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FROM POLYSTYLISM TO INCREMENTALISM

Schnittke's *Concerto for Choir* as a Transformation of Compositional Method

Nathan Reiff

Discussions of Alfred Schnittke's (1934-1998) music frequently focus on the composer's tendency to fuse together widely varying musical styles within a single work. Musicologists Glenn Watkins, Peter Schmelz, and Richard Taruskin, for instance, describe Schnittke's compositional approach with terms such as "collage," "striking juxtapositions," and "fabled eclecticism," respectively. It is easy to appreciate the attraction of this patchwork method. Listeners are bound to be struck by the effect of a monophonic chanted "Kyrie eleison" giving way to dense, trembling instrumental chord clusters in the choral *Symphony no. 2* (1980) or of electric guitar, bass, and drum kit suddenly appearing following passages based on serial techniques in the *Requiem* (1975). Examples like these are jarring and surprising to hear.

Beyond the arresting power of stark musical contrast itself, the strength of Schnittke's explicit devotion to a collage-based method makes it an increasingly appealing feature on which to focus. The composer classified and championed what he called "polystylism" in a lecture and subsequent paper titled "Polystylistic Tendencies in Modern Music" in 1971. For Schnittke, polystylism "widen[ed] the range of expressive possibilities...[allowing] for the integration of 'low' and 'high' styles" to create an all-encompassing musical world capable of universal reach. Schnittke explored the potential of the polystylistic approach in many works throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and the combination of the composer's enthusiasm and the striking nature of the procedure itself has likely contributed to "polystylism" becoming a hallmark in writings about Schnittke's music.

To characterize Schnittke's entire output from 1971 onward as polystylistic, however, is to overgeneralize. In 1985, the year the composer suffered the first of several debilitating strokes, his health began to decline significantly. Schnittke's close friend and biographer, Alexander Ivashkin, noted a transformation in the composer's personality and music around this time. Ivashkin describes the *Cello Concerto no. 1* (1985) as having changed almost entirely from initial sketches to final product, the former having been completed prior to the stroke and the latter after. According to Ivashkin, the finished *Cello Concerto* was unique among Schnittke's works with respect to its approach to dissonance and expression. Others noted a transformation as well. The violinist Gidon Kremer, a friend of Schnittke's and a frequent collaborator, remarked that "an inner change took place directly before or after his illness." Music critic Alex Ross claimed that Schnittke himself discussed 1985 as a turning point toward a self-styled "Series B" in which compositions would be more free and singular in style.

At least one other work of 1985 points toward a marked shift away from polystylistic tendencies in Schnittke's music. The *Concerto for Choir* turns from polystylism's surprising, oftentimes harsh, clashes of dissimilar musical materials placed in close proximity in favor of a compositional procedure governed by even, incremental development. The resulting contrast between Schnittke's works in the polystylistic tradition and the *Concerto for Choir* lends credence to the suggestion that Schnittke underwent a transformation in his approach to composition that may have been linked to personal circumstances in the time around

his first stroke. At the same time, the shift in style evident in the *Concerto for Choir* evokes speculation about the potential links of such a change to Schnittke's savviness in developing a successful career within the controlled artistic world of the Soviet regime.

Incrementalism in the *Concerto*

The *Concerto for Choir* demonstrates compositional incrementalism in musical elements ranging in scale from the minute to the macroscopic. Features including melodic and harmonic motion, texture, and structure all point to Schnittke's tendency to develop this *a cappella* work in a step-by-step fashion or through procedures closely approximating one. That this method seems to pervade such a wide range of musical facets heightens the overall unity of construction within the piece, thereby drawing it into starker contrast with the polystylistic works that preceded it.

On a surface level, the *Concerto for Choir* is immediately distinguished from many of Schnittke's earlier choral works by the uniformity of its orchestration; gone are the electric guitar, vibraphone, and other attention-grabbing instruments found in pieces like the *Symphony no. 2* and the *Requiem*. The *Concerto* is even relatively more uniform than some of Schnittke's earlier *a cappella* works. Although composed for voices alone, *Minnesang* (1981), for instance, builds up dense walls of forty or more independent voice parts at a time only to suddenly shift to much more transparent textures, an example

of pure vocal polystylism, albeit less stark than some of Schnittke's instrumental works.

