

KONSTANTIN V. ZENKIN

ON THE RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS OF A.F. LOSEV'S
PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

ABSTRACT. The article considers A.F. Losev's philosophy of music in the context of his entire religious worldview and as the part of his Christian-Neoplatonic philosophy. Synthesizing Pythagorean-Platonic and Romantic musical doctrines, Losev concludes: music is the expression of the life of numbers, a meonic-hyletic element that rages inside numeric constructions. So it is necessary to analyse the concept of number in the system of Neoplatonic thought. In the Neoplatonic hierarchy of the universe both numeric sphere and music are located at the source of all the eidei, above them and between the One (the first hypostasis) and the World Intelligence (the second hypostasis). Then music is considered in the context of the relation between the uncreated Absolute (Tetrade A) and the created world (Tetrade B). Losev's doctrine on the Tetrades A and B (connected not by essence but by energetics) is the important modification of Neoplatonism. Finally the article considers Losev's account of music in relation to the absolutized individual person.

KEY WORDS: Absolute, Christianity, eidos, energy, essence, music, name, Neoplatonism, number, philosophy, religion, Romanticism

The philosophy of music occupies a prominent place in Losev's oeuvre alongside the philosophy of myth and the philosophy of the name, as one of his most significant and original conceptions. Unlike many thinkers Losev not only considers the question "what is music?" but even provides a definite and conclusive answer, which in short form reads: music is the expression of the life of numbers, a "numeric matter," a meonic-hyletic element that rages inside numeric constructions. To a person unacquainted with Losev's overall system such an answer might seem disappointing. In the first place, the idea of a kinship between music and mathematics is not new, going back to Pythagoras and Plato and featuring such proponents as Leibniz, Novalis, Debussy, and many others. In the second place, the understanding of music as the expressed life of numbers may frighten some with its seeming "formalism." One can easily see that this is far from formalism if one inquires



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The philosophy of music occupies a prominent place in Losev's oeuvre alongside the philosophy of myth and the philosophy of the name, as one of his most significant and original conceptions. Unlike many thinkers Losev not only considers the question "what is music?" but even provides a definite and conclusive answer, which in short form reads: music is the expression of the life of numbers, a "numeric matter," a meonic-hyletic element that rages inside numeric constructions. To a person unacquainted with Losev's overall system such an answer might seem disappointing. In the first place, the idea of a kinship between music and mathematics is not new, going back to Pythagoras and Plato and featuring such proponents as Leibniz, Novalis, Debussy, and many others. In the second place, the understanding of music as the expressed life of numbers may frighten some with its seeming "formalism." One can easily see that this is far from formalism if one inquires



about the nature of numbers in Losev's philosophy. Losev might not speak of this in his works on music, just as he "brackets" the clearly expressed religious (Christian-Neoplatonic) basis of his entire philosophy. Therefore some works which might not at first glance seem relevant to music (such as *Antichnyj kosmos i sovremennaja nauka* [The Ancient Cosmos and Modern Science], *Dialektika chisela u Plotina* [The Dialectic of Number in Plotinus]) may turn out to be *key* for the understanding of Losev's philosophy of music. Consideration of the evolution of Losev's musical philosophy will facilitate the demonstration of its religious foundations.

It would be no exaggeration to state that Losev's conception "folds" the entire history of thinking about music from antiquity to the twentieth century into a single moment. It brings to synthesis such polar opposites as the Pythagorean-Platonic "numeric" musical cosmos and the elegantly emotional and ineffable musical element of romanticism. Losev's romantic roots (one of his major foundations) are most immediately visible in his early works (1915–1916) on Verdi's *Traviata*, Rimskij-Korsakov's *Snegurochka*, and also in the unfinished essay "Stroenie khudozhestvennogo mirooshchushchenija" (The Structure of the Artistic Worldview). Here one discovers Losev to be an heir primarily of the aesthetics of German romanticism (Schelling, Novalis, Hoffmann, and especially Richard Wagner), Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Music for the early Losev is an irrational, Dionysian element, a feminine principle and the basis of any artistic thought. Losev asserts that "pure experience" (the "point of ontological contiguity of being and consciousness") lies at the basis of all art and of all knowledge (Losev, 1995: 299). This is "primary being, characterized (1) as continuous creative process and (2) as purely perceptual unformed quality or meaning" (p. 300). But music, unlike the other arts, deals *only* with this unformed chaotic process of "pure experience": this *is* the musical element. Naturally, Losev speaks of the chaotic and unformed nature of music only in relation to the world of determinate, objective forms and clear logical concepts. Within itself music is of course formed, but this is the "form of the formless," the "expression of the inexpressible." Thus Losev's antinomical dialectics logically completed the romantics' intuitions.

