

■ Contemporary Musical Art ■

Research article

UDC 781.2

<https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.3.111-119>

EDN XJSSSY



The “Magic of Repetition” in Iraida Yusupova’s Music*

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the examination of the compositional method of Russian composer Iraida Yusupova. Our attention is focused on three of her compositions — *Portrait of the Artist’s Wife* (2012), *Polychordia* (2001), and *Beautiful Willows in a Beautiful Ambient* (2010). The definition “magic of repetition,” brought out into the title of the article, belongs to composer Nikolai Sidelnikov, Yusupova’s composition teacher at the Moscow Conservatory. Despite its metaphoric quality, this concept successfully conveys the originality of Yusupova’s compositions. Her compositional technique incorporates methods close to repetitive technique, but also substantially different from it. The first method is represented by the composition *Portrait of the Artist’s Wife*, whereas the second is characteristic for the works *Polychordia* and *Beautiful Willows in a Beautiful Ambient*. In the analysis of the composition *Portrait of the Artist’s Wife*, the hypothesis is brought out about the cryptographic character of the given portrait-composition. The researcher’s assumption, which has been validated, is based on the features of the sound material presenting a musical manifestation of the composer’s name. The idea of replication is realized here by means of repetitive technique. The method of “elemental polyphony” (to use Yusupova’s term) is disclosed with the example of the two other compositions examined in the article.

Keywords: Iraida Yusupova, method of repetition, repetitive technique, contemporary Russian music, “elemental polyphony”

For citation: Panteleeva Yu.N. The “Magic of Repetition” in Iraida Yusupova’s Music. *Russian Musicology*. 2025. No. 3, pp. 111–119. <https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.3.111-119>

* The article is based on materials published in Russian in the journal *Problemy muzykal'noi nauki / Music Scholarship*, 2021, no. 4, pp. 25–33. <https://doi.org/10.33779/2782-3598.2021.4.025-033>

Translated by Dr. Anton Rovner.

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«Магия повтора» в музыке Ираиды Юсуповой

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена рассмотрению композиционного метода современного российского композитора Ираиды Юсуповой. В центре внимания находятся три сочинения — «Портрет жены художника» (2012), «Поликордия» (2001), «Прекрасные ивы в прекрасном амбиенте» (2010). Определение «магия повтора», вынесенное в название статьи, принадлежит композитору Николаю Сидельникову, педагогу Юсуповой по композиции в Московской консерватории. Несмотря на метафоричность, это понятие удачно передаёт своеобразие сочинений Юсуповой. В её композиционной технике присутствуют методы, близкие к репетитивности, а также существенно отличающиеся от них. Первый тип представлен сочинением «Портрет жены художника», второй характерен для произведений «Поликордия» и «Прекрасные ивы в прекрасном амбиенте». В анализе композиции «Портрет жены художника» выдвигается гипотеза о криптофоническом характере данного произведения-портрета. Исследовательское предположение, нашедшее подтверждение, базируется на свойствах звукового материала, который является музыкальным воплощением композиторского имени. Идея повторности реализована здесь средствами репетитивной техники. Метод «стихийной полифонии» (термин Юсуповой) раскрывается на примере двух других рассматриваемых в статье сочинений.

Ключевые слова: Ираида Юсупова, метод повтора, репетитивность, современная русская музыка, «стихийная полифония»

Introduction

The music of Iraida Rafaelyevna Yusupova (b. 1962), a prominent Russian composer and film producer, has attracted attention by the peculiarity of its conceptions and their unusual manifestation. The originality of the composer's artistic world is disclosed already on the level of the catalogue of her works, the titles of which add up to an unfolded picture abundant with poetic images. Let us bring a few examples of such titles — *Bloom of the Willows*, *Gothic Cantata*, *Beautiful Theremins in a Beautiful Ambient*, *Singing of the Virgins on Mount Sion*, *Cadenza and Coda for Cello and Orchestra*, *Windrose Diagram — 2*, *Three Meditations on a Subject from*

the Gospel,” the symphony *Mystery of Babylon and Nosferatu Symphony*, the operas *The New Aelita or the Tragic History of a Revolution on Mars* and *Einstein and Margarita*...

