Orthodox Elements in "Prayer" by Maka Virsaladze: A Topical Analysis and Interpretation

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Abstract

This article proposes the analysis of the representation of two elements of Orthodox Christianity which are referenced in the piece *Prayer* (for solo piano) by Maka Virsaladze, with the intention of assisting in the preparation of this work for performance. The methodology chosen for this analysis stems from topic theory (based on the concept of "topics", introduced by Leonard Ratner in 1980) which has been used to recognise and examine external references (poetic, musical, literary, etc.) in a musical work. This article intends to contribute to this field by proposing a topical analysis of this particular piece, which has not been previously studied academically.

Keywords

Orthodoxy, topic theory, references, Maka Virsaladze

Introduction and Theoretical Framing

Prayer is a work for solo piano, written by Maka Virsaladze in 2016.[2] Its world premiere occurred in that same year by pianist Tamar Zhvania. It has the duration of, approximately, five minutes. Beside the keyboard, used in a traditional manner, this piece requires the execution of *glissandi* on the strings inside the piano, a vocal part that is to be sung by the pianist, and the

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1   Dr. Ana Telles contributed to the article's concept and design, supported the theoretical model's development, critically revised the text, and provided final approval.

2   Maka Virsaladze (1971–) is a Georgian composer and professor at the Conservatory of Music of Tbilisi. Her oeuvre comprises works for orchestra, solo instruments, chamber ensembles and choir, focusing on choral and piano works.

addition of an audio recording at the end. This article proposes an analysis of the representation of elements of Orthodox Christianity identified in Virsaladze's *Prayer*.

The methodology chosen for the analysis of this work was based on topic theory. The concept of topics was introduced by Leonard Ratner in 1980. Topics are "subjects for musical discourse,"[3] "general types, capable of being represented by particular tokens;"[4] these 'tokens' (or 'signs' as they are often called)[5] are sets of musicals codes through which one can recognise a reference to a specific topic.

The term 'topics' assembles a variety of analytical trajectories—such as the study of connotations, evocations, stylistic borrowing, etc.—under an umbrella term, allowing for a more complete analysis of the referenced material and its cultural, historical, and stylistic implications. Moreover, topical analysis focuses on the implied references and on their behaviour within the structure and style of the work, instead of examining merely their reflection as purely musical symbols in the context of the composer's style and technique.

The purpose behind the use of this methodology relies on the notion that, by identifying the reference(s) implied in the score, one may better understand the meaning(s) of the different elements that it comprises, thereby using that understanding to assist the listener toward a more informed experience, and to aid the performer toward the construction of a more nuanced and specific interpretation.

There are a few different frameworks to topic theory in music, which will presently be discussed.

Some scholars focus on Peircean semiotics,[6] which draws on the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce,[7] emphasising the triadic relation between sign, object, and interpretant. Some categorisations derive from this theory: Several authors distinguish three types of signification of the musical codes that refer to certain topics: 'iconic'—when the sign imitates the object it represents; 'indexical'—when the sign locates the object in time and space and/or represents some of its characteristics; and 'symbolic'—when a sign represents a certain symbol and depends on learned cultural codes.[8] Moreover, a single sign may be regarded as belonging to one or more of these types.

3   Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (Schirmer Books, 1980), 9.

4   Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 15.

5   See, for example: Nicholas McKay, "On Topics Today," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft Für Musiktheorie* 4, no. 1-2 (2007): 159–183, https://doi.org/10.31751/251.

6   Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton University Press, 1991); Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Indiana University Press, 1994).

7   Charles Sanders Peirce, "What is a Sign?," in *Theorizing Communication: Reading Across Traditions,* ed. Robert Craig and Heidi Muller (Sage Publications, 2007).

8   See, for example: Boilès, "Processes of musical semiosis," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* no. 14 (1982): 24–44, https://doi.org/10.2307/768069; Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

Other authors emphasise the role of topics within the structure of the work: Such an approach focuses on the analysis of musical structures and the relations between musical elements and their associated meanings or concepts and examines the interconnections between topics and signs within larger formal frameworks.[9]

Another analytical stream prioritises a stylistic analysis of topics, noting the particularities of the behaviour of specific topics in the context of the composer's style, and cross-referencing it with the use of the same topics in other composers' works. For example, Johanna Frymoyer analyses the topic of the minuet in the music of Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Igor Stravinsky, explaining how they use different combinations of signs pertaining this topic, with different rhetorical results.[10]

Zoltán Farkas,[11] Juliana Hodkinson,[12] and others concentrate on the analysis of musical narrative, examining how topics function as narrative motifs or themes, and how they contribute to the storytelling aspects of a work. Farkas, for example, underlines recurring motifs, harmonic progressions, rhythmic patterns, and formal structures in György Kurtág's music in relation to the motif of wandering in Friedrich Hölderlin's poetry.[13]

Historical and cultural contextualisation is a frequently broached subject whereby musical topics are contextualised historically and culturally, by examining how composers adapt them to suit their artistic purposes, within their social, cultural, historical, and political environment.[14] Márta Grabócz, for instance, examines the topic of walking as a recurring thematic element in music, analysing its manifestations—reflected in elements such as rhythm, tempo, and melodic delineation—across different historical periods and musical styles.[15]

Finally, some scholars examine the translation of the meaning of a topic across different semiotic systems, such as music, language, visual arts, and literature, analysing how musical elements evoke or interact with topics from other artistic domains, and how these cross-modal associations contribute to musical interpretation.[16] Janice Dickensheets, for example, parallels Brahms's Piano Sonata no. 2 with the literary styles of E.T.A Hoffmann and Jean Richter in the context of German Romantic literature,

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9 Robert Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Indiana University Press, 2004); William Caplin, "On the Relation of Musical Topoi to Formal Function," *Eighteenth-Century Music* 2 no. 1 (2005): 113-24, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478570605000278.

10 Johanna Frymoyer, "The Musical Topic in the Twentieth Century: A Case Study of Schoenberg's Ironic Waltzes," *Music Theory Spectrum* 39, no. 1 (2017): 83–108, https://doi.org/10.1093/mts/mtx004.

11 Zoltán Farkas, "The Path of a Hölderlin Topos: Wandering Ideas in Kurtág's Compositions," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43, no. 3/4 (2002): 289–310.

12 Juliana Hodkinson, "Aphorisms, fragments and paratactic synthesis: Hölderlin references and compositional style in György Kurtág's…*quasi una fantasia*…," *Musik & Forskning* no. 29 (2004): 25–32.

13 Farkas, "The Path of a Hölderlin Topos."

14 Agawu, *Playing with Signs*; Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*; Danuta Mirka, *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

15 Márta Grabócz, "Some Aspects of Musical Narratology: The Topic of Walking and its Evolution in the Music of György Kurtág," in *Music Theory and Analysis*, ed. Milos Zatkalik (Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013).

16 Such as Agawu, *Playing with Signs*; and Mirka, *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*.

linking specific melodic lines, ornamentations, intervals, and keys to common characters, affects, and episodes in the Romantic novel genre.[17]

In *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, three main analytical approaches are underlined: Semiotic analysis—which focuses on the signifying gestures and symbols in the score, analysing how they convey meaning and interact with each other to create layers of significance; stylistic analysis—whereby certain musical elements are analysed with the purpose of distinguishing a composer's stylistic features and techniques; and hermeneutic analysis—which attempts to interpret a musical work within its broader cultural and historical context.[18]

All three of these approaches stem from the notion that topics are "musical styles and genres taken out of their proper context and used in another one,"[19] although scholars focus on different perspectives—historical, stylistic, social, cultural, interdisciplinary, structural—or on several of these at the same time, to prove their points. However, some discrepancies are highlighted in this book.

