

SVETLANA V. KOSYREVA*Petrozavodsk State A. K. Glazunov Conservatory, Petrozavodsk, Russia*
ORCID: 0000-0002-4818-1643, svetlana.kosyreva@glazunovcons.ru

About Studying the Traditional Singing Tradition of the Vepsians in the Context of Cognitive Ethnomusicology

The article presents an attempt of studying the singing tradition of the Vepsians from the standpoint of cognitive ethnomusicology. This direction, represented in our days by publications in Russian ethnomusicology amounting in the single digits, is analyzed from the standpoint of the development of Boris Asafiev's theory of intonation. In relation to ethnomusicology, in light of the cognitive paradigm, an artistic text is comprehended as a complex symbol which expresses the ethnophor's knowledge of reality, embodied in traditional art works as an individual worldview represented by means of sound. The Vepsian folk music tradition is remarkable and authentic. It is represented by works of various genres: lyrical songs; wedding, funereal and recruit lamentations, calendar chants, lullabies, spells, ditties, fairy tales, etc. Upon acquaintance with the tradition, researchers have their interest aroused primarily by the unusual character of the sound of the Vepsian songs. The ethnic music of the Vepsian people, which is an extremely interesting but an under-investigated phenomenon, is based on the peculiarities of the ethnogenesis, geographical location and historical and cultural specificity. The Vepsians are one of the most ancient peoples of the European North. Scientists link their origin to the Vesi and Chudi tribes, which were first mentioned in historical records as far back as the middle of the 6th century. Thereby, already in the 1st half of the 1st millennium, these tribes have inhabited the Mezhozerye [Region between the Lakes] – the area between the three largest northern lakes – Lake Ladoga, Lake Onega and Lake Belye. Currently, the territory of the traditional settlement of the Vepsians occupies a narrow strip along Lake Onega and the central part of the Mezhozerye. Application of a cognitive approach to the Vepsian ethnic musical material has made it possible to identify the semantically important correlation between timbre and intonation in the process of the formation of the artistic chronotope.

Keywords: cognitive ethnomusicology, studies of Finno-Ugric music, ethnic music, Vepsians, traditional singing, intonation, acoustic analysis, pitch, timbre, articulation.

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С. В. КОСЫРЕВА*Петрозаводская государственная консерватория имени А. К. Глазунова*
г. Петрозаводск, Россия
ORCID: 0000-0002-4818-1643, svetlana.kosyreva@glazunovcons.ru

Об изучении традиционного пения вепсов в контексте когнитивного этномузыкознания

В статье представлен опыт изучения вепсской певческой традиции с позиций когнитивного этномузыкознания. Данное направление, представленное на сегодняшний



день единичными публикациями в отечественном этномузыкознании, рассматривается с позиций развития интонационной теории Б. Асафьева. Применительно к этномузыкологии в свете когнитивной парадигмы художественный текст осмысливается как сложный знак, который выражает знания этнофора о действительности, воплощённые в традиционных произведениях в виде индивидуальной звуковой картины мира. Вепсская музыкально-фольклорная традиция удивительна и самобытна. Она представлена произведениями различных жанров: лирическими песнями, свадебными, похоронными и рекрутскими причитаниями, календарными напевами, колыбельными, заговорами, частушками, сказками и др. При знакомстве с традицией огромный интерес исследователей вызывает прежде всего необычный характер звучания вепских песен. Этническая музыка вепского народа – чрезвычайно интересное, но малоизученное явление, обусловлена особенностями этногенеза, географическим положением и историко-культурной спецификой. Вепсы являются одним из древнейших народов Европейского Севера. Их происхождение учёные связывают с племенами веси и чуди, впервые упомянутыми в исторических источниках ещё в середине VI века. Таким образом, уже в первой половине I тысячелетия эти племена населяли Межозерье – пространство между тремя крупнейшими северными озёрами – Ладожским, Онежским и Белым. В настоящее время территория традиционного расселения вепсов занимает узкую полосу вдоль Онежского озера и центральную часть Межозерья. Применение когнитивного подхода на вепском этническом материале позволило выявить семантически важную взаимосвязь тембра и интонирования в процессе формирования художественного хронотопа.

