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Martin Romberg's Choral Music: Stylistic Features

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Abstract. Contemporary choral music from Scandinavia increasingly attracts the attention of performing groups both abroad and in Russia due to its deep originality and distinctiveness. The article examines the choral work of the contemporary Norwegian composer Martin Romberg, whose work is characterised by Neo-Romantic poetics and style. Three of his choral cycles are subjected to detailed analysis: *Aradia* (2012), *Rúnatal* (2012), and *Requiem of Runes* (2022). The themes of the works reflect the Norwegian composer's interest in mysticism and mythology, as well as in archetypal motifs and plots. The relationship between words and music in his choral compositions is structured according to traditional concepts. The features of the modal-intonation sphere and the structural organisation of the works are determined both by the general artistic concept and by the phonetic properties of the language of the poetic sources, including the specifics of their verse organisation (for example, alliterative versification). Along with a general reliance on a Romantic tonal idiom, Romberg's musical language reveals elements of medieval modal archaism, jazz, and Russian song, which are intertwined in an organic unity. The compositions of the 2010s use elements of phonemic composition techniques and Klangfarbenmelodie ["sound-colour melody"], along with various phonic approaches. In the later work (*Requiem*), the choral writing is simplified, but the interest in timbral experiments remains, as manifested in the unusually low tessitura of the sound of all the voices, which is conditioned by ideas of "depth" and "ascension" of register.

Keywords: Martin Romberg, Norwegian music, 21st century choral music, *Aradia*, *Rúnatal*, *Requiem of Runes*

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Introduction

Choral music holds one of the leading positions in the musical culture of the Northern European countries due to its accessible democratic nature and fidelity to traditions, as well as its openness to new musical trends. Choral music is understood in Scandinavian countries as an integral component of cultural identity on account of the deeply rooted connections of the choral tradition both with folklore and with sacred music.

Choral performance and compositional creativity experienced particularly rapid development in Northern Europe in the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries. This period is marked by new creative figures and compositions of significant artistic merit. The popularity and demand for Scandinavian choral music is evidenced by its increasing inclusion in the repertoires of Russian choral groups.¹ At the same time, this area is not currently well represented in Russian musicology. However, we can mention a number of works by Marianne Glusberg on Swedish choral culture and musical education of the second half of the 20th century. [1; 2; 3] The present article, which partially addresses this gap, focuses on the choral work of contemporary Norwegian composer Martin Romberg (b. 1978). The novelty of the research consists in its presentation of the first Russian scholarly appraisal of these compositions.

Romberg belongs to a generation of composers whose creative development took place in the postmodern era, which is

marked by the rejection of any canons and levelling of the boundaries between elite and mass art. Postmodernism implies an awareness of the multidimensionality of artistic space and consequent mixing of styles and genres, as well as immersion in an absent reality due to a new perception of time according to which the idea of a linear chronological sequence is less privileged. [4; 5] At the same time, Romberg's period of creative maturity coincides with the formation of a new discursive practice and cultural logic referred to under the rubric of *metamodernism*, which is characterised by a fusion of mass and elitist culture along with a new approach to feeling that is not ashamed to express seriousness, emotionality, sincerity, even sentimentality. [6; 7] All this, along with elements of cosmopolitanism — itself a result of the open borders between European countries² — has left a corresponding imprint on Romberg's creative universe.

While his oeuvre is inextricably linked with Neo-Romantic stylistics, Romberg's artistic imagination is equally nourished by folk legends, ancient mythology, modern fantasy literature, and painting. One of the leading genres in his work is the symphonic poem. In fact, all of the composer's works (orchestral and chamber) are programmatic, although Romberg relies on both programmatic and pictorial plot types. Examples of the former include the *Tale of Taliesin* concerto for saxophone and orchestra (2007) and the *Tale of Slaine* saxophone quartet (2010), while pictorial cycles include *Tableaux Fantastiques* (*Fantastic Pictures*, 2008) based on images

¹ The contemporary choral music ensemble *Altro coro* is known for its frequent presentation of Russian premieres of choral works by Knut Nystedt, Ola Gjeilo, and Martin Romberg.

² Born in Norway in 1978, Martin Romberg studied at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (Austria) from 1997 to 2005, participating in the composition class of Michael Jarrell, as well as studying film music with Klaus Peter Sattler. He currently lives and works in France and Norway, where he is the director of the art museum *Nerdrum*. Fluent in Norwegian, French, English and German, Romberg refers to himself as a "European citizen."

by Jacek Yerka,³ *Tableaux Kitsch* (*Kitsch Pictures*, 2014) inspired by the paintings of Odd Nerdrum,⁴ and *Tableaux d'or* (*Golden Pictures*, 2022) which responds to the canvases by Gustav Klimt. In addition, Romberg's work showcases his particular interest in the mythopoetic universe of J. R. R. Tolkien. The book *The Silmarillion* inspired the composer to create a number of musical works including the symphonic poems *Quendi*⁵ (2008), *Telperion and Laurelin*⁶ (2013) and *Fëanor*⁷ (2017), a string quartet *Moriquendi*⁸ (2022), piano pieces *Valaquentia*⁹ (2009) and *Valaquentia II* (2020), and other assorted works.

By now, Romberg has written six choral works: *Eldarinwë Liri* for female choir (2010), *Aradia* for mixed choir (2012), *Rúnatal* for mixed choir (2012), *Streghe* for female choir (2012), *Varangian Lied* for mixed choir and accordion (2021), *Requiem of Runes* for mixed choir and accordion (2022). We will examine these works in varying degrees of detail.

Poetic Texts and Their Themes

The selection of poetic texts for the choral opuses demonstrates the Norwegian composer's

strong interest in the most ancient layers of human culture. Thus, with the exception of the early choral work *Eldarinwë Liri* (2010), which was created around the Tolkien's verses written in the constructed Elvish language, all his other works are based in one way or another on ancient texts that reflect mythological ideas associated with pagan and Christian beliefs.

