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# 'Understandable Song' : Music in *Chevengur.*

*by*

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*Revolution is chiefly feeling, organism, element, music.*
Platonov, 1931[1]

1. At the end of the first Duino Elegy, Rilke invokes the legend of Linos, a beautiful youth at whose death the cosmos, quivering with lament, produced the very first music: 'wagende erste Musik' (daring first music).[2] Like Rilke, Platonov, too, seems fascinated by the origin of musical sound and entertains ideas about the material cosmos itself producing music. In some of his early stories he describes, always unexpectedly, a simple, stirring, semi-musical, elemental sound, coming from the surrounding world, eerie and somehow meaning something. Existing between the heard and the imagined, it may suggest to us the speechless sounds Buddhism conceives as emanating from the Buddha mind, audible only to the enlightened; or it may be close to what Tsvetaeva means when she celebrates sheer sound even more than any composed music,[3] especially when it is suddenly heard, or half-heard, coming from nowhere and calling you to start something new; or to what Pasternak means when he writes, not often but repeatedly, of the quasi-hearing, the as-if-hearing, of something that calls from 'outside' and prompts pity and creativity.[4] Platonov too felt that the world was asking something of us. He surely hints, too, at Tiutchev's poem to the singing 'Night Wind'.[5] But his image has also a meaning that is all its own.

Such a sound occurs several times in *Chevengur* (*Чевенгур*). First there is the 'deaf, sad' train whistle which rouses Zakhar Pavlovich to leave his minimal existence in the forest and go to seek employment. It comes from a mysterious distance and is called 'song' - the word 'singing' occurs four times in the short description[6] (twice about the whistle and twice about the noise of the forest). Later, repairing a piano, the same craftsman insists on understanding exactly how the instrument produces its sounds - not how a composition may be played, but what mechanism underlies the very sound. His insistence is linked



to his reflection that musical sound makes people 'good'.[7] So there is a connection between the basis of music and the 'utopian' condition. This is as far as Zakhar Pavlovich goes. Having understood the technology, he loses interest; he is someone who sympathises with the hope for a 'new world' but is not committed to working for it.

For his foster-son Aleksandr Dvanov, the novel's main hero, who is committed to the new world, primal sound has a far greater significance. At the age of seventeen, Dvanov meditates on existence:

> However much he read and thought, there always remained inside him a sort of empty place - that emptiness through which, like an anxious wind, went the undescribed and unnarrated world. At seventeen Dvanov did not yet have armour over his heart, neither faith in God nor any other mental peace; he did not give an alien name to the nameless life opening out in front of him. He did not, however, want the world to stay unnamed, he was just waiting to hear its own name instead of the deliberately invented nicknames.
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> Once he was sitting at night in his usual anguish. His heart, not closed by faith, was tormented within him and sought consolation. Dvanov bowed his head and visualized inside his body the emptiness where, daily, incessantly, life kept going in and then going out, not lingering, not intensifying, evenly, like a distant hum in which it was impossible to make out the words of the song.
>
> Sasha felt a coldness in himself as from a real wind blowing into the spacious dark behind him, while in front of him, whence the wind was being born, there was something transparent, light and vast - mountains of live air which he had to transform into his breath and heartbeat. From this presentiment something seized his chest in advance and the emptiness within his body loosened up still more, ready for the seizure of future life.
>
> 'This - is me!' Aleksandr said loudly.[8]

The first paragraph describes the habitual pondering of a void within himself and of the way the world - or life (Platonov regularly confounds these categories, the one more objective, the other more subjective) - goes through that void 'like an anxious wind'; not being armed with any conventional set of names for such things, he waits to hear the 'world's own name'. The second paragraph describes one particular occasion of such meditating. The image of

an inner emptiness is repeated, but life's movement is described as going both into and out of it (like breath). And now an image of music is added: the simile 'like an anxious wind' is replaced by 'like a distant hum', and the adjectives 'undescribed', 'unnarrated' and 'nameless' are replaced by the phrase 'in which it was impossible to distinguish the words of the song'. Not only is there a song-like sound being heard or almost heard, but the words of the song, it is implied, are somehow **there**, are not our invention, and are capable of being understood. A meditation on world and self has led to notions of primal sound and of potentially intelligible song.

