

**ALEXANDER I. DEMCHENKO***Saratov State L. V. Sobinov Conservatory, Center for Comprehensive Art Studies  
Saratov, Russia**ORCID: 0000-0003-4544-4791, alexdem43@mail.ru*

## **The Horizons of Otherness<sup>1</sup>** ***Towards the 85th Anniversary of the Birth of Alfred Schnittke***

Alfred Schnittke in his music had prognosed the future on numerous occasions. And one of his most important prognoses consisted in the increasing danger of the absorption of the human element by the cosmic. The paths of approaching towards modeling the processes of cosmization traversed through the ascension towards various types of abstractions and through the “globalization” of sound material. The fluids of cosmism are also clearly perceptible in the pantheistic pictures created by the composer. Stemming from such artistic solutions, the composer had frequently risen towards the heights of extratemporal categories, which undoubtedly marked his immersion into the sphere of cosmogony. As such, the transformation of earthly civilization into a cosmic otherness is presented with the greatest tangibility in two compositions. Schnittke’s electronic piece created by him on the famous “ANS” synthesizer which received the title of “The Stream” (1969) demonstrates the impending situation of total absorption of all manifestations of the human element, making the music a sound-noise analogy of the matter of the universe, its enigmatic Something and Nothing and suggesting an apocalyptic feeling of the inevitability of global catastrophe. The examined issue received all-encompassing elaboration in the Second Symphony (1979), where in a metaphorical form the path of European civilization is traced out from its sources from Medieval times and up to its inevitable outcome in the hypothetical future by means of the transition of earthly matter into a certain cosmic dimension, which makes the present composition a manifest of the already begun process of metamorphosis of human existence into a dimly perceived otherness.

**Keywords:** ideas of cosmism in the music of Alfred Schnittke, the Second Symphony of Schnittke, the electronic music of Schnittke.

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<sup>1</sup> In this proposed article it is necessary to draw the attention of the connoisseurs of the art of contemporary music to those artistic quests of the outstanding composer which have not yet found the proper presentation in the literature of art studies (the texts quoted below are cited from the author’s book “Alfred Shnitke. Konteksty i kontsepty” [“Alfred Schnittke. Contexts and Concepts”] [3]).

**А. И. ДЕМЧЕНКО**

*Саратовская государственная консерватория имени Л. В. Собинова  
Центр комплексных художественных исследований, г. Саратов, Россия  
ORCID: 0000-0003-4544-4791, alexdem43@mail.ru*

**Горизонты инобытия  
К 85-летию со дня рождения Альфреда Шнитке**

Альфред Шнитке в своей музыке не раз прогнозировал будущее. И один из важнейших его прогнозов состоял в нарастающей опасности поглощения человеческого начала космическим. Пути приближения к моделированию процессов космизации пролегли через восхождение к разного рода абстракциям и через «глобализацию» звуковой материи. Флюиды космизма явственно ощутимы также в пантеистических картинах, созданных композитором. От подобных художественных решений Шнитке не раз поднимался к высотам вневременных категорий, что несомненно отмечало вхождение в сферу космогонии. Собственно трансформация земной цивилизации в космическое инобытие с наибольшей осязаемостью представлена в двух сочинениях Шнитке. Созданная им на знаменитом синтезаторе «АНС» композиция и получившая весьма характерное название «Поток» (1969) демонстрирует надвигающуюся ситуацию тотального поглощения любых проявлений человеческого начала, делая музыку звукошумовым аналогом вселенской материи, её загадочного Нечто и Ничто и внушая апокалиптическое чувство неотвратимости глобальной катастрофы. Всеобъемлющую разработку рассматриваемая проблема получила во Второй симфонии (1979), где в метафорической форме прослеживается путь европейской цивилизации от её истоков времён Средневековья к неизбежному исходу в гипотетическом будущем посредством перехода земной материи в некое космическое измерение, что делает данное произведение манифестом уже начавшегося процесса перерождения человеческого бытия в смутно прозреваемое инобытие.

