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Music of Frederic Chopin in the Works of the Rock Group MUSE

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Abstract. The article examines constant interactions with the musical legacy of academic classical composers, in particular, Frederic Chopin, representing one of the chief stylistic features of the British rock group MUSE. References to Chopin's piano music appear in three compositions: *United States of Eurasia (+Collateral Damage)* (2009), *Prelude* (2012) and *Blockades* (2018). The works of the Polish Romantic composer are shown to have been borrowed in various ways: as direct quotes, in somewhat modified form, as well as allusively and indirectly. The understanding and appreciation of Chopin's legacy by the group members evolves over time from the symbolisation of Light, Ideal, and Humanity to the discovery of other dramatic and even tragic facets of the composer's art, which are much more relevant to the challenges of our time. For the creative development of the group MUSE, such a shift in emphasis was decisive: with the disappearance of the idealised (previously personified in the music of Chopin) from the sphere of rock music-making, the optimistic life-affirming principle is also displaced. When incorporated more organically into the multi-coloured sound picture of contemporary man's existence, the music of the Polish Romantic composer paradoxically reveals the dangers and impasses of the modern world.

Keywords: Frederic Chopin, Sergei Rachmaninoff, musical quotation, rock group MUSE, Matthew Bellamy

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Introduction

Musical groups and artists representing contemporary popular culture have often drawn inspiration from various musical sources to integrate diverse styles and traditions into their music. The creation of new, original compositions based on existing creative “statements” is typically framed in terms of the creative freedom of musicians, their desire to engage in dialogue with their predecessors, and the quest for convincing means to represent their vision of human existence.

It was only to be expected that the powerful creative tendencies of mass culture would

awaken the interest of academic researchers of classical music. Following an energetic impetus in the form of solid monographs by Anatoly Zucker and Valery Syrov¹, this led to the formation of a considerable body of musicological works, [1]² including dissertations,³ books⁴ and a large number of articles.

The research field around academic, classical art, of which the compositions of rock and jazz musicians has become part, continues to expand today. [2; 3; 4; 5; 6] It is natural that the performances of the famous British rock group MUSE, which has already been the subject of interactions with authors from

¹ Zucker A. M. *I rok, i simfoniya... [Both Rock and Symphony...]*. Moscow: Kompozitor, 1993. 304 p.; Syrov V. N. *Stilevye metamorfozy roka ili put' k "tret'ei" muzyke [Stylistic Metamorphoses of Rock or the Path to the "Third" Music]*. Nizhny Novgorod: Nizhny Novgorod State University Publishing House, 1997. 209 p.

² Vinichenko A. A. *Stili i zhanry akademicheskoi muzyki v proizvedeniyakh Dzhona Lorda [Styles and Genres of Academic Music in the Works of John Lord]*. *Dialog iskusstv i art-paradigm: Stat'i. Ocherki. Materialy [Dialogue of Arts and Art Paradigms: Articles. Essays. Materials]*. Saratov: Saratov State L. V. Sobinov Conservatory, 2018. Vol. 1, pp. 52–57; Kazantseva L. P. *Klassicheskoe muzykal'noe nasledie i sovremenniy show-biznes [Classical Musical Heritage and Contemporary Show Business]*. *Prirodnoe i kul'turnoe nasledie: Mezhdistsiplinarnoe issledovanie, sokhranenie i razvitie: materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauch.-prakt. konf. RGPU im. A. I. Gertsena [Natural and Cultural Heritage: Interdisciplinary Research, Preservation and Development: Proceedings of the International Scholarly and Practical Conference of the Herzen University]*. St. Petersburg: Asterion, 2012, pp. 162–166; Zucker A. M. *Rakhmaninov v mire massovoi muzykal'noi kul'tury [Rachmaninoff in the World of Mass Musical Culture]*. *Music Academy*. 2013. No. 2, pp. 20–26.

