of musical action in Bronner's work. The theatrical specificity of artistic creativity is manifested especially clearly in his compositions for children.

The *theme of Childhood* is another special area of interest for the composer. This theme is dominated by light, cheerful, bright and

⁷ *Dalekoe — blizkoe (po motivam russkikh romansov)* [Far – Close (Based on Russian Romances)] for balalaika, domra alto and piano (2011), *Dalekoe — blizkoe (po motivam russkikh romansov)* [Far – Close (Based on Russian Romances)] for violin, accordion and clarinet (version) (2011).

harmonious colours, a touching and fabulous world of new discoveries and sparkling humour. More than any other genre, this topic is characterised by its theatricality. Here one can always hear the voices of living nature, animals and birds, joyful cries, laughter, and the “oohs and sighs” of little soloists. It presents a kind of secret room, hidden from the eyes of adults, their worries, anxieties and disasters.

It is characteristic that most of the compositions on the theme of Childhood were written for children’s chorus.⁸ The composer has established long-standing creative and friendly ties with the children’s chorus *Polyot* [Flight] from the city of Zhukovsky. The first leader of this group, whose name it now bears, was Tatyana Selishcheva, a close friend of Mikhail Bronner. The composer’s son and niece “sang and were raised” in this group during their childhood and youth. According to his recollections, for several years in a row he spent the summer months with the group, attending summer camps with them and even working as a “moustached nanny” for the children.

Without limiting himself to images of childhood, Bronner frequently uses the children’s chorus as a timbre for expressing a wide variety of states. In terms of timbre, which is unspoiled by mature vibrato, the composer opines that a children’s chorus may present an ideal expression of a wide variety of feelings and states — from cheerful and lyrical to deeply tragic. For this reason, he also uses the children’s voices as a timbre in many of his “adult” works. Among them

are the *Psaltyr'* [Psalter] for children’s chorus *a capella* (1991), a concerto for children’s chorus *Iz russkoi poezii* [From Russian Poetry] set to verses of Alexander Pushkin, Anton Delwig, Evgeny Baratynsky (1996), *Dva khora na stikhi F. Tyutcheva* [Two Choral Works Set to Poems by Fyodor Tyutchev] for children’s chorus *a capella* (2000), *Iz knigi proroka Isaii* [From the Book of the Prophet Isaiah] for children’s chorus and piano four hands (1998), *Stabat Mater* for solo voice, children’s chorus, and orchestra (1993), as well as a number of other works.

Conclusion

We have seen how Bronner’s creative world is defined by three key themes: the theme of the Book, the theme of Romanticism, and the theme of Childhood. Some of his works, however, demonstrate thematic intersections. For example, *Evreiskii rekviem* [The Jewish Requiem] reflects both aspects of the Book at the same time, since the author used “the counterpoint of different musical mentalities — the sacred: the biblical, liturgical, synagogue (all of this is in Hebrew) and — the folk (in Yiddish).” [5, p. 7] Many of the works presented in all the three themes are “told” in a musical language that is “romantic” in its harmonic colour, tonal timbre and psychologism. Theatricality is also a distinctive feature of many of them.

The music of Mikhail Bronner is distinguished by its pronounced humanistic focus, which is not typical of contemporary

⁸ The concerto for children’s chorus and instrumental ensemble *Klyuch ot korolevstva, ili Chudesa v reshete* [The Key to the Kingdom, or Miracles in a Sieve] set to the texts of English and Scottish folk songs (1982), the Cantata for children’s chorus and symphony orchestra *Gori-gori yasno* [Burn, Burn Brightly] (1986), the cantata-fairy tale *Goryachii kamen'* [Hot Stone] by Arkady Gaidar for children’s chorus, orchestra and bass (1987), *Letnyaya muzyka* [Summer Music] for children’s chorus, bayan and chamber orchestra set to poems by Josef Brodsky (2007), *Desyat' nu ochen' vrednykh sovetov* [Ten Very Harmful Pieces of Advice] set to poems by Grigory Oster for children’s chorus, piano and chamber orchestra (2012).

art in general. In reflecting on the meaning of life, the beauty and tragedy of the world, the composer conducts an open dialogue with the listener in an attempt to evoke a response in his or her soul. His refusal to follow prescribed

fashion indicates the desire on his part to remain honest and true to himself and his principles. The many faces of Bronner's work testify to the universality of the composer's artistic thinking.

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