Regarding semiotic analysis, it focuses on the identification of a sign as iconic, indexical, or symbolic. However, Peirce himself,[20] backed by Raymond Monelle[21] and others, concludes that a single sign can be ascribed to two or even three of these categorisations at once. What exactly characterises a topic as such likewise remains to be agreed upon. On a similar note, while some authors seem to think of music as a fabric entirely composed of topics, others regard it as a juxtaposition or even opposition of passages with and without topical content.

While different analytical perspectives and subsequent categorisations lead to various valid conclusions, they do not, usually, cancel each other out, but rather enrich the conception of a work, thereby offering both the listener and the performer a greater variety of focal points, from which one can choose that which most resonates with their own interpretive insights.

Topics in contemporary music

Early studies on topic theory examine the role of musical topics in different historical periods, underlining their evolution over time, and focusing mainly on eighteenth and nineteenth century music. However, the study of these topics in contemporary works often leads to unexpected conclusions which evidence topics' continuous development. According to Frymoyer, "topics serve as a bridge or mediation between old and new techniques," by "reinvigorating established topics through new and creative expressive combinations."[22]

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17   Janice Dickensheets, "Narrative Analysis, the Sonata Cycle and Implications for Performance: A Reading of Brahms's Piano Sonata No. 2 in F-sharp Minor," in *Musical Topics and Musical Performance*, ed. Julian Hellaby, (Routledge, 2023).
18   Mirka, *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory.*
19   Mirka, *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, 2.
20   Peirce, "What is a Sign?," 177–183.
21   Monelle, *The Sense of Music*, 15.
22   Frymoyer, "The Musical Topic in the Twentieth Century," 102, 107.

For example, one topic that is often discussed in relation with eighteenth and nineteenth century music is the waltz—this same topic is analysed under a new light by Frymoyer, who examines Schoenberg's waltzes, to demonstrate how he distorts and deconstructs the waltz topic, transforming its conventional characteristics to subvert its traditional associations through chromatic harmonies, irregular phrase structures, rhythmic displacement, abrupt changes in texture and dynamics, and the use of twelve-tone techniques.[23]

Other examples include Hodkinson's article, which highlights the short, concise gestures and musical fragments that characterise Kurtág's compositional style, reflecting the aphoristic style and fragmented nature of Hölderlin's poetry,[24] or Gregory Decker and Matthew Shaftel's book, which considers contemporary trends and innovations in opera production and reception, including the use of digital technology, multimedia platforms, and experimental staging techniques, and examines the ways in which opera continues to evolve, addressing contemporary social, political, and cultural issues.[25]

Hatten's theory of marked and unmarked features (1994) and Frymoyer's categorisation of signs (2017)

The following theories are proposed here as analytical tools for the specification of topical meaning in *Prayer*.

Robert Hatten discusses 'topical troping,' which he describes as the alternation of different—even opposing—topics in a musical work .[26] In relation to this, he distinguishes 'marked' versus 'unmarked' features. According to Hatten, "markedness consists in an asymmetrical relation between terms of an opposition such that the marked term is used less frequently than the unmarked term and has a 'narrower range of meaning.'"[27] One of the examples he proposes is that of the opposition of minor and major modes—and their corresponding "tragic" and "nontragic" expressions— where the minor mode is marked in opposition to the dominant major mode. According to Dean Sutcliffe, this involves a narrower set of options in terms of the musical figures and resources that can be used and the affects that are projected in relation to the marked term.[28]

This is an important analytical procedure in that it allows for the distinction between topics that are dominant—these are, frequently, topically neutral passages, composed of unmarked features—and topics that occur less frequently, and are, therefore, essential for the delineation of the layout of a work, thus assisting in the organisation of topics within the structure of the piece.

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23   Frymoyer, "The Musical Topic in the Twentieth Century," 107.
24   Hodkinson, "Aphorisms, fragments and paratactic synthesis," 25–32.
25   Decker and Shaftel, *Singing in Signs: New Semiotic Explorations of Opera.*
26   Hatten, Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation, 34-38.
27   Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*, 35.
28   Dean Sutcliffe, *Instrumental Music in an Age of Sociability: Haydn, Mozart and Friends* (Cambridge University, 2020), 504, 507.

Furthermore, Frymoyer categorised the signs that represent each topic, according to their role in its identification.[29] Fundamentally, if Peircean semiotics examine the various ways in which the relation between sign and topic is effected, Frymoyer's categorisation examines the preeminent nature of the sign itself. She distinguishes three categories of characteristics:

- Essential characteristics: these are the main attributes that define a musical topic;
- Frequent characteristics: these are commonly found alongside the essential traits, but their absence would not fundamentally alter the identity of the topic;
- Idiomatic characteristics: these traits may appear in specific instances of a topic but are not generally necessary for the topic's recognition; they might be specific to a certain composer's style, a particular historical period, or a unique cultural context.

Additionally, when an idiomatic characteristic of a topic is represented more significantly than its essential characteristic(s), it can become an essential characteristic of a new topic, related to the first one, i.e. a subtype.

Methodology

This article's analysis uses topic theory as a framework to consider how Maka Virsaladze's *Prayer* represents certain performative, literary and theological aspects of Christianity, particularly through figures and gestures that relate to the Orthodox tradition, while examining their role in the expressive narrative of this piece.

For this article, I chose a structural perspective, on the grounds that a performance must be guided by a clear understanding of the construction of the work and of the interrelation of its composing elements for its narrative thread to be effectively conveyed to the audience. Additionally, in this work, the structure outlines a topical trope, where the two main topics are represented in contrasting ways.

Comparisons will be made in relation to the use of these topics by other composers. The topics will be contextualised within the scope of Orthodoxy and its relation with Virsaladze and her body of work will be specified. The narrative aspect of *Prayer* will also be addressed.

The analytical procedure will be based on Peirce's triadic correlation between sign, object, and interpretant; Hatten's theory of markedness; and Johanna Frymoyer's categorisation of essential, frequent, and idiomatic signs. These three theoretical frameworks are used to determine the degree of similarity between a topic and its representation in the analysed work, to establish contrasting relations between the representations of different topics, and to ascertain the level of relevance of a musical figure in the depiction and identification of a topic.

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29   Frymoyer, "The Musical Topic in the Twentieth Century Waltzes," 84.

This process shall answer the following questions:

- What are the musical codes that allow one to locate a musical sign in the context of Orthodoxy?
- What is the relation between Orthodoxy and the composer's musical language, in the context of her life and work?
- Does the musical sign resemble its reference, by imitating its characteristics?
- Does it point to its reference by contiguity or by suggestion via the representation of some of its characteristics?
- Does it contour a specific symbol, or reference a symbol in such away that would only be comprehended by someone who is aware of the cultural codes surrounding it?
- Is the sign an essential, frequent, or idiomatic characteristic of the topic it references?
- Which signs are marked and which are unmarked, within the structure of the work?
- Following this analysis, what are the characteristics that should be perceived by the audience in the execution of this sign in a musical performance?

The topics that I have identified in the present analysis pertain to Orthodox culture, music, theology, and practice, namely: bells of the *zvon* tradition, Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* technique, sacred monodic chant, sacred polyphonic chant, iconography, state of prayer, the representation of sacred texts, recited tone, theological concepts, symbolism, and duality of divine versus human. This article is part of a PhD investigation that concerns the elements of Orthodox Christianity as analysed in four works (including the one examined in this article).