³ Danko L. I. *Muzykal'noe napravlenie classical crossover v sovremennoi audiovizual'noi kul'ture: dis. ... kand. iskusstvovedeniya: 17.00.09 [The Classical Crossover Musical Direction in Modern Audiovisual Culture: Dissertation for the Degree of Cand.Sci. (Arts): 17.00.09]*. St. Petersburg, 2013. 146 p.; Polischuk A. E. *Tret'e techenie i progressiv v evolyutsii dzhaza: dis. ... kand. iskusstvovedeniya: 17.00.02 [The Third Current and the Progressive in the Evolution of Jazz: Dissertation for the Degree of Cand.Sci. (Arts): 17.00.02]*. Rostov-on-Don, 2019. 291 p.; Savitskaya E. A. *Printsipy stileobrazovaniya v rok-muzyke (na materiale zarubezhnogo khard- i art-roka 60–70-kh godov): dis. ... kand. iskusstvovedeniya: 17.00.02 [Principles of Style Formation in Rock Music (Based on Foreign Hard and Art Rock of the 60–70s): Dissertation for the Degree of Cand.Sci. (Arts): 17.00.02]*. Moscow, 1999. 288 p.; Slobodchikova A. Yu. *Rok-muzyka na rubezhe XX–XXI vekov v dialoge s muzykoi akademicheskoi traditsii: dis. ... kand. iskusstvovedeniya: 5.10.3 [Rock Music at the Turn of the 20th and the 21st Centuries in Dialogue with the Music of the Academic Tradition: Dissertation for the Degree of Cand.Sci. (Arts): 5.10.3]*. Rostov-on-Don, 2023. 238 p.; Chernyshov A. V. *Dzhaz i muzyka evropeiskoi akademicheskoi traditsii: dis. ... kand. iskusstvovedeniya: 17.00.02 [Jazz and Music of the European Academic Tradition: Dissertation for the Degree of Cand.Sci. (Arts): 17.00.02]*. Moscow, 2009. 252 p.

⁴ Syrov V. N. *Muzyka "tret'ego plasta" v zhanrovo-stilevykh dialogakh: ucheb. posobie [Music of the "Third Layer" in Genre and Style Dialogues: Study Guide]*. St. Petersburg: Lan: Planeta muzyki, 2020. 288 p.

other academic fields, have come into the orbit of musicology. The previous formulation of general issues concerning aesthetic and cultural borrowings on the example of this group's work [7] encourages a more thorough musicological study of this phenomenon.

The activities of the rock band MUSE, which was founded in 1994, are in many ways indicative of the aforementioned phenomenon. Based around its three permanent members — vocalist, guitarist and keyboardist Matthew Bellamy, bassist Chris Wolstenholme, and drummer Dominic Howard — the group's achievements speak for themselves. Throughout its existence, the rock band has toured almost the entire world, including Russia (2001, 2016), to win the hearts of millions of fans. As well as releasing nine studio and two live albums, whose combined sales have exceeded 30 million copies, and shooting over 50 videos, the group has won a number of prestigious awards, mostly for its live concert performances: MTV Europe Music Awards, Q Awards, NME Awards, Brit Awards, Kerrang Awards, Grammy and others.

The validity of these high ratings is confirmed by the statements of authoritative musicians who also made a significant contribution to the development of the rock music genre: Brian May, the guitarist of the group QUEEN, calls MUSE “one of the greatest live bands of our time,” while the drummer of the group NIRVANA, Dave Grohl, opines that “these guys know how to put on a real show, not to mention recording an album.” The guitarist of the American rock group RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE, Tom Morello, praises them as an “exceptional group whose artfulness is equal to its ambition.”⁵ To this we may add that the original phenomenon called MUSE not only entertains rock fans,

but also attracts audiences more accustomed to attending classical concerts.

The musicians' creative success is largely due to their success in developing a unique and recognisable sound, which combines Matt Bellamy's extremely high (up to falsetto) vocals, guitar riffs, frequent use of both ensemble and solo piano (in which Bellamy's arpeggios are prominent) — and, on later albums, orchestral arrangements. But perhaps the most striking element of the band's creative “signature” is its stylistic versatility: alternative rock is combined with elements of electronic and other musical genres and styles, as well as those drawn from the academic canon.

The group's references to the works of world-famous composers of the academic tradition are numerous. However, far from being limited to a single period, music from other eras is incorporated into MUSE's oeuvre. For example, the song *Drones* was inspired by the great Renaissance polyphonist Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, while the compositions *Plug in Baby*, *The Handler*, and *In Your World* are coloured by the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. *Collateral Damage*, *Blockades*, *Prelude*, *I Belong to You / Mon Cœur S'ouvre à ta Voix*, and *Hoodoo* feature the works of Romantic composers. In the compositions *Space Dementia*, *Butterflies and Hurricanes*, and *Exogenesis: Symphony*, features of the work of Sergei Rachmaninoff can be traced. The creative team behind MUSE are also not shy in paying homage to their contemporaries.

While the significance of the music included in the group's work is not limited to their frequent borrowings, MUSE is one of those groups for whom referencing the academic canon has become a conscious aesthetic credo. In order to help us understand this process,

⁵ Cit. ex: Shamonova D. *MUSE: 360 Degrees of Delight*. (In Russ.)
URL: http://britishwave.ru/live/kontsert_MUSE_wiener_stadthalle_09_05_2016 (accessed: 14.07.2024).

we will consider their dialogues with the Polish Romantic composer Frederic Chopin.

***United States of Eurasia
(Collateral Damage)***

It is clear that Chopin is one of MUSE's frontman Matt Bellamy's favourite composers, since the works of the Polish composer appear in MUSE's oeuvre three times. The earliest reference to Chopin's legacy is made in the composition *United States of Eurasia (Collateral Damage)*. This song, with lyrics and music by Matt Bellamy, is featured on the band's fifth album, entitled *The Resistance* (2009).

