

PUSHKIN'S PROSODY IN RUSSIAN ПОМАHC

Spencer Scoville

For a long time Russian society was satisfied with the ingenious muse of its poets . . . Then Pushkin began to write, as if carving his verse out of marble or granite or molding it of bronze and silver. Only in him did Russian verse, as well as the Russian literary language, become artistically simple and pure, yet at the same time amazingly colorful, graphic, brilliant, and popular. (Findenstein 96)

Such is Russian musicologist Nikolay Findenstein's evaluation of Alexander Pushkin's poetry on the development of the Russian art song or *romans*. Because of its overwhelming popularity, Pushkin's poetry touches all aspects of Russian culture. Many of the peculiarities of Pushkin's prosody make it popular among composers of the Russian *romans*. Russian composers especially love Pushkin's many short, lyrical poems about love. A close prosodic analysis of two of Pushkin's most well-known love poems reveals the technical genius of these emotionally intense love poems.

Although the art song originated in western Europe

(especially France and Germany) and migrated to Russia in the form of the *romans*. Russian composers succeeded in developing a particularly Russian musical genre. Many factors influenced the unique development of the Russian *romans*, not the least of which being the Russian poetry that became the standard text for such songs. Written for solo, voice and piano, art songs are by their very nature intimate, focusing on communicating very personal feelings. Russian musicologist Cesar Cui judges the success of a *romans* largely by the suitability of the music to the text, focusing on its ability to communicate the mood and intent of the text. The *romans* became the canvas on which Russian musicians created their most expressive works.

Romans differ from opera, the established vocal tradition of the time, in several important ways. These two genres differ in the resources necessary to fulfill a given work. Opera requires many actors, a massive chorus and an entire orchestra, as well as stage settings and props. *Romans*, on the other hand, developed as a type of chamber music performed in the drawing rooms of the upper class. Its smaller scale made the *romans* much more accessible, and these songs eventually permeated every level of society.

Another important difference was in the texts chosen and written for each genre of music. In both opera and *romans* Russian composers drew heavily on the Russian literary tradition for their librettos, dividing the Russian literature between themselves: opera covered the epic poems and stories, while composers confined their romansy to shorter lyrical poetry. Opera is able to tell and portray epic stories and dramas with drawn out exposi-

tions and substantial musical digressions, while *romans* are always focused and compact—never more than a few pages in length. Accordingly, the texts used in *romans* are short, simple poems that describe brief episodes of love. The ideal *romans* must be at once simple and universal, capturing in a few short phrases some aspect of love at once intensely personal, and immediately understandable for the audience. Cui notes this characteristic of the Russian *romans*:

Almost all of the most genius composers expressed in chamber music their deepest thoughts, their strongest feelings, the hidden motions of their soul (439).

More than anything else, the universality of the poetry of Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin made it so popular among the composers of the Russian *romans*. Belinskii describes Pushkin's place in Russian poetry in these words:

They [the other Russian poets] differ from Pushkin in that each of them expressed a certain side of the Russian soul, while in the spirit of Pushkin all of these verses ran together, all sides of the Russian soul found expression; Pushkin is not found in Lomonosov, Derzhavin, Karazin, Krylov, Zhukovsky, Batyushkov, Griboedov, but they are all in Pushkin (quoted in Livanova 1).

Pushkin introduced a clarity of thought and meaning that immediately set him apart from other Russian poets. On this idea, Cui comments

“Clearness of thought and simplicity of expression have special meaning in song . . . And not one of our poets

possesses such laconic brevity of expression as does Pushkin” (502).

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Pushkin’s verses on love. Pushkin did not simply write love poetry, rather he captured every aspect of love from different angles, providing in each poem some new insight or universal truth.

A prosodic analysis of Pushkin’s poetry elucidates the more technical aspects of his poetry that carry his ideas to the reader. The language of Pushkin’s poetry was simpler than his romantic predecessors. This becomes especially apparent in the rhyme of Pushkin’s poetry, characterized by its unforced, seemingly natural occurrence in the flow of his Russian. In its meter, it successfully mimics the sound and rhythm of spoken Russian within the established metrical conventions of the day.

Characteristic of much of Pushkin’s poetry, *Ya pomnyu chudnoye mgnoven’e* is written in iambic tetrameter. The poem is short, and its subject is clear, and as a result there are few breaks in the rhythm of the poem. The most noticeable rhythmic variation comes at the beginning of the third stanza. The first words of the stanza are *Shli gody* (the years passed). The verb *shli* receives more stress than the meter calls for, marking the turning point of the poem. The first two stanzas nostalgically describe Pushkin’s meeting with his beloved. With the words *Shli gody* Pushkin shifts forward to a time in which she is already lost to him. The spondee on the first foot of this stanza jars the reader, as if waking them from a pleasant dream.

Pushkin made extensive use of repetition in *Ya pomnyu chudnoye mgnoven’e*. He connected the final two lines of each stanza by repeating the key words in each

thought. These closing couplets follow this pattern: A1, B1, B2, C1, A2, C2; the couplet A repeating in the first and fifth stanzas, B in the second and third stanzas, and C in the fourth and sixth stanzas. The second time Pushkin uses each couplet, he reverses the meaning by setting it in a different context. That is to say, in the first stanza, the couplet 'A' is positive, in the fifth stanza, it is negative. Each other pair follows this same pattern—B1 is positive, B2 is negative; C1 is negative, C2 is positive.

