



New Trends in Contemporary Music: an Interview with Karmella Tsepkoenko

Dear readers of the journal

“Problemy muzykal’noj nauki/Music Scholarship”!

We are offering you an interview with Ukrainian composer and public figure, one of the leading representatives of avant-garde music, the artistic director of the festival “Two Days and Two Nights of New Music” in Odessa, Karmella Tsepkoenko. The conversation took place on April 25, 2017 in the Odessa National A. V. Nezhdanova Musical Academy (Conservatory).

Уважаемые читатели журнала

«Проблемы музыкальной науки/Music Scholarship»!

Предлагаем интервью с украинским композитором и общественным деятелем, одним из ведущих представителей авангардной музыки, организатором одесского фестиваля «Два дня и две ночи новой музыки» Кармеллой Цепкоенко. Беседа состоялась 25 апреля 2017 года в Одесской национальной музыкальной академии (консерватории) имени А. В. Неждановой.



Can you tell us about your musical and especially your compositional activities? Where did you study, who were your teachers, and how did this affect you as a composer?

Whenever I am asked this question, I always answer that I was very lucky with my teachers. Of course, my first teachers were my family. I grew up in a mixed Ukrainian-Armenian family. My father Semyon Dmitrievich Tsepkoenko was a battery technician, but at that he was a very well-read and educated person and knew many Ukrainian folk songs and fairy tales, which I listened to with great pleasure in the evenings. My mother, Mariam Georgievna Demchuran, formerly a ballerina, loved music very much and played the piano well. My grandfather played the flute and the mandolin in a virtuosic manner. At our home concerts were frequently organized, in which other members of our family also took part. My first piano teacher was Zoya Dmitrievna Parlikokosh, who was a student of Maria Mitrofanovna Starkova. At the same time, I also studied the fundamentals of composition with Ivan Dmitrievich Botvinov. By the age of six I had already written many musical compositions. At the age of six I started going to the Stolyarsky Music School studying piano with Zoya

Parlikokosh. Starting from second grade, I studied with Grigoriy Dmitrievich Buchinsky, and from sixth grade onwards – with Elena Petrovna Panikova. Starting from fifth grade, I studied composition with Alexander Lazarevich Kogan. He was a remarkable man, who greatly influenced me and my music. As far as I remember, he never prohibited me from doing anything I wanted, allowing me to compose absolutely freely, but always threw in various ideas, introducing me to specimens of painting and literature, thereby considerably broadening my artistic outlook. Having known that I was fascinated with mythology, he gave me a rare edition of a book from 1927 about Greek mythology. This kind of synthetic perception of art, which subsequently evolved into my methodology for composition, called “scenary development,” was installed initially by Alexander Lazarevich. I graduated from school, having completed studies both as a music theory major and a piano major. At the conservatory I studied piano with Ludmila Naumovna Ginzburg, a pupil of Heinrich Gustavovich Neuhaus, and composition with Alexander Alexandrovich Krasotov. Already from my student years I had participated in numerous festivals and competitions for composers.



Having completed my studies at the Odessa Conservatory, I enrolled in post-graduate studies at the Moscow Pedagogical Institute named after Lenin, where my academic adviser was Gennady Moiseyevich Tsylin. Under his guidance I defended my dissertation titled “Perfection of the Forms and Methods of the Educational Process in a Class of Musical Composition (Concerning the Issue of ‘Scenary Development’ of Musical Material)” and obtained the academic degree of Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences.

In 1988 I received an invitation to attend the Third International Festival of Contemporary Music, which then took place in Leningrad, which involved the participation of such composers as Iannis Xenakis, Gyorgy Ligeti, Krzysztof Penderecki, Luciano Berio and George Crumb – the elite of the world of contemporary composers. I was given a guest ticket to all the concerts of the festival, since I was a member of the Composers’ Union of the USSR since 1983. This presented the turning point in my compositional work. I had already composed a lot of music by then, but it was all traditional, in the Soviet vein. During those years starting with 1988 and all through the 1990s my “second compositional education” began, which was based on attendance of festivals of avant-garde music, such as “The Days of New Music” in Moldova, “Europe-Asia” in Kazan and “Gauda” in Lithuania. Particularly after the festival in Leningrad the metamorphosis of my musical thinking began. At first I found much of the music I heard there to be incomprehensible, and I had strange sensations upon hearing it. Prior to that, the only avant-garde music arriving from the West was that which was brought over upon the initiative of the composers living in the Soviet Union who asked their relatives, friends or even sailors to obtain some new musical literature, since at that time nothing was available here, except for works by Polish composers, such as Bohuslaw Schaeffer, Penderecki or Thadeusz Baird. Other Western composers, such as Boulez and Stockhausen, were portrayed to us as pertaining to an enemy culture, as “apologists of bourgeois culture.” This festival opened my eyes, as well as the eyes of many other young composers, towards a multitude of musical trends which previously were absolutely inaccessible for us. Whereas the first two International Festivals of Contemporary Music, which took place in Moscow in the 1980s, featured music by composers only from such countries as Vietnam, China and the countries of Eastern

