

## Brief Remarks on Ivan Wyschnegradsky's Conception of Dramaturgy

by Daniele Buccio

In January 1919 Boris Asafyev praised Ivan Wyschnegradsky's musical talent as "inclined towards large tasks and broad, somewhat theatrical concepts," highlighting the potential richness of the experimentations with temperaments just worked out by the twenty-five-year-old composer, whose developments did not yet appear predictable.<sup>1</sup> The 1910s actually represented for Wyschnegradsky a time of progressive clarification of aesthetic determinations, and also of definition of views concerning the synthesis of the arts in the framework of a historical dialectic.

At the beginning of 1911, already before his classes with Nikolay Sokolov at the St Petersburg Conservatory, Wyschnegradsky began drafting his first dramatic project, *Vih*, after Nikolay Gogol's story, and between 1911 and March 1912 he sketched the first three parts of *Strashnaya mest* (*Terrible Vengeance*), both on original texts by his occultist friend Gavril Elatchich.<sup>2</sup> After composing *Shestvie zhizni* (*The Procession of Life*), a concise melodrama for piano and narrator, in November 1916, Wyschnegradsky devoted himself to the blending of the text and music in his fundamental work for narrator and orchestra, *La Journée de l'existence*, a presentation of the Hindu Manvantara formerly titled *The Day of Brahma*.<sup>3</sup>

In the notebook "Proekty malyh misterij" (Small mystery projects), dated 1918–19, Wyschnegradsky outlined the first sketches of subjects he enriched and clarified throughout his life over six decades. In the second to last page of this notebook he also collected a list of dramaturgical projects, including Edgar Allan Poe's *Hop-Frog*, *Séraphîta* after Honoré de Balzac, *Stenka Razin* possibly after Pushkin, *Songs of the Red Ringer* by Vasily

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- 1 Igor Glebov [Boris Asafyev], "Pro kompozitorov sovremennikov I.," *Zhizn iskusstva* 59, January 15, 1919.
  - 2 These early works are considered irremediably lost; only their mention is preserved in Wyschnegradsky's own journals.
  - 3 On the occasion of its première on January 21, 1978, the three trumpets at the very beginning of the work were placed "on the gallery, in front of the orchestra and behind the audience"; cf. the caption within the orchestral score on page 2 (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS).

Kniazev, *Linnite* by his mother Sophie Ivanovna, born Savitch, and texts by Nietzsche.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1920s Wyschnegradsky emigrated to Paris, and for several years he was mostly committed to instrumental music and to chamber vocal works, culminating in the preparation of a concert entirely dedicated to his own compositions on January 25, 1937, which supported a feeling of ambition towards new artistic achievements. Next to the mention of the rehearsals for the upcoming concert, he noted in his journal in early January 1937: "I begin working on a new work in ballet form with text (chorus and soloists). It will be entitled 'Mystery of Identity' [later *Acte chorégraphique*], a danced action. It is the development of one of the three little 'Mysteries' that were revealed to me in 1918."<sup>5</sup>

While already drafting the first part of the *Acte chorégraphique* op. 27, Wyschnegradsky decided to compose *Linnite* op. 25, a ten-minute work in one act divided into five tableaux for three female voices and four pianos tuned two by two a quarter-tone apart, on a text both in French and in Russian from his mother's story, which already belonged to his early projects; the originally foreseen choreographic plan became a pantomime, with a processional march as residue of dance movements.<sup>6</sup> The scenic peculiarity of both op. 25 and op. 27, not devoid of a certain Wagnerian extremisation, consists in the invisible placement of the singers within the orchestra while the movements, intrinsic to the development of the action itself, are mimed by actors on stage, so that the source of the voice does not coincide with the place of the action.

*Linnite's* effects of brightness, symbolism of colors, and the treatment of the subject found further development in the *Acte chorégraphique*, where the themes of the transcendence towards the divine exceeding the earthly condition, and of the transformation of humanity, are presented in terms of collective consciousness. This work was accomplished in the early 1940's, not without moments of strong discouragement.<sup>7</sup> The chorus and the so-

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4 Cf. Ivan Wyschnegradsky, notebook "Proekty malyh misterij" (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS).

5 Ivan Wyschnegradsky's journal, p. 122 (Association Ivan Wyschnegradsky, Paris). I'm grateful to Martine Joste for lending me a reproduction of it. All translations of sources from the French and Russian are by myself, unless otherwise noted.