The song includes two contrasting parts. The first of these, *United States of Eurasia*, bursts with high drama. The text (the words are heard only in the first part) draws the listener into the theme of military operations and their impact on the lives of the civilian population, raising issues concerning the suffering and destruction caused by war, as well as the tragic consequences it leaves behind: "And these wars they can't be won / And do you want them to go on and on and on? / Why split these states, when there can be only one? / And must we do as we're told? / Must we do as we're told?" Here, the main poetic image uniting the heterogeneous semantic impulses can be interpreted as some kind of declaration of global unity.

The accompanying music also recreates the same semantic field. The volume of sound is expanded with the addition of a hired string section,⁶ thereby creating an image of greatness

as might befit an empire or a ruler. A powerful ode proclaims the triumph of Power.

The sheer scale of the acoustic field invites comparisons with the performances of the cult British rock band QUEEN. Indeed, the sound space of both groups is often characterised as epic.⁷ An example of an epic arrangement by the group QUEEN can be considered the legendary song *Bohemian Rhapsody* (1975) performed by the group's vocalist Freddie Mercury from the album *A Night at the Opera*. What is striking here is the complex harmonies of the vocal layer, the spectacular transitions between sections, as well as the rich range of musical instruments, including piano, guitar, drums and even an orchestra. This combination is what creates the breathtaking sense of epic quality and drama.

In the song under consideration by the group MUSE, a similar impression is created by the use of polyphony. The creative team led by Matt Bellamy often resorts to chordal thickening of the vocal layer in various of their compositions: thus, *Knights of Cydonia Uprising*, *Resistance*, *Starlight* and *Supermassive Black Hole* demonstrate rich vocal polyphony with sophisticated harmonisation. The resulting complex and emotionally charged soundscape reflects the mood and ideas embedded in the lyrics of the song *United States of Eurasia*. In emphasising the content of the text, the music reveals the theme of the song as a series of bold declarations, protests and appeals.

The journalistic boldness, verging on outrageousness, of the geopolitical idea behind

⁶ Session musicians are performers who are not part of a band, but are invited to participate in a live performance of music or in a studio recording.

⁷ As modern dictionaries testify, the adjective "epic," which comes from the concept of "epos" — that is, "narrative" — is widespread not only in the direct sense (characteristic of the epic narrative), but also in the figurative meaning (majestic, dispassionate). However, among young people, a slightly different interpretation has emerged: in youth slang, "epic" has come to mean "very large-scale," "amazing," "grandiose." These are exactly the qualities that we have noted in the sound of the groups MUSE and QUEEN.

the song *United States of Eurasia*, which envisages the merger of Europe and Asia into one grandiose geographical and political entity, uniting a single community of people across vast territories, quite naturally affects the musical style of the first part. Thus, it contains elements of Eastern culture. They are manifested in the smooth, sliding the melodic ornaments characteristic of Eastern music, evoking a sense of lyricism and improvisational freedom. The rhythm is also indicative: on the one hand, it is variable and improvisatory (in contrast to the more precise organisation of time in Western European music), while on the other hand, the ostinato rhythmic formula of the drum kit refers to the practice of playing music on Eastern percussion instruments. The resources of the dominant mode are brought to bear with the inclusion of the augmented second. Authentic instrumentation derived from Eastern culture is also appropriately used, such as the sitar traditionally used in Indian music, to establish a specific timbral colour.

The sound created by the musicians evokes associations with a caravan slowly wandering through the desert. However, this image is given much greater artistic significance than

the depiction of a detached, frozen, epic (in the traditional interpretation of this concept) musical “picture.” The “picturesqueness” is broken by the exclamatory vocal chords articulating the word “Eurasia,” which carry a militantly offensive charge. Their tension is emphasised by the dotted rhythm, the accentuation of weak beats competing with strong, multiple repetitions of spectacular harmonic outbursts with frantic cries of “...sia.” Thus the “landscape” is painted in “tones” of expressiveness and drama (Example No. 1).

If the first part of the song *United States of Eurasia* carries out in the poetic text and musical component the idea of the unification of Europe and Asia, which is associated with various cataclysms, then the completely different performance of second part, which corresponds to the subtitle of the song, suggests a different, contrasting artistic image. From the title *Collateral Damage*, it can be assumed to be about the destruction that is wreaked upon people during military actions.⁸ Thus, the complete vocal-orchestral composition implies the suffering of innocent victims of war and concern about the human losses and destruction associated with such events.

