

STUDIA INSTRUMENTORUM MUSICAE POPULARIS XVI
Tarptautinės tradicinės muzikos tarybos Liaudies muzikos instrumentų
tyrimų grupės XVI tarptautinės konferencijos straipsniai /
ICTM Study Group on Folk Musical Instruments
Proceedings from the 16th International Meeting

ISSN 1392–2831 Tautosakos darbai XXXII 2006

ADYGHE HARMONICA AS A SYMBOLIC TEXT

ALLA SOKOLOVA

Adyghe State University, Russia

S u b j e c t: A diatonic harmonica as the cultural and symbolic text containing extensive information about the Adyghe traditional culture.

P u r p o s e o f s t u d y: To disclose the sense of the basic national notions and the ideals coded in a harmonica as a material and spiritual object of culture.

M e t h o d s: Comparative-typological, semiotic and field observations.

K e y w o r d s: Adyghe harmonica, Circassian folk musical instruments, Adyghe musical culture, symbolics, semiotics, color and shape.

Discussion

Musical instruments as symbolic cultural marks

In semiotics of culture, the phenomena or objects are regarded as texts bearing information; their senses and meanings “are interpreted” by the person and by the society (Lotman 2000). Many people consider musical instruments to be the cultural marks pointing to the epoch, country, geography of the country, its political system etc. From the point of view of semiotic approaches, the Adyghe harmonica “pshchine” is such a text bearing information about ethnos, geography, type of economic activities, epoch, aesthetic values, ideology, gender relations etc. The text is subdivided into visual, acoustical and cognitive parts, each conducting structural, functional, historical, cultural, psychological, aesthetic and communicative functions. The objective of the researcher is to take the necessary information from the investigated object, to interpret the senses in it and to inform the reader about them. It should be emphasized that the article offered is a certain intellectual experiment carried out by a native Russian in relation to the Adyghe culture, which she observes, studies, likes for many years, but at the same time “reads” as the representative of different culture.

What is the harmonica?

Until now in European organology there is no one opinion concerning classification of this musical instrument. In the Hornbostel-fon Zax systematization, the harmonica is named a free aerophone with a set of slipping reeds (Hornbostel and fon Zax 1987). However, in the Zax reduced systematization, it is referred to as a wind-idiophone (Sachs 1930). Strictly speaking in terms of instrument classification according to the source and activator of a sound, the harmonica should be attributed to idiophones since the source of its sound is a slipping reed and the activator is a current of air (Boiko 2004). Hence, a harmonica with reeds fixed in a framework should be attributed to idiophones with an index 142.2 (a set of plates with blasting) (Sokolova 1998).



The Adyghe harmonica
of the Master Efim Kirilenko.
Photo: Alla Sokolova

The harmonica as a marker of the epoch

In the history of the Adyghe culture three musical instruments are distinguished as the code dominants of culture: a kamil (aerophone), a shichepshin (hordophone or a fiddle) and a pshina (harmonica). Based on musical instruments dominating in a specific period, one can subdivide the Adyghe musical culture into three periods, namely archaic-shepherd, heroic-epic and entertaining-aesthetic. The first is related to the shepherd culture. Correspondingly, various aerophones dominate in this period. We have found data and corresponding terminology showing that the distribution of aerophonic music is connected to the mythological period of culture. Also, aerophones in fairy-tale performances were said to have magic and medical properties.

The second period of the Adyghe instrumental culture is characterized by prevalence of song-instrumental epic genres. Dominating instruments in this period are fiddles (shichepshi). In a system of genres of this period, Nart epic music forms the dominant layer characteristic of the ritual space of special rooms intended for a meeting of visitors and for spiritual dialogue (khachesh). The period existed within a vast time-frame, but its golden age occurs in the 16th–17th centuries.

The third period is related to the appearance of a new musical instrument, the Adyghe harmonica (pshina). The dancing culture came to the foreground, which lead to the domination of dancing folk tunes, followed by a willingness to alter any song melody into a dancing folk tune, which resulted in the creation of other types of ensembles and a new genre of instrumental music.

Thus the harmonica symbolizes the latest period of development of the Adyghe traditional musical culture. It corresponds to new times and new conditions of life by the quality of its sound, by the techniques of mastery, and by its adaptation to a changed art and different aesthetic.