6 *Linnite's* initial motive was sketched in the above-mentioned notebook (see note 4) as "experiences of synthesis." Its sole performance to this day was actively supported by Olivier Messiaen and took place in concert form on November 10, 1945, at the Salle Chopin-Pleyel in Paris (Gisèle Perron and Mady Sauvageot, sopranos, Lili Fabrègue, alto, Yvette Grimaud, Yvonne Loriod, Pierre Boulez and Serge Nigg, pianos, under the composer's direction). A note on page 23 of the autograph score (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS) expresses gratitude for Mady Sauvageot's suggestion of a doubling effect within the piano part.

7 The work was later revised and transcribed for quarter-tone piano on the occasion of a recording on his own instrument in the late 1950's (cf. *Cahier Ivan Wyschnegradsky*, 1985, pp. 113f.). It is originally scored for bass-baritone, two sopranos, mezzo-soprano, mixed chorus, four pianos tuned two by two a quarter-tone apart, percus-

Présentation

MYSTÈRE DE L'IDENTITÉ  
(Acte chorégraphique)

Musique et paroles de Ivan Wyschnegradsky

Dans ce ballet l'auteur s'est inspiré de l'esprit de la secte orgiastique russe, les "chlysty", dont les réunions s'accompagnaient de chants et de danses extatiques. L'œuvre, précédée d'une introduction et suivie d'une conclusion, se divise en 2 parties, séparées par un intermède. Le personnage principal est le peuple russe auquel s'ajoute le personnage du coryphée ou meneur d'action qui est en quelque sorte l'émanation et le porte-voix du peuple dans ses aspirations les plus profondes et les plus sublimes, et qui par conséquent fait un avec lui. Il n'apparaît que 3 fois sur le scène: dans l'introduction, dans l'intermède et dans la conclusion, en s'adressant chaque fois au public devant le rideau baissé et en commentant le sens du spectacle. Son chant est confié à un chanteur dans l'orchestre, tandis que la chorégraphe sur la scène mime le texte. En plus sa voix se fait par moment entendre au cours de la 2<sup>me</sup> partie sans qu'il apparaisse sur la scène. Le personnage de l'intellectuel, apparaissant dans la 1<sup>re</sup> partie doit être considéré comme l'aspect négatif du coryphée. Il ne peut donc se sentir un avec le peuple et se trouve en désaccord avec lui en s'opposant à lui. Son chant et le chant du coryphée doivent être exécutés par le même chanteur et le même chorégraphe doit incarner sur la scène les 2 personnages.

La 1<sup>re</sup> partie représente le monde du péché. Elle porte un caractère satirique et même par moment bouffon. Les chants sont exécutés par un chœur placé dans l'orchestre. Après quelques entrées épisodiques (l'ivrogne, le jeune voyou, les vauvau-pieds etc.) commence une danse générale interrompue par l'épisode grotesque de l'intellectuel qui, bien qu'incarnant les mêmes aspirations sublimes, ne trouve pas de langage commun avec le peuple, d'où un conflit inévitable. L'élan du peuple se trouve <sup>ainsi</sup> freiné, il en résulte chez ce dernier, après la sortie de l'intellectuel, un désarroi général et un ennui. La danse reprend toutefois peu à peu et devient de plus en plus frénétique. Elle aboutit à un point culminant qui termine la 1<sup>re</sup> partie et

Plate 1: Ivan Wyschnegradsky, "Présentation: Mystère de l'identité (Acte chorégraphique)," typescript of the text spoken by the author on the occasion of his recording (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS).

sion and viola ad libitum, clarinet in C ad libitum, and balalaika ad libitum. It was never performed during Wyschnegradsky's lifetime. Its sole staging took place on October 10, 1999, at the Musikhochschule Zurich, conducted by Dominik Blum.

loists are placed in the orchestra pit while the *choreutes* silently evolve on the stage, except for the bass-baritone, who at the same time sings and plays on stage as an actor playing the role of coryphaeum, dissolving every fictional relationship with the public and of the intellectual in the first part. The dance is constitutively integrated into the action and culminates in a *Vision de la face unique*. Wyschnegradsky considered some Russian expressions as untranslatable by virtue of their characteristic onomatopoeic sound; therefore he only provided their phonetic transliteration and included a quotation directly drawn from the poetical text of Scriabin's *Acte préalable*.<sup>8</sup>

