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**Russian Philosophy of Music:  
An Unknown Phenomenon**

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**Abstract**

The article explores the distinctive nature of Russian philosophical thought on music. Spanning a rich history from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the present, the author examines how Russian philosophers and thinkers have consistently viewed music as a means of human salvation. The article begins with Nil Sorsky's early ideas about "prayer singing" and proceeds to analyze the musical philosophies of thinkers such as Grigory Skovoroda, Vladimir Odoevsky, Pavel Florensky, Alexey Losev, Nikolai Lossky, Ivan Lapshin, and Evgeny Trubetskoy. The author also proposes its own model of the philosophy of music. The article investigates how Russian philosophers linked the understanding of music with the Orthodox religious tradition, particularly hesychasm. It emphasizes the tendency in Russian philosophy to consider music not just as an aesthetic phenomenon, but as a powerful means of transforming a person, anticipating their encounter with God. Unique concepts developed within this tradition are examined, such as Skovoroda's idea of Symphony as a manifestation of cosmic harmony, and Odoevsky's theory of living and deadening principles in music. The author's proposed model, termed "New Synergetic Philosophy of Music," generalizes the concepts of the Russian philosophy of music. By presenting the ideas of Russian philosophers concerning music, the article contributes to a more thorough understanding of the foundations of the Russian mentality, which is particularly necessary in our time.

**Keywords:** philosophy of culture, philosophy of art, philosophy of music, Russian philosophy, Orthodox culture, cosmic harmony, hesychasm, synergy, salvation.

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## Русская философия музыки: непознанный феномен

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### Аннотация

В статье исследуется своеобразие русской философской мысли о музыке. Охватывая богатую историю с XV века до наших дней, автор показывает, как русские философы и мыслители последовательно рассматривали музыку в качестве средства спасения человека. Статья начинается с ранних идей Нила Сорского о «молитвенном пении» и переходит к анализу философии музыки таких мыслителей, как Григорий Сковорода, Владимир Одоевский, Павел Флоренский, Алексей Лосев, Николай Лосский, Иван Лапшин и Евгений Трубецкой. Автор также предлагает собственную модель философии музыки. В статье исследуется, как русские философы связывали понимание музыки с православной религиозной традицией, в частности с исихазмом. Подчеркивается тенденция в русской философии рассматривать музыку не просто как эстетическое явление, но как средство преображения человека, предвосхищающее его встречу с Богом. Освещаются уникальные концепции, разработанные в рамках этой традиции, такие

как идея Сковороды о Симфонии как проявлении космической гармонии и теория Одоевского о живящем и мертвящем началах в музыке. Предложенная автором модель, получившая название «Новая синергетическая философия музыки», обобщает концепции русской философии музыки. Представляя идеи русских философов о музыке, статья способствует более глубокому пониманию основ русской ментальности, что особенно ценно в наше время.

**Ключевые слова:** философия культуры, философия искусства, философия музыки, русская философия, православная культура, космическая гармония, исихазм, синергия, спасение.

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## Introduction

The Russian philosophy of music is a unique and deeply original phenomenon in the global philosophy of music. Distinguished by its special attention to music as a means of *salvation*, this philosophical tradition offers a distinctive interpretation of music's role in human existence. Russian thinkers, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, have consistently considered music not just as an aesthetic phenomenon, but also as a powerful means of communion with God. This view of music was formed on the basis of Orthodox traditions and, in particular, the practice of hesychasm [Gregory Palamas 2018, 309]. This approach distinguishes the Russian philosophy of music from many Western interpretations, which often focus more on the formal aspects of music.

The development of Russian philosophy of music was marked by constant reference to the importance of music in the spiritual ascent of man. Starting from the early concept of “prayer singing” proposed by the reverend Nil Sorsky in the 15<sup>th</sup> century [Nil Sorsky 2016],

and ending with the model of the “New Synergetic Philosophy of Music” developed by the author of this article [Klujev 2021], there is a continuous thread of research on music’s ability to elevate the human spirit and contribute to establishing a human connection with the Divine.