**Ключевые слова:** идеи космизма в музыке Альфреда Шнитке, Вторая симфония Шнитке, электронная музыка Шнитке.

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**A**lfred Schnittke in his music did not limit himself to recounting about life in the second half of the 20th century, of which he was a witness and participant. The composer constantly immersed himself into the distant past (above all things, with the aim of juxtaposing it with contemporaneity), utilizing in this case the resources of polystylistics as the leading aesthetical-technological system

for his musical oeuvres. But, in addition, he frequently foretold the future. And one of his most important prognoses was quite dismal – namely, that of the surging dangers of the absorption of the human element by the cosmic.

At first, let us highlight some of the paths of his approach towards the modeling of the processes of cosmization. One such path lay through the ascent toward various types

of abstraction. This is rather characteristic of the composer's late opuses, with their commonly characteristic flight of abstract thought – a type of thought from which one may sense the wave of sublime cold of snowy mountain peaks (one striking example is the first movement of the Eighth Symphony). Another channel was served by the “globalization” of the sound material. On the whole, Schnittke declared himself rather early in his life as an artist of a planetary scope: already on the student bench, in his oratorio “Nagasaki,” and in reality – in the First Symphony. Incidentally, at its end we find a rather distinct insinuation of a universal catastrophe, when the phonosphere crumbles into “cosmic dust” among which fragments of “human” music flicker.

Among these fragments are the final measures of Haydn's “Farewell Symphony.” Moreover, it is absolutely not by chance that they are given in a tape recording, and not in live performance and for this reason are perceived “as the sounds of a radio speaker which has survived amid smouldering ruins. There is no more life, only remembrances of it have remained” (Elena Shabshaevich).

Speaking of globality, mention must be made of the fact that later in Schnittke's work two variants of its semantic filling have evolved: the first in the form of the intimidating weighty footfall of the industrial Moloch with the influxes of iron darkness-smog and the estrangement from all the human element accompanying them (the 3rd movement of the Third Symphony); the second – as a grandiose austere-hymnical apotheosis personifying the “Oecumenical Council” of humanity, which extends praise to the universe (the general culmination of the Finale of the First Cello Concerto).

The fluids of cosmism are likewise unmistakably perceptible in the pantheistic pictures created by the composer. The most grandiose of them may be found by

us in the first movement of the selfsame **Third Symphony** (1981). In its form this is a gigantic prelude (a sort of “ecological” prologue to the composition), which unfolds in three large waves – each of them in a uniform evolution from a desolate rumble in the lowest register to an extra powerful culmination based on a literally roaring vibration of the orchestral mass with the scale of the coverage of the texture from the top to the bottom, which generates the impression of hypercolossality. Thereby the panorama of the contemporary worldwide existence as a certain pre-matter in its inharmonious, circumlocutory fluctuation and primary matter element thrice cresting from blind chaos to a no less blind magma of its state in the era of urbanization. Having made use of such resultant characteristics as *blind chaos* and *blind magma*, it becomes proper to specify that compositionally all of this “anarchy” is based on complex calculations (such is one of the paradoxes of contemporary music).

Not touching upon the system of quotations, quasi-quotations and allusions characteristic to Schnittke, comprising the “chrestomathy” of Austrian-German music (it suffices for us to notice that the initial motive reminds of the equally pantheistic Introduction to Wagner's “Das Rheingold,” but in *C major* instead of *E-flat major*), mention must be made of the most essential constructive elements: first of all, each of the three waves is initiated by a different group of instruments – the strings in the beginning, then the woodwinds and, finally, the brass; second, the texture is based on contrapuntal layerings, including the use of the technique of endless canon, and the number of the lines-voices is brought almost up to seventy (Alexander Ivashkin fairly observed “the unique many-layer element and contrapuntal complexity of the score”); and, third, using the overtone

series in the main theme, Schnittke brings the music closer to the natural primordiae and thereby enables the creation of the impression of an objectivistic character of the depicted natural element.