Example No. 1

MUSE. *United States of Eurasia*, fragment

⁸ Anastasia Slobodchikova clarifies the meaning of the phrase “collateral damage”: “Initially, this expression was used among the American military to denote damage inflicted on the civilian population during military operations.” [3, p. 71]

The sharp semantic turn is marked by a quotation of a large fragment from the *Nocturne in E-flat major* op. 9 No. 2 by Frederic Chopin. In the second part, entitled *Collateral Damage*,⁹ the main sections of the nocturne are heard (without repetitions, as in the composer's original work), forming a simple three-part form (Example No. 2). Chopin's music is reproduced almost exactly, with the exception of the omission of the coda fragment and some minor changes (a trill at the beginning of the theme; small rhythmic and melodic variations that do not distort the contours of the melody; episodic, almost imperceptible doublings of the melodic voice and delicate accompaniment of the strings).

Example No. 2

Frederic Chopin.
Nocturne in E-flat major op. 9 No. 2

The musical quotation plays a major role in forming the semantic space of the complete



composition, which consists of diametrically opposed images. Thus, the first part asserts the idea of a Eurasian unification with a vision of a rather gloomy future, in which a totalitarian

regime has come to power, and which is fraught with inevitable cataclysms. All this is contrasted in the second part by Chopin's angelically sublime lyricism, presented in the form of one of the most beautiful romantic themes in the world's music. In such a situation, Chopin's euphony presents itself as a symbol of incorruptible beauty, ideality and joy.¹⁰ In an echo of the second (and title) track on the album, *Resistance* and manifesting ("Love is our resistance!"), as well as with a quote from the ecstatic third aria of Delilah from the opera *Samson and Delilah* by Camille Saint-Saëns in the eighth composition "I Belong to You / Mon Cœur S'ouvre à ta Voix" ("I belong to you / Your voice echoes in my heart") from the same album, the nocturne is interpreted as the personification of love — and, given the chamber tonality of the acoustic piano, humanity.

Unfortunately, perfection turns out (to continue our eastern "caravan" metaphor) to be, like a mirage in the desert, impossible to attain. Such a course of artistic thought may be suspected due to the introduction of the quotation as if by chance and unprepared: it appears suddenly rather than growing into the already existing thematic fabric. Moreover, its rather long, almost "verbatim" reproduction, which does not fit into the natural course of artistic "events," is perceived as some kind of abstract abstraction, incompatible with real life and the modern world.

⁹ Anastasia Slobodchikova refers to this fragment as a coda, [3, p. 71] which seems to us not entirely correct. Considering the large scale of the quotation, its original artistic self-value and conceptual significance in the composition of modern musicians, as reinforced by a special title, as well as its clear internal structure, we should be talking not about a coda located outside the main idea, but about a fully-fledged second part.

¹⁰ A symbolic designation of an ideal, revealed to the imagination (but not the existence!) of a person, often appears in the works of Chopin himself. In this connection, we will recollect his *Nocturnes in B-flat minor op. 9 No. 1*, *in C minor op. 48 No. 1*, and *in F minor op. 55 No. 1*. Let us add that in this composition by the MUSE group, a significant contribution to the depiction of the image of the Beautiful is made by the soundtrack of the laughter of children playing.

The detachment of the ideal from what is happening in real life is accentuated by the group's timbre decision. Elevated and aestheticised, declared as a standard of purity, innocence and hope for a better future, the Beautiful is depicted in the colours of natural (i.e., not electronic) acoustic sound — primarily of the piano. It is joined by the rather “animated” timbres of the choir and strings, which seems to be associated with the expression of a personal element — regret, sadness.

The final aural detail is obviously intended to be conceptually significant. An unexpected acoustic effect reminiscent of the roar of an airplane taking off appears as if bursting into the terrible beauty of something alien, unnatural and inhuman. This unceremonious disavowal of beautiful illusions makes us remember the sonorities with which the song began — mechanical, harsh, assertive. Through such a recapitulation, the composition acquires a kind of logical conclusion. The sound of an aircraft taking off not only reprises the musical form, but also serves to heighten the dramatic imagery of the first part in comparison with the second, which is based on a quotation. This is how the main idea of the song matures: there is no place for the ideal in reality; the idea of unity is utopian due to its unrealisability. The concept of the rock composition resonates with Chopin's worldview and creativity (and, more broadly, that of the Romantics).

Prelude

Another quotation of Chopin's music appears in the composition *Prelude* from the

group's sixth album *The 2nd Law* (2012). *Prelude* is a short orchestral composition serving as an introduction to the fifth song on the album, *Survival*, which was chosen as the official anthem of the 2012 Summer Olympics in London.