The *Concerto* spans four movements, each setting the text of a different meditation by the tenth-century Armenian monk Gregor of Narek in Russian translation. Though the movements vary in length, they are all scored for unaccompanied mixed chorus. Schnittke sets the text in a primarily syllabic fashion and generally stacks the voices homophonically. As a result, the text can be heard clearly throughout the piece and is free of obstruction from polyphonic writing or instrumental accompaniment, and no sudden changes of timbre interrupt the mellifluous choral soundscape. Given the relative consistency of sound and compositional approach across the entirety of the piece, the first movement will provide a representative sample of the principle of incrementalism as it is expressed in the *Concerto for Choir*. A translation of the text of this movement is provided in Table 1.

The first movement of the work is structured in a large-scale ABA¹ form and consists of a twenty-nine-measure opening section, a 174-measure main body which can be further divided into quasi-strophic subsections, and a nineteen-measure closing variation on the introductory material. Individual voice parts are characterized by a predominance of stepwise motion, a localized example of incrementalism at work. Accounting for movement from each note to the next within individual parts, on average the voices progress via motion by whole step, half step, or repeated notes 86% of

Table 1. A Translation of the Text of *Concerto for Choir*, Movement 1

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>I</p> <p>О Повелитель сущего всего, Бесценными дарами нас дарящий, Господь, Творящий все из ничего, Неведомый, Всезнающий, Страшущий, И милосердный, и неумолимый, Неизреченный и непостижимый, Невидимый, извечный, необъятный, И ужасающий, и благодатный!</p> | <p>I</p> <p>O Master of living everything (all living things), Priceless gifts (to) us giving Lord, creating everything from nothing Mysterious, omniscient, frightening, And merciful, and implacable, Ineffable and unknowable, Invisible, eternal, boundless, And terrifying, and beneficent!</p> |
|---|--|

Непроницаем Ты, неосязаем,
И безначален Ты, и нескончаем,
Ты—то единственное, что безмерно,
Что в мире подлинно и достоверно,
Ты—то, что нам дает благословенье,
Ты—Полдень без заката, Свет без тени,
Единственный для нас родник покоя,
Что просветляет бытие мирское.
И безграничный Ты, и вездесущий,
Ты и сладчайший мед, и хлеб насущный,
Неистошимый клад, пречистый дождь,
Вовек неиссякающая мощь.

Ты и Хранитель наш и Наставитель,
Недуги наши знающий Целитель,
Опора всех, всевидящее Зренье,
Десница благодатного даренья,
Величьем осиянный, всем угодный,
Наш Пастырь неустанный, Царь беззлобный,
Всевидящий, и днем и ночью бдящий.
Судья, по справедливости судящий,
Взгляд негнетущий, Голос утешенья,
Ты—весть, несущая успокоенье.
Твой строгий перст, всевидящее око
Остерегают смертных от порока.
Судья того, что право, что неправо,
Не вызывающая зависть слава,
Ты—Светоч наш, величие без края,
Незримая дорога, но прямая.
Твой след невидим, видима лишь милость,
Она с небес на землю к нам спустилась.

Слова, что я изрек Тебе во славу,
Бледнее слов, которые бы мог
Услышать Ты, о Господи, по праву,
Когда б я не был речью столь убог.
Господь всеведущий, благословенный,
восхваленный,

Восславленный всем сущим во вселенной,
Все то, что совершить нам суждено,
Твоею волею предрешено.
О Господи, дорогу очищенья
Ты мне в моих сомненьях укажуй
И, приведя меня к вратам спасенья,
Ты удовлетворишь и возликуй.
Цель песнопенья Твоего раба—
Не славословье и не восхваленье,
Мои слова ничтожные—мольба,
Которой жажду обрести спасенье.

—Gregor of Narek

Unfathomable you (are), intangible,
And beginningless you (are), and endless,
You (are) that one thing, that is measureless
That in (the) world is true and real,
You—that, which us gives blessing,
You—noon without sunset, light without shadow,
The sole for us fount (of) peace,
That illuminates existence earthly (earthly existence),
And boundless you (are), and omnipresent,
You (are) both sweetest honey, and bread daily,
Inexhaustible treasure, purest rain,
Forever inexhaustible might.