This picture is complemented by the aesthetic ideas of other Russian religious thinkers from the turn of the twentieth

century (Vladimir Solov'ëv, Father Pavel Florenskij, Father Sergij Bulgakov), who saw the source of art and artistic images in the divine world or in the eternal prototypes of things, the Platonic *eidei*:

Primal being, untouched by thought, bears within itself however the imprint of nascent transfiguration, which is completed here in the reforming of inert matter into the true form of beauty. Nothing is as important for art as this matter. But in art this matter seems transfigured and saved, frankly speaking, as something religious. *True aesthetics is the aesthetics of religious materialism.* (p. 300)

Developing the traditions of his predecessors in Russian philosophy, Losev accentuates the understanding of art not only as likeness and symbol of divine creation (this is a commonplace in medieval Christian aesthetics) but also as the portent of the final *transfiguration* of the world.

We have characterized this primal being phenomenologically as pure pre-structural experience; ontologically as the final qualitative basis of being or objective meaning; and religiously as transfigured being. On the basis of this being art further erects *structures* and formations, taking these latter from the portent of the future Logos which is distorted in the current level of being to the degree of static and inert matter. (p. 301)

In this manner the twenty-two-year-old Losev viewed the operas of Verdi and Rimskij-Korsakov: "Let them not accuse us of being unbalanced if we assert that the worldview of the Italian *melos* is the childlike simplicity and innocence of which Christ said, 'For of these is the Kingdom of Heaven' " (p. 634). Rimskij-Korsakov's *Snegurochka* allowed him to glimpse "realized beauty that has overcome earthly encumbrances [...] a praise of universal Spring and universal Love [...] the earth [...] transfigured, resurrected [...] a personhood from which the chains of death and evil have fallen and which sees the world and beauty as they really are" (p. 617).

Fragments of manuscripts from the early 1920s, recently published as "Metodologicheskoe vvedenie" (Methodological Introduction) and "Ocherk o muzyke" (Essay on Music), were drafts towards Losev's major musical work *Muzyka kak predmet logiki* (Music as an Object of Logic; 1922–1925, published in 1927). In his "Metodologicheskoe vvedenie" Losev grounds his epistemological position by tracing it to medieval Byzantine philosophy (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and especially Gregory Palamas). The essence of this epistemology is in the idea of *seeing* as a method,

seeing *meaning* and *revealed essence*. Meaning for Losev is beyond the subject-object opposition, outside of the physical and psychic realms. Seeing the *eidos* is not a psychic act but a “revelation in the psyche of the semantic energy of the object itself.” In this text Losev does not name the religious-theological sources of his epistemology, but neither does he conceal them. His very terminology (not to speak of his intention) reveals a certain reliance on the onomatological conception that can be traced to Gregory Palamas’ doctrine concerning *faith* in the undivided and unconfused nature of essence and energy (manifested as the phenomenon or the name). Losev extends the foundational thesis of onomatodoxy – “The Name of God is God Himself, but God is not a Name” – to the relation of any essence to its energies. Appealing to the classical and medieval tradition, he goes beyond the bounds of modern philosophy with its aspiration to the “absolute” (Hegel) and to pure scientific method. Losev battles such pillars of classical human sciences as the subject–object dualism and formal logic.