Reflecting on the composition, we cannot help but notice some “oddities” in it. One of these is borrowing. In *Prelude*, we can speak of the presence of first Rachmaninoff, and then Chopin. The music of the Russian composer can be recognised already in the opening measures of the violin melody, which refers to the theme of the slow movement of his *Second Piano Concerto*. This intertextual echo is not surprising: frontman Matt Bellamy constantly talks about Rachmaninoff's influence on the band's music. In particular, in an interview with the magazine MK-Boulevard in June 2002 to the question “Who influenced you most as a composer?”, he answered: “A Russian guy named Rachmaninoff. (Smiles.) I'm trying to do with guitars what he composed for piano. I hope it turns out more or less successfully.”¹¹

Here Rachmaninoff's music is, however, significantly altered: in addition to a tonal shift (Rachmaninoff's *E major* becomes *B-flat major*), it acquires a rhythmic formula characteristic of rock music along with a bolder register, a more sweeping melodic outline, and structural metamorphosis (mm. 5–6 move to the beginning of the theme of the rock composition) (Examples No. 3, 4). In thus blurring its outlines, the quotation loses its distinctness to fall in line with the features and tasks of its allusive function.¹²

¹¹ Stepan BO. *Matthew Bellamy*. (In Russ.) URL: <https://www.guitars.ru/05/info.php?z880> (accessed: 15.07.2024).

¹² That is, in the words of Alfred Schnittke, it acquires the meaning of “the subtlest hints and unfulfilled promises on the verge of quotation — but without crossing it.” Cit. ex: Schnittke A. G. *Polistilisticheskie tendentsii v sovremennoi muzyke* [Polystylistic Tendencies in Contemporary Music]. In: Kholopova V. N., Chigareva E. I. *Alfred Shnitke. Ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva* [Alfred Schnittke. *Essay on Life and Work*]. Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1990. P. 328.

Example No. 3 Sergei Rachmaninoff. *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Part II, fragment



Example No. 4 MUSE. *Prelude*, fragment



The listener is also confronted by the following oddity: the “wanderings” in Rachmaninoff’s intonational field smoothly lead to a quote from Chopin’s *Étude op. 10 No. 3 in E major*. The composition culminates with an (imitatively) repeated laconic, melodious Chopin motif, whose effect is clearly intended to convey exaggeration (Examples No. 5, 6).

Example No. 5 Frederic Chopin. *Étude op. 10 No. 3*, mm. 18–19



Example No. 6 MUSE. *Prelude*, fragment



Of course, the intonational and stylistic modulation is puzzling here. Are such polystylistic borrowings not excessive? Moreover, how organically do the works of two such different composers coexist in the space

of a rock composition? The answer can be found in the smooth transition from one theme to another, as well as in the figurative kinship of two humanly warm lyrical themes: in terms of their effect, the stylistic distanced themes turn out to be not so far from each other. Another kind of common denominator here lies in the generic name of the composition, i.e., the prelude, to which both Chopin and Rachmaninoff paid tribute. While acting as a united romantic block to denote nobility, inner harmony and beauty, these qualities are vaguely and dissolutely embodied in the intonational transformations of Rachmaninoff’s musical thought, and then more formulaically in the case of the quotation from Chopin.

The timbral presentation of both themes in terms of their performance by a symphony orchestra is not unexpected due to the previous use of orchestral resources in the MUSE repertoire. Nevertheless, we will appreciate the semantic emphasis on mass character, community, nationality (in terms of Russian religious philosophy, *sobornost'* [conciliarity]), coupled with the orchestral sound of piano music. Chopin’s Romantic music has been accorded a very high socio-cultural status: in this regard, the MUSE seem to be acting in solidarity with the Russian composer and critic César Cui, who claimed that Chopin “contained the whole world within himself and belongs to the whole world.”¹³

Another socio-cultural aspect consists in the choice to present the music using an orchestra despite its inseparability from the history of piano performance. Having recourse to the sound potential not of “their” instruments, but of a symphony orchestra, the musicians form a corresponding model of communication: we (the audience) seem to

¹³ Kyui Ts. A. Frederic Shopen [Cui C. A. Frédéric Chopin]. *Izbrannye stat'i* [Selected Articles]. Leningrad: Muzgiz, 1952. P. 508.

be not in a stadium or an open area, listening to a rock concert, but are instead transported to the concert hall, a space where academic art reigns supreme. These separate circumstances distinguish *Prelude* from the cycle of rock compositions.

The same effect is conveyed in the title of the piece. A *Prelude* (*pre* — before, *lude* — play) sets the preliminary tone for the music-making that is to follow. Here the introductory purpose of the piece corresponds to an enigmatic sound, which creates an atmosphere of mystery, expectation and anticipation. However, in modern popular culture, such a function is more often designated by another concept, i.e., the *Intro* (English). Thus, it turns out that in this case the function of introduction is designated by a term accepted in academic music, which again displaces *Prelude* from the surrounding context of rock music and thus sets a more serious tone than is habitual for commercialised popular culture.