The choral composition *Rúnatal* (2012) is based on stanzas from the Old Norse poem *Hávamál* (*Words of Hávi* [the High One]), which makes up part of the *Codex Regius*¹⁰ and is drawn from the *Poetic Edda*. The poem, which is dedicated to the supreme god Odin, comprises short moralistic verses concerning the rules of life conduct, as well as stories about the origin of the runes. The poems making up the *Hávamál* are conventionally divided into five parts. The first part, *Gestapáttir*, consists of stanzas 1–80, in which the rules of hospitality are formulated. The second part (usually untitled), which encompasses stanzas 81 to 110, is devoted to the theme of love and the peculiarities of female nature. The third part, *Loddfáfnismál* (stanzas 111–137), which is

³ Jacek Yerka (b. 1952) is a contemporary Polish surrealist artist whose work was influenced by the works and techniques of Flemish painters Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel, Jan van Eyck, and others. Winner of the World Fantasy Award.

⁴ Odd Nerdrum (b. 1944) is a Norwegian figurative artist, who presents his art as part of the kitsch painting movement. He is the author of still lifes, portraits and paintings of an apocalyptic nature. His work was influenced by Rembrandt and Caravaggio. The *Nerdrum* museum, which was established in the artist's hometown of Stavern, contains the most complete collection of his paintings and drawings. Martin Romberg is the current director of this museum.

⁵ In the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, the Quendi are one of the peoples that inhabit the fictional continent of Middle-Earth.

⁶ Telperion and Laurelin are the names of two light-emitting trees (Silver and Gold) that grow in the kingdom of Valinor.

⁷ One of the characters described in *The Silmarillion*, Fëanor is the son of King Finwë, the ruler of the Noldor tribe.

⁸ Moriquendi — Dark Elvish tribes that did not see the light of the two trees (Telperion and Laurelin).

⁹ Forming one of the parts of *The Silmarillion*, Valaquentia lists and characterises the divine beings and spirits inhabiting the universe of Eä.

¹⁰ *The Codex Regius* is an Old Icelandic manuscript dating from the second half of the 13th century.

addressed to the wandering minstrel Loddfáfnir, also contains didactic verses that form a code of conduct. The fourth part, *Rúnatal* (stanzas 138–145), tells how Odin gained the runes through self-sacrifice. The fifth part, *Ljóðatal* (stanzas 146–165), describes the miraculous powers of the supreme god. The poems in this section are made up of magical songs and spells.

Romberg took the verses of the fourth part for his choral composition. They are written in Old Icelandic using the *fornyrðislag* and *ljodahátt* verse meters, which are used in alliterative verse.

The content of *Rúnatal* is attractive, above all, for the unusual parallelism between pagan and Christian rites: the self-sacrifice of Odin, who hung on a tree for nine long nights after piercing himself with a spear, evokes clear associations with the crucifixion of Christ. Such semantic echoes are important for Romberg since testifying to the timeless nature of the plot-forming motifs. Like the American mythologist Joseph Campbell,¹¹ with whose books the composer is well acquainted (for example: [8]), Romberg believes that the spiritual history of mankind has a common foundation.¹²

The choral cycle *Aradia, or The Gospel of the Witches* (2012), which is also called *Witch Mass* in the foreign press, is based on the texts of spells collected in the book of the same name by the American folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland (1824–1903). The collection, published in 1899, was the result of many years of studying the folklore of the province of Tuscany. It contained rituals and spells

of an ancient witchcraft cult allegedly dating back to the Etruscans and practiced by pagan witches. According to Leland, he received the manuscript from a follower of this cult, an Italian woman named Maddalena. The manuscript was entitled *Vangelo (Gospel)*.¹³ As well as translating it into English from Italian and editing it, Leland provided a preface and an appendix in which he attempted to understand the mythology of *Aradia*.

The book consisted of 15 chapters. In addition to magical rituals and spells, it included short stories about the origins of the cult and stories involving the deities revered by the witches. Although the mythology of *Aradia* bears traces of influence from both Roman and Christian religions, it is generally considered to be heretical due to its establishment of a cult of forbidden gods and consequent character as a rebellion against society. The main characters of the book are Diana, were the goddess of the Moon, presented as the “queen of the witches,” her brother, Lucifer (the sun god), their daughter Aradia (who is identified with Biblical Herodias), and the lunar deity, Cain.

Despite the existence of an English translation, Romberg relies fundamentally on the Italian original. The choral cycle consists of seven parts: 1. *Introductione (Introduction)*; 2. *La Sabba (The Sabbath)*; 3. *L'incantesimo delle Pietre (The Charm of the Stones)*; 4. *Diana e Endamone (Diana and Endymion)*; 5. *L'invocazione dell'amore (The Invocation of Love)*; 6. *Incantesimo del Vino (Incantation*

¹¹ Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) — American writer, literary scholar, author of works in the field of mythology and religious studies. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he substantiated the concept of the monomyth, according to which all myths have a single plot structure, defined as the “hero’s journey.”

¹² It should be noted that this idea is also set out in Jorge Luis Borges’ famous laconic story *Four Cycles* (1972). The writer believes that all world literature from ancient times to the present day is based on four key stories: about the siege of a city, about a quest, about a return and about the suicide of God.

¹³ Currently, the authenticity of the manuscript is questioned by a number of researchers.

of the Wine); 7. *Laverna (Laverna)*. The composer selects texts from Chapters I (worship of Aradia), II (spells related to the preparation of a ritual feast), IV (spells of the Sacred Stone, Diana's amulet), VI and IX (love spells, requests for help in love affairs), VIII (spells for a rich grape harvest), and XV (rituals and spells addressed to the goddess Laverna, with the aim of returning illegitimate children who were abandoned at their birth). In many of them (especially in *The Sabbath* and *The Incantation of Wine*), there are many parallels with the Catholic Eucharist. However, in contradistinction with the sacraments of the Church, food and wine are interpreted here not as the body and blood of Christ — but of Diana.