From such rather relevant artistic solutions Schnittke frequently rose to the heights of extratemporal categories, which undoubtedly marked the entry into the sphere of cosmogony. Thus, in a number of episodes in the **Fourth Symphony** the composer repeatedly turns his gaze to Eternity (with the greatest distinctness in the bell-like postlude). Most symptomatic is the conclusion of the **Piano Quintet**: with the last statements of the *ostinato* melody the sound gradually evaporates, as if dissolving in the far reaches of eternity. No less characteristic is the ending of the **New Amsterdam Sinfonietta** (the authorized orchestral version of the String Trio), where the sound points of the final “ellipsis” ascend the overtone scale, evaporating in the heights of Eternity and Infinity.

It must be acknowledged that the idea of such a finishing dissolution had been extremely enticing for Schnittke, especially during the central phase of his musical work – from the First Symphony to the Viola Concerto. As an iconic concentration of such inclinations we may consider to be the 6th movement (Postludio) of **Concerto grosso No. 1** (1977). Here, after the conclusive statement of the theme in the prepared piano, an expanded zone of the “scattering” of the image, its dispersal up to the level of cosmic dust, is opened. Being, first of all, a poem of reflecting meditations reflecting the over-complexified, remarkably contradictory consciousness of the individual, this composition quite logically crowns the esoteric wanderings by means of the effect of annihilation. There occurs the disintegration and dematerialization of the sound fabric: the misty reminiscences of the thematicism

of the previous movements in the form of its barely recognizable fragmented repercussions, the feebly whistling violin harmonics in an extremely high register, the shimmers of the segmental fantastic glints of the piano – everything signifies the process of exhaustion, the departure into the unreal Nothing, the dissolution within it, the disappearance in the fathomless reaches of Space and Time.

And in addition to the aforementioned, let us remind of the culminating episode of the film “**Voskhozdenie**” [“**Ascent**”]. The music here presents a sonorous stream of noise, which implacably accumulates for a lengthy period of time and almost momentarily contracts after an occurred execution, vanishing in cosmic distances. Thus is created the generalized image of the fatal outcome of earthly life.

Passing directly to Schnittke’s artistic forecasts for the future, let us immediately notice that they were quite unconsoling. What is meant here is the danger of absorption of the human element by the cosmic, or the transformation of the earthly civilization into a non-human dimension, into a cosmic Anderssein [Otherness]. Similar to Avet Terteryan, who insistently developed this idea in his symphonies, Schnittke also implemented it by means of sonorically interpreted acoustic instrumentarium (Second Symphony).

But with the greatest precision the impending situation of total absorption is illuminated in Schnittke’s sole electronic composition created by him on the famous “ANS” synthesizer, which received the rather characteristic title of “**Stream**” (1969). He had first attempted to realize a comparable cosmogonic idea in his orchestral composition “**Pianissimo...**” (1968). Here, approximately within the same time frame (around eight and a half minutes) an analogous dramaturgical

trajectory was envisioned: from a barely audible sound with a very gradual, albeit unswerving timbral-registral and dynamic swell of a catastrophic character up to a climax with the subsequent fast departure and fading up to a weakly glimmering point of a tone sounding in unison.

Besides the more modest artistic result, the differences chiefly consist in the interpretation of the sonoric writing, which is especially discernible in the first half of the composition “Pianissimo...” On the basis of this technique, not only a depersonalized-estranged noise environment is created here as a half-exotic fantastic world of mysterious rustles, unintelligible fluctuations, fluctuating vibrations and distant lightning gleams – the composer’s turning to the acoustic instrumentarium had played its role in such a “concretization.”

Incidentally, we have before us a notable illustration of how in compositional work the conception and the real result may not coincide. The impulse for the creation of this composition was served by Franz Kafka’s shortstory “In the Penal Colony.” The plot of this novelette consists in the occurrence that a certain inscription is being written on the body of a criminal for a lengthy period of time. This inscription fixates that biblical commandment which the probationer has violated: thou shalt not kill, thou shall not steal, etc. When he realizes what is being written on his body, he is pierced by a taper, and the body falls into a pit. It is almost unthinkable to conceive of such a perception identical to that of Kafka’s shortstory by the listener of this musical composition. The genuine result of the sound manifestation prompts us towards other semantic interpretations, moreover, generalized ones.