A “bizarre” disposition is achieved in the standalone setting of *Prelude* on the album: despite its explicitly declared introductory function, the piece does not even appear at the beginning of the cycle, but in fourth place out of thirteen. While this weakens its introductory character, which is clearly directed towards the subsequent structural element, such a placement strengthens its intrinsic value.

The insufficient manifestation of the function of anticipation (direction towards the next part of the cycle) in *Prelude* is confirmed by the inclusion of the track in live performances. In their live performances, MUSE do not perform *Prelude* and *Survival* together in the sequence in which they originally appeared on the album. Instead, following *Prelude*, another composition is often played: *Starlight* from the album *Black Holes and Revelations*. The lyrics of the song *Starlight* describe a strong feeling of attraction associated

with a search for inspiration: “Starlight / I will be chasing the starlight / Until the end of my life.” Of course, this is a metaphorical usage, which proclaims a desire for spiritual freedom and liberation from mundane routine existence. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the group is deliberately placing a certain semantic emphasis, bringing these two compositions closer together, thereby sending a signal to listeners about those *by whom* they are inspired, *whom* they deeply respect and without *whom* real music would not exist. Under these circumstances, the deceptively autonomous title *Prelude* is filled with symbolism.

Finally, in order to understand the conceptual significance of the borrowings in *Prelude*, the title of the entire album is also important — *The 2nd Law*. This clearly hints at the second law of thermodynamics, which, in positing the existence of entropy, speaks of the tendency of an isolated system towards chaos and of order towards disorder. Since the band often explores themes of state oppression, struggle and revolutionary transformation of society, the album’s title can be interpreted as a declaration of protest against the established order and outdated stereotypes. In relation to the characteristics of the instrumental genre of the prelude (freely unregulated preliminary music-making), the mention of the law of the physical world can be interpreted as a statement that is natural for rock music in general, where there is room for chaos, change, and unpredictability. Here, we may include such a “bizarreness” as the seemingly antagonistic — academic — musical environment.

Blockades

The third borrowing from Chopin’s music appears in the song *Blockades* from MUSE’s eighth studio album *Simulation Theory*, released in November 2018. Presented in the spirit of retro-future, the album references

the aesthetics of 1980s science fiction films,¹⁴ although retaining the group's close ideas of conspiracy theory, life in a world of simulations, and cosmism.

Matthew Bellamy's lyrics from MUSE's eighth album refer to a reality-substituting simulation that the lyrical hero understands and strives to escape from by rising above it. In particular, in *Blockades* the hero realises: "Life is a broken simulation, I'm unable to feel / I'm searching for something that's real / I am always seeking to see what's behind the veil." Here, the teenage spirit of maximalism and protest that permeates the retro-futuristic concept is unmistakable.

The band's composition sounds energetic and assertive. The heavy rhythm section evokes associations with a "shootout" or an advancing army with a drummer in front to raise the morale of his comrades. Bright guitar riffs create an atmosphere of tension and dynamics, while the ascetic vocal part with occasional jumps to an ascending minor sixth adds even more intensity to the emotion. The overall concept of the song *Blockades* is a hymn to overcoming difficulties, embracing authenticity and breaking free from artificial limitations. An alternative interpretation is also possible — a proclamation of the power of art and music as a means of surmounting such obstacles to fight for freedom and rights.

The development of the complex concept of the song was not without the participation of Chopin's music, in particular his *Étude in C minor op. 25 No. 12*. A broad repertoire of études had developed even before Chopin. In the 19th century, the genre included virtuoso pieces by Charles Alkan, Adolf von Henselt, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Friedrich Kalkbrenner, Muzio Clementi, Johann Baptist

Kramer, Ignaz Moscheles, Sigismund Thalberg, John Field, Maria Szymanowska, Daniel Steibelt, as well as the famous collection *Gradus ad Parnassum* and numerous other examples of the étude genre by Carl Czerny. The étude of that time was a more complex version of exercises, which was mainly aimed at solving problems associated with the performer's mastery of various techniques, types of articulation, textures, etc. However, Chopin saw a different potential: in the example of his pieces we perceive an understanding of the genre as a carrier of a powerful artistic charge, where the development of a virtuoso technique is not so much a goal as a means of revealing a poetic image.

The evolution of the genre was marked by Chopin's formation of a rich spectrum of imagery, in which not only the brilliant pathos (*op. 10 No. 1 in C major, op. 10 No. 8 in F major*) and playfulness (*op. 25 No. 3 in F major, op. 25 No. 4 in A minor*), traditional for the étude, was present, but also the contemplation of the beautiful (*op. 25 No. 1 in A-flat major*), intense internal dialogue (*op. 25 No. 7 in C-sharp minor*), tragedy (*op. 25 No. 11 in A minor*), drama (*op. 10 No. 12*, which Liszt designated as "Revolutionary").