The symbolic contents of Adyghe harmonica music

The harmonica appeared in the Western Adygheya in the 19th century as captured material of the Caucasian War, a strange toy bought in a market. At once it was found in the female and children's environment, initially bearing in itself joyful and light images. In the 20th century, under conditions of the Soviet system, the harmonica symbolized only celebratory and light lyrical music. It sounded at weddings, birthdays, parties of young people and on Soviet public holidays, namely 1st of May, November 7th, and Parliament Elections. The Adyghe never play tragic, dramatic or mournful music on the harmonica, but instead only dancing, light, celebratory or occasionally lyrical, narrative music. By virtue of this, the harmonica is perceived as a subject bearing pleasure, a presentiment of the excitement of a holiday or celebration.

Sacral symbolics

If there is a dead man in the house, the harmonica cannot be touched, it is hidden; it is impossible to play the harmonica for one year if the harmonier has someone of his close relatives who has died. The harmonica, like a mirror, is covered with a towel during mourning ceremonies or is hidden far from view.

Symbolics of the shape

The vertically put harmonica, whether in storage or during a musical pause, can be assessed as a mark of "animation"; it is provided with anthropomorphic characteristics. The upright instrument bears a strong resemblance to the image of the Circassian, the slender Dzhigit with a thin waist, wide shoulders and an obligatory silver belt. Separate parts of a harmonica are decorated with metal plates located at a level of "a waist", "shoulders" and "legs". Metal ornaments "preserve" the harmonica from touching wood, protect the most vulnerable parts from damage, strengthen psychological perception of the instrument as a beautiful thing intended for fun and a holiday. It is possible that for this reason a harmonica is never put on one side.

Symbolics of color

A harmonica for the Adyghe is an expensive and magnificent object dressed in colors that reveal the art – aesthetic values of the people. For example, furs of a harmonica are of a bright red color. They were made from the high-quality silk used for Soviet flags. For comparison, the Tatars, Cheremises, Chuvashs paste over the furs with printed cotton, while in the Russian harmonicas, black color prevails. In the Adyghe



Harmonier Kharis Mukhamedjanov.

Photo: Alla Sokolova

ancient culture there were no natural red dyes; they were expensive, therefore only rich people purchased material of red color. On a populous holiday only one person (the organizer of the holiday) was authorized to wear a red cap or red clothes. Red color in the Adyghe fairy tales has a therapeutic effect; it is possible to cure any illness with a red egg, while an old woman in a red headscarf helps the hero to cross a river (Gutov 1994). Red is a color of the fire around which dancing circles were organized. It is generally known that in the 15th–17th centuries nobody, except for the prince, could put on a *cherkeska* or *mitra* (a rich hat) of red color. Color distinguished one person among others, thus marking him as a person of high social status (Neflyasheva 1993).

The red middle part of the harmonica makes this instrument the leader, gives it special properties that require respect for the instrument and for the person who is playing it. It is usual therefore that the harmonier at a wedding receives two shares for the work: one goes to the musician and the other, to the musical instrument.

Symbolics of numbers

Musical instruments are characterized by certain numbers, which have a financial-pragmatic and sacral sense. For example, the harmonica of the Adyghe has sixteen keys. Nevertheless, while highly esteeming the performance of a good harmonier, the Adyghe say: “He plays all the twelve keys”. Other sayings and staple phrases also contain the sacral number twelve as a mark of appreciation, gratitude or blame. The Adyghe say about a good farmer: “He works at twelve jobs”, about a small child who began to speak: “The child pronounces all the twelve words”, about a strong blow on head: “I see the twelve”. Thus, the harmonica entered the traditional context of culture through the number twelve. Because of this and other reasons, it stopped being seen as an alien musical instrument.

Ways of playing the harmonica

Ways of manipulating a harmonica can also be interpreted as the cultural text bearing the multi-layered and multiple-valued information about the Adyghe traditional culture. If the musician with a harmonica in his hands has run in a circle (has outlined an imagined circle), the young men and women, youth and elders stand in a certain order along this imagined line and the dances begin. If the musician lifts up a harmonica highly on outstretched hands, he draws attention to himself signaling:

- The beginning of a new dance;
- The beginning of a new melody;
- An establishment of a silence;
- Raising an emotional tone of a holiday;
- The appeal to clap hands more temperamentally.