As Wyschnegradsky reported in his journal, in March 1942 he resumed work on *L'Éternel étranger* op. 50, formerly named *Mystery of the Incarnation*, for four pianos tuned a quarter-tone apart, percussion, soloists, and mixed chorus.<sup>9</sup> The libretto was conceived solely in Russian, although the apparatus of captions of the movements and of the descriptions of the scene are reported in French throughout the musical score. A seeker of truth announces the arrival of the new consciousness to the world and thereby brings himself into conflict with his environment; the topic is here disclosed in terms of individual consciousness. Wyschnegradsky wrote down instrumental timbres in many places of the condensed score without setting up the entire orchestration.

In a letter to Alexander Tcherepnin on October 1, 1968, Wyschnegradsky confided:

I am currently working on a rather large work. Its full title (in French): l'Éternel Etranger, action musico-scénique en 5 tableaux avec Prologue et Epilogue musicaux. Words and stage design are mine. I started writing this work many years ago and since then have sporadically worked on it, now putting it off and moving on to other works, then returning to it again. But the most important thing is ahead, since neither the Prologue nor the Epilogue have yet been written, although in part they have been sketched. The task is very difficult, because I think of this music (approximately the same in the Prologue and Epilogue) as *absolute*. This directly comes from the general design and corresponds to the inner content of the work. I can only add (and this is an important detail) that the action takes place in Russia and that the entire *ambiance* is Russian. I can say the same about my other stage work (I only have 2): The *Choreographic act* (completed in 1958, all attempts to "secure" it so far have failed), which also includes the text of my composition (sung by the chorus and soloists in the "orchestra") and which is dedicated to the Russian people (there are no solo dancers in it, this is the difficulty of its realization). In it I express my faith in the Russian people and in their great spiritual destiny.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Wyschnegradsky submitted his own French translation of the text of Scriabin's *Acte préalable* to Marina Scriabine and Boris de Schloezer on July 7, 1966 (Fonds Ballif at the Bibliothèque Lagrange-Fleuret, Paris). Excerpts of Wyschnegradsky's translation were publicly read by Michel Bernadi on the occasion of a Soirée chez M<sup>me</sup> Fayard, *L'étrange Alexandre Scriabine*, on November 23, 1966.

9 Cf. Wyschnegradsky's journal (see note 5), p. 153. The subject shows affinities with one of Igor Miklachevsky's orchestral pieces, *Voploslenie* or *Inkarnazia*, shared by the author in January 1924.

10 Ivan Wyschnegradsky, letter to Alexander Tcherepnin, October 1, 1968 (Alexander Tcherepnin Collection, PSS). The letter is partially quoted in Ludmila Korabelnikova's monograph *Alexander Tcherepnin: The Saga of a Russian Emigré Composer*, trans. Anna

(по французски): l'Eternel Etranger (action musico-scénique en 5 tableaux avec Prologue et Epilogue musicaux). Слова и весь сценический замысел мои. Я начал писать диалог между мной и моим катом и в тех пор спорадически работал над ней, то откладывая и переходя к другим работам, то снова возвращаясь к ней. Сейчас 5<sup>ая</sup> (и последняя) сцена подходит к концу. Но раньше главное впереди, т.н. кт Тролоу, тн Эинос еще не написаны, хотя и отложены и написаны. Задача очень трудная, т.к. я слышу диалог музаву (приблизительно один и тот же в Тролоу и Эинос) как абсолютную. Это непосредственно вытекает из общего замысла и соответственно внутреннему содержанию произведения. Это труднее объяснить вкратце, если хочешь я тебе при случае расскажу или напишу об этом замысле более подробно. Могу прибавить только, что это важное подробное, что действие приходящее в Россию и что вы увидите русская. Мне самое мое сказать про мое другое сценическое произведение (их несколько): Хорезмский Акт (заключен в 1958 г. все попытки "приспосабливать" его закончили пока неудачей) который вкратце также некий мой сочинения (театр хорни и сочинения в "оркестре") и который посвящен русскому народу. (В нем много сочинений танцоров, в диалог трудный для реализации). Я в нем выражаю мою веру в русский народ и в его великое духовное предназначение. Но не буду вдаваться в подробности, т.к. не хочу задерживать отправки этого

Plate 2: Ivan Wyschnegradsky, letter to Alexander Tcherepnin, October 1, 1968, p. 2 (Alexander Tcherepnin Collection, PSS).