The purpose of this article is to explore the rich palette of Russian philosophy of music, tracing its evolution from early experiments to modern synthesis<sup>1</sup>. By studying the works of figures such as Grigory Skovoroda, Vladimir Odoevsky, Pavel Florensky, and others, the author aims to demonstrate both the diversity and the remarkable coherence of philosophical thought about music in Russia. Through this research, the author seeks to highlight the unique contribution of Russian philosophy of music to global philosophical thought on music.

### **The Orthodox basis of the Russian philosophy of music**

The Russian philosophy of music is deeply rooted in the Orthodox religious tradition. This foundation has profoundly influenced how Russian thinkers approached and interpreted music, distinguishing them from Western philosophers. The practice of hesychasm played a special role in this development. This mystical practice, which emphasizes inner peace and contemplative prayer, has contributed exceptionally to the evolution of Russian thinkers’ views on music [Ware 2014]. The concept of “prayer singing,” introduced by Nil Sorsky in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, illustrates this intersection of music and spiritual practice. Sorsky emphasized the importance of mental prayer and tears in musical experience, considering church singing as a means of spiritual ascent [Nil Sorsky 2016].

The emphasis in Russian philosophers’ reflections on music, particularly on the works of Russian composers, vividly reveals the specifics of the Russian philosophy of music. Ivan Lapshin’s analysis of the works of Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, and Scriabin serves as a convincing illustration of this trend [Lapshin 2007]. Lapshin not only explores the philosophical foundations of these composers’ music but also places them in the broader context of Russian thought. For example, he describes Rimsky-Korsakov’s music as an expression of “pantheism,” reflecting a distinctly Russian

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas presented in this article are the result of the author’s continuous research, collected in three recently published books [Klujev 2023a; Klujev 2023b; Klujev 2024]. These works have received reviews from Russian and international scholars.

approach to nature [Lapshin 2007, 258]. The Russian philosophy of music is also characterized by unique concepts that have no direct equivalents in Western thought. The concept of the “sense of life,” central to the philosophy of Evgeny Trubetskoy, is one such example [Trubetskoy 2017]. This concept, exploring the fundamental sense and purpose of existence, is closely related to Trubetskoy’s understanding of music. His deep familiarity with Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, which he describes as “a life experience of the otherworldly,” illustrates how Russian thinkers often viewed music as a means of access to the Highest Truth [Trubetskoy 2000, 157].

The historical context of Russian philosophical thought about music is crucial for understanding its development. The period from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by a flourishing of philosophy in Russia. This coincided with an intensified study of Russian identity and mentality (Russianness) through art and philosophy [Zenkovsky 2011].

The growth of philosophy and philosophical thought about music in Russia led to an increasing interest among Russian philosophers in the laws (principles) of music, particularly its structure.

### **The structure of music**

Russian philosophers consider the structure of music from a unique perspective, intertwining spiritual concepts with musical analysis. An exemplar of this approach is the work of Vladimir Odoevsky, whose ideas provide a fundamental understanding of music’s structure in Russian philosophical thought. Odoevsky interpreted music as a manifestation of the unity between Spirit and the objective world. He considered harmony as the embodiment of this unity, arguing that “the existence of the Unconditional [God] is not only in nature, but the thought of it is in the very soul of man; this thought is native to the soul, it is a property of the human soul” [Odoevsky 1974, 157]. This understanding of harmony as a reflection of the highest, Divine reality is a constant theme in the Russian philosophy of music.