I had read the third paragraph several times under the impression that 'wind' was being transferred from metaphorical to literal status: Dvanov's transforming 'mountains of live air' into 'breath and heartbeat' seemed so apt an account of our physical condition. But that meant ignoring the 'as' in 'as from a real wind'. True, as the sentence continues there is no reminder that a simile is in force, and the ungrammatical (or elliptical) phrase 'whence the wind was being born' does seem nonfigurative; all the same, the simile - although it may be another instance of Platonov's confounding of categories - has to be acknowledged. What is being said, I think, is that, just as inhaling transforms air into breath, so being transforms world/life into - but into what? It would be presumptuous to say 'into spirit' (even given the identity of wind, breath and spirit at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, which this passage may well call to mind). An apparent answer seems to be given: into me. 'Вот это - я!' ('This is - me!')

Yet this is ambiguous, especially as 'это' could be translated either 'this' or 'that'. It could mean: 'this is me sitting here thinking these thoughts!' or, fitting better with what we know of him: 'that whole external world is me!', or, though less in character: 'I am the whole world'; or again: 'what I am is this inner emptiness and this seizure by presentiment of a future'. It is even not altogether ruled out that the **name** Dvanov longs to find, the world's 'own' name, is here being identified as 'Я': its name is 'I'.

2. I shall mention two further instances of the young Dvanov's responding to wordless 'song' issuing from nature. Just before he is taken prisoner by anarchists, he walks alone in the evening and, while fishes, birds and insects grow silent around him, he hears in the air the 'inaudible stanzas of the day's song'.[9] Again, he fails to catch the words of the song; he is left hearing only



a 'movement which did not resemble his feeling of consciousness'. A later encounter with 'unintelligible song' comes when he first hears the name 'Chevengur'. He 'liked the word Chevengur. It resembled the alluring hum of an unknown land.'[10] Why 'land'? After all, it is the name of an unknown town in his own land. But 'land' connotes more largeness, distance and vagueness than 'town' and, associated as it is here with the word 'гул' ('влекущий гул' [an alluring hum]), it may hark back to that moment when the seventeen-year-old heard the movement of life as 'отдаленный гул' (a distant hum). It recalls, too, the still earlier moment when his father drowned himself to discover what fish know about death; death seemed to him some other land, or, as he said, 'another province under the sky **as if** under water'.[11] Eventually Dvanov will follow the sound of the name and go to Chevengur to work towards setting up a naïve and 'tender' communist society, like the distant land of his desire.[12] As Natalia Kornienko has said, 'он идет на звук' (he follows the sound).[13] All this is important to his characterization, in which, to quote Nina Malygina, 'we note echoes of Platonov's idea about the world's self-expression in sound. Sasha awaits the manifestation of its musical essence'.

3. 'Understandable [or intelligible] song' is Platonov's phrase. It comes in the passage about how the old inhabitants of Chevengur, the 'alien folk', lying on the earth awaiting their destruction, console themselves with Christian myth and language. No such 'understandable song'(понятная песнь),[14] laments the narrator, exists for the bolsheviks - they have only the difficult, Sabaoth-like Karl Marx who neither tells them what communism will be like nor offers comfort on the hard path towards it. From this one may think that the 'understandable song' needed by the bolsheviks will be a mere substitute for the now rejected lyrical talk of Christians, but the earlier contexts suggest it is far more than that. They are looking for something unprecedentedly original; the primal sound has not yet become that from which a tradition can develop.