According to Losev, the essence of music is not reducible to anything else. It is ineffable, but it reveals itself to another in its semantic energies, in its *names* as particularly concentrated energies and, finally, in myth as an “unfolded magic name.” It is no accident that his essay “Ocherk o muzyke” includes a myth concerning Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, while the strictly scholarly tract *Muzyka kak predmet logiki* also includes a section entitled “Muzykal’nyj mif” (Musical myth), full of “mad” romantic exuberance.

Muzyka kak predmet logiki presents the ideas of Losev’s early articles in their mature form, which here comprises a fully original philosophy of music. In this work Losev takes the great romantic tradition of interpreting music to its limit and overcomes it by synthesizing it with the classical and medieval tradition. It is for good reason that the arch-romantic “Muzykal’nyj mif” is presented as the text of some unknown German writer of the nineteenth century, although Losev was of course its actual author. The concrete result of Losev’s overcoming of the romantic conception and his appropriation of the Neoplatonic conceptual system was the revelation of the inner basis of music, that which lies at the foundation of its continuous chaotic processuality and formlessness. The key role here was played by the concepts of number, *eidos*, logos,

and time as the “alogical becoming of the number.” Wagner’s idea of the formative role of the word *vis-à-vis* music, which Losev had shared in his early works, was now projected inside music itself. Music contains within itself its own logos, eidos, and its own word. The eidos of music is the number, or more precisely the other, being-as-other, the meonic element of number, the unique numeric matter. In Losev’s philosophy, as in Neoplatonism, there is a notion of non-material, ideal, or, as he preferred to say, “noetic” [*umnyi*] matter. The matter of a number is the principle of its becoming, the otherness of number as determinacy; it is the continuousness of the transition from one part of the number to another: Music is the sonic expression of this numeric matter as the alogical element of becoming. “In music, amidst the alogical element of becoming, in the storms and passions of irrationally flowing continuity [...] one sees a clearly formed, absolutely motionless and clearly defined border: this is the semantic figurality of the number” (Losev, 1990: 330).

One might ask what relation the numeric nature of music bears to religion. Losev understands number itself in the context of the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition, not just as the dry abstraction of modern European mathematics. In the Neoplatonic hierarchy of the universum the numeric sphere was located at the source of all the eidei (meanings and concepts), above them and between the One (the first hypostasis) and the World Intelligence which contains within itself all the eidei (the second hypostasis). The One (the Absolute) logically posits as its other *the many*, which takes form thanks to numbers. Thus the numeric sphere occupies the same hierarchical step as the musical element. Both are maximally near to the Primal One, to the Absolute. Both lie at the beginning of any formed being, prior to any concrete essences. Number is not only the pure act of positing, empty of any objective meaning. The musical sphere is supra-objective in the exactly same way. But if each number is the One in its being-as-other (*the many*), then this is the “point” from which everything is unfolded and numbers become, as it were, directional and formative principles of the unfolding of all being. They are the conductors of the demiurgic process. Following the Neoplatonist Proclus Losev classified the gods of ancient mythology as numbers. Thus numbers and music occupy the nearest hierarchic step to the Absolute.

TABLE I

Losev’s philosophical categories	Possible religious analogues
Tetrad A	Tetrad A
1. The One. 2. The One Being. 3. Becoming (no hierarchy or subordinationism)	1. God the Father. 2. God the Son. 3. God the Holy Spirit
4. The fact (the appearance of essence).	4. Uncreated energies of God which are separate from the trihypostatic essence of God, including the Divine Light of Mt. Tabor and the Name of God.
Tetrad B	Tetrad B
1: The analogue to the supra-objective One in the created world. Numbers, “pure musical being”. “Fire.”	1. The created energies of God (the angelic world).
2. Eidei (images) of things. “Light.”	2. The sphere of the cosmic Intelligence.
3. Becoming (external to the eidei). Life. “Air.”	3. The World Soul.
4. Things. “Earth,” “Water.”	4. The Cosmos.

