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Clarinet Concerto by Tolibkhon Shakhidi: Poetics of the Genre

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Abstract. The article presents an analysis of the Clarinet Concerto by Tolibkhon Shakhidi, created in 2009–2010. The work's dramaturgic, orchestration and composition features are considered in the context of contemporary trends in the development of the clarinet concerto genre. The interpretation of the solo clarinet as a multifaceted "chameleon" instrument, capable of organically synthesising academic, jazz and national performance traditions, is examined. The principles of interaction between the soloist and the orchestra, the specifics of the sonorous organisation of sound, as well as the role of the extended cadence as the semantic and dramatic centre of the composition are analysed. A conclusion is made about the synthetic nature of the musical language, which combines elements of dodecaphony, modality and ethnically coloured thematism in the work. Shakhidi's concerto is interpreted as an example of a contemporary rethinking of the genre canon combining the classical logic of a form with poetry and the principle of continuous development.

Keywords: Tolibkhon Shakhidi, clarinet concerto, genre poetics, 21st-century instrumental concerto, contemporary academic music

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Концерт для кларнета с оркестром Толибхона Шахиди: поэтика жанра

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Аннотация. В статье представлен анализ Концерта для кларнета с оркестром Толибхона Шахиди, созданного в 2009–2010 годах. Рассматриваются особенности драматургии, оркестровки и формообразования сочинения в контексте современных тенденций развития жанра кларнетового концерта. Исследуется трактовка солирующего кларнета как многоликого «инструмента-хамелеона», способного к органичному синтезу академической, джазовой и национальной исполнительских традиций. Анализируются принципы взаимодействия солиста и оркестра, специфика сонорной организации звучания, а также роль развёрнутой каденции как смыслового и драматургического центра композиции. Делается вывод о синтетической природе музыкального языка произведения, объединяющего элементы додекафонии, модальности и этнически окрашенного тематизма. Концерт Шахиди интерпретируется как пример современного переосмысления жанрового канона, в котором классическая логика формы сочетается с поэмностью и принципом сквозного развития.

Ключевые слова: Толибхон Шахиди, концерт для кларнета с оркестром, жанровая поэтика, инструментальный концерт XXI века, современная академическая музыка

Introduction

> *The music of Tolibkhon Shakhidi is always beautiful and bright; the heart of the East and ancient Tajik nation beats in it. At the same time, this music has the features of all people on earth. It seems to me this is what makes it understandable and dear to every person.*
>
> Roman Ledenyov [1, p. 16]

Tolibkhon Shakhidi is a Tajik and Soviet composer, recognised as People's Artist of Tajikistan. On March 13, 2026, the maestro celebrated his 80th birthday. In honour of the anniversary, a concert was held in the Great Hall of the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory with Valery Gergiev conducting the combined orchestra of the Bolshoi and Mariinsky Theatres.

The instrumental concerto occupies a significant place in Shakhidi's creative legacy. The composer has written more than twenty works in this genre, some of which go beyond typical notions of "oriental beauty." One of them is the Clarinet Concerto.

"Harsh age — harsh sounds" — this is how musicologist Olga Malevich described Tolibkhon Shakhidi's Concerto. [2, p. 76] This assessment acquires special meaning in the context of the history of the work's creation. Work on the concerto took place in 2009–2010, which was a difficult period in the composer's life, marred as it was by health problems. At one point during the process, Shakhidi felt so bad that he destroyed all the written material out of despair. However, a sense of responsibility and his promise made to the soloist Igor Fedorov,

at whose request the concerto was being created, prompted the master to overcome himself and recreate the score.[1] As Igor Fedorov told the author of this article in a personal conversation, the musical material of the "second" version of the score differed significantly from the original, which he and the composer had managed to review and discuss together.

Shakhidi dedicated his opus to the clarinettist, whom he considers one of the outstanding musicians of our time: "Meeting him was a real discovery! He is a brilliant professional and a deep-thinking person, whose worldview is very clear and close to me." [1, p. 78]

The premiere of the concerto performed by Igor Fedorov and the Omsk Academic Symphony Orchestra under the direction of conductor Dmitry Vasiliev took place on April 4, 2010 in Omsk. A few days later, the work was successfully presented at the prestigious Russian Symphony Forum in Yekaterinburg. The conductor himself mentioned that both premieres were warmly received by the public and highly appreciated by professionals. [2, p. 81]

The present work sets out to analyse Shakhidi's Clarinet Concerto and identify the specifics of dramaturgy, the role of rhythm as a formative factor and the interpretation of the solo instrument in the context of the contemporary development of the genre.