Europe, the Third Festival was organized in a totally different way – it was moved to Leningrad, and the leading Western composers of avant-garde music were invited there. Among the composers from the Soviet Union, the music of Gubaidulina, Denisov and Schnittke, as well as a number of others, was performed there. I was especially impressed by the music of Xenakis, as well as how Zubin Mehta conducted the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. At that time it was very difficult to understand this music. There was a tremendous amount of concerts, and they were held in the most diverse types of concert halls – not only at the Grand and Small Halls of the Philharmonic Society and the Concert Hall of the Leningrad Conservatory, but also in many of the palaces, most notably, the Palace of Yusupov. At that festival there was a concert at the Philharmonic Society, which for the first time was held at night, after which we sat the rest of the night in a café with my colleagues among the composers and discussed the program. This served as one of the impulses for the conception of the idea of the festival “Two Days and Two Nights of New Music,” which was subsequently organized and directed by me (along with German percussionist, Professor Bernhard Wulff) in Odessa. After that, in 1992 I received a commission from organist Vladimir Khomyakov, who asked me to write a composition for an unusual instrumental ensemble consisting of flute, cello, organ and percussion, and promised to have me invited to the Summer Courses for Composers in Darmstadt. He had been invited to perform in Darmstadt, and he needed a program of new compositions. I was immediately excited by this idea and started to write this composition, which I gave the title “Night Preference.” This whole idea of the card game was transferred into the musical texture by me – in this composition the structure of the game is described in musical images. At that time I had not yet created my method for composition, but this piece forestalled it. It presents a sort of program music, but notated in greater detail. I went to the courses in Darmstadt twice – in 1992 and 1994. Then I attended master-classes in Bayreuth, which were taught by Romanian composer Violetta Dinescu, the courses of Helmut Lachenmann in Dresden, and various other composition courses in different European countries.

Could you tell us, how you came up with the idea of organizing the festival “Two Days and Two Nights of New Music,” when this festival began, how it was organized throughout all these years, and which musicians you invited to perform in it?



The idea for this festival was conceived during the various contemporary music festivals I had attended, starting from Leningrad, including many European ones. After the festivals' concerts, instead of going to bed, we gathered together with other composers, listened to each others' music and discussed it – sometimes this happened during a meal at the table. This way, we passed organically from one concert into another. As a result of this, I had noticed that during the course of such communication, approximately at 3 or 4 in the morning, you begin asking yourself: are you one person, or are there several people present within you? There arise certain interesting images and those influences which develop compositional creativity. After each festival I attended I regularly began composing a new musical work. Sometimes I even began composing music while still attending the festival. I have retained this habit up to now – whenever I go somewhere to a musical event, I always bring along music paper or a musical score on which I am working. Let me cite one interesting fact – I began work on my mini-mono-opera “Tonight Boris Godunov” in Lithuania, where the action of the play by Alexander Pushkin began – on the border of Lithuania. That was when I was attending the “World Music Days” contemporary music festival, organized by the ISCM (International Society for Contemporary Music), which was being held in Vilnius that year. As the result of all of my attendances of various European festivals, I myself gradually developed a strong desire to organize my own festival devoted to contemporary music. My first attempt took place in 1994, when I even compiled the entire program, since at Darmstadt I made some wonderful friends of the musicians who came there, such as Pierre-Stephane Meugé, Carin Levine, Fernando Grillo, the Ensemble für Neue Musik Zürich and the 2E2M ensemble. But wherever I had gone to ask for help, none of the governmental structures were interested in this in the least, since at that time everything was in a chaotic state, and neither the Ministry of Culture, nor the Composers' Union had any money. Then my husband, Oleksandr Perepelitsya turned to the newly opened branch of the Soros Foundation to ask them for financial assistance, and they paid my trip to Switzerland to a concert where my composition was performed. After this trip we were suggested to write the theses for several cultural projects, which the directors of the Foundation liked, and they offered Oleksandr the position of manager of cultural