How must this (“musical”) step look in *Christian* Neoplatonism? If in pagan pantheism God (or gods) and the world are substantially one, then in Christianity the divine, uncreated Prime Essence is substantially incompatible with created being. Therefore, taking as his basis the four-step tetrad of Neoplatonism (The One – the Universal Intelligence – the World Soul – the Cosmos), in the book *Antichnyj kosmos i sovremennaja nauka* Losev divides them into various tetrads in order to avoid subordinationism and the homoousia of God and the world. The uncreated Essence together with its uncreated energies is denoted as Tetrad A, while the created world is denoted as Tetrad B (see Table I).¹

To explain the interaction of the two named essences (Tetrads A and B) Losev uses the aforementioned theory of energies of St. Gregory Palamas and the theory of the divine names (Dionysius Areopagite) from Byzantine theology: “Tetrad B is sustained by

Tetrad A" (Losev, 1995: 191) in other words the world is sustained by the Name of God.

The Prime Essence itself is ineffable for human consciousness, but it is revealed in the divine energies or divine names. The sphere of the divine energies includes beauty and, consequently, the source of artistic prototypes. The artistic prototype, one can conclude based on Losev's concepts, arises as a modification of the divine energy in the artist's creative thought. Besides numeric and musical being, the highest level of the creative essence includes also the sphere of incorporeal powers: the angelic world. In Christianity, according to Losev, "the angels are a natural link in the emanations leading from God through them to the rest of creation" (Losev, 1995a: 102–103). Thus the life of numbers is, in a certain sense, the life of angels which bear within themselves the energy of the Absolute, and this is the ideal status of music, its principal task. The concept of "angels" should here be understood not as a mythological concept, but rather as a logical and philosophical one, as "tidings" about divine will and as "tidings" about essence given prior to its real formation; this is the basis of the supra-objectivity and "incorporeality" of numbers and of music. Moreover, Losev speaks of the modifications of the angelic world in various mythological systems:

Thus in any transcendental philosophy the place of angels is occupied by the transcendental schema and the entire semantic sphere as such [...] Therefore Kant's "category," Hegel's "concept," Husserl's "eidos," and Cohen and Natorp's "hypothesis," are beyond a doubt only inwardly nullified angelology. These structures are intelligent and incorporeal; they make sense of and form all of being and in this sense are its guardians. (Losev, 1995a: 102–103)

Incidentally, the medieval church which became the source of the professional tradition of European music understood music precisely as the singing of angels.

However it is obvious that music frequently departs quite far from its principal position and, of course, working with music does not automatically presuppose nearness to God; usually quite the contrary! There are some eloquent and sometimes grotesque passages about this in Losev's fiction. The tendency to divinize art, and music in particular, reached its apogee in the romantic consciousness, a situation that Losev depicts in the section "Музыкаль'ныj миф" in *Музыка как предмет логики*. Losev attributed

this section to “a little-known German writer [. . .] who had a quite profound understanding of musical art,” although the real author was Losev himself. This quite exalted text is noticeably different in style from the strictly logical and almost mathematical argument of the tract. Here the romantic-minded author divinizes not only music but also his beloved, his own artistic madness, and the entire cosmos: “To live musically means to pray to everything”; “to feel musically means not to know the separation of God and world. To feel musically means to praise each blade of grass and each grain of sand [. . .] there is something pagan in the soul’s musical ecstasy. There is something amoral and biological [. . .] in the madness of musical feeling” (Losev, 1993: 470). All of this had no place in Losev’s own position as an Orthodox Christian, which was why this text was attributed to another with the comment that “he now felt little sympathy for these mad exaltations of musical feeling” (Losev, 1993: 479) and that he could not bear responsibility for such delirium. But why then did Losev include this “musical myth” at all? It contained something of great importance for the essence of modern European music, which is absolute music in that sense that it seeks to replace the Absolute with itself, to become absolute being and world within itself. Therefore in this section everything is intentionally colored with romantic pantheism. Failing to consider the philosophical context of this fragment and the element of play with the romantic conception (a play that includes both attraction and repulsion), the German music scholar Andreas Wehrmeyer made the incorrect conclusion that for Losev music becomes “the emanation and reproduction of the One” and “the direct expression of the Absolute itself” (Wermeyer, 1990: 74, 75; cf. 1991: 24–43). That Losev did not hold music to reproduce the Absolute directly I tried to show with the help of Table I. In answer to Wermeyer’s allegations of pantheism I would clarify that it is the characteristic of the romantic divinization of music towards which Losev had an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand the romantic understanding of music and the romantic concept of “pure” and “absolute” music bore a kernel of truth which Losev developed and reworked in his own manner and within his own conception of music. On the other hand, Losev consistently opposed the extremes of romanticism, speaking against the divinization of music and of the musical