Topic theory is particularly suited for this study because it reveals hidden meanings in certain musical figures through their contrasting and interacting behaviour. Ratner affirms that topics develop from the mixtures and contrasts of different ideas, affections, and styles;[30] Danuta Mirka clarifies this by saying that it is the deployment of musical figures "in other pieces and mixtures with other styles that turns styles into topics," additionally underlining that topics can be better understood through cross-referencing between different subjects.[31]

Therefore, topic theory provides a structured perspective through which specific musical codes within this piece can be observed in the context of Orthodoxy; weighing their symbolic significance and comparing them to their referents in Orthodox practice will allow us to recognise how Virsaladze uses the emulated topics to convey spiritual and emotional expression, thereby enabling interpretations that resonate across listeners and performers.

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30   Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form and Style* (Schirmer Books), 26–30.
31   Mirka, *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, 1.

"Prayer"

In her answers to an interview that I composed regarding this specific work, Virsaladze explains that this piece was written in order to be performed in a memorial concert dedicated to Olivier Messiaen's "Visions de l'Amen" (for two pianos).

As for the relation between Virsaladze and Orthodoxy, it is a clear one: she is an Orthodox Christian. In the aforementioned interview, she claims to be familiar with Georgian Orthodox bell-ringing and chanting traditions and affirms that she attempted to "create a religious and meditative mood" in this piece, an aesthetic that is, according to her, "close to her creative interests and mood."[32]

I have discerned five topics of Orthodoxy in this piece: *trezvon* bells, recited tone, the representation of a sacred text, the recreation of a state of prayer, and the divine-human duality.[33] The first two—bells and recited tone—are structural topics, for the topic of bells alternates with sections that merge signs of recited tone with signs of bells. Additionally, these two topics are represented by contrasting features, and can, therefore, be regarded as a topical trope. Hence, this article will focus on the topics of bells and recited tone.

There are three sections where these two topics merge: in the first one, the recited tone topic is predominant; the second one is dominated by the bell topic; in the third section, once more the dominant topic is the recited tone.

The text that is represented here is that of the prayer "Holy God, holy Mighty, holy Immortal, have mercy on us", which is sung in the liturgy in the Orthodox Church shortly before the reading of the Gospel. In this piece, it is to be sung by the pianist, in the Georgian language, twice. The first time, the prayer is sung three times—this corresponds to the performative tradition of this prayer's recitation in the Orthodox church—while the second instance (located near the end of the piece) presents only the first and third of the prayer's sentences.

The recreation of the state of prayer is effected with the use of motivic reiteration that imitates the repetition of prayers, the inclusion of fermatas that generate pause (related to the concept of eternity), and the perception of a clear structural development that binds narrative and stasis.[34]

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32   Maka Virsaladze, Personal communication to author, 2023.

33   I have interviewed the composer regarding the specific characteristics of the zvon tradition present in her piece, to which she responded that "there are similar figures in the Georgian church bell-ringing tradition," though she did not aim for a scrupulous representation of these characteristics. The reason why I thought I recognised the bells of the Russian Orthodox tradition in this piece composed by a Georgian woman is due to the fact that Georgia was under Russian rule for many years, having become independent only in 1990; hence, the bell-ringing and chanting traditions were heavily influenced (or even substituted) by the Russian ones in Georgia during the times of occupation, and were prevalent during most of the composer's life.

34   Ivan Moody, "The mind and the heart: Mysticism and music in the experience of contemporary Eastern Orthodox Composers," *Contemporary Music Review* 14, no. 3–4 (1996): 65–79.

Additionally, the alternation and merger of bells and recited tone represents the divine-human duality, where the divine dimension is signified by bells and the human one by the recited tone, due to the rhetorical consistency of the former (relatable to divine stability), and the variability of the latter (associated with human emotionality).

The coda presents the right hand performing a single melodic chromatic line on the higher register of the piano, accompanied by a recording of Virsaladze's *Prayer* for mixed choir. It is a topically neutral section (i.e., a section without topical representation)—the only one, in fact, even though it presents one sign of the recited tone (a single melodic line) and two signs of bells (dissonances and wide range). The first one does not behave as it is expected to, within this topic (this will be elaborated later), and the last two do not allow for topical recognition because they are not accompanied by other essential characteristics of this topic.

Therefore, these signs cannot be ascribed to their respective topics in this coda, and the following analysis will only pertain the score up to the coda.

Bells	bars 1–10
Fusion of recited tone and bells	b. 11–19
Bells	b. 20–22
Fusion of bells and recited tone	b. 23–30
Bells	b. 31–35
Fusion of recited tone and bells	b. 36–37
Coda	b. 38–41

Table 1. Topical structure of *Prayer*.

Analysis of "Prayer"

Bells

In the Russian Orthodox tradition the ringing of bells is called *zvon*. The bells are assembled by size and register, but never according to a scale; hence, the resulting sound does not resemble that of a tempered consonance (in accordance with Western musical tradition); consequently, it is concentrated not on melody but on rhythm. These bells are not swung in order to be played (as is the case in other European bell-ringing traditions); instead, the clappers are attached to ropes that are manipulated by the bellringer or connected to foot pedals or wooden levers.

There are three types of bells per collection:
- *Blagovestniki*—the largest and lowest in register, which play the slowest rhythmic figures;
- *Podzvonnye*—bells that are medium in size, register, and rhythmic movement;
- *Zazvonnye*—the smallest and highest in register, with the fastest rhythmic movement.

There are four main canonical rings—*Blagovest, Perebor, Perezvon* and *Trezvon*—of which, I will only describe the latter, as it is most significantly represented in this piece.[35]

The *trezvon* uses all three registers: high, medium and low. The main part of this ring can have several movements, each with its own dynamic, rhythm, and composition, ending with one, two, or three chords. It is usually introduced by three slow rings on the *blagovestnik* (symbolising the Holy Trinity) and concludes with three chords (*idem*) using all the bells.[36]

The subtype of *trezvon* bells is signified in this piece by specific rhythmic patterns related to a *trezvon*, a *tremolo,* dissonances, simultaneous layers with different rhythmic speeds, perfect 5[ths], a mostly polyphonic texture, and a wide range.

Rhythmic Patterns of a Trezvon

The sets of two quavers or four semiquavers that are utilised in this piece are featured in the rhythmic hierarchy of a *trezvon*. Additionally, the rhythmic patterns executed by *zazvonnye* often resemble triplets, if the bellringer's rhythmic precision is not accurate or the condition of the ropes is not ideal; the density of the bells themselves and the intensity of the wind are other contributing factors.

Hence, the use of triplets, sets of two quavers, and four semiquavers, and their combinations, in this work, are reminiscent of the *zazvonnye's* rhythmic patterns.
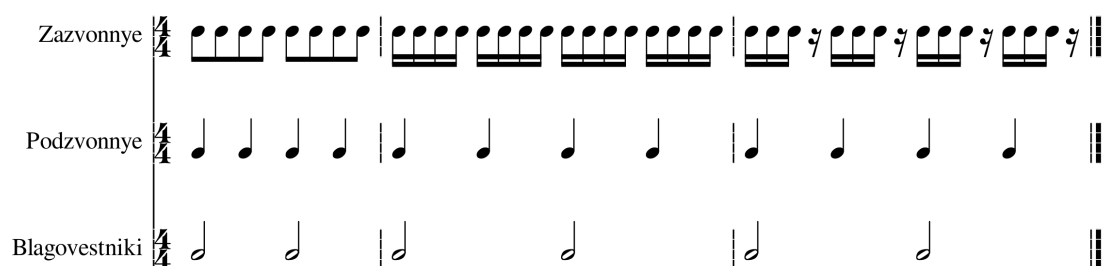

Figure 1. *Zvon* bells' rhythmic hierarchy.

Considering that these rhythmic figurations are presented in accordance with the rhythmic hierarchy of a *trezvon*—that is, with a faster and a slower layer, simultaneously—this sign is iconic for it accurately depicts the rhythmic behaviour of the bells in a *trezvon* ring.