The contextual and expressive plans of Yusupova's works are very varied; when describing the composer's music in the categories of aesthetics, one cannot avoid the concepts of “the beautiful” and “the sublime.” Dazzling by its meditative repetition, submerging the listener into a world of refined and sad beauty, this music is replete with states of meditateness and statics in the depth of which a great amount of emotional strength is concealed. “The actuality of the beautiful,” the famous formulation coined by Gadamer,

reflects precisely the aesthetic ideal of many compositions by Yusupova, an artist oriented in her music towards) the high examples of classical art.

By interpreting this music as a continuation of classical traditions in their contemporary insight, researchers have found in it a specific stylistic positioning. In particular, Natalia Gulyanitskaya, while characterizing Yusupova's idiolect in its versatile aspect, classifies it as conceptualism and post-conceptualism, which is plausible by the specificity of the composer's creative projects, as well as the absolutely new stylistic category of a "nonclassic classic": "Indeed, *Iraida Yusupova's* 'virtual compositions' — for example, 'Birds-4,' 'Kitezh-19,' 'Postlude,' 'Cherubic,' etc. — not only do not make a stand against such categories as the 'beautiful,' the 'harmonious,' or the 'spiritual,' but also assert it in a new 'ambient,' which is both conceptual and musical." [1, p. 127]

The beautiful ambient and the beautiful phenomena, essences, objects, etc., are an aesthetic conception that has asserted itself in Yusupova's music and has received a diversified actualization in a whole set of compositions compatible in their titles.¹ Gulyanitskaya emphasizes that the present "cycle unified by the appellation of 'ambient' is an open composition, a hypertext consisting of an n-number of pieces." [2, p. 143]

Indeed, the composer does not avoid the tautology in the least, repeating in her titles

of her almost entirely similarly titled works the epithet "beautiful." "Willows," "a violin," "a harp," "Didos," "samples," "theremins," and other essences, being beautiful in themselves, are placed in similarly "beautiful ambients," and this method of assertion is assertive. It is especially so, if it is to be viewed in a broader context of contemporary artistic practice: "The sublime is substituted with the remarkable, the tragic — with the paradoxical," [3, p. 7] etc. Thereby, the repetition of the word "beautiful" in the titles of Yusupova's compositions is perceived as a significant expressive technique: a means for enhancing (emphasis), an assertion of the predominating idea.

Working in various genres, traditional and innovative, appearing at an intersection of musical genres and on a borderline with other arts (media operas, media projects, etc.), Yusupova has, in addition, long since gained her own personal manner of artistic utterance. The aim of the present article is to research the style of certain compositions in which the technique of repetition plays a significant role.

***Portrait of the Artist's Wife* and Aspects of the Repetitive Technique**

First, let us turn to the composer's own commentary, which is also all the more valuable because it contains the expression uttered about her music by another contemporary master: "The '*Magic of Repetition*' [my italics. — Yu.P.] (Nikolai Sidelnikov). These words uttered

¹ *The Beautiful Violin in Beautiful Ambients* (2008) for baroque violin and baroque ensemble; *Beautiful Theremins in Beautiful Ambients* for two theremins, oboe, string quartet and piano (2008); *The Beautiful Harp in Beautiful Ambients* (2008) for pedal-less harp and historical music ensemble; *The Beautiful Didos in Beautiful Ambients*. *Purcell's Last Dream* (2009) for two countertenors, chamber chorus and baroque ensemble; *Beautiful Continuums in Beautiful Ambients* (2010), Concerto for Cello, Piano and Organ with Chamber Orchestra; *Beautiful Voices in Beautiful Ambients* (2010) for string quartet and phonogram; *Beautiful Samples in Beautiful Ambients* (2012), Composition in Memory and in Honor of Benjamin Britten for oboe, violin, viola, cello and piano; *Beautiful Sounds in Beautiful Ambients* (2012), Composition for Oboe and Piano; the cantata *Beautiful Words in Beautiful Ambients* (2013) — these are the compositions included in a single hypertext.

accidentally by my great teacher responded in me as a slowed detonator. I define my technique as ‘elemental polyphony’ and ‘polyphony of samples,’ at times combining together both of these methods.”²

The poetic comparison provided by Nikolai Sidelnikov may turn out to be not only a metaphor, but also a methodological instrument applicable for researching Iraida Yusupova’s compositional technique.