Leland's folklore work inspired Romberg to create another cycle, *Streghe (Witches, 2012)*, written for female choir. This time the composer used the texts of hymns and magic spells that were collected by the American ethnographer in the book *Etruscan Roman Remains in Popular Tradition* (1892). The theme of the seven-part cycle was associated with the veneration of nature spirits and love spells.

The composer's interest in folk culture and witchcraft traditions is natural: on the one hand, it represents a way to get out beyond the limits or "over the edge," an opportunity to combine the real and the unreal; on the other hand, in the mixture of pagan and Christian

religions, timeless ideas of eternity once again emerge. For Romberg, the past is not something obsolete, like some kind of museum exhibit, but rather constantly brings its influence upon us, inducing us to experience and perceive cultural values in a new way.¹⁴

The composer wrote the texts for *Varangian Lied* and choral cycle *Requiem of Runes* himself.¹⁵ However, they include fragments of runic inscriptions on the so-called Varangian stones located throughout Scandinavia. These stones are memorial steles and tombstones dedicated to the Viking campaigns in the lands of Gardariki.¹⁶ While most of these monuments were erected in the 11th century (during the period of active Christianisation), some date back to earlier times. The stones were erected in honour of the Vikings who died in campaigns and battles. The inscriptions, which were engraved in Old Norse, constituted a kind of epitaph. They contained information about the social status of the deceased, his virtues and deeds. Since toponyms are frequently recorded in the inscriptions, rune stones are of particular interest for historical epigraphy and onomastics.

The *Requiem* contains three parts: *I, The Stranger, Memory*, and *Varangian Lied*. The first (*I, The Stranger*) was inspired by an inscription on a rock from Kårstad (see: [9, pp. 691, 695]),¹⁷ the second, by an inscription

¹⁴ It should be noted that Leland's book *Aradia* gave a powerful impetus to the formation of neo-paganism and influenced the development of the modern religion of Wicca.

¹⁵ Both compositions were written by commission of the accordionist Maria Vlasova and the contemporary choral music ensemble *Altro coro*. *Varangian Lied* was created for the anniversary of the choir in 2021. The successful Russian premiere encouraged Romberg to continue collaborating with musicians based in Moscow. In 2022, the composer decided to expand the concept expressed in the *Varangian Lied*. This is how *Requiem of Runes* came into being, which included *Varangian Lied* as its finale.

¹⁶ Scandinavian name for Kievan Rus.

¹⁷ The Kårstad rock is located in Norway. The inscription dates back to the 5th century. Only the first line can be deciphered, which is usually translated as "I, who come from an another land" or, more briefly, "I, the stranger." The runic inscription is combined with rock carvings of ships and a swastika.

on a runic buckle from Strand,¹⁸ while Odin's song, the text of the third, includes inscriptions on Varangian tombstones located in Sweden.

Despite the fact that rune stones were erected at Viking burial sites, Romberg prefers to interpret the inscriptions in a positive and even romantic way. In his introduction to the concert that opened the festival *Bayan and Bayanists XXXV*,¹⁹ at which the *Requiem* was first performed by the contemporary choral music ensemble *Altro coro* (artistic director and conductor — Alexander Ryzhinsky; accordion — Maria Vlasova), the composer emphasised his view that, in their journeying to the East, the Vikings found not death but love. According to this interpretation, many neither fell in battle nor returned home but instead remained in a foreign land to be with those they had come to love.

The runic inscriptions (given in translation) are incorporated into Romberg's English-language poetic text, which, in essence, represents a poetic fantasy-reflection on the life of the Vikings, past and present. The fragmentary lines from the stones served as an initial impulse for a reconstruction of the lost part of the cultural whole. The composer uses a variety of techniques of lexical repetition:

anaphora, epiphora, anadiplosis, and symploce. These stylistic figures, which are characteristic of the poetry of ancient times, give the texts of the *Requiem* a special expressiveness and brightness, as well as incantatory features.

In addition to the runic inscriptions, signs of other eras are introduced into the verbal basis of the *Requiem*. For example, in the second part, there is mention of Gremory, a demon described in the magical spell book *Lemegeton*,²⁰ which was compiled in the 17th century. Gremory has always been portrayed as appearing in the form of a seductive woman possessing knowledge of the past, present and future, who uses this knowledge to help men win love. The appearance of this figure is not accidental. As already mentioned, Romberg offers his own interpretation of the Varangian campaigns and the story of the Vikings' failure to return.

In general, in the texts of the *Requiem*, the past and the present are closely intertwined. This is achieved not only through the inclusion of fragments of runic inscriptions that resound in the modern language of global communication, but also thanks to the use of the recursive "mise en abyme" technique.²¹ Thus, the second part of the composition contains the following lines:

¹⁸ The buckle was found at the Strand farm in Åfjord in Trøndelag county. Dating back to the 8th century. The runic inscription is interpreted by researchers as symbolising protection from ghosts and the dead. In a letter to the authors of the present article, Romberg points out that in ancient Scandinavian culture, people sought to protect themselves from spirits at the same time as viewing them as a source of energy and knowledge about another world. According to the composer, he tried to reflect both of these aspects in his music.

¹⁹ The concert took place on December 13, 2023 at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music. The premiere of *Requiem* took place in Petrozavodsk on March 15, 2024, as part of the All-Russian Day of Bayan, Accordion and Harmonica. The composition was performed by the chamber choir of the Petrozavodsk Conservatory under the direction of Olga Shmakova, with the accordion part performed by Ksenia Egorova.