Ключевые слова: когнитивная этномузыкология, музыкальное финноугроведение, этническая музыка, вепсы, традиционное пение, интонирование, акустический анализ, звуковысотность, тембр, артикуляция.

Introduction

Singing as a means of cultural communication is the most important ability of a human being to communicate with people, their community, nature and space. The art of singing combines a great number of components which make it possible to attribute it to one of the functions of musical statement.

In the present day singing as a phenomenon is studied from different points of view by representatives of various fields in scholarship and art. Scholars are interested in issues related to theory and practice, historiography, the study of specificity of genre and the analysis of folk music texts. One of the trends of ethnomusicology which develop the intonation theory of Boris Asafiev (the study of the singing timbre and intoning

as the basis of the musical style of an ethnic group) is connected with the study of his musical thinking. The essence and aesthetic orientation of Asafiev's theory are defined by the following statement: "intonation as an expression of thought" [4, p. 11] or "Music is the art of the intoned meaning" [10, p. 8]. The scholar has been the first to express the idea of intonation as a structural-semantic, emotional-imaginative component of the musical language (in the book: "Musical Form as a Process", 1930)¹. According to Boris Asafiev, intonation is the "fountain of music," and a human being's thought, which for the sake of becoming sound turns into intonation, or becomes intoned [4, p. 211]. The development of the theory of intonation as a semantically indicative basis of music within the framework of the academic school of Boris V. Asafiev is

among the basic methodological positions of ethno-musicology; this trend is currently being updated in the context of cognitive musicology “which aims at the profound comprehension of the semantic organization of the musical text, its content and structure”, as well as revealing their internal hierarchy [10, p. 6].

It is generally known that at the present time cognitive studies are extremely popular, especially in Western musicology. Different research programs are devoted to the issues of cognition in music (See: [3]). Cognitive scholarship, which represents the corpus of interdisciplinary research, focuses on the achievements of linguistics, philosophy of thinking and psychology (neuropsychology), acoustics and computer science². A number of studies is connected with mathematical methods for analyzing the language of music, creating computer models of neural networks in music perception, computer analysis of musical interpretation, the development of methods for extracting musical information from phonograms using computer programs, the psychology of artistic perception and essence of musical emotions, including by means of timbre acoustics. In Russia, the cognitive approach is primarily associated with the meaning-bearing/semantic formation³. According to Khokhlova, the modern “Generalized scholarly anthropological paradigm <...> implies disseminating the art of music beyond its established boundaries into the sphere of philosophy of knowledge, theory of thinking, information theory, that is, into the sphere of interdisciplinary knowledge about the world and the man. The latter transforms this complex approach – the involvement of scholarly disciplines of all kinds to explain various aspects of musical art – into the cognitive approach, in which music becomes a part of the worldview of the human mind. Its essence lies in the study

of various forms of musical existence on the basis of processing flows of information streaming from the physical world, biological matter, society and culture” [9, p. 166].

The music of the *oral tradition*, which is based on a certain type of musical thinking, acquires sense and meaning only in a certain cultural tradition which forms its own unique *sound ideal* (*die Klangideale*, term by Fritz von Bose). It exists in the minds of culture-bearers and reflects to the greatest extent the idea of harmony existent between man and the natural environment. This harmony is expressed by means of sound. Therefore, in relation to ethnomusicology, in light of the cognitive paradigm, an artistic text is comprehended as a complex sign which expresses the ethnophor’s knowledge of this reality, embodied in traditional works as an individual sound worldview⁴.

Results

In our opinion, the most important factor in the actualization of musical semantics in the context of the Finno-Ugric ethnomusical systems is the domain of pitch (including the pitch system, the specificity of timbre, intonation and articulation), which is generally implemented in improvisational forms in the framework of monodic thinking.

In this article I shall present an endeavor of studying the Vepsian singing tradition from this perspective.