Let us concentrate our attention on those compositions of hers where the repetitive technique is presented in two qualities separate from each other: the stricter (repetitive technique) and the freer variety (“elemental polyphony”).

A vivid example of the former may be found in the short six-minute composition *Portrait of the Artist’s Wife* (2012) for string orchestra. The work exists in several versions, namely, string quartet and bass — prepared piano, double-bass, bass guitar or phonogram (2010); oboe, viola, cello and piano (2012).

“I consider this piece my self-portrait,”³ — Yusupova asserts, and this phrase is undoubtedly significant in the hermeneutic interpretation of the present musical text. The original title, notwithstanding the reference to the well-known prototype,⁴ impels us to turn to the sphere contiguous to music — that of the visual arts. The well-known historian Dmitri Sarabyanov in his article *Pered zerkalom vremeni. Zametki o russkom avtoportrete* [In Front of the Mirror of Time. Notes about the Russian Self-Portrait] makes the following observations in regard to

this specific genre: “...when the self-portrait ceases being a direct participant of the ‘great’ history of the arts, when its monuments stop entering into this history, it indirectly testifies of the occurring historical-artistic processes much more significantly than any other ‘sub-genre’ of art. *Because the object of his glance remains to be the artist himself — the chief participant of creativity* [my italics. — Yu.P.]. And when self-portraits begin standing among the most outstanding phenomena of painting in general, their significance becomes doubly important: they become simultaneously direct and indirect facts of the history of art.” [4, p. 46]

If the self-portrait is considered to be a “subgenre,” the *Portrait of the Artist’s Wife* turns out to be a variety of it, absorbing into it influences of the enormous stratum of artistic examples⁵ created by Western and Russian painters. In its turn, the female self-portrait continues this differentiation, but already within an allocated subtype of genre. In the history of the visual arts, a small number of self-portraits by women artists are known — mention may be made, for example, of works by Artemisia Gentileschi and Zinaida Serebryakova. As for the domain of music, Yusupova’s case is, most likely, a unique one. For the reason that her work, the heroine and the composer of the work, the protagonist and the creator, the portrayed and the portrayer coincide, there arises the additional conceptual meaning “provoked” by the enigmatic title.

Among the rare examples of the musical self-portrait, — in this case, by a composer who

² From Iraida Yusupova’s letter to the author of the present article (January, 2019).

³ Ibid.

⁴ It is referred to the movie *A Portrait of the Artist’s Wife* (1981) created by producer Alexander Pankratov.

⁵ In 2018 in Moscow at the A.S. Pushkin State Museum for the Visual Arts the exhibition *Wives* was held with great success, which demonstrated over forty portraits of the wives of outstanding Russian artists — Boris Kustodiev, Mikhail Vrubel, Valentin Serov, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, Alexander Deyneka, Robert Falk, Pyotr Konchalovsky, Igor Grabar, Boris Grigoriev, Sergei Sudeykin, Yuri Pimenov and other masters of Russian painting.

is a man, — there is the second of the *Three Pieces for Two Pianos* (1976) by György Ligeti, called by him *Self-portrait with Reich and Riley (and Chopin in the background)* (“Selbstportrait mit Reich und Riley (und Chopin ist auch dabei)”). As for the portrait genre chosen by Iraida Yusupova, most likely, she is continuing in it the tradition of her teacher Nikolai Sidelnikov, who a certain period of time earlier had created an orchestral composition original in its genre *Romantic Symphony-Divertimento in Four Portraits (The Times of the Day)* (1964). We wish to refer to the musical portraits of great European composers realized in the movements of this cycle — namely, Antonio Vivaldi, Maurice Ravel, Alban Berg and Igor Stravinsky.