²⁰ Also known as the *Lesser Key of Solomon*. As well as representing collection of texts on magic, the book presents information about Christian demonology and goetia.

²¹ A special case of self-reference, realised in the form of "text within a text," "film within a film," "image within an image," etc.

Memories of those you loved
 are hidden in the runes
 The requiem of the runes
 are sounding though the tunes

 Ghosts sing the requiem,
 the requiem of the runes

Here the effect of metonymic reproduction of the figure within itself arises since what the ghosts sing is nothing other than Romberg's *Requiem*.

The Norwegian composer arranges the texts in a special sequence. In the verses of the first part, the dominant position is occupied by the first-person singular and plural pronouns (I and we). In the text of the second part, the emphasis is on the second-person personal pronoun (you). The verbal basis of the third part is based entirely on third person singular and plural pronouns (he, she, they). As a result, the semantic space is characterised by a constant change in narrative point of view, switching from the narrators of the story to the characters to whom it is narrated. The change in narrative perspective — transition from internal to external focalisation, from a shared view to an external view — determines the semantic stereophony of the work and simultaneously facilitates the interpretation of all events beyond the passage of time. By thus recreating the model of an ancient text, Romberg acts simultaneously as a restorer and a mystifier, both filling in lost meanings and introducing new ones.

The analysis of the poetic sources underlying Romberg's choral works demonstrates that a significant part of the composer's creative consciousness is made up of a deep archaism that rehearses connections with mythological and neo-mythological traditions. The artistic world of his choral works is based on a special chronotope in which the boundaries between different times and spaces are erased. The combination of different languages and cultures, traditions and beliefs in this world

endows it with magical properties, in which the real and the fantastic, the spiritual and the demonic, are combined. The choice of texts demonstrates Romberg's gravitation towards subjects and motifs that can reflect universal and timeless themes.

Features of Musical Stylistics

We will discuss features of the musical style of Romberg's choral works in more detail on the example of his three choral opuses: *Aradia*, *Rúnatal* and *Requiem of Runes*.

In *Aradia*, the composer attempts to recreate ancient ritual music. In order to express his vision of ancient art, he uses a whole panoply of artistic means. Just as Leland's book combined pagan (Etruscan) and Christian beliefs, so the musical language of this choral cycle intertwines various intonational spheres: diatonicism, reminiscent of medieval Gregorian chants and organa, and chromaticism, referring both to the music of Ancient Greece and to the style of Western European romanticism.

The severe and strict colouring of the sound is largely determined by the peculiarities of the choral texture including use of the harmonic vertical, in which parallelism of intervals (primarily fifths, fourths, thirds) and triads prevails. Choral voices often move mono-rhythmically.

Analysis of the interaction of the parts indicates that the composer largely proceeds from the principles of medieval diaphony. At the same time, he manifests it rather diversely in the context of polyphony. For example, in No. 2 (*The Sabbath*), all the voices are often divided into two layers: the leading melodic line is entrusted to the soprano, to which the altos join in parallel fifths a little later; the remaining voices (tenors and basses) perform a background function (Example No. 1).

In No. 3 (*The Charm of the Stones*) the soprano is contrasted with the monolith

Example No. 1

Martin Romberg. *Aradia*. No. 2, mm. 49–53²²

49

sei il cor - po nos - tro sen - za di te non pot - trem - mo vi - ve - re tu che pri - ma di di - ve - ni - re fa - ri - na,

pp

non pot - trem - mo vi - ve - re tu che pri - ma di di - ve - ni - re fa - ri - na, *pp*

cor tro za Scon -

sei cor - po nos - tro sen - za di te non pot - trem - mo vi - ve - re tu che pri - ma di di - ve - ni - re fa - ri - na, Scon -

sei nos sen te trem re pri ni - re fa - ri - na,

Example No. 2

Martin Romberg. *Aradia*. No. 3, mm. 180–191

180

- na - - - - - Di - a - - - - - na Di - a - na

che tu non ab - bia - - né pa - ce né be - ne che tu po - sa vi - ve - re in pe - na,

che tu non ab - bia - - né pa - ce né be - ne che tu po - sa vi - ve - re in pe - na,

che tu non ab - bia - - né pa - ce né be - ne che tu po - sa vi - ve - re in pe - na,

of the lower voices not only by its rhythmic pattern, but also by its intonational chromaticism (Example No. 2).

The imitative type of exposition is used extremely rarely in *Aradia*. In particular, imitative echoes are found only in No. 2 (*The Sabbath*) and No. 4 (*Diana and Endymion*).

The main principle of intonation is syllabic. While chants also occasionally, appear, but, as a rule, they include no more than four sounds. In addition to the orientation towards ancient medieval monody, the preference for the syllabic style seems to have been influenced by the works of Igor Stravinsky (*Oedipus Rex*)

²² From here on the fragments of musical examples are taken from the scores provided to the authors by Martin Romberg. In the score of *Aradia*, all movements have continuous bar numbering.

and Carl Orff (*Carmina Burana*), the ancient Latin text of which is intoned in precisely this way. The creation of a quasi-archaic style is also facilitated by the non-vibrato style of singing. According to the composer, *Aradia* should be performed with a “clean” and even sound, practically devoid of expression.

The melodic lines of the choral voices often have a smooth character, based on chants with a limited range. In this regard, the beginning of No. 1 (*Introduction*) is already indicative, opening with a two-part choral melody: against the background of the sustained sound of the tenors, a gradual melodic line of the altos moves (Example No. 3).

The variation of diatonicism (Aeolian and Phrygian *E-flat*) into which elements of chromaticism of the ancient Greek type (containing an augmented second, Example No. 4) are later introduced, creates a fantastical sound profile.

In the numbers dedicated to the theme of love, the diatonicism of Gregorian chant is combined with the chromaticism typical of Western European romanticism. The most characteristic in this respect is No. 5 (*The Invocation of Love*), the beginning of which is written in *C Aeolian*, while the culmination is oriented towards the chromatic style of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* (Example No. 5).