The ethnic music of the Vepsian people, due to the peculiarities of their ethnogenesis, geographic location, and specific historical and cultural traits, is an extremely interesting phenomenon, which generally has been insufficiently studied, notwithstanding the existence of publications on individual issues.

The Vepsian musical tradition has been studied by Russian and Estonian scholars (Ingrid Rüütel, Tamara V. Krasnopolskaya,

Kristi Salve, Irina B. Semakova, Mart Rimmel, Marje Joalaid, Viktor A. Lapin, Elena E. Vasilyeva, Olga Yu. Zhukova, Svetlana V. Kosyreva, etc.).

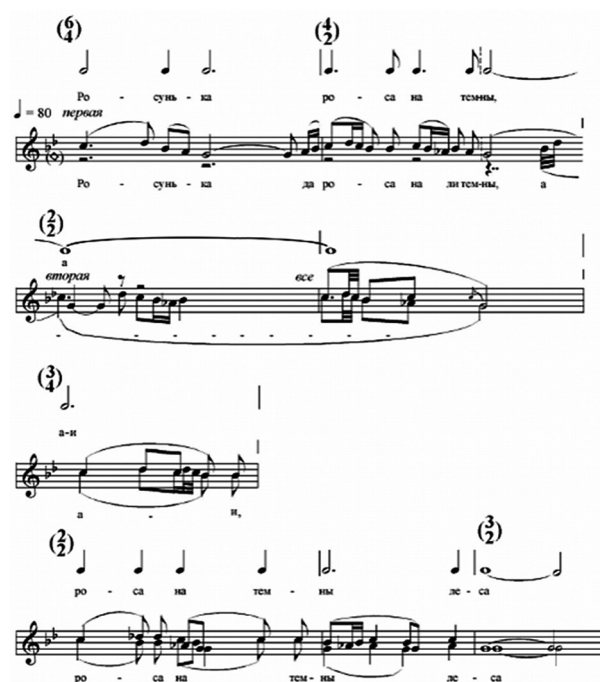
The Vepsian folk music tradition is astonishing and authentic. It is represented by works of various genres: lyric songs; wedding, funeral and recruit lamentations, calendar chants, lullabies, ditties, fairy tales, etc.

In their encounter with this tradition, researchers are primarily interested in the unusual nature of the sound of the Vepsian songs. The songs of the Veps possess certain features which are immediately discernable to the listener. First of all, there is the powerful, lengthy sound which completes the verses of the long melodies. Performance of songs by Vepsians in the Russian language is also endowed with its own peculiarities, specifically the unique sound of the poetic language in the songs [7, p. 66]. Krasnopolskaya notes: “The fact that we are talking about the Russian language ... is clear from the comparison with the poetic texts of wedding, dance, and square dance songs, similar in their language structure, which have been recorded in the same venues by the same performers. We are surprised, not only, and not so much by the sound of the words unusual for the Russian ear <...> It astonishes us how the singers pronounce the texts of the songs. They do not sing the poems. They proclaim separate words and exclamations which sound and impress the listener as meaningful symbols...”⁴ [7, pp. 66–67].

A remarkable example is the long song “Rosynka”⁵ (See: Example 1). The chanting of words in it astonishes by its breadth: “The words are broadly sung and seem to be immersed into the nature of long-lasting and slowly changing musical sounds. The rhythm of the movement of these dense sound waves is controlled not by the words,

but by the change of phonemes ... thereby creating the feeling of a vast space-time. Only at certain times do the phonemes form ... certain varieties of “key” words ... The intensity of the delivery of sound and its inner fullness present this sound of the human song as an appeal to the forces of nature, to its spirits” [7, p. 67]. In this connection, we find the hypothesis of the Karelian researcher Semakova rather remarkable that “this song [Rosynka], in its onomatopoeia, most accurately reflects the howl of the wolf pack, which explains its phonetic fluidity and the presence of two leaders (which is the rarest phenomenon in traditional culture in general)...” [8, p. 94]. According to Krasnopolskaya, this particular chronotope⁷ becomes the result of the influence of a different ethnic consciousness which possessed its own singing traditions: “... in the Vepsian chants of the Russian lyric songs, the feeling of time typical for this ethnic group was expressed most consistently, which led to a rethinking of all the structural levels of a traditional Russian song...” [7, p. 93].