Perceiving this work in the context of other compositions by Iraida Yusupova, one cannot but notice its light color, noticeably contrasting to many compositions that convey almost on the level of baroque effects the states of deep sadness, grief, suffering. Such, for example, is the composition *Beautiful Didos in a Beautiful Ambient*, which brings to our mind Henry Purcell’s famous *Cold Song*, or the aria for soprano, *Lasciatemi morire* sounding in the composition *Polychordia* (2001) for pedal-less harp, cello, piano and phonogram. The textual basis of this music is presented by the words in the aria with the same name from Claudio Monteverdi’s opera *L’Arianna*, and in this dialogue with the past, one of the characteristic features of Yusupova’s creative method is revealed. In the “ambient” inherent in the compositions, the atmosphere of which reminds of enigmatic Symbolist paintings, filled with enchantment, vague melancholy, and disquieting mystique, the *Portrait of the Artist’s Wife* stands out with its light color — this is a portrait that has been carried out with the precision of a pencil drawing and endowed with the finesse of gentle watercolors. The state of legerity and airiness is attained due

to the fact that on one level the entire complex of pitch and non-pitched parameters is held out: the refined dance rhythmic formula constructed of repeated motives, the stable tonal environment (*D major*), the homogenous sound of the string instruments, the consistent dynamic mark (*mf*) and the even tempo.

The strict coordination of the instrumental parts forming various contrapuntal combinations (and this is an important technique of development of the thematic material in the composition) forms an antipode to the principle of “elemental polyphony,” presuming a certain freedom in the connection of the voices present in a unified textural space.

Despite the fact that each voice contains its own particular pattern, they all form a unified sound object, which is simultaneously mobile and static. The static meter and the regular accentuation in connection with the periodic alternations of two pitch foundations (*D* and *B*) create a stable balance. The laconic two-measure formula of the bass pattern (and its resultant variant) constantly repeated during the course of the entire work (Example No. 1) serves as yet another factor of stabilization on the scale of the entire composition.

Example No. 1 Iraida Yusupova. *Portrait of the Artist’s Wife*.
Part of the bass voice



Leaving aside the details of compositional technique (albeit an analysis of that sort would provide a splendid illustration of structural logic), let us observe the strict rationalism of the overall construction. Everything that pertains to the amount of repetitions of the patterns, their rhythmical/intonational modification, the coordination of thematic elements on the horizontal-vertical planes, as well as everything connected to the idea

of continuous development of the texture, including the details of the ornamentation, indicate a hidden architectural plan. Even the minimal decorative elements carry out a constructive role in it within the frameworks of a unified whole.

The proof of how the distribution of all the elements in the composition are regulated in both close and distant view is served by the finale, which presents a logical result of the gradual augmentation of the role of what seems at first to be an insignificant textural detail (the mordent). The exquisite ornamentation, which endows the sound with a certain “historical,” possibly baroque gradation, is situated in the texture in a far

from arbitrary manner. In the placement of the melismas we can trace a stable regularity — this decorative element appears as an ornamentation of the descending major second motive of *E–D* (Example No. 2), in certain sections of the form growing into unfolded pedal lines (see the viola part in measures 33–55).

Nonetheless, the function of this ornamental figure is not only that of differentiating the texture inwardly, imbuing it with motives hovering in the manner of butterflies, but also of fulfilling an important role in the organization of the form, — the final section of the work (starting with m. 229, Example No. 3) is fully based on trill-like sounds. The vibrating sonorous texture based according to the aleatory principle

Example No. 2

Portrait of the Artist's Wife, mm. 36–40

Example No. 3

Portrait of the Artist's Wife, finale, m. 229

(and this presents one of the forms of presenting “elemental polyphony”) are combined with a graphically precise outline of the bass, preserved in this repetitive composition from the beginning to the end.

The impressionistic coloration of this section brings in associations with the second movement of the composition *Beautiful Willows in a Beautiful Ambient* — the same flowing sonority, barely rippling, similar to branches of weeping willows. The motive from the basic pattern (*E, D, A*) sheds its dance-like character here and smoothly, as if in time-lapse shooting (it seems quite appropriate to apply this cinematographic term here), is transported, almost coagulating in its manifold repetitions. (Such a dramaturgical move reminds of contrasting final sections in certain other works by the composer, for example, the sound of the solo electric guitar following the section with choral singing in that part of the collective composers’ project of *Passions-2000* written by Iraida Yusupova.)