The contoured two-part tone of the altos and basses in bars 383–384 is identical to Wagner’s leitmotif of yearning (transposed a minor second down). The triple beat and the stop on the dominant seventh chord in bar 384 reinforce the association. The appearance of the *Tristan* allusion correlates with the text: at this moment the soprano sings the lines “And may I then make love to her until / Our souls with joy are fully satisfied,” and the rest of the choir sings virtually every letter in the word “I’amore” (love). In private correspondence

Example No. 3

Martin Romberg. *Aradia*. No. 1, mm. 1–5

Misterioso ♩ = 50

S.
A.
T.
B.
B.

Quan-do i-o sa-rò par-ti-ta daques-to mon-do... qual-un-que co-sa di cui av-re-te bi-so-gno... U-na

Quan-do qual un - que U-na

U-na

Example No. 4

Martin Romberg. *Aradia*. No. 1, mm. 17–20, soprano part

pp

Vi rit-tro-ver - e-te in u-na sel-va tut-te in-si-me ad a-do-ra-re lo spi-ri-to po-ten-te di mi-a.

Example No. 5

Martin Romberg, *Aradia*. No. 5, mm. 379–384

379

bel-la come e-ra pri-ma e co-si po-tre-mo fa-re al-l'a mo-re fi-no a sod-dis-fa-re le nos-tre a-ni-me in-fi-ne per

- a l'a - - m - - - - o - - re

- a l'a - - m - - - - o - - re

- a l'a - - m - - - - o - - re

- a l'a - - m - - - - o - - re

with the authors of this article, the composer, however, insists that the similarity to Wagner's leitmotif is unintentional. He considers this coincidence to be a natural consequence of the language of tonal music, whose vocabulary has been enriched with many stable lexemes over the centuries of its existence.

The chromatic "distortion" of polyphony, which is clearly oriented toward the medieval parallel organum, appears in *Aradia* as a kind of musical analogue of the "distorted" rites of witches, which, as noted above, contain a clear echo of the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

In the Witches' Mass, Romberg also uses innovative techniques of choral writing, in particular, he resorts to elements of the technique of phonemic composition and *Klangfarbenmelodie*, which ensure "active interaction of musical sounds simultaneously in horizontal, vertical and depth dimensions." [10, p. 87] Thus, a specific timbre-texture effect is created in No. 2 thanks to a special verbal disposition: while the text is fully developed in the soprano and first bass parts, only its individual syllables and vowel sounds are intoned by the second basses and tenors (see Example No. 1).

At the end of No. 4 (*Diana and Endymion*), in the words *innamorato* and *mi*, the composer separates the sonorant consonant "m," voicing it separately in the bass part. A special acoustic effect is created by the alternation of *solo* and *tutti* in the soprano part and the imitation of the solo replica by the altos. At the same time, the tenors perform the final syllables of the words *innamorato*, *sconguirerà*, *correrò*, to "illuminate" these words timbrally (Example No. 6).

The characteristic sound image of No. 6 (*Incantation of the Wine*) is defined by the technique of *glissando*, which is carried out both within fairly narrow intervals (minor and major seconds) and wider ones (fourths and fifths). Romberg combines it with elements of phonemic technique. Thus, the number begins with a full choral sound (only the second bass part is absent). However, the altos and sopranos enter with a slight delay (a sixteenth and an eighth note, respectively). In the words *bevo*, *che*, and *vino* the initial consonants are cut off, which are voiced only by male voices, while *glissando* is directed in the opposite direction (descending versus ascending in tenors). The culmination of this technique is the word *trasformato* (transformed). It is fully intoned only in basses, while in other voices it is only

Example No. 6

Martin Romberg. *Aradia*. No. 4, mm. 301–311

301 *pp* solo tutti solo

ques-to cuo - re chi un - que si - a inn - a - mo - ra - to se mi
 ques-to cuo - re chi un - que si - inn - a - mo - ra - to
 ques-to cuo - re ra - to
 ques-to cuo - re m mo - ra - to m - i
 ques-to cuo - re m mo - ra - to m - i

partially intoned (Example No. 7): in the tenors the initial consonants disappear (...*asformato*), in the sopranos and altos the entire first syllable disappears (...*formato*). All this contributes to a special iridescent sound, reflecting the main image — the transformation of wine into Diana’s blood. The sliding motion also creates a slightly dizzying effect.

Aradia’s magical sound is greatly aided by a variety of speech techniques. In No. 5 (*The Invocation of Love*), the rhythmic

speech in the soprano part is accompanied by the phonemic material of the remaining voices of the choir, alternating the consonant “m” and the vowel “a.” No. 7 (*Laverna*) opens with an ostinato second figure in the basses, against which background the sopranos and altos whisper the text.

As the cycle unfolds, the number of specific techniques increases. In the same way, the intonational sphere gradually becomes more complex. In this regard, a comparison

Example No. 7

Martin Romberg. *Aradia*. No. 6, mm. 426–430

426

a - na, e da i - no_ si è for - ma - to
 a - na, e da i - no_ si è for - ma - to
 a - na, che da vi - no_ si è as - for - ma - to
 a - na, che da vi - no_ si è tras - for - ma - to

of the first and last numbers of the cycle is especially indicative. The *Introduction* was written in *E-flat minor*, based on variant diatonics (alternation of the 2nd and its lower degree, as well as the natural and harmonic 7th) with a minimal inclusion of chromatic harmonies (rare appearances of hemiola tetrachords and semitone consonances). In *Laverna*, the main theme is based on a diminished mode (the octatonic scale) (Example No. 8).