In this series of images, *Étude op. 25 No. 12 in C minor (Molto allegro, con fuoco)* also found its place. The seething waves of monotonous broken arpeggios rise and bubble, reaching a high (ultimate) point of intensity in the final phase of the piece (*più forte possibile*), which requires considerable performing technique from the pianist. In the incessant flow of arpeggios in the middle register, a theme emerges, full of dramatic beginning, grandeur and heroism, which ultimately triumphs. The multiple final repetition of the major third

¹⁴ Retrofuturism or "seeing the future through the eyes of the past" is a genre of science fiction that describes a future world based on technologies (as well as fashions, styles, etc.) of the past or present.

of the tonic chord dispels any doubts about its triumph (Example No. 7).

This artistic image was invoked in the composition *Blockades* on account of its seething passion. The use of Chopin's opus had two main aspects. One way it is manifested in the rock environment is in the modelling virtuoso figurations that open the composition and to which it returns more than once. A group of small note durations, which are performed by the arpeggiator¹⁵ on the synthesiser, has a generalised, abstract character (Example No. 8).

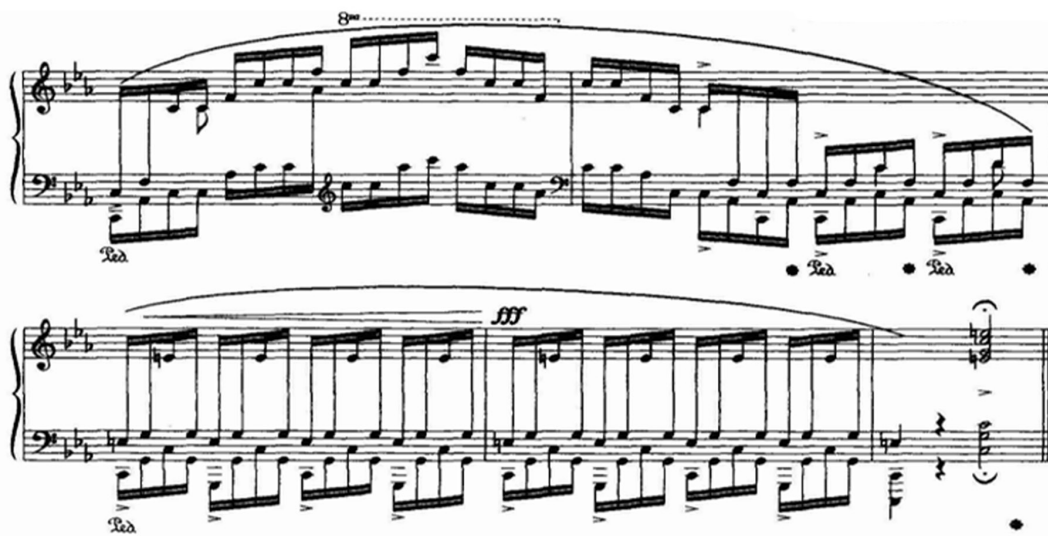
It should be acknowledged that, despite having used the schematic *étude* figuration, which preserves the fast tempo prescribed by Chopin, the key minor mode with major-minor modal oscillations, as well as the accentuation of strong and relatively strong beats, MUSE

were by no means concerned with recreating the authentic appearance of Chopin's *étude*. This is suggested by the smaller scope of the amplitude of the figuration and its rather typical character; the "cosmic" (in the understanding of adherents of electroacoustic innovations) colouring it acquired here, unusual for romantic art, is caused by the sound of a monotonous melody on a synthesiser, optimal in the construction of a certain fantastic space and an artificial life in it, as represented by the image conceived in this composition.

However, in addition to the allusion to the general forms of movement of Chopin's *étude*, contact with the Polish composer is achieved in another way. In the non-stop sound flow of the original source, one can discern strict bass supports, which fold — especially clearly

Example No. 7

Frederic Chopin. *Étude op. 25 No. 12*, mm. 77–83



Example No. 8

MUSE. *Blockades*, Introduction



¹⁵ An arpeggiator is a synthesiser module that transforms the chord structure entered by the keyboard player into a rhythmic fabric according to a given algorithm.

when the polyphonic fabric is reduced — into a sparse, ascetic melody. It was this terse linear formula that the musicians decided to weave into the chorus of their composition, entrusting its almost hysterical chanting to Matt Bellamy’s high-pitched vocal part (Example No. 9).

The modest melody, breaking through the seething thickness made up of sound-impulses accented on strong and relatively strong beats, is a quite remarkable treatment of Chopin. It is certainly far from his “signature” lyrical, sincere, stunningly beautiful melodies, which stand for the standards of the Beautiful, the Ideal. The undeveloped (“lifeless”), laconic, formalised line (recalling the themes of chorales) is nevertheless sometimes necessary for him for tragic, fatal images, as for example in the *Preludes op. 28 No. 4 in E minor* and *No. 20 in C minor*, the *Funeral March* from the *Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor*, the beginning of the *Étude op. 25 No. 11 in A minor*.