Clarinet Concerto by Tolibkhon Shakhidi in the Context of Genre and Performance Practice

By the beginning of the 21st century, the clarinet had established itself in performance practice and academic musicology not only as an orchestral, but also as a self-sufficient virtuoso instrument with significant acoustic potential. The evolution of its expressive means, which began in the era of classicism with the works of Johann Molter, Johann Stamitz and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, is determined by the expansion of the timbre palette and dynamic range, which cemented the instrument's place in various genres, including the large-scale concerto form. [3, p. 2]

A significant factor in the enrichment of the technical arsenal of the present-day clarinet is the interpenetration of academic and jazz traditions. A prime example of this synthesis is the creative tandem of Aaron Copland and Benny Goodman. While the Clarinet Concerto (1948) created by the outstanding jazz clarinettist retains the foundations of academic form and orchestral writing, jazz features can be traced in the intonational structure, rhythmic organisation and improvisational nature of the solo part. In this context, the turn to the genre of the clarinet concerto made by Tolibkhon Shakhidi represents a logical stage in the synthesis of academic heritage with contemporary and national performance trends.

Dramaturgy and Musical Language of the Clarinet Concerto

Like all of Shakhidi's other works in this genre, the Clarinet Concerto is written in a single-movement form with through-composed development. This model, which goes back to the tradition established by Franz Liszt, is used by the composer to abandon traditional cyclicality and focus on the continuous development of musical thought. According to Olga Genebert, "compositional combinations arose due to the intersection of two interdependent stylistic tendencies in 19th-century music: on the one hand, the tendency toward greater relief, sometimes polarisation

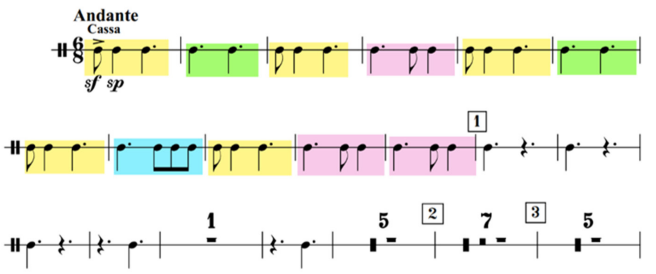
[1] Tolibkhon Shakhidi. "Symphony of Time". TV movie. YouTube. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1LX98O_GiE (accessed: 16.04.2026).

of contrasts, completeness and expanded presentation in the sonata form of the first part of the cycle; on the other hand, the desire for conceptual unity achieved by various means, such as veiling the boundaries between parts, thematic unity reaching its limit in the conditions of monothematicism or the previously practiced principle of clinging, the derivative formation of thematically independent sections." [4, p. 250]

The orchestra in Shakhidi's concerto can be defined as intermediate between a double and triple varieties. On the one hand, the woodwinds are represented by two main performers; on the other hand, the expansion of the group by the piccolo flute (which has three flutes) and a separate English horn (with two oboes) creates a number characteristic of the triple composition. The orchestra also includes brass (the score lists four trumpets; however, this is a typo — only three are used in total), a large percussion section (timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, castanets, bongos, tom-toms, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, bells, xylophone, vibraphone), harpsichord/piano and strings.

Let us turn to a sequential analysis of the concerto event line. The 11-bar bass drum solo (Example No. 1) serves as the impetus for the opening section. In the absence of a strict ostinato formula, the rhythmic fabric involves a combinatorics of short microformulas consisting of three basic durations: an eighth, a quarter and a quarter with a dot. This sequence can be interpreted as a *rhythmic progression*, which is a kind of a gradual expansion of duration that creates a "swinging" effect. In this sense, a special sound space is formed with elements related both in time and in terms of tension and duration. As Catherine Nolan notes, "space may be broadly defined as an extent in which objects or phenomena exist in relative positions, relations, or distances from one another." [5, p. 201]

Example No. 1 Tolibkhon Shakhidi. Clarinet Concerto, mm. 1–34



The dominant syncopated rhythm sounds in odd measures (1, 3, 5, 7, 9[2]) to form a repeating structure that gives the pattern integrity. This alternation suggests an analogy with a poetic stanza or couplet form. This repetition can be graphically represented as a sequence of rhythmic "stanzas": AB – AC – AB – AD – AC – C, where "A" performs the function of an unchanging "chorus" (ostinato "swinging" element), while "B", "C", "D"[3] have the function of updated "verses" (corresponding to measures 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11) with variability preventing the rhythm to become mechanical.