projects. The same year, towards the end of 1994, we submitted a proposal, which in February 1995 was approved, and we obtained the monetary means for organizing the festival “Two Days and Two Nights of New Music.” When we received this assistance, only two months remained until the time of the planned festival, and we had to organize everything, think everything over, invite the participants, send out invitations for visas, etc. Everything which now is done in a relatively easy and painless way each year was tried out at the first festival with great effort, since all this experience for us was new and previously unknown. We spent sleepless nights working and worrying, all the communication took place by telephone, since there was no Internet at that time. However, notwithstanding all the difficulties involved, the festival took place, and literally all the guests who came to it expressed their wishes to come again next year. This is how the festival was established, and it has continued successfully since then up to the present. Our festival is an international forum for contemporary art, which includes not only music, but also theater, the visual arts and poetry. It has been compared to a symphony, a novel, or a theatrical play, all of which unfold during the course of two days and two nights. Yes, our festival is elitist in its innovative direction and bold artistic search, but it presents a living creative organism, which carries the idea of an open, democratic society and the integration of Ukrainian culture into the world space. I am sure that it has carried out its mission successfully. Here is one example: during the first years musical works by Ukrainian composers were almost never performed at the festival, since the guest musicians performed only music from their own countries. Ukrainian music was associated with Russian music, and among the latter only three composers were known – Alfred Schnittke, Edison Denisov and Sofia Gubaidulina. Musicians from other countries had no idea that there exists an Ukrainian musical culture, which is closely connected in its past not only with Soviet music, but also with European music. During the subsequent years this situation changed. Presently, an indispensable stipulation for performing in the festival is the mandatory performance by musicians from other countries of at least one work by an Ukrainian composer. Each year no less than ten ensembles and around 50 soloists come to participate in our festival: thereby, during all the years of the festival a tremendous amount of Ukrainian music has been played in it.



Presently, each of the ensembles and soloists who has participated at the Odessa festival has in their repertoire compositions which serve as examples of contemporary Ukrainian music. And these include such world famous ensembles as “Musik Fabrik,” the Percussion Ensemble of the Freiburg University of Music (Germany), “Accroche Note,” “2E2M” (France), “Wiener Collage” (Austria), the “Continuum” ensemble (USA), “Ensemble für Neue Musik Zürich” (Switzerland) and many others. Another important development of our endeavor is that these ensembles and soloists are commissioning Ukrainian composers to write compositions to be performed especially at our festival. The makeup of our listeners have also has changed, having become younger in their age and more numerous in their quantity.

We are setting up great plans for 2019, when our festival shall celebrate its 25th anniversary, for which date we shall think over the program of the festival most painstakingly, and we already have some preliminary agreements. It is already known that the Jugendliche Symphonische Orchester is going to come to our festival that year – this is an assembled German orchestra comprised of musicians from various cities in Germany, which is now directed by flutist Carin Levine. She herself shall also come to our festival and will perform a program of contemporary music in our Solo-solissimo cycle. She performed in the very first Solo-solissimo cycle of our very first festival, and this cycle virtually began with her performance. I wrote a piece for solo flute for her performance at the festival, which I called “Carin Sounds.”

Please tell us about your own music, about the main features and parameters of your musical style and about some of the most representative of your musical compositions.

My music is written in an innovative style and makes use of a wide range of contemporary extended techniques for the achievement of expressive, depictive and theatrical effects. I cannot say that I always work in the same style, whether it is pointillism, the dodecaphonic technique, sonorism or anything else. It seems to me that in each of my compositions everything is determined by the scenario. In some cases it could even be a combination or blending of several different styles. If it is necessary for the sake of image-related expression, I could make use of pointillism – while a pitch series is essentially present in any musical composition. Since I communicate regularly with

a large number of interesting musicians in Europe, I have compositions for solo instruments written for particular soloists, who have also performed my works for irregular ensembles of performers, in which I have used non-standard combinations of instruments for the creation of unusual and innovative sound effects. An example of the latter is my composition “...und auch der Wind wohnt...” for contrabass flute, contrabass saxophone and tuba, in which this extraordinary combination of instruments generates a special kind of musical development and the achievement of the innovative sound effects that are present in this work. I have written a number of operas and musical-theatrical compositions which have been staged in various countries in Europe, in which I have made use of colorful vocal and instrumental effects for the intensification of dramatic effects.