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35   John Burnett, *Typikon for Church Ringing* (Blagovest Bells, 2004).
36   Burnett, *Typikon for Church Ringing*, 10–11.

Figure 2. Rhythmic patterns of *zazvonnye* bells in Virsaladze's *Prayer*.

This sign is an unmarked one for, in opposition with the flexible rhythm that characterises the first and third mergers of bells and recited tone, it is associated directly with bells, which are present throughout the entire work, whether as a single referent, or paired with the recited tone, while the latter features only half the work.

These rhythmic patterns constitute an essential characteristic of the *trezvon* bell subtype (as evidenced, for example, in Modest Mussorgsky's "The Great Gate of Kiev" from *Pictures at an Exhibition* or in Sergei Rachmaninoff's Prelude op. 3)[37], as they are used primarily in *trezvon* rings.

This sign also carries symbolic signification, because this ring is associated with the theological figure of the Holy Trinity, due to its tripartite structure (beginning with three rings on the *blagovestnik*, followed by up to three movements, ending with three chords), and to the use of the three registers.
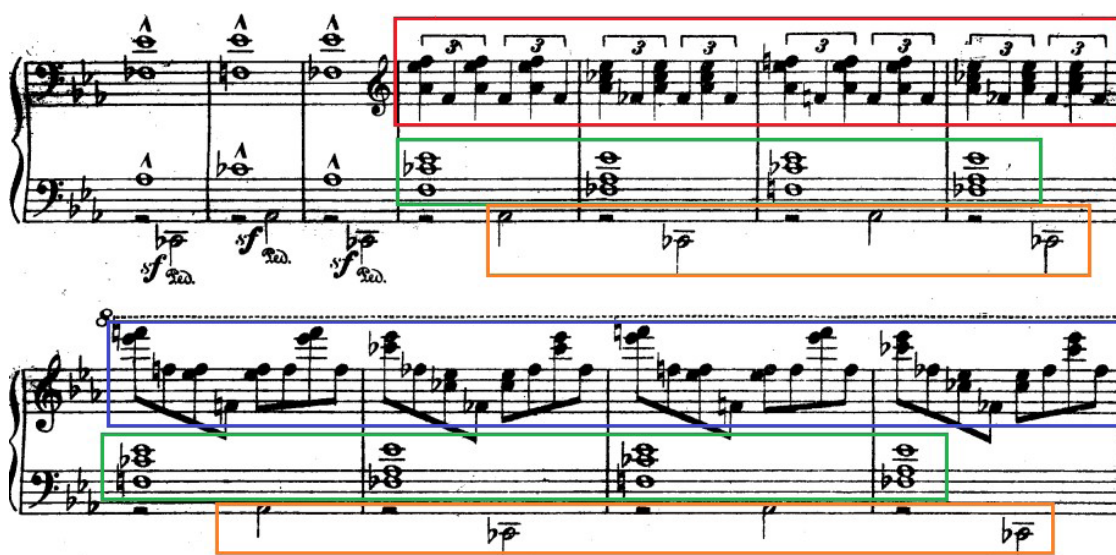
Figure 3. *Zvon* bells' rhythmic hierarchy in Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (in augmented form).

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37 Konstantin Shamray, "The Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches: Performing and Extending the European Traditions of Bell-Inspired Piano Music" (PhD diss., University of Adelaide, 2020), 50–53.

Figure 4. *Zvon* bells' rhythmic hierarchy in Rachmaninoff's *Prelude* op. 3.

Therefore, rhythmic precision is an important consideration for the performance of these patterns, as this resource will allow for the distinct perception of their rhythmic delineation, making them recognisable as a distinct element in this piece's texture.

Polyphonic Texture

Bells in general are rarely depicted in a single voice. Even when this does occur, the monophonic texture is usually a polyphonic one in arpeggiated form (for example, in Franz Liszt's "Sposalizio," where the single line at the beginning delineates a harmonic organisation [in crotchets] and is meant as an introduction to a following section with multiple voices). Polyphonic texture is, then, the most common way to represent bells.

Figure 5. Harmonic organisation in crotchets (introduction of Liszt's "Sposalizio").

This work presents this sign in two different harmonic settings: the main one, marked by an abundance of dissonant intervals, and a rather consonant one in bars 12–19.

Figure 6. Consonant harmonic setting in bars 12–19.

Hence, given the direct relation between this sign and its referent, it is an iconic sign. Additionally, it is a dominant sign throughout this work, with the exception of four bars—25, 26, 29, and 30—and of the coda—which makes it an unmarked feature.[38]
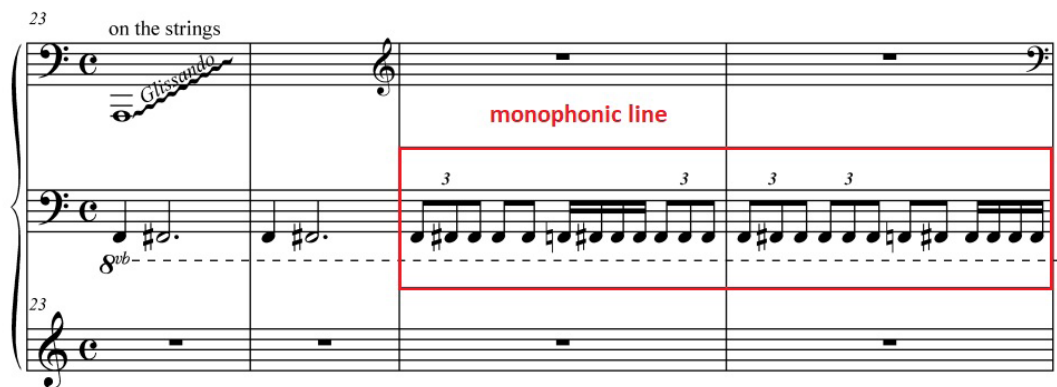

Figure 7. Monophonic line in bars 25 and 26.

Figure 8. Monophonic line in bars 29 and 30.

This sign is an essential characteristic of the representation of bells, signifying the multiplicity of bells engaged in a *trezvon*.

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38   I consider the *glissandi* to be part of the polyphonic texture as well, since they generate numerous notes' resonances.

Consequently, the chord texture that can be observed in most of this work should be evinced in performance for this sign to convey its topical meaning. It can, additionally, be dynamically distinguished from the few bars that present a monophonic texture to emphasise this contrast.

Wide Range

Trezvon bells are characterised by a wide pitch range. This sign manifests itself in this work in that all the sections where the bell topic is the only referent feature sudden leaps from one extreme register to the other, or (once) two simultaneous extreme registers (bb. 20–22). Therefore, this is an iconic sign, for the contrasting registers of the bells are imitated in this work by these characteristics. Meanwhile, in the sections where the bell topic is merged with the recited tone topic, this sign is not present.

Figure 9. Sudden leaps from one register to another.
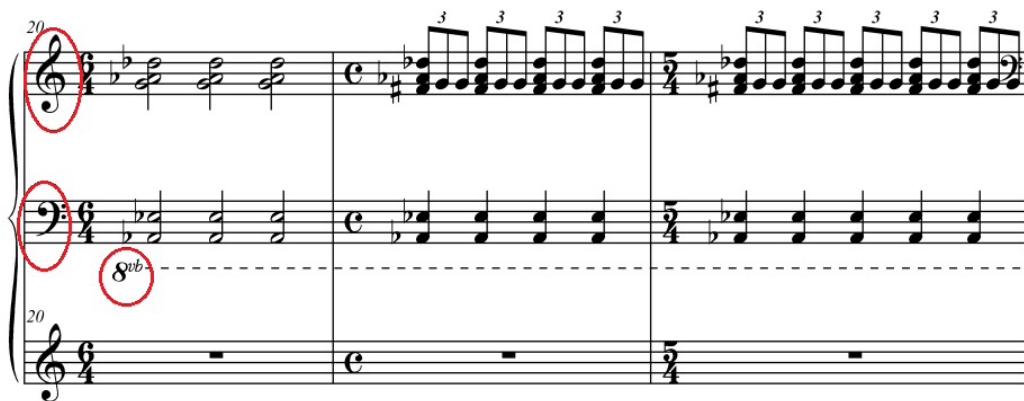
Figure 10. Two simultaneous extreme registers in bars 20–22.