The harmonica lowered downwards almost to the ground and brought to legs of a dancing pair or soloist is a demonstration of special respect for them on the part of the musicians and the audience. At such moments the audience, as a rule,



Harmonier's tricks in the Adyghe harmonica.

Photo: Alla Sokolova

begins to clap and shout to support the dancer. The harmonier can periodically lift up the harmonica and lower it. Simultaneously the rattler runs back and forth under it. At such moments the musician continues playing, keeping a tempo. The game theatre is a part of a dancing circle, simultaneously carrying out an entertaining and educational function: the youth learns to be dexterous, capable of great endurance as well as how to behave in public.

Symbolics of professional skill

Gesticulation with a harmonica becomes a mark of professional skill. The harmonier, keeping the instrument in one hand, lifts it up and overturns it. Because of the weight of a harmonica the fur opens, but the musician continues to play. Then he sharply overturns the instrument, the harmonica is slowly shrunk, but music continues to sound. Similar tricks are also included in the game theatre of a dancing circle.

Gender information

Ways of holding a harmonica are divided according to sexual attribute. While men play standing up, women must sit. For convenience, men put a leg on a chair. Women put a towel or a scarf on their knees in order not lift up their skirts. If a man plays sitting down, the society speaks ironically that he plays as a woman does. If the woman plays standing up, and puts a leg on a chair, she is named "the man in a skirt".

The harmonica as the subcultural symbol

Depending on the harmonica and the instruments accompanying it in an ensemble, one can gather the following cultural information:

- The diatonic harmonica in combination with rattles is characteristic of the ensemble of the Western Adyghe living in the territory of the Adygheya Republic and Krasnodar region;

- The chromatic harmonica and a drum are typical of the traditional ensemble of the Eastern Adyghe (the Kabardins living in the Kabardino-Balkar Republic and Circassians living in the Karachaevo-Circassian Republic);

- The harmonica in combination with blows on a board is used by the Adyghe living in Turkey and Syria.

- The harmonica and one rattle or the harmonica and several musicians, each playing the rattle is an ensemble characteristic of the Adyghe culture at the end of the 19th–the beginning of the 20th century.

- The harmonica and two musicians, each playing two rattles at once is an ensemble of the Western Adyghe of the second half of the 20th century.

Hence, the harmonica forms not only “the text” of culture, but also its context. Each specific type of harmonica is connected only with its own particular accompanying instruments.

Table 1. Varieties of the Adyghe traditional ensembles in the 20th century.

The name of subethnic group	The leading instrument in an ensemble	Rhythmic instrument		Other components of an ensemble
		In authenticities	In amateur performances	
Western Adyghe	Diatonic harmonica	<i>Clappers</i> <i>Pkhachichi</i>	Membranophone Dool	<i>Zhyu</i> (a vocal supporting voice), claps
East Adyghe	Chromatic harmonica	Membrano-phone Dool	<i>Clappers</i> <i>Pkhachichi</i>	
Foreign Adyghe	Diatonic harmonica	Claps <i>pkhambgu</i>		<i>Zhyu</i> (a vocal supporting voice)

The harmonica as the ideological symbol

The harmonica symbolizes new way of life, a new political system and new thinking. For this reason during the Soviet times, competitions and concerts of harmoniers were arranged on religious holidays (both Muslim and Christian). This was especially typical of the 1930s, the time of active struggle against religion. On the eve of Easter or Muslim Kurmena (a holiday of Sacrifice) the order to conduct competitions of harmoniers and dancers was received in schools and clubs throughout the territory of the USSR. Such actions were meant to divert youth from participating in forbidden religious ceremonies (Zaur 1929). On the other hand, such competitions



Harmonier Yury Nagoev.
Photo: Alla Sokolova

of harmoniers and youth parties were organized to involve young people in political assemblies, in council elections, party actions etc. Musical instruments and musicians acted as an original “enticement” to gather people into clubs to make them attend political actions. For example, in 1929 a note was placed in the newspaper “Adyghe life” informing that an audience of 210 people was gathered at the competition of harmoniers in a club of the Dzhambechy settlement.