The choral works *Rúnatal* and *Streghe* were created in the same year as *Aradia*. Their musical language is close to the “witches’ mass.” The similarity is ensured by related intonation patterns: narrow-ranged chants falling seconds, and chanting of sounds. In *Streghe*, solo parts are also introduced. A significant role is also played by the commonality of individual textural techniques such as parallelisms of fourths, fifths, and sixths. Sometimes there are repeated elements present. For example, the opening invocation of *Rúnatal* is reminiscent of the introduction to No. 2 of *Aradia*. In both cases, a small-interval juxtaposition of the triad and the fifth-octave chord with a grace note in the soprano part arises.

At the same time, the harmonic vertical in *Rúnatal* is more astringent, being permeated

with a large number of dissonances. In addition, this composition differs from the “witch” cycles in terms of its rhythm. The choir uses alternations and simultaneous combinations of duplets and triplets, as well as reversed dotted rhythms; there is frequent metrical variability. All these features seem to reflect the linguistic specificity of the text and its verse meter, which, we recall, was originally written in Old Icelandic.

The predominant type of textural writing in *Rúnatal* is the homophonic-harmonic style of presentation. This is evidenced by the clear functional distribution of voices: the basses often play the role of the harmonic foundation (their part is either based on a sustained sound or creates motion on intervals of fourths or fifths that make up the the scale degrees of I, IV and V of the resultant scale); in cases where they do not duplicate the main melodic voice, the middle voices perform the function of harmonic support, while the leading melodic line, as a rule, is entrusted to the soprano (see Example No. 9).

In the given example, the archaism of the sound is provided by the quartal doubling of the altos and tenors, as well as the reliance on the Phrygian mode in *D*, whose diatonicism is infringed by the intervallic parallelism

Example No. 8

Martin Romberg. *Aradia*. No. 7, mm. 482–486

The musical score for Example No. 8 consists of five staves. The top staff is the soprano line, followed by the alto and tenor lines (which are quartally doubled), and the bass line. The piano accompaniment is shown in the bottom two staves. The score is in E-flat major (three flats) and 4/4 time. It begins at measure 482. The lyrics are: "pos - sa por - ta - re a me mi - o fig - lio, e che pos - sa guar - dar - mi da qua - lun - pe - ri - co - lo. che". Dynamic markings include *p* (piano) and *pp* (pianissimo). The score ends at measure 486.

Example No. 9

Martin Romberg. *Rúnatal*, mm. 58–60

58

fræ - vask ok fró - ðr ve - ra ok va - xa ok vel ha - fask,

fræ - vask ok fró - ðr ve - ra ok va - xa ok vel ha - fask,

fræ - vask ok fró - ðr ve - ra ok va - xa ok vel ha - fask,

ok va - xa ok vel ha - fask,

of the middle voices, which introduce “conflicting” sounds into the harmonic vertical.

The appeal to the homophonic type of writing is natural, given the generic reference of the choral subtitle to the runic song of Odin.

Runic songs, as it is well known, were based on dialogic form, performed alternately either by two singers sitting opposite from each other and holding hands, or by the leading singer and the chorus. The structure of the chant often had a question-and-answer character, which was due to the alliteration and parallelism typical of runic poetry. A peculiar refraction of these patterns is revealed in the compositional structure of *Rúnatal*. The chorus is dominated by the syllabic type of intonation, with the melodic lines outlining the third, fourth and fifth modal frames. In fact, each stanza of the text (let us recall that Romberg took stanzas 138–145 from *Words of Hávi* [the High One] for the chorus) is musically constructed from two similar melodic links that differ in their clausal constructions (Example No. 10).

From Example No. 10, it becomes clear that the melodic repetition is determined mainly, albeit not always, by the text (in stanza 140 similar melodic lines are performed with different texts). The musical material of the stanzas is related to itself. Thus, the beginning

of stanzas 138 and 139 represents a kind of melodic anaphora, while the incipit of stanza 140 coincides with the final refrain of stanza 139. Such intonational correspondences form a kind of analogue of the sound feature of alliterative verse.

Stanzas 141–143 repeat musically the material of stanzas 138–140, but with tonal-harmonic changes, consisting at a larger level in the form of two varied couplets (in essence, it projects the two-link form of melostrophe). This unification is due to the semantic echo: thus, stanza 138 tells of the sacrifice of Odin the man to Odin the god, while its semantic parallel may be found in stanza 141, which presents the consequences of this sacrifice (initiation, the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom, as if equivalent to a new birth); meanwhile, stanzas 139 and 142 are united by the image of the runes (in one case, Odin’s suffering for the sake of acquiring the runes is described, while the other indicates that the supreme god comprehended the image and meaning of the runes); stanzas 140 and 143 are connected by an abundance of anthroponyms (the mythological characters Böllþorn, Bestla, Dáinn, Dvalinn, and Ásviðr are mentioned).

Stanza 144 is based on the introductory musical material of stanza 138. On the one

Example No. 10

Martin Romberg. *Rúnatal*. Stanzas 138 (soprano part), 139 (alto and soprano parts) and 140 (soprano part)

Строфа 138

p

sjal - fr sjal fum mér, — á þeim mei - ði, er mann-gi veit hvers af ró-tum
renn. Du-di du-di du - di du-di du-di dum-da, Dum du-di du-di du - di du-di du du - di dum-da,
sjal - fr sjal fum mér, á þeim mei - ði, er mann-gi veit hvers af ró-tum renn.

Строфа 139

A.

Við hlei-fi mik sæl-du né við hor-ni-gi, nýs-ta ek ni dr, nam ek upp rú-nar æ-pan-di
nam, fell ek af - tr þa - ðan. Við hlei - fi mik sæl - du né við hor - ni-gi, nýs-ta ek
ni dr, nam ek upp rú - nar æ - pan-di nam, (...) fell ek af - tr þa - ðan.

Строфа 140

S.