In the 1980s I developed a special method of composing which is conducive for form-generation and achievement of the identity of musical form and dramaturgy, which I use in teaching at the Odessa National Academy of Music (formerly the Odessa Conservatory). I discovered this method in 1983. That year I had the wish to participate in the Carl Maria von Weber Competition, and I had to compose a string quartet. My professor had a very negative attitude towards string quartets, and this dislike towards this ensemble, naturally, was picked up by me. I wished to compose this work, anyhow, in order to take part in this competition, but could not force myself to write this work. I turned to my friend poet Vladimir Grigoryevich Razhnikov, who was a psychologist, a Doctor of Sciences and, moreover, wrote poetry and was always ready to share his new ideas. I asked him to help me and think of a way which would be able to help me write a composition for string quartet. He thought it over for a long time and came up with the idea of the four musicians in the string quartet ensemble representing the four elements – water, earth, fire and air. As the result of his suggestion, I wrote this composition with great ease, since it was solely this idea, without any scenary development, without any step-by-step direction, stirred a creative urge, aroused musical images and enabled me to compose this work, which received a prize at this competition. After this, my following compositions were written by me together with him. I expressed the wish to write compositions for specific ensembles, he came up with ideas or wrote epigraphs, and this was conducive for me to compose music. One of the first compositions

written by me in this fashion was “The Story of the Puritan Flute” for the “Pastoral” ensemble, which existed during those years in Odessa, consisting of a non-standard ensemble of instruments: flute, oboe, violin, cello and harpsichord. This composition also presented a case of “scenary development,” albeit the second kind – the plot-related. There also exists the literary type of “scenary development,” when the musical elaboration is connected with the literary text. The plot-related scenary development has more resemblance to operatic dramaturgy, when the composer creates for himself or herself a structural plan resembling a libretto, but he or she does not demonstrate it or tell about it to anybody. All of this is described in my book “Formirovanie osobennostey studentov-kompozitorov (osnovnye printsipy metodiki prepodavaniya v klasse kompozitsii)” [“The Formation of Individual Features in Student Composers (the Basic Principles of Methodology of Teaching a Composition Class”], published in Odessa in 2008, which describes in detail the method of scenary development for instruction for student composers.

Could you tell us about your colleagues among the composers living in Odessa, or those who have lived there recently, whose artistic presence in the city is significant, and whose music has been performed in your festival?

In Odessa I have always been surrounded by worthy colleagues, with whom I had very friendly relations, and together with whom we have formed the Odessa composers’ school. First of all, I must mention my closest friend and colleague was Julia Gomelskaya, a brilliant person and composer of numerous significant compositions, many of which have been performed in our festival and in many European countries, including Moscow. Her tragic death in December 2016 in a car accident has created an irretrievable loss among the musicians of Odessa. This year a whole block of her musical compositions was presented at our festival, which included her works written with contemporary musical means: the string quartet “From the Bottom of the Soul,” “Hutsulka – Dance for Piano and Percussion,” “DiaDem” for two violins, as well as works for childrens’ chorus and female chorus, which elaborated Ukrainian folk songs. Our colleague, Ludmila Samodayeva, was an active participant of the Odessa musical life for a long time; she has recently moved away to Mexico, having promised to return to Odessa in a few years. Our other colleague, Alyona Tomlyonova now lives in

Moscow. Presently a new generation of composers has grown up, among which the following are especially noteworthy: Asmati Chebolashvili, a very talented composer from Georgia, now living in Odessa, whose music is frequently performed at our festival; Svitlana Azarova, who is presently residing in Holland; Natalia Cherbi, a student of Julia Gomelskaya, presently living in Poland; Anna Tikhoplav, a very good composer, whose music was successfully presented at the festival this year. Among the older generation, special respect was always merited by Alexander Krasotov, who passed away, and Yan Mikhaylovich Freidlin, who now lives in Israel.

Which of your compositions have recently been performed in European countries during the past years or are planned to be performed recently?

Since I started traveling to Europe to attend master-classes in the early 1990s, I have made friends with many remarkable musicians and musical ensembles, many of which have commissioned me or asked me to write music for them. For this reason, since those years my music has been performed in Europe. My first work performed in Europe was “The Endless Sameness of the Sun” for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano, and it was performed in Switzerland by the Ensemble für Neue Musik Zürich. My music is frequently played at the “World Music Days” festival organized by the ISCM (International Society for Contemporary Music) in different countries of the world. I have been the president of the Ukrainian section of the ISCM since 1997, and so I have regularly attended these festivals. In addition, my music has been performed in many other concerts and festivals of contemporary music in Europe. In 2009 my composition for piano trio was played at the Jurgenson Salon in Moscow by the “20th Century” ensemble directed by Maria Khodina. Of course, it has been performed in Odessa at the “Two Days and Two Nights of New Music” festival, in Kiev and Lviv. Soon I am planning to go to Lviv to the “Contrasts” festival festival, and to Kiev to the Musikfest festival.

Anton A. Rovner

Ph.D. in Music Composition from Rutgers University
(New Jersey, USA), Candidate of Arts (Ph.D.)
from the Moscow State Conservatory,
faculty member at the Department
of Interdisciplinary Specializations for Musicologists
of Moscow State P. I. Tchaikovsky Conservatory
ORCID: 0000-0002-5954-3996,
antonrovner@mail.ru