artist, against untrammelled individualism, etc. Highly representative in this sense is Losev's essay from 1919–1921 "Mirovozzrenie Skrjabina" (Skrjabin's Worldview). Taking Skrjabin as the logical result, "ultimate tension" and "end" of "Western European thought and art," seeing in the composer's worldview "an unprecedented system of pagan Christian-solipsistic atheism" (Losev, 1995: 779, 773) passionately criticizing Skrjabin's self-divinization and declaring Skrjabin anathema, Losev was simultaneously criticizing and rejecting what he himself had experienced in the most profound and intimate sense. Testimony to this are the following words: "in all this pagan vile which is expelled only by fasting and prayer, Skrjabin revealed a purely religious element and he, I repeat, is one of the rare geniuses who provide a concrete experience of paganism and its relative truth which can never be destroyed" (Losev, 1995: 778–779).

Losev's fiction extends this critique of romanticism as a significant part of his own personal makeup and as a part of contemporary culture that was yet to be overcome but which was in the process of being transformed. The novel *Zhenshchina-Myslitel'* (The Woman Thinker) is especially telling in this regard. It was inspired by the inspired skill of the great pianist Marija Yudina. The tragic fate of the novel's heroine, the scandalous and degraded genius Radina, which has nothing in common with the biography of her prototype, symbolically expresses the inner drama of modern European music which reflects the absolutization of the human subject, the illusory nature of this absolutization, and, as its consequence, the destruction and nullification of human personhood.

It is precisely the divine origins of art which allow great works to be created under the conditions of a "sick" culture and "sick" personhood. Losev formulates the interrelations of music and the Absolute and thus provides the methodological foundation for his meditations on this subject:

If one speaks about music as an intra-divine sensation, then this fails to raise the problem of the Absolute itself. The Absolute, according to its very concept, is something that endlessly transcends any human sensation. Music provides the intra-divine absolute life not in the sense of its literal reproduction, not in the sense of its substantial absoluteness, but in the sense of a corresponding perspectival foreshortening, i.e. in the sense of an image that repeats only the proportions but not the absolute measures. After all the sun is reflected in a drop of water [. . .] But

this does not mean that the drop of water has the size of a sun [...] Music provides an intra-divine sensation precisely in the image of such semantic foreshortening such as is proper for the finite compared to the infinite. (Losev, 1993a: 184–185)

I should note that the “perspectival foreshortening” of the Absolute which Losev mentions should be understood not quantitatively but qualitatively. The Absolute as the supreme religious value may be understood not in a spiritual and Christian manner, but in any one of a number of concrete socio-historical applications such as in paganism, where it could be understood magically, materially and plastically, subjectively, or in some other way. A particularly dramatic problem for Losev is the understanding of the Absolute in modern European culture.