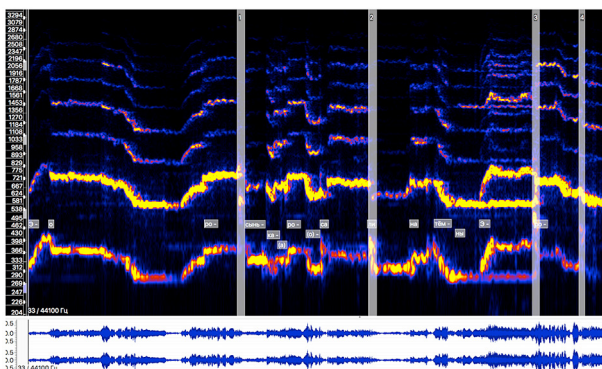
Example 1

Rosynka⁸


At the same time, at the level of pitch, in the melodies of the plangent songs, “... the melodic structure is formed as being autonomous in relation to the verbal structure. It is permeated horizontally with brief, semantically significant, “original” intonations of calls ... intonation-symbols...”

These “semantically significant”, “original” intonations literally permeate the musical texture of the Vepsian plangent songs. Our acoustic analysis of the musical language of the Vepsian long song has demonstrated the presence of the forms of early folklore intonation of α and β -types [2] in the vocal intonation (See: Example No. 2). We are referring to the so-called contrast-register (“vocal flageolets”), and the “unstable sliding” types of melodic formations [2]. The α -type intonation is implemented in the form of *timbre-phonemes*, the articulation basis of which is assumed by the singing position of the timbre-phoneme *ho* [6, pp. 129–130]. This component, in our opinion, becomes determinant in the sound formation of Vepsian singing. In the Vepsian singing intonation the analysis reveals the abundance of micro-slides⁹, micro-alterations, micro-dynamics, i.e., in general, a rather complex intonational “microform” (term by Roman Zelinsky) may be found. Similar features of intonation are also common for another ethno-labeling genre of the Vepsian singing culture – *lamentations*¹⁰.

Example No. 2

Rosynka¹¹

The singing timbre in the process of intoning is the most important cultural marker of the Vepsian tradition. It is distinguished by a powerful nasalization, which forms the unique nature of the sound of the singing voice. The Vepsian specificity of timbre and articulation is determined mostly by vowel phonemes weakly differentiated in terms of their position, flowing into each other. This process correlates with the specific aspects of the singing apparatus of the performers: an almost motionless lower jaw.

As it is well-known, during the process of intonation, the thickness and density of the vocal chords varies substantially due to their tension. In Vepsian singing, the chords are tightly closed, the subglottic pressure is increased. On the one hand, it requires high energy consumption, on the other hand, it provides the spectrum in which more harmonics appear, which makes the timbre of the voice dense, rich and bright. Such sound extraction is achieved mainly due to the work of the resonators: the vocal and the thoracic tracts.

The singing tradition of the Veps is focused on performing in an open space, so it is not a coincidence that their singing is distinguished by a very powerful, strictly space-oriented sound. It is reflected in the structure of the spectrum of sounds, the gradation of which can be differentiated up to 7.5 kHz. In general, the timbre of the Vepsian singing sound is saturated with overtones: along with a low singing formant (~500–700 Hz), there is a high formant (3200 Hz) in the spectrum, with the inter-formant areas being strongly marked. Such sounds may be interpreted as *timbre polyphony*. In our opinion, authentic performers usually use the timbre perception of pitch¹² (there is a statement by E. Alekseev about the timbral perception of pitch: “... what we now label as pitch has for a long time been completely absorbed by timbre – the undifferentiated



and compound complex in which a real separate sound is revealed to our direct perception...” [2, pp. 36–37].