This passage lamenting the bolsheviks' lack of 'understandable song' is preceded and followed by the two stages of Chepurnyi's meeting with the blacksmith Sotykh, a meeting surely meant to adumbrate the new kind of love which will characterize the 'new world'. Conscious of living on the very eve of 'communism', Chepurnyi becomes filled with an excitement and a desire which focus on a stranger (who turns out to be Sotykh) seen walking from far away towards the town. His feeling could well be read as a transformation of

sexual excitement ('were Klavdia in his arms right now', he would be less impatient)[15] into something which is repeatedly called 'comradeship' and 'friendship' and which is depicted - in their shared night in the barn - as tender, shy and non-sexual. If it is right to read this as the insecure beginning of a 'new world' love, then it parallels the new kind of lyrical thinking that needs to be embodied in understandable song. Moreover, Sotykh tells Chepurnyi not to weep, as 'people aren't songs'.[16] There are, then, these two kindred but distinct things: love and music - both needing to be realised in a new form.

The words 'understandable' and 'non-understandable'('понятный' and 'непонятный'), used of a kind of amorphous music proceeding from nature, readily recall Tiutchev's poem 'What do you wail about, night wind?' - particularly with its hearing of a song in the wind's howl and with its lines: 'In language understandable to the heart / You speak of non-understandable suffering'.[17] This poem, too, is about a relationship between human being and the wind's mysterious singing. But its message is an opposite one. Tiutchev senses 'terrible' meaning in the song of the wind and, fearing the consequences of understanding it, begs it to stop sounding, while Platonov desires above all to go on listening and to understand. Platonov too uses the epithet 'terrible' but he apples it to the unlyrical works of Marx. For Tiutchev, who has no plan for building a new world, to listen fully to reality's wordless song would mean a dire loss of individuation, a merging with chaos. But Dvanov has already merged with the elements and does not romantically call them 'chaos'. His main childhood feature has been an extraordinary sympathy with the whole surrounding world, human and animal, animate and inanimate, a sympathy so powerful it even takes the place of sexuality. The passage I've looked at is his first conscious recognition that he has this seamless oneness with things; along with consciousness has come the sensation of music.

If we ask what, in Dvanov's development, leads to this moment, we are impeded by Platonov's customary withholding of all developmental-psychological explanation (*Chevengur* is certainly no Bildungsroman), but the singling out for importance of the moment of arrival at 'consciousness' accords with all Platonov writes, in his journalistic articles, about consciousness supplanting sexuality in the better, 'proletarian', human being of the future.

4. If the primal hum, like Rilke's 'daring first music', is deep within the elemental world, and if Dvanov, the listener to it, is in some sense the



elemental world ('This is - me!'), then the primal music is deep within Dvanov.

If in Dvanov, then, we note the origin of that distant music, the not yet understandable song, from within - since he is the author's chosen centre of inhabited subjectivity - we may also note it, conversely, from without, in certain other characters, those who are typically seen in their struggle to get something emotionally gripping into speakable thoughts. In *Chevengur* there are several characters of this sort, resembling Filat in the earlier work *Iamskaya sloboda* (*Ямская слобода*), and Makar in *Doubting Makar* (*Усомнившийся Макар*). There is, notably, Moshonkov-'Dostoevskii'; there is, to some extent Kopenkin, and, most conspicuously of all, there is Chepurnyi. Their struggles with language can be understood as complementary to Dvanov's attempts to hear the world's own name and then to use it. If it is somehow in him, it is also outside him, in them.