The next event in the introductory section is the appearance of a pitch. Against the ornamental presentation of the rhythmic sequence from the bass drum solo, the strings produce a four-note chord (*B♭ – C♯ – E – F*), which can be interpreted as a minor triad (*C♯* is enharmonically equal to *D♭*) with a split fifth tone.

By the end of the first number, four ascending interrogative intonations smoothly passing from one timbre to another (oboe, clarinet, double bass, flute; Example No. 2) in their totality cover almost the full twelve-tone scale omitting only the sounds *C* and *F♯*.

[2] In Example No. 1, they are highlighted in yellow.

[3] In Example No. 1, they are highlighted in green, blue and pink, respectively.

Example No. 2 Tolibkhon Shakhidi. Clarinet Concerto, rehs. 1–2, mm. 20–28



Let us consider the composer's timbre solution of this fragment. A double bass has been added to three woodwind instruments (flute, oboe, clarinet) as if replacing the bassoon. At first glance, the choice of this instrument seems paradoxical: traditionally, the double bass plays the bass line, often doubling the cello at an octave, whereas in this case, along with the woodwinds, it acts as the bearer of the melodic figure. However, the timbre contrast is free of conflict with the overall colour of the sound. This technique reveals parallels with jazz practice, where the double bass often goes beyond the bass voice, acting as a carrier of the melodic line both in *solo* and in ensemble *tutti*.

The interpretation of the string group is of particular interest. The composer deliberately rejects the basic cantilena, "bowed" nature of the instruments, instead giving preference to percussion-plucking methods of sound production: *pizzicato* (rehs. 5–7, 12–14, 22, 45, 57, 59), *col legno* (rehs. 14, 22), *tremolo* (rehs. 11, 55, 58, 61). Taken together, these techniques evoke direct associations with the folk instruments of the Central Asian countries — rubab (similar to the domra in terms of sound production) and chang (a type of cymbals) — and generally reflect the influence of the national musical tradition on composers' thinking. [6, p. 8]

Strings in this interpretation most often perform the function of a sonorous (timbre-harmonic) background emphasising the ethnic colouration. Conductor Dmitry Vasiliev notes that this approach to the embodiment of Eastern style represents a deliberate move away from direct quotations in favour of the "inner feeling of the East," where "often veiled characteristic Eastern intonations give birth to unique, original sounds." [2, p. 81]

The clarinet part announces itself from the very first measures with extreme expression. Its thematic kernel emerges from a single sound point. The motivic fragmentation of the phrases adds tension to the entire development. The conventional melodic line with its rough dynamic bursts, virtuoso passages and sharp accents evokes some associations with the first movement of Edison Denisov's Clarinet Concerto (1989), which literally begins with the soloist's cadence. The similarity is manifested not in the thematism, but in the very set of means of musical expression: just like Denisov, the soloist's part includes trills, figurations, passages and wide leaps, which are rhythmically quite complexly organised and presented at a fast tempo. However, in Shakhidi, the clarinet part is associated with the "voice" of a person and its inherent excited intonation. The illusion of "humanised" musical speech is broken only by the disproportionately wide range and abrupt leaps between registers, which give the utterance a bizarre character. The hero seems to be "listening" to his own memory, "remembering" and conducting a conversation not so much with the orchestra as with himself, unfolding this internal dialogue in time and space. Altogether, it creates a feeling of spontaneity and primordiality, similar to a chaotic flow of thoughts in the process of intense reflection; at the same time, the action can be interpreted as a process of internal comprehension, correlated with the Sufi principle of "zohir–botin" ("explicit –hidden," "external–internal") [7, p. 46–51].