Pushkin's reversal of the final pairing sets off the happy ending of the poem. In each of the other couplet pairs, the positive comes first, making the beginning of the poem very idealistic in its descriptions of love. All of the negative stanzas are grouped together in the middle of the poem, leaving C2 to stand alone as the satisfying resolution to this love poem.

Pushkin also repeats individual words, creating both a rhythmic and phonic image. In stanza four, the final couplet (C1) reads: *bez bozhestva, bez vdokhnoveniya, bez slyoz, bez zhizni, bez lyubvi*. Literally every other word of these to lines is *bez* (without). The beating of this negative word creates a powerful melancholy feeling. In contrast, the final couplet (C2) of the sixth stanza reads: *i bozhestvo, i vdokhnovenye, i zhizn', i slyozy, i lyubov*. To counter the couplet C1, Pushkin repeats the word *i* (and) in its place. This substitution is especially effective in Russian, because the construction *i . . . , i . . .* means "both . . . and . . ."—the exact opposite of stanza four.

The rhyme scheme of *Ya pomnyu chudnoye mgnoven'e* is AbAb, a very common rhyme scheme among Russian poets. Within this rhyme scheme, Pushkin organized his rhymed vowels in such a way that all of the feminine

rhymes include the stressed syllable /e/, while all masculine rhymes involve the stressed syllable /i/. In his book *The Dynamics of Russian Verse*, Ian Lilly points out another interesting feature of Pushkin's rhyme scheme. In his book, Lilly reports on a quantitative analysis of the frequency of vowel usage in iambic verses of various Russian poets. He comments that, "both distributions—but especially the feminine one—represent a massive disruption of normal stressed vowel patterns in Pushkin's rhyme pairs" (Lilly 79). This information makes possible the assumption that Pushkin intended for this pattern to have some meaning in the poem.

The repetition of rhymed vowels serves to bind the entire poem together because it leads the listener's ear to expect certain sounds and rhythms at the end of each line. Pushkin uses this expectation to his advantage in the last stanza, where he deviates from this pattern, rhyming the stressed /o/ in the place of /i/:

i serdtse b'yotsya v upoen'e,
i dlya nevo voskresli vnov'
i bozhestvo, i vdokhnoven'e,
i zhizn', i slyozy, i lyubov'.

The appearance of the accented /o/ in *vnov* and *lyubov* surprise the ear. The meaning of the entire poem rests of these two words, the first meaning 'again', and the second meaning 'love'. By setting this rhyme outside of the established rhyme scheme, Pushkin draws special attention to these two words. Through the poetic device of rhyme, Pushkin communicates a message at once personal and universal while maintaining the brevity of his poem.

In the poem *Ya vas lyubil*, Pushkin makes use of simi-

lar poetic conventions to express his understanding of love. Similar to *Ya pomnyu chudnove mgnoven'e*, *Ya vas lyubil* is short and simple in form. In its eight lines, even the slightest variation of meter and tone holds greater meaning.

Overall, Pushkin employs a very regular meter, including only three deviations from the iambic pentameter. The first variation comes in line six, which reads, "*to robst'yu to revnost'yu tomum*". This variation originates in the rules of the Russian language. Russian pronunciation depends greatly on the placement of the accent, consequently reducing the amount of stress given to secondary accents in a word. In this situation, this stress rule results in two unfulfilled ictuses:

1 3 1 1 1 3 1 1 1 3

To ro | bost'yu, | to rev | nost'yu | tomim;

This line is very strong rhythmically; the syncopation caused by the two eliminated stresses causes the reader to pause longer on those syllables that are accented. Pushkin further intensifies the line rhythmically by repeating words and sounds. Each syllable before an accent reads "*to*", punctuating each accent. In addition, Pushkin repeats the instrumental case, a very distinctive marker: "*robst'yu*" and "*revnost'yu*". All of these metrical intensities combine to create a deepened sense of passion and feeling. In this way, Pushkin makes clear the powerful nature of his love. By introducing such passion Pushkin threatens the balance of his poem, .

Pushkin uses similar poetic techniques in the lines immediately before and after this line to soften the effect of its intensified emotion. Lines four through six read: "*Ya vas lyubil bezmolvno, beznadezhno, / To robst'yu, to*

revnost'yu tomim; / Ya vas lyubil tak iskrenno, tak nezhno". The consonance of lines five and seven has the reverse effect of line six. In them, Pushkin repeats the sounds "i", "i", "vno", and "nezh". While all of these sounds are more liquid and calming, the syllable "nezh" is especially effective in this role. The root "nezh" means "tender", and repeating it instantly brings balance back to the poem, showing the true character of Pushkin's love.

Literally thousands of romance songs have been written to Pushkin's poems. On Pushkin's influence in Russian music, Cui comments, "No other poet has had such a meaningful and noble influence on our composers as A. S. Pushkin. This influence is evident in the enormous number of operas and romances written to Pushkin's plots and texts, as well as in the development of a unique style of vocal music completely our own" (Cui 501). The prosodic style exhibited in the two poems *Ya vas lyubil* and *Ya pomnyu chudnoye mgnoven'e* is characteristic of Pushkin's lyrical verse. Such mastery of rhythm and phonics allowed Pushkin to communicate Pushkin's poetry made the romances uniquely Russian, in the process bringing Russian music to a world-class level.

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