One of the possible renditions of its actual meaning has already been expounded. And, once again, as this may be noted in relation

to the aforementioned first movement of the Third Symphony, what draws our attention is the paradox of the incongruity of the harsh constructive set course “at the entrance” and the recreated irrationally mystic atmosphere “at the exit.”

As for the electronic composition “The Stream,” Schnittke himself reproduced it as the result of extensive work on a powerful synthesizer, modeling by means of artificial sounds of a purely sonoric type the abstract, disengaged motion of universal matter devoid of the least bit of interconnectedness with humanity.

This is really a stream – a stream of cosmic plasm, absolutely non-personalized and objectivized. Since there is absolutely nothing human present here, for this reason there can be no discussion of traditional melodicism – what is reproduced here is a purely noiselike sound of various intensities and diverse timbral color. And precisely the same way any emotional color is out of the question, i.e., the sound is bereft of any tints of joy or sadness. And if at certain times there seem to be depictions of catastrophic landfalls (as if reminding of the fact that the stars flare up and extinguish themselves), this is merely stated.

Thus, we have before us a purely sonoric etude, in which, according to the composer, he “wished to try out a pure timbre of sine tone” and which is constructed according to the principle of dynamic swelling in two waves – a small one and a large one.

In the phonosphere reconstructed here at times one can hear something which arouses associations with reverberations of machine production, with a buzzing circumterrestrial atmosphere of a large megapolis and, especially – with the rumble of airplanes and with the whistle of jet-motors. The last of the enumerated association according to its own genesis seems to bring out into an interplanetary space, separating from the





earthly and the human. As a result, the short six-minute piece becomes an impressive sound-noise analog to universal matter, its enigmatic Something and Nothing. And this presents that abstracted elemental force which is capable of inducing an apocalyptic feeling of fear and terror of the possible outcome of human civilization. Thus the piece's reliance on synthesized sounds registered the symptom of its modification into a certain extra-human, cosmic dimension – in our technological era many things lead therein, and this process is developing in an accumulative progression.

The most diversified, truly all-embracing elaboration was given to this issue (the path of human civilization and the forecasts of its prospects) in Alfred Schnittke's **Second Symphony** ("St. Florian," 1979). In a short thesis-like exposition, its conception may be presented the following way.

Dramaturgically the symphony is constructed in such a way that for the most part two chronological points are established: a remote past as the source and a hypothetical future as the *outcome*. The intermediary stages are indicated predominantly by "dotted lines" – in relation to a conditional classical style interpreted in a purely general way (closest of all to Wagner). Catholicism from the time of the Middle Ages as the Christian dawn of European civilization is chosen as the *source*, in correspondence with which each movement of the Symphony is opened by vocal choral opening sequences *a cappella*, which reproduce liturgical melodies derived from the Gradual. The *outcome* is interpreted in the guise of the transition of the earthly-human element into a certain cosmic dimension, through the interfusion with universal matter. The transparent pureness of the emotionally detached prayer chants is juxtaposed to the extreme complexity of the sound structure of the orchestral

episodes. The composer's extraordinary mastery allows him to recreate the motion of the amorphously abstract magma by means of acoustic instrumentarium – due to the multilayer overtone vibration of the immense mass of sonorous clusters. From the perspective of the interaction between these two stylistic components, which absolutely differ from each other, their key assignment is carried by the zones of the gradual absorption of human voices by inflows of cosmic cold.