Platonov's preoccupation with compassion for whole peoples, or classes of people, who have become lost, wretched and forgotten and are on the verge of vanishing, and his concern with repeatedly exploring the theme of their rescue, also belongs in this consideration. For, in *Chevengur*, the 'прочие' - the 'prochie' or 'other people', the 'et ceteras'; In *The Juvenile Sea* (*Ювенильное море*) the 'невыясненные' - the 'unexplained', the 'unclarified ones'; in *Dzhan* (*Джан*) the whole 'dzhan' people, the 'soul' people: all of these are expressly nameless. At one point Chepurnyi reflects that Lenin will want him to attract into life 'the whole low nameless people',[18] and the concept 'nameless'[19] is later used four times of the 'prochie' as they approach and enter the town. Their apparent lack of nationality further stresses that they are 'indescribable'. Namelessness and indescribability relate these people to that 'undescribed and unnarrated' world in which the young Dvanov heard a far-off, indistinguishable song, just as inarticulacy - an inability to name, describe and narrate things - relates Chepurnyi and the other speech-sufferers to it. The 'prochie', 'the unclarified' and the dzhan exist at the border with non-existence; those who speak with difficulty - at the border with silence and inaction. All need saving, spurring into life. Platonov's vision is of a sombre universe of people who are at once doomed and at a beginning, at once nearly dead yet alive with promise. The promise he often calls music.

5. Other images of pre-musical or quasi-musical sound occur in *Chevengur*. All carry suggestions of a hoped-for happier life. Firs, the tramp, listens

nightlong to the 'singing' sound of streams, and is ready to lie down and merge into them.[20] Kirei lights a lamp to attract flies and be comforted by their 'music'.[21] The sound of a cricket is said to draw yard, grass and fence with it into a childish homeland, a place better than any other in the world for living in.[22] And then there are about twelve references to played or sung music.

Six times the words of a song are given. Prominent themes of the songs are: lost or ambiguous parents, water, and fish - recalling the wisdom for whose sake one may be ready to die, as did Dvanov's father. There are also six or more references to wordless music, and a recurrent motif is the need for it to gain words. Listening to a harmonica, Kopenkin thinks: 'it was almost speaking the words, only just stopping short of uttering them, and so they remained an unrealised yearning'; the lack of words proves to him that there is no communism, for 'under communism [the player] would have spoken the music fully'.[23] The church bells rung at Dvanov's entry into Chevengur also seem to speak, repeating their old Christian message about giving up one's possessions and going ahead; this coincides with the bolshevik message but is of no use to the new Chevengurians, who have no possessions and who have 'nothing ahead except the revolution';[24] no one yet knows the new, non-Christian, words that need to be put to the sound of these bells. (Serbinov's weeping at the concert in Moscow, where the music seems to speak of a 'splendid'[25] and perfect human being, merely rehearses this motif in a culturally less eccentric context.)

Much of the pathos of the novel *Chevengur* is bound up with the need for music and with music's absence: the 'prochie' and bolsheviks have only church bells and an occasional mouth-organ. Several times it is noted that there is 'no art' in Chevengur and that people are in need of it. When, almost at the end, Prokofii returns from his journey bringing a musician, the latter is, explicitly, 'bourgeois'[26] and he arrives in the same carriage as a dozen women brought in response to a general clamour. Sexual love now distracts some of the men from the new love, the 'tender' comradeship which had just begun to develop; while the bourgeois-derived music, too, brings non-socialist emotional pleasures. The satisfaction of ordinary erotic and aesthetic desires is surely to be taken as a sign of the beginning of Chevengur's decline. The true emotion (as between Dvanov and Kopenkin, Chepurnyi and Sotykh) has not become universal, and the true music is still only adumbrated in strange overhearings of a distant primal humming.



6. In Platonov's early stories the rare but conspicuous music imagery is anticipatory of Dvanov's experience. The also seventeen-year-old eponymous hero of *Markun* (*Маркун*) feels 'music' rise in his blood as he contemplates his diagram of water pressure.[27] Kreitskopf, in *The Moon Bomb* (*Лунная бомба*), flies to the stars, where he will die, and finds they really do produce a celestial symphony.[28] Mikhail Kirpichnikov, in *The Ethereal Tract* (*Эфирный тракт*), twice hears, at climactic moments, a peculiar 'music' or 'ringing' that comes from deep in the natural world around him. On its first occurrence, which starts him off on his scientific career, it is a 'quiet, strange, sad music'[29] for which no explanation is offered. The second time, it sounds as he dies in the shipwreck: 'through the cracking of his brain as it split apart he heard for a moment an indistinct song, like the ringing of the Milky Way, and felt sorry it was so brief'.[30] Just before this, Platonov has compared the ocean to 'that great sound which our ear does not hear because it has too high a tone'.[31] And there is a telling moment in *The Innermost Man* (*Сокровенный человек*) where Pukhov, on board ship in a terrible storm, is fascinated by a distant music, a song being sung by someone on a nearby vessel which has broken in two and is doomed to sink.[32] In these instances Platonov associates musical or pre-musical sound both with the passion to understand nature and with the moment of death. The so characteristic absence of commentary is almost as palpable as a commentary and I think we may say he is using these images of sound to mark the possibility of some future true understanding.