The organizers then forced the expecting public to listen to the report “Participation of non-party youth in re-elections of councils” (Gorets 1929).

The historical-stylistic information

The historical-stylistic information is incorporated in musical texts. On the one hand, melodies sounding at modern Adyghe weddings and festivals are marks of the present time. On the other hand, the texts inherited from the last centuries “appear through” in these melodies. It is typical that the harmonica melodies that sounded a hundred years ago and are familiar to us from phonorecords seem rather simple, childlike and even primitive. The same melodies in the modern authentic variant are filled with powerful volume, richly decorated with ornaments and are impressively various in manner of performance. There can be no doubt that the adaptation of the musician (his shoulders, hands, fingers and body) to the instrument is gradual, demanding essentially new manners of holding, manipulation, and deriving sounds. Performing adaptability has resulted in a design of the instrument, which on the eve of the 21st century, still has an ancient sound like the Adyghe fiddle, shychevshyn. Musicians mastered a harmonica gradually. In the beginning of the 20th century it sounded simply, at times even primitively. Gradually, within 100 years, harmonica tunes became different – more ornamented, flexible, expressive, very similar to ancient fiddle tunes. Rudiments of violin thinking are clearly shown in the pitch organization of dancing melodies. The most widespread are tirade sequences, sequential descending second melodic parts, typified final accords and prolonged final sounds. For comparison we shall give two variants of the dancing melody “Islamey”. One was written down on a phonograph in 1911, the second, in 2004. For convenience both melodies are in one tonality.

In “Islamey” of 1911 the “bared” melody actually sounds, whereas in “Islamey” of 2004 it is variously decorated. In both variants there is a fifth ambitus; however, M. Khagaudzh includes 28 sounds, and K. Tletsruk, 47. Simultaneously, the image

of the dancing tune and the dancing genre of Islamey remained invariable: in both cases a descending sequential movement, and metrically shock shares of bars completely coincide that allows one to identify folk tunes.



Dancing melody “Islamey”. Record of 1911.
The musician playing the harmonica (*pshynao*) – Magomet Khagaudzh.



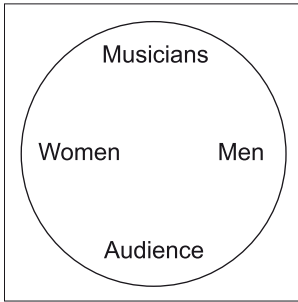
Dancing melody “Islamey”.
Record of 2004. The musician playing the harmonica (*pshynao*) – Kim Tletseruk.

Universality of the harmonica

The universal character of the harmonica is its capability to perform ancient dancing music as well as new melodies showing the different musical thinking. Therefore, we find rudiments of flute and fiddle sound-rhythmic and structural-composite constructions in various genres of harmonica music. The first are characterized by the presence of short structural cells rated at one deep breath. Each cell is necessarily repeated. Such structure is typical of the ancient dance “Udzha”. New melodies are longer, drawn-out, of the question-answer character.

Symbolic value of ceremonial conditions for the harmonica

The harmonica is the instrument of the street, therefore it is related to many ceremonies spent in stadiums, open-air areas, and squares where a great number of people gather. For example, the Adyghes until today create a ceremonial space of a dancing circle in which the harmonier occupies an honorable “high” place “protected” by the wall of a house, a fence, trees etc.



Scheme 1. Traditional dancing circle.

The harmonica has partly incorporated the symbolic meanings inherent in ancient musical instruments. The Adyghe play the harmonica in a ceremony *chapsh – klapshch* at the bed of an injured person (the Adyghe think that music treats wounds). A minute musical warming-up takes place before sports competitions: contenders dance *lezginka* to the sounds of the harmonica and clapping of hands. The sportsman who has received sympathies of the public, as a rule, wins the duel. Thus, the harmonica and music predict a victory to one of the participants of the struggle. In horse competitions, the harmonica plays

when the horsemen are hidden from public view. The magic sense of the game is a transfer of “voices” of the spectators to the horsemen, stimulating them on to victory. The harmonica, thereby, inspires action and at times replaces or provokes it.