Still much later, in 1979, Wyschnegradsky mentioned to Stephen W. Ellis his “opus 50, The Eternal Stranger: (short opera in 5 scenes) Not quite yet finished. (remains only the conclusive music; for certain reasons I refused until now to finish it).”<sup>11</sup> Wyschnegradsky accomplished the full orchestration of an *Etude pour le prologue de l’Eternel étranger* op. 50 on July 21, 1964, whose prolonged low sound appears to refer to the *Pralaya* or *Nuit de l’existence*.

In Lucile Gayden’s opinion, op. 27 and op. 50 were to prepare and to explain his last “ideal work.”<sup>12</sup> Among the documents of the Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection it is possible to read some papers gathered under the title of “Paradoxe éthique,” in which the author also prefigured dialogues between Christ and the Antichrist, at the end of which a “proclamation of the paradox” was foreseen;<sup>13</sup> the representation of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the becoming of a superconscious and overindividual will, the problematization of authorship and of the creative subjectivity, the revelatory procedure uncovered through the work itself, would unfold a dialectical structure closely and significantly linking this unresolved work to op. 27 and op. 50 as a third mystery. It is also possible to relate these contents to an extremely short piece,<sup>14</sup> and to a larger orchestral work completed in October 1965, intentionally labelled *Partition sans nom*, which also bears the title of *Paradoxes* in a copy of the first page of the score.

Almost fifty years after the revelation of the mysteries and his early writings on “*La Journée de Brahma* et la synthèse de la parole et de la musique” and on “*L’art ancien et nouveau et le surart*,”<sup>15</sup> Wyschnegradsky returned in 1968 to some unpublished “*Réflexions sur l’union des éléments de tous les arts*.”<sup>16</sup> In this late text he reflected on the relationship between vision of movement and sound, between audience and musicians; he also pointed

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Winestein, ed. Sue-Ellen Hershman-Tcherepnin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 168. Cf. also Wyschnegradsky’s unpublished writings on “*L’idée russe*” (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS).

- 11 Ivan Wyschnegradsky, letter (in English) to Stephen W. Ellis, September 10, 1979 (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS). Stephen W. Ellis was collaborating at that time with Nicholas Slonimsky for the preparation of updated entries for *Baker’s Dictionary*. Cf. Nicolas Slonimsky, “*Lexicographis secundus post Herculem labor*,” *Notes* 33 (1977), no. 4, p. 763–82, esp. 781f.
- 12 Lucile Gayden, *Ivan Wyschnegradsky* (Frankfurt: Belaieff, 1973), pp. 30–33.
- 13 Cf. the folder “*Textes pour l’Acte*” (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS); cf. also Wyschnegradsky’s “*Tretiy zavet*” and his typewritten study “*O hristovom sinteze*,” written in the early 1940s (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS), and Gavril Elatchich’s and Nina Rudnikova’s dialogue between *Lucifer and the Antichrist*, published in Petrograd in 1915.
- 14 Ivan Wyschnegradsky, *Affirmation du paradoxe éthique* for two male voices, ondes Martenot, and six pianos (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS) was premiered in Basel on September 22, 2019. A title, later added, reads *Etude pour l’œuvre totale*.
- 15 Published in Ivan Wyschnegradsky, *Libération du son: Ecrits 1916–1979*, ed. Pascale Criton (Lyon: Symétrie, 2013), pp. 67–73 and 55–66.
- 16 Cf. the text of this title in Wyschnegradsky’s notebook “*Essai sur l’union des éléments de tous les arts*” (Ivan Wyschnegradsky Collection, PSS).

to the false opposition of temporal and spatial arts, to the overpassing of dualisms, to correspondences of chromatic cyclicities, and to the “synthesis of the sensory and the intelligible.”

In consequence of a unitary design of the components even the purely instrumental compositions end up being affected by correspondences drawn from a synthetic dimension (rotational movements, transparencies, densities and volumes, magic squares). This absolute and all-embracing dramaturgical sense appears to be actually disclosed, in one work after the other, as a constant unveiling of mysteries never publicly staged in the course of his life, visions consciously forewarned in his youth in 1918, through which a synthesis of the arts and through the arts is given shape.