Now let us examine the conception of the composition in greater detail. Already in the previous, First Symphony Schnittke had asserted himself as a "globalist" artist, but, unlike the demonstratively subjectivist approach characteristic for it, here it is similarly demonstratively objective and, moreover, it is possible to speak of an overtly objectivist position. This is expressed in the seemingly complete detachment from everything personal and emotional and in an intentional absence of the so-called author's voice (we will not find anything "Schnittkean" in the intonational manner of the composition). Also exemplary is the fact that the peculiar epos of the given large-scale score is implemented in a relatively unified manner. Conceptually this unity is also determined consistently in the various aspects of the asserted idea of the absorption of the human element by the cosmic.

Let us begin by observing that by itself the human element is presented from a purely objectivist angle. It is demonstrated predominantly in its extratempral hypostasis, which is achieved is the result of the reliance on the "Old Testament" tradition of Gregorian chant singing, and what, in its turn, generates the illusion of the ascent to the fundamental primordial foundations of European civilization. This impression is also aided by the composer's aspiration to abide by the canons of the

ancient genre archetype – he created, in his own definition, “an invisible mass,” since “the six movements of the symphony follow the canonic order of the mass, while the choral part contains quotations of liturgical melodies,” i.e., each of the movements opens up with the sound of the corresponding Gregorian chorale (from the Kyrie to the Agnus Dei). The mass becomes “invisible” due to the active incorporation of independent orchestral episodes – they present “variations” on the choral themes and unfolded “commentaries” to them. In whole, this symphony-mass turns out to be a monumental ritual-spiritual action, which is replicated by vocal and orchestral means, and its rituality is aimed at the recreation of the evolution of humanity from its initial essence up to the potency of the “plasmatic” condition.

In its underlying essence the image of humanity appears in legendary mythologized contours cleaned from paltriness and vanity, in elevated musings-meditations, in roseate devout offerings, as well as in solemn oratorio enunciations, energetic sermons, sonorous hymnic jublations and festive glorifications. However, in any case, all of this sounds in a transpersonal-detached tone, beyond the degrees of sadness and joy (no more than stating) and, in addition, not infrequently as if from the depths of the church either lost in the immense spaces and remote time periods. The basis is served by Gregorian chant, but it is presented in a broad stylistic spectrum: from psalmody and the elaborated chant of the Late Middle Ages to the antiphonic singing and polyphony of the times of the Renaissance. Both are perceived as the personification of the sources of Christian culture, its foundations and strongholds.

The marked figurative boundaries are presented predominantly in the beginning sections of each of the movements and,

as a rule, in *a cappella* sounding. Starting from these points of departure, in the same movements in a generalized way the subsequent evolution of human existence is disclosed. It is revealed with the expanding participation of instrumental resources. And here from time to time there are already emotionally saturated strokes breaking through. With all their restraint of expression, it is possible to fathom in them the voice of saddened man or the inner struggles of the perturbed spirit – rather intelligibly, for example, in the episode of the strings in the beginning of the third movement and in the two episodes of the solo oboe in the fifth movement. Considering the strengthening of inner intensity and the concentration of shaded color, it is possible to speak of the fact that in such wanderings of thought and reflecting meditations the progressing discrepancy and disharmony of human existence peculiar to historical development (in all its visibility in the fourth movement). Such kinds of “psychotronic” inflating normally lead to such a phase when the necessity arises of a radical transformation into a new quality. In the Second Symphony by Schnittke this is modeled as a rebirth of the human and mundane into the cosmic. And then, paraphrasing the lexicon of Boethius, *musica humana* (human music), and then *musica instrumentalis* (instrumental music, which is intellectualized and “mechanical”) which superseded it, will be replaced by *musica mundana* (world music, which is “celestial” or universal).

The indicated “three types of music” comprising the conceptual framework of a musical composition, are already represented with impressive prominence and fullness in the initial sections of the first movement. In its very beginning through the unison of male voices the archetype of Gregorian chants is expounded as a symbol of spiritual chastity, which took shape during the time of the

formation of the Christian sense of the world – it is particularly *musica humana*. Then, there is a denser stratification on the pensive monody of the “chanters” of the specks of *musica instrumentalis* enveloping it, and the primary image is gradually shaded, clouded, pushed aside, which personifies the stages of the further development of life perception (0.51 – here and onwards out of considerations of ostensiveness the corresponding points of dramaturgical unfolding are marked according to their chronometer timeline in Gennady Rozhdestvensky’s performance version).