Information values of the harmonica

The information incorporated in the Adyghe harmonica (as in other musical instruments), bears cognitive, mental, aesthetic and socio-regulator senses. The cognitive block is extremely extensive: it is possible to learn a great part of traditional life of ethnos owing to the harmonica. The valuable block gives the fixed characteristic of the relation of the person of traditional culture to the object of research. Regulators contained in a culture define the norms of behavior and activities in ceremonial space with participation of the harmonica.

The harmonica as the consolidating ethnic symbol

The diatonic harmonica symbolizes a folk art and the Adyghe themselves, just as the *balalaika* is the indication of the Russians, a guitar, of the Gypsies, a bagpipe, of the Scots etc.

Conclusions

The area of our research is a cultural field containing a diatonic harmonica of the Western Adyghe (the Circassians living in the Northwest Caucasus in the Adygheya Republic and in the territory of the Krasnodar region). During the period of twenty years, we have accumulated the information from more than a hundred folk musicians. We have taken several hundred pictures, created a few schemes of various types of harmonicas and obtained valid data on ways in which the harmonica has permeated the Adyghe culture. Symbolic vision of the harmonica became possible owing to structural-semantic approaches and comparative-typological methods. The knowledge of Adyghe musical culture is small, and research in this field is scarce. Therefore a new contribution regarding this diatonic harmonica, the most popular and widespread instrument among the Western Adyghe, as a cultural and symbolic text is of importance for further studies of Adyghe culture.

REFERENCES

- Boiko, Yu. E. (2000). An Aerophone or Idiophone? In A. N. Sokolova (Ed.), *The Harmonica: A History, the Theory, Practice: Materials of the International Scientific-Practical Conference* (pp. 17–18). Maikop.
- Gorets (1929). Competition of Harmoniers. *Adyghe Life, March, No 6*, p. 4.
- Gutov, A. M. (1994). A Designation of Color in Poetic Language of Epos “Nartkher”. In A. M. Gadagatl (Ed.), *The Nart Epos and the Caucasian Linguistics: Materials of the VI International Maikop Colloquium of the European Society of Scientists Studying the Caucasus* (p. 130). Maikop.
- Hornbostel, E. M., and fon Zax, K. (1987). Systematization of Musical Instruments. In I. V. Matsievsky (Ed.), *National Musical Instruments and Instrumental Music* (Vol. 1, p. 255). Moscow.
- Lotman, Yu. M. (2000). Inside the Conceiving Worlds. Three Functions of the Text. In Yu. M. Lotman, *Semiotics* (pp. 155–163). Saint-Petersburgh.
- Neflyasheva, N. A. (1993). Color in a Context of Traditional Outlook of the Adyghes. In D. H. Mekulov (Ed.), *Collection of Papers of Young Scientists and Post-graduate Students* (p. 67). Maikop: Meoty Publishing House.
- Sachs, C. (1930). *Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft*. Leipzig.
- Sokolova, A. N. (1998). Classification of Musical Instruments of the Adyghes. In V. Svobodov (Ed.), *Materials to the Encyclopedia of Musical Instruments of Nations of the World* (pp. 134–149). Issue 1. Saint-Petersburgh.
- Zaur (1929). We Cross out the Drunk Priest Easter with Cultural Entertainment. In *Adyghe Life, April, No 20*, p. 3.

ADYGĖJŲ ARMONIKA KAIP SIMBOLINIS TEKSTAS

ALLA SOKOLOVA

Santrauka

Nemažai duomenų apie tam tikro etnoso kultūrą galima gauti įvairiais požiūriais tiriant atskirus muzikos instrumentus. Straipsnio objektas yra diatoninė armonika, suvokiama kaip kultūrinis bei simbolinis tekstas, kuriame sukaupta daug informacijos apie tradicinę adygėjų kultūrą. Tyrimo tikslas – išanalizuoti ir interpretuoti armoniką kaip tekstą, pateikiantį žinių apie etnosą, jo geografinę teritoriją, gyvenamąją epochą, estetines vertybes, ideologiją, lyčių tarpusavio santykius ir t. t.

Gauta 2006-06-20