This work—with the exception of the coda—is evenly divided between sections with wide range (where bells are the only referent) and sections with narrow range (where the two main topics are merged); the latter represent the recited tone, whether predominant or not, a topic which (as will be demonstrated further) behaves as the narrative element of this work.

Therefore, I consider wide range to be an unmarked feature in *Prayer*, since it is only present in sections where bells are the single referent. Given that these sections are more consistent in character, this suggests that this sign is not fundamental in the context of the narrative discourse, subsequently making it less salient in the expressive rhetoric of this work.

This sign is, also, an essential characteristic of *trezvon* bells. Even though some *trezvon* movements may briefly present a single register, or only two registers at once, these rings always culminate with the use of all three.

Therefore, the leaps between registers which illustrate this sign, as well as the section that presents two simultaneous extreme registers, may be dynamically and timbrically evinced in performance to emphasise this topic's representation.

Simultaneous Layers with Different Rhythmic Speeds

The hierarchy of *zvon* bells is as follows: The slowest rhythmic movement is carried out by the *blagovestniki*; the medium one by *podzvonnye*; and the fastest by *zazvonnye* (Figure 1). Each of these layers performs on a different register: low, medium, and high, respectively.

Although this work is presented in three-staff writing, the bottom third staff belongs to the voice, and the piano never displays more than two simultaneous rhythmic layers. Moreover, in bars 12–15, the fastest layer—which would be carried out by the top voice in a direct imitation of the hierarchy of *zvon* bells—is instead performed by the bottom voice in the left hand; this also occurs intermittently in bars 27–28 and 32–33.

Figure 11. Triple staff—two for the piano and one for the voice.

Figure 12. Fast layer in the bottom voice—unlike zvon hierarchy.

Figure 13. Shifting location of the fast layer in bars 27–28.

Figure 14. Shifting location of the fast layer in bars 32–33.

Therefore, this sign is not presented according to *zvon* practice, but instead, processed through the composer's creative resourcefulness, thereby making it an indexical sign. It is also an unmarked one, as it delineates the dominant texture throughout the work. This sign is an essential characteristic of *trezvon* bells, characterised by three registers with distinct rhythmic velocities.

Considering that what makes this an indexical sign is the shifting location of the fastest layer, it may be of the performer's concern to highlight said layer, for a more nuanced sonority and a clearer perception of the multi-rhythmic texture that distinguishes *zvon* bells.

Dissonances

Dissonances permeate the entire work, in the form of major and minor 2nds and augmented 4ths clustered within a small range, major and minor 7ths and 9ths, and chromatisms. These represent the general, non-consonant sonority of *zvon* bells. Therefore, this is an iconic sign for it emulates the discordant soundscape of this tradition, on the piano, by combining dissonant intervals in order to recreate that sonority.
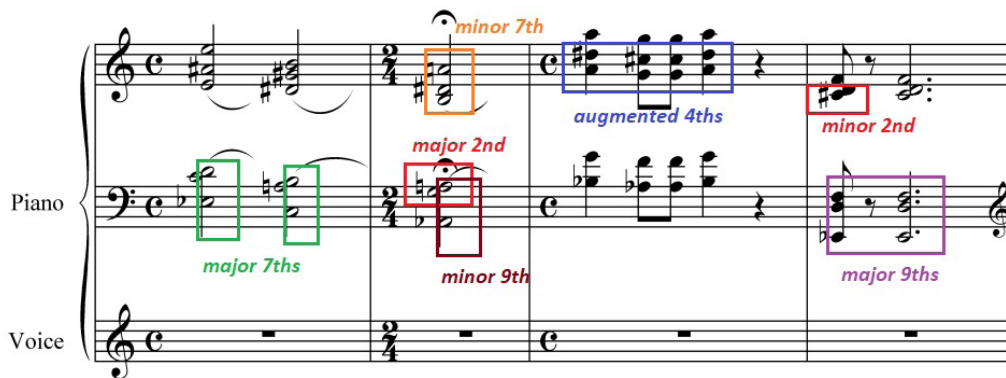

Figure 15. Dissonant intervals in Prayer.

It is an unmarked feature because it dominates most of this work, with the single exception of the section in bars 12–19 which represents the recited tone topic predominantly and features a consonant harmonic organisation (Figure 6). Furthermore, this sign is essential for the recognition of the *zvon* bells subtype, given that this European bell-ringing school, in particular, is characterised by discordant bells.[39] Hence, the dissonant intervals within the chords may be highlighted in performance, to accentuate the unique sonority that characterises this work and distinguish it from the harmonically consonant section.

Perfect 5ths

Bells are often represented in piano music by perfect 5ths, due to the fact that one of the main harmonics of a bell is a perfect 5th. This harmonic—named 'quint'—can be heard more distinctly than the others.[40] Thus, its use in a score may be considered an iconic sign.
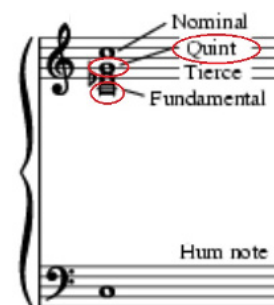

Figure 16.
Harmonics of bells—'quint.'

39   Shamray, "The Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches: Performing and Extending the European Traditions of Bell-Inspired Piano Music", 28.
40   Grove Music Online, s.v. "Bell," by Percival Price, et al., accessed February 10, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.42837.

It is a marked sign for it appears only three times in this work: bars 20–22 in the bass, bar 31 in the left hand, and bars 35–37, first in the right hand of the piano, and then subsequently in both hands.

The structural location of these 5ths additionally contributes to the narrative cohesion of this work: The first appearance coincides with the culmination of the climax (which occurs in bar 23); the second marks an abrupt leap from the bass register to the middle and high registers of the piano after the climax (generating a sudden decrease in intensity); and the third is located in the bridge that transitions to the coda.

Figure 17. Perfect 5ths in bars 20–22 in the bass.

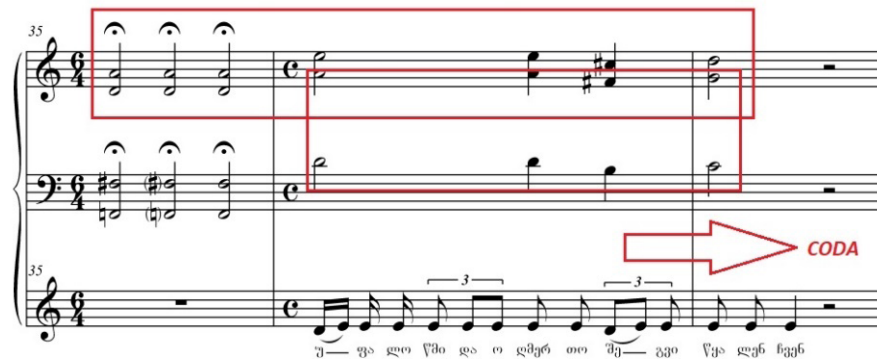**Figure 18.** Perfect 5ths in bar 31 in the left hand.

Figure 19. Perfect 5ths in bars 35–37.