Odoevsky’s theory of “living and deadening principles” in music is particularly significant. The philosopher argued that these principles are expressed in music as “agreement and disagreement” or “consonances and dissonances (consonantia – dissonantia)” [Odoevsky 1974, 157–158]. These manifestations, according to Odoevsky, correspond to the duality of human feelings: joy and sadness. He elaborates on this duality in detail, noting that it extends to the very principle of musical

composition: “Polarity is in the very consonance... why there is the bass, the middle voice and the combination of them, both, the highest voice or treble. In nature, this duality is reflected in four rows of human voices (corresponding to the four ages of man): bass, tenor, alto, treble” [Odoevsky 1974, 158].

We have developed a more complex vision of music’s structure. We distinguish three levels in music: physico-acoustic (revealed through rhythm, meter, tempo, timbre, dynamics), communicative-intonational (revealed through intonation), and spiritual-value (revealed through mode (tonality), melody, and harmony). These correspond to the Orthodox, and specifically hesychastic, interpretation of humans as a unity of body, soul, and spirit, thereby establishing a deep connection between the structure of music and human existence [Klujev 2021].

Our proposed approach to music’s structure goes beyond a simple technical description. It serves as a basis for understanding the profound impact of music on individuals, contributing to their spiritual growth. The approach posits that music, at its various levels, can touch and elevate all aspects of human nature.

The views of Russian philosophers on the structure of music are characterized by an integrity that combines technical musical analysis with spiritual ideas. This allows Russian thinkers to arrive at an understanding of the unique influence of music on human consciousness.

### **The influence of music on human consciousness**

The impact of music on human consciousness is a significant topic in Russian philosophy of music. Russian thinkers have explored this issue deeply. The 15<sup>th</sup>-century reverend Nil Sorsky was one of the first Russian philosophers to present a view on this topic. Sorsky emphasized the importance of mental prayer and tears in musical experience, especially in the context of liturgical singing. He wrote, “It is necessary to pray to the Lord Christ diligently with... tears” [Nil Sorsky 2016, 149]. Sorsky believed that a person’s emotional involvement in music could lead to an elevated state of consciousness, bringing one closer to the Divine.

The concept of music as intuition, developed by Nikolai Lossky, offers another perspective on this topic. Lossky’s theory of intuitionism asserts that knowledge is “the direct contemplation by the subject of the most authentic transubjective [external] being” [Lossky 1999, 138]. In this context, Lossky viewed music as a powerful means of intuitive

cognition, capable of providing direct insight into the nature of reality (see: [Klujev, Perkins 2023]).

Ivan Lapshin's works on reincarnation through artistic creation demonstrate a unique perspective on music's effect on consciousness. Lapshin believed that through creative actions, including composing and performing music, an individual could achieve a certain form of transformation into an "alien self" [Lapshin 2007]. This concept suggests that music has the ability to expand consciousness beyond individual identity.

Lapshin's analysis of Alexander Scriabin's music provides a concrete example of this philosophy. He described Scriabin's approach as focused on exploring the "deep Self" and the "super-individual side of the Self" [Lapshin 2007, 342]. According to Lapshin, Scriabin's music sought to gain access to universal consciousness and express it in a particular form, reflecting the composer's belief in the development of individuality towards "comprehensive individuality – God" [Lapshin 2007, 340].

The impact of music on consciousness is vividly illustrated in Evgeny Trubetskoy's account of his experience with Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. Trubetskoy described this musical encounter as a "vital experience of the transcendent," suggesting that music can contribute to a profound shift in consciousness, allowing the listener to perceive reality from "that height of eternity where all confusion and horror miraculously turn into joy and peace" [Trubetskoy 2000, 157].

Alexey Losev further develops the idea of music as a means of altering consciousness in his writings. He draws parallels between the perception of music and the practice of the Jesus Prayer in hesychasm, arguing that both music and prayer can lead to "an experience of unity with God" [Losev 1999, 376]. This comparison highlights the Russian philosophical view of music as a potential catalyst for spiritual awakening and expansion of consciousness.

Thus, in reflecting on music's impact on human consciousness, Russian philosophers organically arrive at the idea of music's cosmic mission, leading to the theme of the relationship between cosmic harmony ("Harmony of the Spheres") and music.