The unswerving modernization, the complexification of the sound structure with the appearance of indications of reflection and emotional expressivity presents as one of the milestones a vigorous incantatory prayerfulness of the chorale of the strings (4.07). And, finally, the headlong excrescence of the textural mass leads to the emergence of *musica mundana*, presented as a heartlessly blind, chaotic, overwhelming elemental force and signifying by itself a complete absorption of the human element by the cosmic. Now the sound of the strings is also transformed until unrecognizability (6.12). The catastrophic quality of existence acquires apocalyptic outlines, while the bell peal is perceived as a sign of ineluctable funereal features (9.14).

All the highlighted elements are based on one single intonational basis, which serves as a disclosure of a logically motivated dialectics of the process of historical evolution. And one of the results of this evolution consists of the following: if *musica humana* is filled with a high sacred meaning, its cosmogonical metamorphosis is not only depersonified, but also “made meaningless.”

The absolute transformation of sound is carried out by means of sonoric-cluster technique with an extremely multilayer

saturation by means of dissonant vertical harmonies. Moreover, it is striking that this is made exclusively with the resources of the acoustic instrumentarium, but with the achievement of the effect of its “electronization.”

The examined conceptional thesis of the symphony is developed by multiple paths in its subsequent movements by means of any forms of interaction between the human and the cosmic. The undoubted superiority of the latter over the former is provided already by the fact that they are situated in excessively diverse “weight categories”: *the humana* is almost always represented only by four solo singers and *chamber* chorus, while *the mundana* – by a large orchestra with a *quadruple* ensemble of winds, which are joined by all varieties of keyboard instruments (organ, harpsichord, piano, celesta), as well as two harps, guitar and bass-guitar.

This “universal” massif systematically makes itself known in extremely varied ways – by weak flickerings and intensive conglomerations of an amorphous sound-noise environment, intergrowth by degrees and loud-spoken breakthroughs, inflows of estranging cold and rattling landfalls of cataclysms, which may be perceived as a sound of ecological catastrophe. The human voice attempts to save and maintain its existence, but more often than not drowns in the chaos, darkness and deafness of the overall matter. The soft, transfigured coda of the symphony seems to endow with faint hope, but even this *finalis* is rather rendered as a “swan song” of suffering humanity and dying humanness, since cosmic darkness envelops and absorbs the mundane world.

In conclusion to these musings about the Second Symphony, it makes sense to remind of the life impression which served as the impulse to its conception. What is meant here is the composer’s visitation to the *St. Florian*



monastery near the city of Linz, which is on the north of Austria (as it is known, Anton Bruckner studied, worked as an organist and was buried in this monastery). In the words of Alfred Schnittke himself, having entered the “gloomy baroque church,” he experienced an absolutely special “sensation of cold and powerful emptiness.” Such a personally specific perception was hardly an accidental occurrence for him at

that time. It was undoubtedly connected with the issue of cosmization, which entered his consciousness at that time (or an artistic-intuitive subconsciousness – this is essentially not important). And the composition examined by us presented itself as a manifestation of the already begun process of rebirth of human civilization into a dimly perceived *Anderssein* [otherness].

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#### *About the author:*

**Alexander I. Demchenko**, Dr.Sci. (Arts), Professor, Chief Research Associate of the Center for Comprehensive Art Studies, Saratov State L. V. Sobinov Conservatory (410031, Saratov, Russia), **ORCID: 0000-0003-4544-4791**, alexdem43@mail.ru

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#### *Об авторе:*

**Демченко Александр Иванович**, доктор искусствоведения, профессор, главный научный сотрудник Центра комплексных художественных исследований, Саратовская государственная консерватория имени Л. В. Собинова (410031, г. Саратов, Россия), **ORCID: 0000-0003-4544-4791**, alexdem43@mail.ru