At this time, the orchestra does not oppose the soloist, but forms a single sound space with him: the composer uses a sonorous writing technique, in which the voice of the clarinet sometimes moves along the very surface of the sound mass and sometimes appears as if from the depths. Olga Malevich also emphasises this duality in her note: "...he soars in the sky like a free bird, and then, like a wounded animal, he cries, screams and rages." [2, p. 77] Individual expressive accents of the orchestral groups, for example the fanfare unison of four French horns in reh. 9 (Example No. 3) picks up and develops the intonations of the clarinet, keeping the general atmosphere of the sound.

Example No. 3

Tolibkhon Shakhidi. Clarinet Concerto,
reh. 9, mm. 73–76 (score fragment)



Rehs. 11–14 have a local culmination with a dense *tutti* sound. The composer uses several different writing techniques at once — polymetry, polyrhythm, aleatoricism and clusters — to create a chaotic effect (Example No. 4).

A sharp dramatic turning point occurs in reh. 15. The ostinato unison of the entire orchestra, based on the sound of *C*, interrupts this rich flow as if "clearing" the acoustic space for a new section (Example No. 5).

Example No. 4 Tolibkhon Shakhidi. Clarinet Concerto, reh. 14, mm. 98–101



Example No. 5 Tolibkhon Shakhidi. Clarinet Concerto, rehs. 15–16, mm. 102–110



Reh. 16 contains a full-fledged lyrical theme presented by the unison of four French horns. A more restrained tempo and rhythmic unison restore the triple meter, which forms a structural arch with the introduction. Without waiting for the theme to end, the soloist enters with an expressive melody recitation that complements and develops the main idea sounding in the French horns. The sound palette is refreshed: the inclusion of vibraphone, triangle and harpsichord in the background of the group gives the sound the effect of a reminiscence. Its fragile, almost immaterial nature is emphasised by its variable meters giving the texture lightness and instability.

Cadence as the Dramatic Centre of the Work

The very presence of a *cadence*, which forms the central event of the concerto, indicates that the composer adheres to the classical-romantic model of form creation. However, while in the classical-romantic tradition, the cadence was intended to demonstrate the soloist's technical mastery, in Shakhidi, its function is diametrically opposed. Despite its external virtuosity, it plays the role of the semantic and dramatic centre of the entire composition. This is an arena where external action stops and the protagonist is left alone with himself, giving way to internal reflection. It is here where two contrasting images of the exposition — expressive-dramatic and lyrical-contemplative — are revealed to be a dual manifestation of a single whole. First comes the expressive-dramatic one with its sharp trills, tremolos, dynamic bursts, intermittent rhythms, chromatic tension and wide leaps (Example No. 6, sign 1). Then the lyrical-contemplative one based on diatonicism, fifth leaps with filling goes (Example No. 6, sign 2). The tragic *B-flat minor* with its archaic natural seventh degree emphasises the sublimity and serenity of the image. However, a third, meditative element emerges in this struggle — a restrained "authorial commentary" (Example No. 6, sign 3), a neutrally-philosophical voice embodied in a calm recitative and a repeated structure (Example No. 6). It acts as an internal regulator stopping the emotional outbursts of one and transferring the thoughts into a lyrical channel of the other.

According to clarinettist Igor Fedorov, "the result is an incredible oriental saga taking emotions to the extreme: the highest tenderness and trepidation contrast with unbridled passion and strength." [2, p. 79]

It is noteworthy that the cadence designated as a free kind is presented in an untimed notation containing elements of improvisation. This gives the performer the right to become a co-author of this intense reflection and influence the development of the internal conflict according to his own artistic vision. This approach refers to the traditions of folk music or jazz, where improvisation is one of the main principles of development.