### **The relationship of cosmic harmony and music**

The interplay of cosmic harmony and music is another important theme in Russian philosophy of music. Originating in Ancient Greece and receiving a powerful impetus from the Orthodox Christian tradition,

this topic has been developed and interpreted by various Russian thinkers throughout history. Grigory Skovoroda arguably played a decisive role in establishing this theme within Russian musical philosophy.

Skovoroda proposed an original interpretation of cosmic harmony, calling it a Symphony. According to Skovoroda, this Symphony is consistently formed by the symphonies included within it, which are based on music in which God is hidden. Skovoroda claimed that “God... this is music” [Skovoroda 1973, 134].

This idea was further developed by Pavel Florensky. Florensky understood music as the rhythmic organization of the cosmos. For him, music was the embodiment of the organization of cosmic sound – a cosmic symphony performed by an Invisible Orchestra [Florensky 2004, 90]. In Florensky’s mind, this cosmic symphony was identified with the Heavenly Liturgy, the earthly manifestation of which was the church liturgy.

Florensky’s concept of the earthly liturgy as a musical drama [Florensky 1996, 379] further strengthened the connection between cosmic harmony and earthly music. He believed that the musicality of the earthly liturgy transformed it into a heavenly one, preparing the Christian listener for the perception of heavenly music, which their whole life was now becoming.

Evgeny Trubetskoy made a significant contribution to the development of this concept. He viewed the symphony as something uniting the earthly and the Heavenly (Divine). Trubetskoy wrote: “The Symphony uniting the entire heavenly and earthly world sounds already at the very beginning of the Gospel – in the story of the evangelist Luke about the Nativity of Christ” [Trubetskoy 2017, 208]. For Trubetskoy, Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony was the forerunner of such a cosmic symphony.

We propose integrating the concept of cosmic harmony into a broader understanding of music’s structure and its impact on humans. We consider the spiritual-value level of music, including harmony, as corresponding to the spiritual dimension of human existence, which connects individual musical experience with the cosmic order [Klujev 2021].

Thus, the Russian philosophical view of the relationship between cosmic harmony and music envisions a unified Universe, where music serves as a bridge to the Divine.

### **Music as a bridge to the Divine**

In Russian philosophy of music, music is considered a means of connecting man with the Divine. This idea is deeply rooted in Orthodox



Christian thought, especially in the practice of hesychasm, but Russian thinkers have developed and interpreted it in their own distinctive way. The concept of music as a bridge to the Divine can be traced back to the idea of “prayer singing” proposed by Nil Sorsky in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Sorsky emphasized the importance of mental prayer, stating: “I will pray in spirit, I will pray... with my mind” [Nil Sorsky 2016, 88]. He considered temple singing in general to be the highest form of prayer, which he described as “standing without laziness in singing” [Nil Sorsky 2016, 175].

Pavel Florensky developed this idea by considering music as a preparation for the Heavenly Liturgy. Florensky believed that the earthly liturgy, which is thoroughly musical in nature, is a reflection of the Heavenly Liturgy. He argued that the musicality of the earthly liturgy transforms it into a Heavenly Liturgy, preparing the Christian listener for the perception of Heavenly music [Florensky 1996, 379]. For Florensky, this Heavenly music was not perceived by physical ears, but was experienced by the whole being: “This music flows into ears other than those that grow on the head, and they hear it with their whole being” [Florensky 2010, 97].

Alexey Losev’s work provides another important interpretation of music as a bridge to the Divine. Losev drew a parallel between musical experience and the practice of the Jesus Prayer in hesychasm. He argued that both music and prayer can lead to “an experience of communion with God” [Losev 1999, 376]. Losev considered prayer, particularly the Jesus Prayer, as “the deepest and most intense activity of a person’s aspiration to God” [Losev 1999, 269]. It is important to note that Losev believed this prayerful aspiration to God constitutes the very essence of music. He poses a rhetorical question: “In Schubert’s naive and dreamy song, in the sunny rejoicings of Rimsky-Korsakov’s creations, in the strict contours of Vivaldi’s organ concerto – are there no prayers, tears, intense suffering, agonizing moans and complaints?” [Losev 2012, 97].