Fim - bul-jóð ni - u — nam ek af i - num, fræ-gja sy - ni — Böll þorns, Bes-tlu fǫ-ður,
ok ek drykk of gat ins dý - ra - mja-ðr — aus-sin Ó - ðre - - - ri.

hand, their unification is achieved by means of alliteration: the first lines of each stanza begin with the same sounds (“**Veit** ek at ek hekk” and “**Veistu**, hvé rísta skal?”). However, stanza 144 also represents a kind of summary of the whole story (Odin’s sacrifice and his discovery of the runes). Here the eight actions are listed that must be mastered in order to learn how to cast spells with the runes (the ability to cut them, paint them, comprehend their meaning,

divine with them, talk to the gods through them, create spells and neutralise them).

The reappearance of the initial musical material provides the compositional structure with the features of a frame. However, the form of *Rúnatal* remains open, since the final stanza, which functions as a kind of coda, introduces new material: the composition ends with a chorale. The change in the genre profile occurs in connection with the text. Stanza 145 first

warns against excesses in making sacrifices²³ and then narrates about Odin's return home and rise to prominence. It is significant that Romberg shifts the tonal foundation in this section: while beginning in *D Phrygian*, the stanza ends in *G# Phrygian*. In this case, the tritone polarity acts both as a sign of another existence and a symbol of exultative transformation.

Following *Rúnatal* and *Streghe*, there was a significant break in Romberg's choral work, which lasted for almost a decade. His latest choral opus, the *Requiem of Runes*, is sufficiently different from his works composed during the 2010s to mark the beginning of a new period in Romberg's choral music.

First of all, we observe that a solo accordion is introduced into the three-part choral cycle. While this unusual format is primarily due to the circumstances of its commission, for Romberg it served as a factor in his inspiration. Thus, the accordion in the *Requiem* becomes, as it were, the soul or voice of the musical narration. Sometimes its lines are contrasted with the choir, while at others the voices are duplicated; the choral sound is additionally coloured with improvisational and sometimes quite virtuosic passages.

The musical language of the *Requiem* is based on the idioms of romantic harmony with the inclusion of elements of jazz (an abundance of chords with added sixths, the repeated appearance of II_7-V_7 and dominant seventh chord chains, as well as the appearance of "blue notes" at the end of the composition). At the same time, virtually all themes are based on trichordal chants, including the interval of a fourth, and are often harmonised by plagal chord progression. These features, together with the frequent repetition of motifs, bring them closer to the style of Russian folk songs.

In the first part of the *Requiem* there is even a fleeting allusion to Glinka's song *The Lark*. In one of the verses, the composer transforms the initial motif of the main theme (Example No. 11a), replacing the ascending third to the second degree with descending stepwise motion and aligning the dotted line with quarter notes (see measures 48–49 of Example No. 11b). Not only the melodic line coincides with Glinka's song, but also the tonality, harmonisation and — in part — texture do (see the accordion part).

According to Romberg, this allusion, as in the case of Wagner's leitmotif in *Aradia*, is unintentional. The composer nevertheless confirms that the music of the *Requiem* possesses "a character and emotional depth that resonates with the Russian 'spirit'."²⁴ Be that as it may, the intonational proximity to Russian songs correlates with the content of the composition, dedicated as it is to the Viking campaigns in Ancient Rus.

In the *Requiem* possesses, the composer turns to simpler forms, such as the couplet-variation (often with a verse-chorus structure). Due to the work's reliance on harmonic structure, homophonic texture becomes dominant. However, the choral writing features of the Romberg's earlier works can also be found here. The most indicative in this regard is the second movement (*Memory*). Its opening exclamatory gesture, both in its rhythmic and harmonic form, evokes distinct associations with the introduction of *Rúnatal* and the beginning of the *Sabbath* from *Aradia*. The following narrow theme, moving in doubled fourths in soprano and alto against the sustained background of the lower voices using closed-mouth singing, recalls the quasi-archaic style of the composer's early choral works (Example No. 12).

²³ "Tis better not to pray / than too much offer; / a gift ever looks to a return. / Tis better not to send / than too much consume" (trans. by Benjamin Thorpe).

²⁴ From a letter to the authors of the present article, dated June 19, 2024.

Example No. 11a

Martin Romberg. *Requiem of Runes*. First Movement, main theme, first verse, mm. 1–7

Grave ♩ = 62

pp

Soprano
I, the stran-ger I, the ran-ger I found friend-ship in the runes Though they hurt me Though they blurt me I did seek them

Alto
I, the stran-ger I, the ran-ger I found friend-ship in the runes Though they hurt me Though they blurt me I seek

Tenor
I, the stran-ger I, the ran-ger I found friend-ship in runes Though they hurt me Though they blurt me I seek

Baryton/Bass
I, the stran-ger I, the ran-ger I found the runes Though they hurt me Though they blurt me I seek

Accordion

Example No. 11b

Martin Romberg. *Requiem of Runes*. First Movement, main theme, third verse, bars 48–52

47

p

Ah Ah Ah Ah

p

Ah Ah Ah Ah

p

Ah Ah Ah Ah

p

Ah Ah Ah Ah

f

Example No. 12

Martin Romberg. *Requiem of Runes*. Second Movement, mm. 13–23

13 **E** *p*

Ghosts are the me-mo-ry of me-mo-ry of runes They are the Gre-mo-ry of Gre-mo-ry of runes You are the cas-ter of the cas-ter of the

Ghosts are the me-mo-ry of me-mo-ry of runes They are the Gre-mo-ry of Gre-mo-ry of runes You are the cas-ter of the cas-ter of the

p

Me - mo - ry

M M M

The composer's attention to registers and tessitura comprises an essentially new element in his work. Romberg may sometimes be accused of forcing performers to step outside their singing comfort zones. In particular, the composition often uses a fairly low range of sound for all the voices (see, for example, the beginning of the first and third movements²⁵). The low tessitura seems to be intended to create the effect of "profundity": on the one hand, the depth or abyss of the times separating us from the Viking Age, and on the other, the depth of the human soul, in which there is room for both sorrow and hope. In some cases, Romberg resorts to voice-crossing between the altos and the tenors, violating the tessitura between the voices, which leads to a more strained sound (see, for example, mm. 22–23, 60 in the first movement, mm. 112–113 in the second movement). In the latter movement, this technique also contributes to timbre variation: in mm. 57–64, with the repetition of the same harmonic progression, the harmonic vertical construction is timbrally renewed through a comparison of the natural and the artificial ensemble.

