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ScienceDirect

Russian Literature 79–80 (2016)

**Russian
Literature**

www.elsevier.com/locate/ruslit

AJGI: MUSIC TO NAME THE DIVINE

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Abstract

This essay argues that music and sound are as significant in Aigi's poetic world as are visual forms and images, with important implications for the poet's distinctive theology. His poetry responds to and itself resounds as music. The essay describes his strong personal connections to musicians and composers, and argues that his distinctive rhythms come from musical forms, not traditional poetic meters. For Aigi, meter is constraining but rhythm is expressive and inspiring. The essay treats a small number of poems, concentrating on 'Motsart: "Kassatsiia I"' ('Mozart: "Cassation I"' (1977), with its unusual rhetorical features and crucial use of repetition. The poem strives to create something like a musical chord and to layer its words in a way that reaches for unearthly, divine revelations. In showing the poem's theological implications, particularly its negative theology, and its use of musical forms, the essay draws on theoretical writings by Albright, Adorno, and Derrida.

Keywords: *Gennadii Aigi; Music; Rhythm*

The work of Gennadij Ajgi challenges multiple traditions of what it means to be a Russian poet, and taking full account of his position as a central figure in late twentieth-century Russian poetry requires that we understand how radically, indeed how insistently, he also stood outside it. The expression in his life and works of this outside-ness (what Bakhtin would call "внеаходимость") is familiar but worth reminding ourselves: Ajgi came to Russian as

his second language, and was oriented as a poet as much by the radical innovations of modern European poetry as by anything within Russia. He was inspired by French poetry, particularly by the innovative work of Baudelaire, Jacob, and Char; he learned as well from the more jagged edges of work by German master modernists, principally Kafka and Celan. Within Russian culture, his most admired figures were also nearly all outsiders, many of them from the visual and performing arts, as he often noted proudly.¹ Perhaps because of these affiliations, or perhaps because of his own artistic temperament, Ajgi worked with words as if they were also visual signs and musical symbols. We are still trying to understand what that experiment in *panaesthetics*, if I can use Daniel Albright's term, means in Ajgi's poetic world.² This essay takes up only one part of that question, how his poetry responds to and itself resounds as music, and it does so by concentrating on a single, and rather unusual poem. I want to suggest, in the terms Albright offered in his discussion of a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley, that Ajgi can be understood in some texts, including the one discussed here, as "a composer who uses words instead of notes".³ What melodies are those words meant to play, whose praises do they sing, and how are readers to hear them?

Perhaps because Ajgi's poems are also visually striking, often turning on arresting visual imagery, and perhaps because the poems frequently thematize silence, we may have underestimated the role of music and sounds in his creating a poetic world at the margins of Russian poetry or, when we have appreciated the music, not fully appreciated why the music matters. For all their evocations of silence and quiet, or perhaps because of the vast quietness in which he is able to settle his readers for moments of intense listening, his poems are oriented toward sounds, melodies, and especially rhythms, and in this sense he is staking out a strong position in a border zone between poetry and music. His friendships with Andrej Volkonskij, Sof'ja Gubajdulina, Valentin Sil'vestrov, and other Soviet composers show up in the dedications of poems, confirming his ambition to place his poems in the world of musical composition; those poems also show us his many ways of absorbing the lessons of their radically inventive compositional work. Music is a theme or point of reference in many poems, and the musical or rhythmic features of Ajgi's poems are distinctive, varied, and often deceptively complex.

His rhythms, one could argue, derive as much from the musical tradition as from poetic conventions. In a documentary film made in 2001, Ajgi explained that his fascination was with rhythm, not meter – a distinction by which he meant not the contrast of underlying vs. realized metrical structure, as the terms are technically used by poetry scholars, but rather a rejection of conventional, regular poetic meter in favor of unpredictable, changing rhythmic phrases as he sensed them in the natural world.⁴ In articulating and evaluating that contrast between meter and rhythm, Ajgi approaches these

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