Music appears variously in works subsequent to *Chevengur*. The mere twelve or so allusions to it in *The Foundation Pit* (*Котлован*, 1931) do not substantially contribute to the theme of 'primal sound' or '(non)-understandable song', nor do the more than fifty references to music in *Happy Moscow* (*Счастливая Москва*, 1933-6). But this theme is important in the fragmentary narrative of the 1930s *Moscow Violin* (*Московская скрипка*), originally part of *Happy Moscow* with which it coincides for lengthy passages.

In this story, Veshchii, a musician and wanderer, finds that 'dead' matter can give out a singing sound; at one point this is called 'the voice of space and of wild surrounding matter'.[33] Although he thinks every substance has in it this 'new music', this 'live feeling',[34] the particular substance he hears it coming from is material that has been rejected by the Weights and Measures Institute, made into a violin by the institute's watchman and bought by Veshchii at the market. (Unusable by those concerned with exact calculation, it is cherished

by the lesser man who safeguards their work and comes into its own among the crowd of common people.) The musicality of the very material is manifested in the violin's habit of producing (when Veshchii plays it) melodies Veshchii himself is not capable of, and also by its singing, as it lies inside its case, 'an unknown and moving theme'.[35] The sound is at once 'tender and threatening'; it fills the whole street and spreads up to the 'electric glow of night-time Moscow';[36] at the same time it is so obscured by the general noise of people around that, in order to hear it, Veshchii has to press his ear to it. At another time, playing alone, he hears windows, walls, furniture and air all sing in response to the violin. In all this there is a fairy-tale or science-fiction quality, but the story is not a fantasy; its focus on the daily experience of a credible Soviet citizen suggests that something philosophically real is being researched or sought.

It is not clear why the music is called 'threatening', whereas the adjective 'tender' does seem appropriate to Veshchii's relation to it, for his belief is that music should express not one's own soul but the souls of others. Like Sartorius in *Happy Moscow*, he longs to sense the subjective being of other people and finally disappears in order to take on, apparently, someone else's being. He has been introduced as a 'happy tramp'[37] - something which socialism makes possible if you have in your heart 'a melody that is right for everyone' (подходящая для всех).

Hitherto *Moscow Violin* corroborates and develops the idea hinted at in *Chevengur* that the old world contains a latent 'primal' music which promises a new lyricism and indeed a new world. Moreover, although music in 'Moscow Violin' has far more power and audibility, the *Chevengur* motif of failure to make out the 'words of the song' is repeated here: 'the external noise and bustle of people prevented [him] from catching the music's thought (мысль)'.[38] Almost at the end of the fragment, however, comes a different explanation. It is presented by one Grubov, who tells the workers of the institute that (1) the world is constructed of 'sick material'; (2) man's belabouring it has dislodged the molecules from their native places so that they now wander about within matter, suffering; (3) high-frequency electric current restores them to their old places, 'nature becomes healthy and firm, the molecules come to life and begin to give out a harmonious resonance', singing in response to stimulus and continuing to sing when the stimulus stops, so as to tell of their suffering. 'This sound', says Grubov, 'is understandable to man', whose heart, when carrying the tension of art, sings in almost the same



way, only not so precisely or clearly.[39]

That the ancient wrong in the world can be put right by our treating inert substance with high doses of electric current is an idea relating far more to Platonov's stories of the early 1920s than either to *Chevengur* with its unscientific utopian hope or to the equally unscientific anti-utopian despair of *The Foundation Pit*. The view propounded by Grubov, the 'Crude', seems to me a mere fanciful adjunct (or parallel) to the experience of Veshchii, the 'Prophetic', who, in being a new type of person, is able to hear a new kind of music, and who represents, without analysing it, a future lyricism.