This stable interval, positioned in a low register nearing the climax, paired with augmented intervals in the section where the intensity decreases toward the end, and finally, joined by another perfect 5th in the bridge to the coda, depicted each time by means of minims and crotchets—i.e. stable, longer rhythmic figurations, as opposed to the patterns that resemble *zazvonnye* bells—renders more pathos to these important moments in this work and cements two of the structure's most relevant moments, the climax and the end. The first of these moments additionally represents an axis point, for it is located exactly in the middle of *Prayer* (bars 20–22 in a work with 41 bars in total).

This sign is not essential for the recognition of this topic; it is, however, frequent to it. Despite the fact that *zvon* bells are usually dissonant, this consonant interval is often used to represent this salient harmonic of a bell. In this work, it can also be linked to Virsaladze's use of the perfect 5th as an element of Georgian traditional secular music.[41]

Hence, given that it is an iconic and marked sign, it needs to be somewhat isolated in performance to avoid melting into the surrounding texture. The repeated rhythmic figurations that delineate it can also be emphasised through the rigorousness of tempo and rhythmic articulation.

Tremolo

The *tremolo,* such as it is written in this work—in a middle-high register in the right hand of the piano (bars 15–19)—emulates the *zazvonnye*'s fast rhythmic movement. However, as it is written as a free *tremolo,* instead of utilising patterns of four semiquavers, it represents an indexical sign, thus emulating the *zazvonnye's* rhythmic profile without precisely matching it.

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41   Maka Virsaladze, "Choral Compositions (with Orchestra and A Capella) on Religious Themes in the Oeuvres of Nodar Mamisashvili, Eka Chabashvili, and Maka Virsaladze," in *Music—The Cultural Bridge: Essence, Contexts, References*, ed. Aleksandra Pijarowska (Karol Lipinski Academy of Music in Wroclaw, 2021), 86.

Figure 20. Tremolo in Virsaladze's Prayer.

This fast movement in a high register will more likely be associated to *trezvon* bells by those who are familiar with the *zvon* tradition, especially considering that this sign is paired with a slower rhythmic motion in the left hand, mimicking the rhythmic hierarchy of a *trezvon*; therefore, it is also a symbolic sign.

It lasts for only four and a half bars and represents the only noticeable sign of bells in this section. Two simultaneous layers with different rhythmic speeds (i.e. another sign of *trezvon* bells) are presented. However, the continuous motion in sixtuplets of the left hand, in which each two semiquavers correspond to one quaver of the right hand, make for an even polyphonic texture that almost sounds homorhythmic (which does not characterise *zvon* bells). Thus, these two signs—layers with different rhythmic speeds and polyphonic texture—are depicted so that their perception as distinct signs of bells is not evident.

The *tremolo*, on the other hand, stands out with its faster rhythmic speed in contrast with the regular motion of the left hand. Therefore, this is a marked sign due to its brevity and to the fact that it represents the most prominent reference to bells in this section. It also brings some narrative development to an otherwise unchanging texture (on the piano). This sign is not essential to the recognition of the bell topic, though it is a frequent one, often used to represent *zazvonnye* bells.

Consequently, this *tremolo* should be dynamically detached from the surrounding texture. Additionally, its rhythmic similarity with *zazvonnye* patterns can be evinced in performance by opting for an even and, perhaps, slower, *tremolo* execution.

Recited Tone

This topic refers to the manner in which a reader in church recites psalms, prayers, scriptural readings, and any text that is not meant to be sung by the church choir. The reader is usually a member of the choir or the congregation; the recitation is effected mostly upon a single repeated note on a middle register.

The recited tone is signified, in this piece, by repeated notes, rhythmic patterns that follow the delineation of the words of the text, sections with a single melodic line, narrow range, and the use of the voice.

Repeated Notes

The recitation of a prayer or another form of sacred text is usually carried out on a single note. Occasionally, the first syllable of each sentence begins on a note beneath or above the main one, always in a narrow range. This is accurately emulated in this work by setting the first syllable of each sentence in one note and the rest in another note one major or minor 2nd above it, in the voice staff. Hence, this sign is iconic, for it matches its referent authentically.

Figure 21. Repeated notes in Virsaladze's Prayer.

When this sign appears in the sections which are dominated by the recited tone topic (bars 11–19 and 36–37), it is a marked feature, for it is presented in the context of a consonant harmonic organisation in the first instance, and its rhythmic movement follows the delineation of the words of the text, contrasting with the rhythmic and harmonic behaviour of the rest of this work.

Additionally, in the second instance its appearance is short, accompanied by homorhythmic chords on the piano, instead of the dense rhythmic accompaniment of the first recited tone section; this generates a feeling of uncertainty, of something that is incomplete.
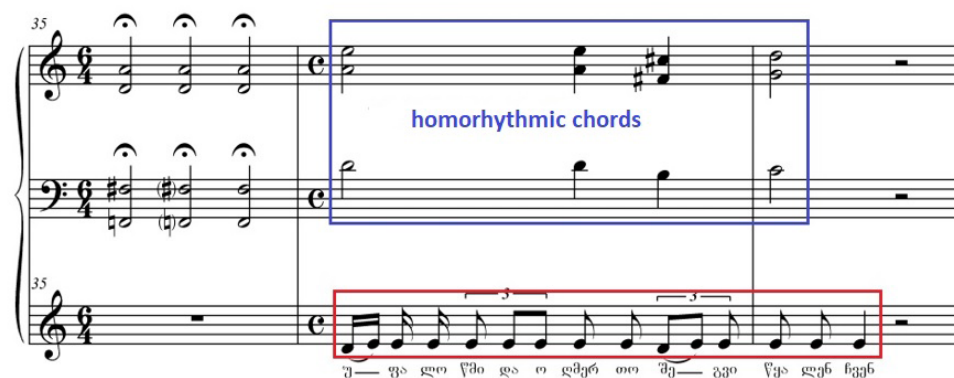
Figure 22. Homorhythmic chords in the second section dominated by the recited tone topic in bars 36–37.

However, when this sign is presented, on the piano instead of the voice, in the section where the two main topics are merged and the topic of bells is the dominant one (bars 23–30), it is paired with four unmarked signs of bells—simultaneous layers with different rhythmic speeds, polyphonic texture, dissonances, and rhythmic patterns of *trezvon* bells—making this one (repeated notes) an unmarked sign as well in this section (all four of these unmarked signs of bells can be observed simultaneously in bars 27–28, in Figure 13).

Additionally, repeated notes are essential for the recognition of the recited tone topic, as a recitation entails repetition.

The characteristic which identifies this sign as an iconic one is the setting of the first syllable of each sentence on a lower note; this can, subsequently, be underlined in performance. Additionally, the distinction between this sign's marked versus unmarked representation can be highlighted as well, by distinguishing the sections where the recitation is carried out by the voice from those where it is emulated on the piano, by means of contrasting dynamic and temporal parameters.

Single melodic Line

A recitation is usually carried out by a single person. Hence, the representation of the recitation on a single note is an iconic sign because it reflects this topic's performative tradition. It is, also, an essential sign for the representation of this topic, for the same reason.

In bars 27–28 the recitation line in the bass is joined by a second line. Combined, these two staffs present the rhythmic figurations, polyphonic texture, simultaneous layers with different rhythmic speeds, and dissonances which are essential characteristics of *trezvon* bells, representing the merger of the two main topics in this section.

Figure 23. Merger of topics in bars 27–28.

This work is characterised by a predominantly dense rhythmic and harmonic texture; hence, the presentation of a layer with a single melodic line creates contrast with the surrounding sonorous environment and is, therefore, a marked feature. This contrast is particularly noticeable in bars 25–26 and 29–30, where the recitation line in the bass is the only musical element in play (Figures 7 and 8).

Highlighting this sign, the monophonic line, in performance is, therefore, quite relevant, inasmuch as it will allow for it to be recognised as a direct reference to the recited tone topic.