Evgeny Trubetskoy’s account of how he became acquainted with Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony serves as a vivid illustration of music acting as a bridge to the Divine. Immersing himself in this symphony, Trubetskoy became convinced that through music, one can perceive reality “from that height of eternity, where all confusion and horror are miraculously transformed into joy and peace” [Trubetskoy 2000, 157]. For Trubetskoy, this musical experience resolved a fundamental existential dilemma: “Either there is a God, and in him there is the fullness of life above the world, or it is not worth living at all” [Trubetskoy 2000, 157].

The concept of music as a bridge to the Divine influenced Russian philosophers to put forward a fundamental and key idea: *music is a means of salvation*.

### **Music is a means of salvation**

In Russian philosophy of music, the concept of music as a means of salvation occupies a central place. This idea goes beyond a simple assessment of the aesthetic perception of music, emphasizing music as a powerful force that promotes spiritual growth and the transformation of a person.

The work of Nikolai Lossky illustrates this transformative power of music. Lossky viewed music as a force capable of bringing a person into the Kingdom of God. He states: “Music... introduces us to the inner life of the elements, chemical and physical processes, to the life of crystals, dust particles dancing in the rays of the sun, to the life of plants and animals, rivers, streams, and seas... to the life of planets and solar systems and, finally, even to the life of the Kingdom of God” [Lossky 1998, 327]. This broad view suggests that music has the ability to elevate a person, allowing them to perceive the fullness of being and participate in it, ascending from the earthly world to the Kingdom of God.

We offer our own perspective on this problem, embodied in the author’s model of the philosophy of music. We position it as the most generalized expression of the leading idea of Russian philosophers regarding music as a means of salvation. In this sense, it serves as a synthetic embodiment of the Russian philosophical experience of understanding music.

We call this model the “New Synergetic Philosophy of Music.” It encompasses two dimensions: theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the model is based on a combination of two principles: classical (old) synergetics and hesychasm. Classical synergetics, an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the 1970s, studies the self-organization of systems in the world. It posits that systems evolve from less organized to more organized states. Hesychasm is a spiritual practice in Orthodox Christianity aimed at uniting the energies of the body, soul, and spirit with the energies of God.

In practice, we proceed from the premise that there is a structural similarity between personality and music: both consist of three interrelated levels. The levels of a personality – bodily, soul, and spiritual – correspond respectively to three levels of music: physico-

acoustic, communicative-intonational, and spiritual-value. That is, the first level of music corresponds to the first level of a personality, the second level of music to the second level of a personality, and so on. This structural similarity between personality and music that we affirm informs our vision of the transformative power of music. We believe that the realization of music's transformative activity is *music therapy*.

The music therapy process begins with the use of musical material related to the physico-acoustic level of music, gradually moving on to musical material reflecting the communicative-intonational and spiritual-value levels. This sequence of actions aims to stimulate the bodily, soul, and spiritual ascent of a person, leading him to unity with God in the world, or salvation [Klujev 2021].

### Conclusion

The Russian philosophy of music is a unique phenomenon in world philosophical thought about music. Since the idea of “prayer singing” and up to the generalizing concept of the “New Synergetic Philosophy of Music,” Russian philosophy of music has consistently emphasized music's ability to spiritually uplift humans and facilitate their ascent to God.

Indeed, *the Russian philosophy of music, with its rich set of ideas and vision of music as a path to human spiritual growth and victory over the corruption of earthly existence – salvation, remains to this day an unparalleled example of philosophical understanding of music's potential.*

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