Losev’s fiction gives two cases of a direct comparison of music and prayer: the novel *Zhenshchina-myslitel’* and the novella *Trio Chajkovskogo* (Tchaikovsky’s Trio). This is not a coincidence, but rather two different manifestations of a *single* essence – two types of ecstasy, two ways in which human consciousness penetrates into the sphere of the supra-intelligent and supra-objective. In other words music is to the other arts as the “noetic” prayer of the Hesychasts is to regular verbal prayer. But the two types of ecstasy differ in an analogous manner as the cultures which gave rise to them. Losev demonstrates that medieval culture with its objective-personal Absolute (i.e. the Christian God) allowed the human acceptance of divine values to occur only in the form of prayer. Obviously under such conditions music cannot become a self-sufficient world but must dissolve in the prayerful attitude. On the contrary, in modern European culture, where the human subject is subjected to absolutization while the objective Absolute is increasingly schematized and depersonalized, the place of religious prayerful ecstasy was occupied by secular musical *ecstasy* as a special form of knowledge of the Absolute.² Regardless of how man understands the concept of the Absolute, it is “the transcendental principle of ecstasy,” and the concrete form of ecstasy is determined by the content of the Absolute. In Losev’s words, modern European “music presupposes the absolutization of the human subject; since it is impossible for the mortal human subject to become the Absolute in all seriousness, the actual Absolute [...] which contains the infinity of all finitudes in a single point, emits it as a potential Absolute, an Absolute of eternal searching and becoming” (Losev,

1993a: 164). But then it is clear why the music of the anthropocentric European culture of modernity (from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries), which originated as the incarnation of the supra-rational sphere of numbers and incorporeal essences, becomes at the same time increasingly human (and eventually “all too human”), since the Absolute itself becomes immanent to human consciousness. Thus it becomes clear why the supreme form of spiritual activity for the absolutized individual person is no longer prayer, but rather the immersion into one’s own “pure art” and “absolute music.”

For Losev the ecstasy of prayer was superior to music and to any art. Through the protagonist of “Trio Chajkovskogo” Losev says:

What can we do if we are not monks, and if we are not fated to experience the noetic ecstasies of hermits and saints? [...] This is where music consoles us [...] Taking into account all the explanations, clarifications, and exceptions that I gave, the musical ecstasy is the purest and most perfect achievement of culture, the most positive and valuable thing that Western Europe has produced in all of modernity.³ (Losev, 1993a: 194)

In his works of the 1920s, while Soviet censorship was gaining strength, Losev was able to conceal and mask the religious nature of his philosophy, which he did with especial virtuosity in *Filosofija imeni* (Philosophy of the Name). However the publication of *The Dialectic of Myth* led to the author’s arrest. Thereafter, from the 1940s to the 1970s, Losev was forced to observe “ideological compliance.” It is remarkable that Losev’s final essay on music (published posthumously in *Sovetskaja muzyka*) lacks the most important element: the doctrine of musical number. I believe that this indirectly confirms that Losev understood musical number in a *religious* manner, and not, say, in the manner of formalism or structuralism. However in the 1960s and 1970s Losev continued to write on his beloved Wagner, which allowed him to augment his picture of the “apocalypse” of European culture with a profound analysis of *Der Ring der Nibelungen*. Without launching into a detailed account of this analysis, I shall merely note in conclusion a certain parallel between Wagner and Losev as cultural phenomena, a parallel produced by the logic of history. The initial moment at which Losev’s work seemed a direct continuation of Wagner’s was the turn to mythology as the first principle of culture. The difference is in the instrument of analysis: if Wagner uses a musical analysis

of myth, Losev provides a philosophical and conceptual analysis. The goal of Wagner's life was the creation of a future art which turned out to be nothing but a myth (a Christian myth, as is shown in the finale of *Parsifal*). The life task of Losev was the philosophical grounding of myth and the creation of absolute dialectics as the realization of a philosophically manifested "absolute mythology," which in Losev's terminology meant Christianity.

NOTES

¹ Losev characterizes the members of Tetrad B by the words in parentheses, which apply *symbolically* the names of the elements as they featured in ancient philosophy.

² Incidentally the surviving part of "Očerok o muzyke" opens with the intriguing statement: "This is terrifying to utter and sounds unusual and uncanny to a normal ear. Yet this [...] is only a descriptive portrait of musical ecstasy" (Losev, 1995: 638).

³ Of course by this time Losev *was* a monk, but this excerpt is uttered by a secular person from *that particular time*.

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