Rhythmic Movement that follows the delineation of the Words

A recitation of a text does not follow specific rhythmic figurations, but instead, adheres to other factors, such as the length and meaning of the words and of the sentences, the breathing of the narrator, and his or her mood—these typically result in a flexible rhythmic motion.

This flexibility is solely represented in this work in the two fusioned sections that are dominated by the recited tone. Conversely, in the one where the bell topic is predominant over the recited tone the rhythmic patterns in use are the ones associated with *trezvon* bells (Figures 1 and 2).

The first of the sections where the recited tone topic prevails (bars 12–19) showcases semiquaver quintuplets and sixtuplets (in the voice staff), which creates a flexible, but regular rhythmic motion. Sixtuplets characterise the piano part, as well.

Figure 24. Quintuplets and sixtuplets in bars 12–19.

In the second and last section where the recited tone topic is predominant (bars 36–37), the decelerating rhythmic sequence resembles a *ritardando*, a gradual slowing down of the recitation's pace which, coupled with the homorhythmic chords on the piano and the short duration of this section, further enhances the previously mentioned feeling of uncertainty.

Figure 25. Written ritardando in bars 36–37.

A similar rhythmic movement can be observed in the coda. However, the large melodic leaps and the use of a very high register make it difficult to categorise it as a reference to the recited tone topic, as a human being is hardly capable of executing these large melodic leaps or singing in such a high register (except with proper training) and, in any case, would do neither in the context of a recitation of a text.
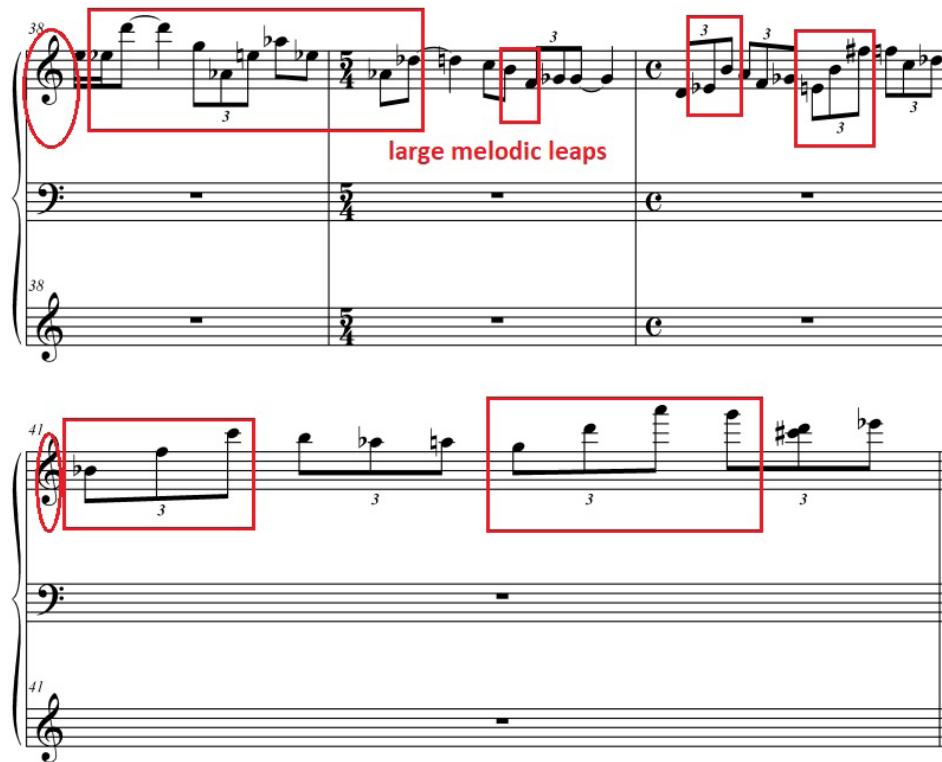
Figure 26. Large melodic leaps and high register in the coda.

Considering that this rhythmic movement follows the delineation of the words of an existing prayer, this is an iconic sign, for it matches Orthodox liturgical practice.

It is also a marked feature because it does not match the rhythmic behaviour of the rest of the work and presents a significant contrast with the surrounding rhythmic material. Its suppleness, as opposed to the rigorousness of the remaining sections, suggests that these are moments of emotional rest and meditation in *Prayer.*

This sign is a frequent one in the representation of the recited tone, though this topic is also frequently depicted with a slower rhythmic movement, in a fragmented disposition, an example of which can be seen in the second movement of Sofia Gubaidulina's Piano Sonata.
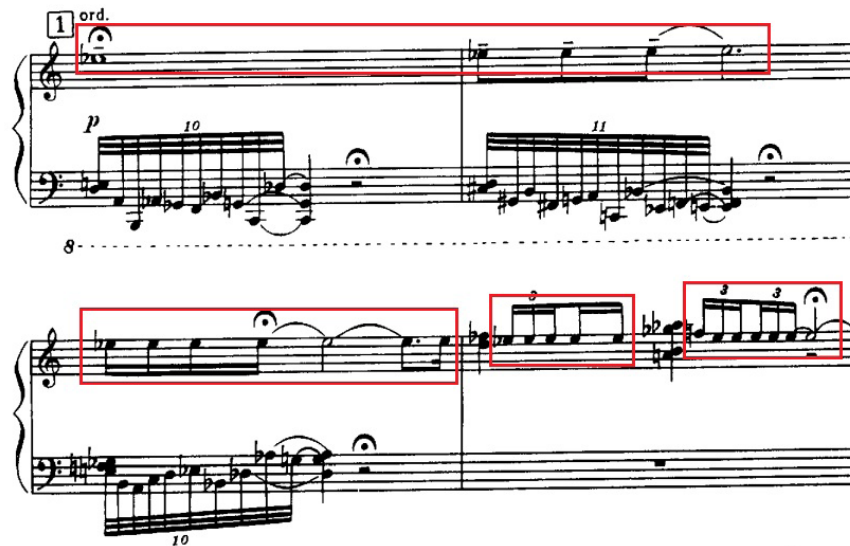
Figure 27. Slow and fragmented recitation in Sofia Gubaidulina's Piano Sonata.

Therefore, the rhythmic elasticity and syllabic nature of these phrases should be perceptible in performance, in contrast with the *zazvonnye* patterns' rhythmic acerbity.

Narrow Range

Traditionally, the recitation of a text in church is carried out in a single note, or in two notes – in which case each sentence begins on a note beneath or above the main one. Most commonly, these two notes outline the interval of a major 2nd. However, as the person who recites the text is often someone without musical training, other intervals may be used, such as minor 2nds, major and minor 3rds, and even (not usually perfect) 4ths or 5ths.

Nonetheless, it is more frequent to start each sentence one major 2nd beneath or above the main note, usually in the middle register of the voice. In this work, Virsaladze imitates these features— major 2nd in the middle register—in the sections where the recited tone topic is predominant. Therefore, in these sections this sign is iconic, even more so because the recitation is effected by the voice.
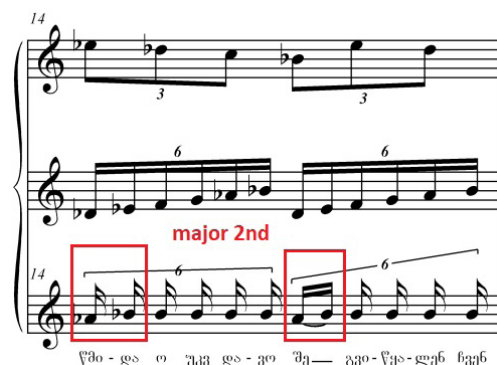

Figure 28. Major 2nd in the first section dominated by the recited tone.

Figure 29. Major 2nd in the second section dominated by the recited tone.