The unfolding performance resembles a one-man show. A rich palette of technical means (strokes, dynamics, agogics) serves as a tool for both demonstrating the technical capabilities of the soloist and switching between these stage roles. This interpretation is particularly relevant in light of the composer's own statement about dedicating the concerto to Igor Fedorov: "Frankly speaking, if it wasn't for Igor, I would never have written a concerto for clarinet and orchestra. I dedicate this work to him as my heartfelt co-author!" [Ibid., p. 78]

The further development of the musical material in terms of form is perceived ambiguously. It hardly can be called a reprise without theme repetitions; however, the figurative content is subject to repetition. Thus, starting from reh. 22, the expressive figurative sphere dominates, while the lyrical sphere comes to the fore from reh. 45. The performed analysis indicates a hidden three-part structure: the section at the tempo of *Andante*

Example No. 6 Tolibkhon Shakhidi. Clarinet Concerto. Cadence



(two measures up to reh. 45) is the lyrical centre of the composition, while the *Allegro* section (from the anacrusis to the second measure of reh. 52 and until the end) sounds like the finale. However, such structuring was not the author's intention. The fact that the composer felt no desire for a three-part logic is evidenced by his notes in the manuscript: the *Allegro* section added at the last moment before the premiere is designated by him as *Coda* (Example No. 7).

Example No. 7

Tolibkhon Shakhidi. Clarinet Concerto. Coda



Thus, it can be argued that the work is dominated by continuous development and a tendency towards poetry as a principle of form creation, while the apparent tripartite nature arises unintentionally.

Conclusion

To summarise the results of the performed analysis, let us note that the identified features of the musical language and dramaturgy of Shakhidi's concerto reflect a broader process of searching for adequate means of artistic expression in contemporary musical art. In this context, Adam Carse's remark that "the impetus for gradually moving forward art has always entailed the discovery of the most valuable means of self-expression" is indicative. [8, p. 17]

The conducted analysis allows a number of conclusions to be drawn regarding the interpretation of the solo instrument and the features of the musical language used in the composition. Firstly, the composer demonstrates a special, creative approach to rhythmic organisation. Rhythm in this composition becomes one of the main formative and unifying principles to permeate the fabric of the work from the first to the last bar. Rhythmic logic is consistently carried through all sections of the form to ensure continuous development. Even string instruments are often treated by the composer more as percussion than as plucked or bowed ones, which emphasises the dominance of the rhythmic principle over the timbre-melodic one.

Secondly, the clarinet appears as a "chameleon" instrument, whose nature can be used to organically transform itself. On the one hand, in the chant-like, lyrical episodes, the imitation of the timbre and melismatics of a folk wind instrument, for example, the naya or surnaya, is clearly evident. On the other hand, the expressive, rhythmically sharp phrases gravitate towards the manner of jazz improvisation, emphasising the dramatic intensity and contemporary sound. Thus, the composer freely uses all the available means of the musical language of his time, not limiting himself to the framework of one direction.

Thirdly, the musical language of the composition demonstrates a synthesis of various compositional techniques. The pitch line combines elements of dodecaphonic writing with thematism of ethnic origin. The modal and harmonic language also has its stylistic versatility and combines features of complex romantic harmony with contemporary sonorous techniques for organising sound space and modal consonances characteristic of the folk music of Central Asian regions.

Fourthly, the improvisational nature of the extended cadence acts not simply as a performance technique, but as the semantic centre of the work, which reveals the protagonist's internal dialogue. At the same time, the integrity of the form and the listener's attention are preserved due to the single-part structure, unified rhythmic logic and contrasting images.

The area of form creation presents a synthesis of classical-romantic external contours with continuous development, which makes the concerto akin to jazz improvisation with variability on a fixed harmonic framework and to the principle of variability characteristic of Central Asian music (in particular, maqoms), where melodic development is based on a gradual, continuous transformation of the original grain. As a result, classical logic is organically combined with the fantasy-narrative development of the material to define the form of the concerto as hybrid, open to multiple interpretations.

Thus, the work of Tolibkhon Shakhidi represents an organic fusion of national

origins, academicism and contemporary compositional techniques: the centre of this fusion is an updated interpretation of the solo clarinet and the active use of rhythm as a key dramatic factor.

Let us conclude the analysis with the words of the Latvian composer and musicologist Georgs Pelēcis, addressed to the author of the concerto. This short letter captures with remarkable precision the main substantive and technical merits of the work:

"Dear Tolib!

Congratulations! Such a wonderful, bright, informative Clarinet concerto! The longing, pain and beauty of your soul sings and cries in it! Masterful orchestration, form, solo part! Excellent performance! I think, Aram Ilyich would be glad and proud of you! I especially liked the warm, watercolour-like space before the quick coda. Once again, congratulations and much, much success in the future!

Riga, May 27, 2010." [2, pp. 105–106]

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