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to note that the study of the vocal timbre and intonation

in the plangent songs of the Veps in the cognitive aspect has made it possible to identify their semantically important correlation in the process of the formation of the Vepsian ethnic culture artistic chronotope.

NOTES

¹ It must be noted that Asafiev’s intonation theory is one of the perspectives of the musical scholar’s concept which may be expressed in the following words: “musical culture as a whole and as a part of the social practice” [4].

² See the works of European and American musical scholars: A. S. Bregman, J. Ingram, D. Deutsch, J. Nattiez, J. Risset, D. Wessel, T. Umemoto, S. Tomic, P. Janata, etc.

³ See the works of Russian musical scholars: M. Aranovsky, E. Nazaikinsky, V. Medushevsky, Yu. Rags, S. Skrebkov, V. Kholopova, A. Amrakhova, L. Shaymukhametova, I. Krivoshey, A. Khokhlova, etc.

⁴ By analogy with the statement of A. L. Khokhlova [see: 10, p. 6]. The concept of the *sound world view* has been introduced by A. S. Alpatova [see: 1, pp. 126–127].

⁵ The Karelian musical scholar T. V. Krasnopolskaya, in particular, studied the reflection of the peculiarities of the artistic thinking of the Vepsians “in the musical material they derived; the nature of the adoption of the principles of foreign ethnic artistic thinking, in this case, the adoption of the melodic-compositional patterns of Russian long songs by the Vepsians” [7, p. 69].

⁶ The electronic database of the Finno-Ugric timbres (see: URL: <http://glazunovforum.ru>).

⁷ The term *chronotope* (M. M. Bakhtin) is associated with the most important categories: space and time. The concept of their interrelation forms the basis of the view of the world of any ethnic group.

⁸ See: *Songs of the peoples of the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic: a collection*

of Karelian, Vepsian and Russian songs. Compilers V. P. Gudkov and N. N. Levy. Petrozavodsk, 1941.

⁹ For further details on the attempts of in the notation of the intonation pattern of the tunes with the predominance of the pitch glides through the example of the Vepsian material, see: Ingrid Rützel, Mart Rimmel. Attempts of notation and study of Vepsian lamentations. *Finno-Ugric folklore and interrelations with neighbouring cultures*. Tallinn, 1980, pp. 169–195.

¹⁰ For more information on the lamentations of the Vepsians, see [5].

¹¹ The graph of the intonation spectrum of α and β -types is presented. Fragment of the lyric song “Rosynka” of the northern Vepsians. Performed by the Sheltozero village ensemble: M. I. Arestova (born in 1908), P. M. Moshkina (born in 1900), M. A. Gorbacheva (born in 1902), O. I. Kottina (born in 1907), A. N. Nikitina (born in 1922). Recorded under the supervision of T. A. Krasnopolskaya in 1981. The Folklore Archive of the Petrozavodsk State Conservatoire. See: Catalog of the collections ... Collection 059, Digitized collection CD No. 584.

¹² According to A. Volodin, in terms of perception, the pitch and the timbre of the sound are not isolated phenomena, but forms of different comprehension of the spectral content in the specific conditions of their musical application (See: Volodin A. A. The role of the harmonic content in the perception of pitch and timbre of the sound. *Muzykal'noe iskusstvo i nauka* [Musical Art and Science]. Moscow, 1970. Issue 1, pp. 37–38).

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About the author:

Svetlana V. Kosyreva, Ph.D. (Arts), Associate Professor at the Music History Department, Petrozavodsk State A. K. Glazunov Conservatory (Petrozavodsk, 185031, Russian), **ORCID: 0000-0002-4818-1643**, svetlana.kosyreva@glazunovcons.ru

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Об авторе:

Косырева Светлана Витальевна, кандидат искусствоведения, доцент кафедры истории музыки, Петрозаводская государственная консерватория имени А. К. Глазунова (185031, г. Петрозаводск, Россия), **ORCID: 0000-0002-4818-1643**, svetlana.kosyreva@glazunovcons.ru