This observation has found its confirmation: the final section of the composition presents the composer’s name in a ciphered manner. Three pitches (*E, D, A*), repeated in numerous times in all the respective parts of the score (except that of the bass) may be transcribed into the letter

system, as the result of which the composer’s name — IRAIDA — is “revealed”:

E (*I*), **D** (*R*), **A** (*A*), **E** (*I*), **D** (*D*), **A** (*A*)

The “magic of repetition” contained in an unfathomable way in the composer’s name (Iraida) finds its disclosure and artistic validation in the composition. The monogram of the composer’s name — is this not a sort of autograph of a painter on the canvas, moreover, incorporated into the main text of the composition, just as, for example, the signature “Aivazovsky” on the wreckage of the ship in the painting *The Ninth Wave*? These and other similar techniques of inoculation of the name into the depiction are contained in the main patterns of the work (see the second violin part, m. 59, Example No. 4), subsequently replicated by the other instruments. Thereby, the composition, permeated to the core with letters comprising the composer’s name, may rightfully be labelled as *cryptophonic*.

The main logical principles of this work may be generalized in the form of binary oppositions: the precision of the repetitions (from short intonations to large-scale constructions) / their absence (in the conditions of aleatory texture); meter and rhythmic pulsation / “amorphous” time (to use Pierre Boulez’ term), etc. It must be added that Yusupova combines

Example No. 4

Portrait of the Artist’s Wife, mm. 59–62

the repetitive technique with various polyphonic transformations of the texture (strettos, canons), activating the processes in the conditions of an immobile tonal plane.

"Elemental Polyphony"

The other type of musical construction marked by the "magic of repetitions" is presented in the composition *Polychordia* (2001), dedicated to sound engineer Pyotr Kirillovich Kondrashin.⁶

The particular orientation on the style of baroque music inherent in this composition is manifested in strict reserve and expressivity of utterance. The entire fabric of the formal construction of the work is permeated with repetitions: the latter also characterize the aria, constructed according to the principle of varying one harmonic progression, and, to a considerably great degree, the solo part and the background, ambient parts. While freeing the ensemble performance from a rigidly fixed coordination of voices, the composer achieves their supple — elemental — polyphonic combination. Here the principle is active not of "note against note," but of mutually complementary existence of independent textural elements ("ambient elements," according to Iraida Yusupova's terminology). The arpeggiated figures, the descending scale-like lines — this is what unifies the solo part with its surrounding musical material; from these similarities there appears the capacious space filled with mutual reflections and varied repetitions. Among the techniques managing the combination of "ambient elements" and the solo part, we shall mention the techniques of augmentation, prolongation of separate elements (for example, the repetition of harmonies), and, on the other hand, diminution, reduction — in particular,

the subtraction of the sounds from the descending scale-like line according to the principle of the logograph.

One of the manifestations of the "magic of repetition" is present in the composition *Beautiful Willows in Beautiful Ambients* (Concerto for pedal-less harp and strings). The harp is a favorite instrument of Yusupova, for which she has written for a long time and constantly; it suffices to name, for example, the Concerto for Amplified Harp and Orchestra *Arpa amplificata* (1987). The general atmosphere of this two-movement composition immerses the listener into a state of lengthy contemplation of beautiful essences — repeated motives, chord progressions, textural units. The elemental polyphony is visibly manifested in the second movement of the *Beautiful Willows*..., where, as it follows from the composer's commentary in the score, "the soloist and the orchestra play independently and separately from each other."

The musical texture of the composition is saturated with numerous repetitions of textural, thematic and athematic units that are consistent with the logic of harmonic progression or, on the other hand, are present in a certain static condition. Yusupova's compositional method also presumes work with numerical ideas influencing the creation in the recipient of the impression of a seemingly arbitral contraction/expansion, acceleration/retardation within a supple and heterogeneous musical space.

Therefore, Iraida Yusupova's "magic of repetition" forms a special compositional technology combining in itself the principles of determinism and indeterminism, as well as an aesthetical search directed towards the ideals of the beautiful.

⁶ This composition also formed the subject matter of a published article by Elena Kasmynina, a graduate of the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music, where she studied with Natalia Gulyanitskaya: *Ambient Composition in Iraida Yusupova's Music: 'Polychordia' for Pedal-less Harp, Cello, Piano and Phonogram*. [5]

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Received / Поступила в редакцию: 20.07.2025

Revised / Одобрена после рецензирования: 04.08.2025

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 06.08.2025