Melodic “stinginess” is not alien to the MUSE oeuvre. For example, in the composition *Drones* from the seventh album of the same name, the group turned to the *Missa Papae Marcelli* [Mass for Pope Marcellus], a work by Italian Renaissance composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. The quoted melody from the part *Benedictus* is sung by Matthew Bellamy “in chorus” using multiple audio tracks. The rather dark lyrics take the ostensible form of a prayer said for all those killed in modern wars. It ends like this: “Now you can kill from the safety of your home with drones. Amen.”

The sparse melody in *Blockades* is not accidental. It not only migrated here from Chopin’s *étude* legacy (the melodic framework of *Étude in C minor* is obvious here). Ascetic, almost devoid of relief, it helps to create an atmosphere of particular tension. Each sound, reinforced by regular jolts of the instrumental part, chants, as if shooting, one word: “Crush, crush / Raze and rush / Seize, fight for your life

Example No. 9

MUSE. *Blockades*, chorus

The musical score for Example No. 9 consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line in 4/4 time with a sparse melody and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Smash, test, Beat the best Fight for your". The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "life You've been summoned now".

/ Smash, test / Beat the best / Fight for your life
/ You've been summoned now.”

However, in addition to the aggressive oratorical appeals, a sensitive ear will also detect deeper, symbolic meanings in the melody in recognising the contours of the intonation of the cross or BACH (mm. 3–4) and the weak-willed, passive Phrygian descent (see mm. 7–9 in example No. 9). The terse, not to say formulaic, semantic “messages” counterpoint with their antithesis — the ceaseless bubbling of *étude* passages (Chopin ordered the texture of the *Étude in C minor* in a similar manner). In this semantic context, the song reads as a decisive (not to say catastrophic) collision of the hero with the barriers that mercilessly repulse him, suppressing his attempts to overcome them.

While both the opening and chorus allusions to Chopin's *étude* are rather indirect, they are persistent, returning repeatedly to serving as a vector for advancing the band's artistic vision. What is significant here is the composer's image — not as the accustomed bearer of a perfect melody that heralds beauty and perfection, but one involved in the drama and even tragedy of existence.

Conclusion

We have considered how Chopin's music appears in three compositions by the rock group MUSE. Each manifestation has its own manner of presentation: in the form of a large fragment of an opus (from *Nocturne in E-flat major*), as a laconic quotation (from the *Études in E major* and *C minor*), as well as general forms of movement that do not have intonational relief (from the *Étude in C minor*). In this case, the borrowed material is sometimes reproduced almost verbatim, sometimes slightly changed, sometimes allusively mediated. In all cases, however, there is sufficient detail for the prepared listener to recognise the famous music.

The timbral aspect of the borrowings is generally informative. The authentic documentary quotation in *United States of Eurasia* subsequently gives way to radical timbral renewal of Chopin's music: the “uplifting” and enlarging theme of the *Étude in E major* and orchestral sound in *Prelude* is then replaced by a frantic pathos (expressionistically acute) vocalisation of the motif from the *Étude in C minor* in a riot of electronic (not “live” or “natural”) vibrations in *Blockades*. Thus, Chopin's music increasingly loses its timbral authenticity to approach contemporary sonic realities.

Nevertheless, the temporal dynamics in the understanding and assessment of Chopin's legacy remain visible. If anything, this seems to resemble a gradual opening up to a deeper comprehension. At first, Chopin was seen as the typical romantic, a pure lyricist, full of hope, inspired by the attractive Light he radiated, the indisputable spiritual and mental Ideal of Humanity. The aesthetic-philosophical dichotomy of an uncomfortable existence and a harmonising “point of support” that developed is somewhat reminiscent of the disposition, collisions and artistic concepts of the Romantics, including Chopin, together with an amendment for the higher degree of stress that coexists alongside Chopin's world.

Over time, other facets of Chopin's art emerge in MUSE's repertoire — dramatic and even tragic elements, which seem much more in tune with today's challenges. The evolution of the conceptual significance of borrowings from Chopin's work is outlined: a departure from the symbolic manifestation of a priceless, enduring Ideal to the involvement of Chopin's former moral and aesthetic authority in the dramas and tragedies of the modern world. For the creative development of the group MUSE, such a conceptual modulation is decisive: with the disappearance of the idealised (previously

personified by the music of Chopin) from the sphere of rock music-making, the optimistic life-affirming principle is displaced. Fitting more organically into the multi-coloured

sound picture of contemporary man's existence, the music of the Polish romantic paradoxically reveals the ambiguity, confusion, dangers and dead ends of our world.

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