However, in the section where the topic of bells is predominant over the recited tone one, this sign is transformed into a minor 2nd. Even though this is not unheard of in church practice, I believe that the use of a minor 2nd in this section is more representative of the merger of topics—defined by the fusioning of the narrow range of the recited tone topic with the dissonances that represent an essential characteristic of the bell topic—than of a less frequent reading custom. For this reason, this sign may, in this section, be considered an indexical one.
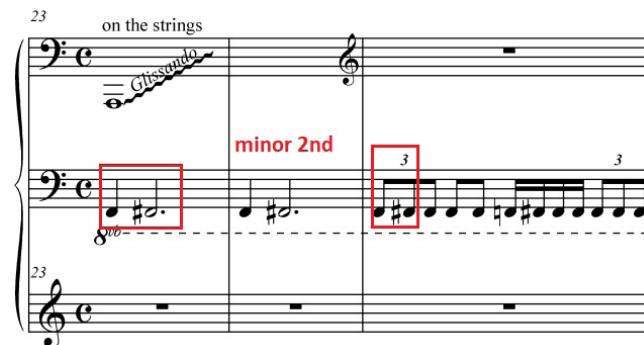

Figure 30. Minor 2nd in the section dominated by bells.

The topic that is referenced by this sign (i.e., recited tone), is the most storytelling of the elements in *Prayer*. Unlike the bell topic which is mostly represented as sound pictures that permeate the piece, and unlike the coda which suggests a departure from everything that was previously presented in this work, the recitation that is realised by these intervals of a major or minor 2nd narrates the emotional development of *Prayer* in all its variations.

It is stable and uniform in the first section, where the recited tone is predominant, transformed into a minor 2nd and surrounded by dissonances in the section dominated by bells, generating agitation and unease, and paired with a slowing rhythmic motion accompanied by homorhythmic chords in the short, last section where the recited tone prevails over bells (Figures 22 and 25), suggesting hesitation.

Figure 31. Stable rhythmic motion in the first merged section.

Figure 32. Minor 2nd and dissonances in the second merged section.

Therefore, this sign is a marked one, for it illustrates the most expressive and variable of the two structurally essential topics—the recited tone.

As the recited tone may also be represented by the repetition of a single note, in which case, narrow range is not applicable for there is no melodic movement, this is not an essential characteristic of this topic, but rather a frequent one.

The importance of highlighting this element in performance has already been previously discussed. That which can be further evinced is its markedness, particularly considering that the selection of either a major or minor 2nd for each of the sections has a notable effect on the narrative development of this work.

Use of the Voice

This is, undoubtedly, an iconic sign for the recitation of a prayer is, in fact, executed by a human voice, in church practice. It is also a marked one for the timbre of the voice contrasts significantly with the predominant timbre of the piano in this work.

The fact that in the first merged section the vocal part is accompanied by a consonant harmonic organisation (Figure 6), which does not characterise most of the work, further enhances its markedness, and renders an increased expressiveness to this section, a tenderness that does not define the segments that reference bells (predominantly or exclusively).

This sign is not essential for the delineation of this topic, but rather idiomatic, for the use of the voice in conjunction with the piano is uncommon. Furthermore, in this piece, this sign can be linked to this composer's numerous creations for vocal ensembles.

The contrasting timbre of the voice is, naturally, the characteristic one may strive to evince in performance, to enhance this sign's topical distinction.

Conclusions

This article analyses references to elements of Orthodox liturgical practice in the piece *Prayer* (for solo piano) by Maka Virsaladze, employing a methodology based on topic theory. This piece references five elements (named 'topics'): bells, recited tone, sacred text, state of prayer, and the duality of human and divine. The first two form the structural scheme of the piece, alternating and merging continuously. In this article, I have chosen to focus on the structural perspective of topic theory, on the grounds that it is the most useful one for performers to understand a piece and organise their interpretation accordingly; therefore, the present analysis concentrates solely on these two structural topics.

The aforementioned pair of topics is represented in *Prayer* by means of the musical codes (or 'signs,' in the context of topic theory) that I will list in the following two paragraphs.

The topic of bells is examined in the context of the *trezvon* bell-ring subtype, which is expressed by means of specific rhythmic patterns that relate to a *trezvon*, a *tremolo*, dissonances, simultaneous layers with different rhythmic speeds, perfect 5ths, a mostly polyphonic texture, and a wide range.

The topic of the recited tone is invoked by repeated notes, rhythmic patterns that follow the delineation of the words of the referenced prayer, sections with a single melodic line, narrow range, and the use of the voice.

In relation to the behaviour of bells and recited tone in the topical structure of Virsaladze's piece, I have reached the subsequent conclusions: The topic of bells appears as a single referent in sections which alternate with other sections where the two topics are merged, wherein the recited tone acts as a narrating element.

This element appears, first, in the form of a rhythmically regular and harmonically consonant prayer that follows traditional practice, evolving into a section where the recited tone topic is transformed by that of bells, presented in the bass register in a dissonant sonorous environment, and concluding with a short, decelerating section that transitions to the coda.

Additionally, the climax of this work coincides with the single merged section where bells are predominant.

The alternation and merger of bells and recited tone in this piece allows for the discernment of a continuous exchange between divine power and human emotional variability, with bells signifying the divine and the recited tone relating to the human plane.

The latter expresses reverence at the beginning of the piece (as shown by the regular rhythm and consonant ambience), followed by agitation (represented by the dissonances and rhythmic behaviour related to bells in the second merged section), symbolising the turbulence of human life, and concluding with hesitation and uncertainty (evidenced by the written *ritardando* and homorhythmic texture), which precedes the coda, described by Virsaladze in her answers to my interview as "the movement of the human soul before death."[42]

Following the topical analysis of *Prayer*, I have made some suggestions regarding the performance of this piece (in view of accurate topical representation), such as the use of dynamic and temporal contrasts which can be implemented to distinguish the topic of bells—particularly where they act as a single referent—from the topic of the recited tone in the merged sections. The narrative development of the latter may also be accented.

Some parallels can be drawn between certain characteristics of this piece and the stylistic tendencies that can be observed in Virsaladze's oeuvre. Of primary importance is the fact that her repertoire is strongly represented by choral works and by works for piano and voice. The use of the voice in *Prayer* is, therefore, a natural symbiosis. Additionally, the use of "ostinatos of texture," chromatic chords, polytonality, and perfect 5^{ths}, which can be encountered in this piece are cited by Virsaladze as being part of her musical style.[43]

Considering this piece in the context of Orthodox Christianity, as well as that of the composer's cultural and national identity, it can be said that the two main topics in this work—bells and the recited tone—are associated with Virsaladze's religious background (Orthodoxy). The choice of this particular prayer, which is common in the context of the liturgical practice of the Orthodox Church, similarly relates to the composer's religious background.

In addition, some of the elements in *Prayer*, such as "perfect 5^{ths} and complex chord sounds,"[44] are linked by Virsaladze to Georgian traditional music, which Eka Chabashvili claims to be a frequent referent in this composer's body of work.[45]

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42   Maka Virsaladze, Personal communication to author, 2023.
43   Virsaladze, "Choral Compositions," 85.
44   Virsaladze, "Choral Compositions," 86.
45   Eka Chabashvili, "Different Aspects of Chants by Contemporary Georgian Composers as Revealed Through Variations in Performance," *Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Music, no. 3 (2018)*: 108–111, https://journal.fi/jisocm/article/view/88721.

In conclusion, Virsaladze integrates two Orthodox topics into *Prayer*—bells and recited tone—which form a structural and symbolic frame for the spiritual dialogue central to this piece. By contrasting these topics and blending them at key moments, Virsaladze reflects on the interplay of the human and divine illustrating the inner life of an Orthodox believer.

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