7. Finally, I shall suggest that, while the act of listening to the primal sound, and, on a lesser scale, to any music, seems to signify, in *Chevengur*, the desire for a kind of lyrical thinking appropriate to the future world of 'socialism' or 'communism', there are nonetheless three ways in which this desire might be considered already indirectly fulfilled in the novel.

First, some of our ordinary, present language, if perceived in a certain way, already contains the needed lyricism, the 'words of the song'. The passage in which Dvanov is drawn to the name 'Chevengur' is an example of this. At a later point, Kopenkin is drawn to something beautiful and unclear - beautiful because unclear - in the phrase 'the current moment'. In Russian - as in English but more noticeably - 'current' means 'flowing'. 'A moment, yet it flows', Kopenkin thinks, 'that can't be imagined'; and he asks the more educated Dvanov what those words are called which cannot be understood - is it 'thorns'? Dvanov corrects him: 'No, it's "terms"'.[40] Here, in an admirably concentrated passage, we have both the unnoticed lyricism of a common metaphor and a translation of the bureaucratic into the religious-poetic: 'термины' (terminy) into 'тернии' (ternii). Kopenkin's ignorance of an ugly word has enabled him to utter a beautiful one.

Secondly, the positively valued episode of communal work near the end of the novel[41] may be interpreted as a realisation through activity of the 'distant hum' and of the 'stanzas of the day's song', especially if we recall how, long ago, before Dvanov set off on his travels, the new world which he had in himself was described as something that could not be 'said' but could only be 'done'.

The third way in which the desire for a peculiarly bolshevik lyricism is fulfilled

is of a different order. It is that the whole of this novel, as all Platonov's best work, is itself lyrical - in a new way, in unfamiliar poetic language. Easy to sense but hard to fathom, this new lyricism accounts for the effect Platonov has again and again on his readers: dark and bright at once; 'savage, tragic, and - enchanting', as a new reader of Platonov said to me; and, to quote a recent reviewer,[42] there is 'something so joyful and delicate and absurdly hopeful in his writings that the whole heartfelt impulse of the Russian experiment, as well as its corruption by the poverty of the human spirit, seems embodied in his unique prose'.



## NOTES

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1. Andrei Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki,* ed. N. V. Kornienko, Nasledie, Moscow, 2000, p. 69.

2. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke in drei Bänden*, Frankfurt am Main, Insel Verlag, I, 1955, p. 444.

3. E.g. throughout *Krysolov;* and see my commentary in *The Ratcatcher*, translated by Angela Livingstone, Angel Books, London, 1999, pp. 23-24.

4. E.g. in Boris Pasternak, *Sobranie sochinenii v 5 tomakh,* Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow, IV, 1991, p. 299.

5. See note 17.

6. *Chevengur*, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow, 1988, pp. 26ff.

7. Ibid. p. 30.

8. Ibid. p. 71.

9. Ibid. p. 103.

10. Ibid. p. 192.

11. Ibid. p. 27.

12. In conversation.

13. N.M. Malygina, *Khudozhestvennyi mir Andreia Platonova,* Moscow, 1995, p. 81. The idea of the physical world expressing itself in music is put forward most strongly in the 1930s story 'Moskovskaia skripka', in *Tvorchestvo Andreia Platonova*, kniga 2, ed. V. V'iugin, Nauka, St. Petersburg, 2000, pp. 287-305. (See pp. 65-7 of the present essay.)