An analysis of the register development and tessitura position of the voices of the third movement of the *Requiem* provides a useful background for understanding the dramatic idea that the composer is developing. This idea can be described in terms of "ascent." The outer sections (the first and fourth verses) both begin in a low register. The melody, initially assigned to the tenors and basses, gradually shifts to the first and then to the second octave. The elevation of register is accompanied by modal and intonational changes in the melody: the perfect fourth expands to a perfect fifth, the tritone is replaced by a perfect fourth, and *D minor* turns into *B-flat major*. The accompanying mood of "enlightenment"

is determined by the semantic direction of the text, in which the transition from death to love and hope takes place, reflecting the general artistic concept of the work:

They went to the East
They served in the East

Varangian lied

They fell in the East
They died in the East

Varangian lied
Varangian creed

They met in the East
They loved in the East
They yearned in the East

Varangian seed
Varangian lied

Despite the presence of apparently heterogeneous intonational and harmonic elements — Russian song, romantic harmonic language, elements of jazz and the archaism of parallel organum — Romberg's style does not give the impression of being eclectic or polystylistic. On the contrary, the indicated components appear to be melted down into some kind of organic whole.

Conclusion

The study reveals that, despite the diversity of poetic sources they draw upon, Romberg's choral works are united by an interest in antiquity, mysticism, fantasy, and mythology. The composer's attraction to archetypal plots and images, including the eternal themes associated with life, death and love is due to their universality and ability to overcome the boundaries of historical time and space. In his various interviews, Romberg argues that European civilisation has lost its mystical and metaphysical view of reality as a result of its striving for rationalism. According to

²⁵ The rather slow tempo also contributes to the challenges posed by the work to its vocal performers.

the Norwegian Neo-Romantic composer, in order to reveal their creative potential, contemporary human beings must open themselves to the experience of longing for the “other world.” Following a similar line of thought to that of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Romberg is convinced that there is an ontological kinship between music and myth due to their unique ability to overcome the antinomies of historical time.

The texts that Romberg chooses for his choral works blend Christian and pagan cults with old and new mythology. While the works of the 2010s display a clear interest in linguistic experiments (e.g., Tolkien’s Elvish language), the phonetics of language and the peculiarities of verse organisation (most indicatively in *Rúnatal*), the verbal series of his latest choral oeuvre was created by Romberg himself by using the language of international communication to integrate ancient runic inscriptions into his own (Neo-Romantic) vision of the history of the Varangian campaigns. The composer thereby strives to create a special international atmosphere, both on a verbal and a musical level. The proclamation of the victory of love over death, friendship over enmity, and the value of human life during military campaigns testifies to the humanistic orientation of his work.

The interaction of words and music in the Norwegian composer’s choral works of the is ultimately anchored in tradition due to its basis on the parallel development of these two elements. In this way, the initially bizarre mixture of paganism and Christianity embodied in the texts of *Aradia* is reflected in the modal-intonational sphere, which unites the diatonicism of medieval polyphony with the chromaticism

of late Romanticism in both hemiolic and symmetrical modes. In the *Requiem*, which is dedicated to “those who fell in the East,” elements of Russian song emerge, which are organically intertwined with archaistic and jazz elements. Happily, this multi-component nature does not create an impression of excessive stylistic variegation. The composer’s musical style is quite organic and holistic. Like the artists Jacek Yerka and Odd Nerdrum, who inspired him to create the so-called “picture” cycles of works, Romberg acknowledges his debt to the tonal techniques of the “old masters,” which have proven their relevance and viability and remain unsurpassed by other methods of composition. The language of tonal music should be based, in his opinion, on structures that are “immediately recognizable by anyone without introduction and translation”: in this respect, like mythological archetypes, tonal music should be considered as a “pre-verbal pathways of communication.”²⁶ In doing so, the Norwegian composer strives to offer the audience “a musical reality that is regenerative, not moralistic or attacking.”²⁷ Placing the central emphasis on the communicative function of music, he deliberately uses the language of pure feeling, which should be understandable to the majority of listeners.

Of course, one can see elements of kitsch in such an attitude. But Romberg is not afraid of this line of criticism. “To not embrace kitsch is rooted in the fear of being like everyone else,” the composer believes. “It is the fear of being you, because ‘you’ share the same wishes, dreams and sentiments as does everyone else on this planet.”²⁸

²⁶ From a letter to the authors of the present article, dated June 19, 2024.

²⁷ See: Rokkones O. A. *Bastionene for Fall*. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180418093001/https://www.minervanett.no/bastionene-for-fall/> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

²⁸ Nerdrum B. S. *Meet the Norwegian Composer Martin Romberg. Word Wide Kitsch*. URL: <https://worldwidekitsch.com/news-articles/the-kitsch-interview-martin-romberg/> (accessed: 10.07.2024).

Presently, it is still too early to draw any conclusions about the overall contribution of Romberg's compositional work; after all, it is still in its active phase, enabling the composer to engage in collaborations with many musical groups in Europe and

delighting fans with new compositions every year. Nevertheless, as this appraisal of his choral work demonstrates, he has already clearly managed to find his own unique niche within the framework of the contemporary metamodernist paradigm of art.

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