You (are) both (our) guardian ours and guide,
Ills our knowing healer (healer knowing our ills)
Support (of) all, all-seeing sight,
Hand (of) abundant giving,
(With) greatness radiant, all pleasing (pleasing to all),
Our shepherd tireless, tsar benevolent,
All-seeing, both day and night vigilant,
Judge, by fairness judging,
Gaze unoppressive, voice (of) comfort,
You—message, carrying peace.
Your strict hand, all-seeing eye
Warn mortals against sin.
Judge (of) that, which (is) right, what is wrong,
Not causing envy glory (glory that does not cause envy),
You (are) lamp ours (our lamp), greatness without end,
Invisible road, but straight,
Your trace invisible, visible only mercy,
She (mercy) from heaven to earth to us descended,

(The) words, that I pronounce (to) you in praise,
Pale (compared to) words, that could have
Heard you, o Lord, by right,
If had I not been (of) speech so poor,
Lord omniscient, blessed, glorious,

(You who are) praised (by) all living in (the) universe,
All that, which (to) achieve we (are) destined,
(Is by) your will predecided (sealed).
O God, (the) path of purity
You (to) me in my doubts indicate,
And, (having) led me to (the) gates (of) salvation,
You (be) content and rejoice.
(The) goal (of this) paean (of) your slave
(Is) not glorification and not praise,
My words meager (are a) supplication
(By) which (I) yearn (to) obtain salvation.

—translated by Misha Semenov

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the time throughout the movement. Table 2 summarizes the incidence of individual-voice incremental motion within each large-scale section: 88% in the A section, 80% in the B section, and 89% in the A¹ section. This feature generates both aural and psychological effects. To the listener, independent parts almost never stick out of the overall texture, resulting in a smooth and unbroken flow of interweaving lines. To the singer, the nature

of the note-to-note motion inspires facility in performance. Passages in which diatonic clusters are common (i.e., mm. 5–7 or mm. 11–12; see Figure 1 on page 12) are easier to sing because their complex arrival points are approached by step rather than leap. Singers are thus more naturally inclined to maintain *legato*, heightening the fluidity already inherent in each line.

Where they do occur, leaps within voice parts tend

Table 2. Incidence of Note-to-Note Motion by Type and Within Individual Voice Parts

| mm 1-29 | | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|----------|-------|
| Voice Part | Repeated | Step | Leap | Total |
| Soprano 1a | 24 (31%) | 46 (60%) | 7 (9%) | 77 |
| Soprano 1b | 27 (35%) | 42 (55%) | 8 (10%) | 77 |
| Soprano 2a | 30 (39%) | 42 (55%) | 5 (6%) | 77 |
| Soprano 2b | 36 (47%) | 35 (45%) | 6 (8%) | 77 |
| Alto 1a | 42 (54%) | 32 (41%) | 4 (5%) | 78 |
| Alto 1b | 40 (51%) | 33 (42%) | 5 (6%) | 78 |
| Alto 2a | 28 (36%) | 37 (47%) | 13 (17%) | 78 |
| Alto 2b | 23 (30%) | 44 (56%) | 11 (14%) | 78 |
| Tenor 1a | 34 (45%) | 33 (44%) | 8 (11%) | 73 |
| Tenor 1b | 27 (37%) | 37 (51%) | 9 (12%) | 73 |
| Tenor 2a | 36 (48%) | 33 (44%) | 6 (8%) | 75 |
| Tenor 2b | 30 (41%) | 36 (49%) | 7 (10%) | 73 |
| Bass 1a | 36 (56%) | 20 (31%) | 8 (13%) | 64 |
| Bass 1b | 31 (52%) | 21 (35%) | 8 (13%) | 60 |
| Bass 2a | 30 (48%) | 22 (36%) | 10 (16%) | 62 |
| Bass 2b | 23 (38%) | 24 (40%) | 13 (22%) | 60 |
| Bass 2c | 23 (38%) | 20 (33%) | 17 (28%) | 60 |
| Percentage of motion consisting of repeated notes or intervals of half or whole step (average across all voices, mm. 1-29): 88% | | | | |
| mm. 30-203 | | | | |
| Soprano 1a | 121 (38%) | 146 (46%) | 53 (16%) | 320 |
| Soprano 1b | 110 (34%) | 157 (49%) | 54 (17%) | 321 |

| | | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----|
| Soprano 2a | 62 (20%) | 189 (60%) | 63 (20%) | 314 |
| Soprano 2b | 62 (20%) | 189 (60%) | 63 (20%) | 314 |
| Alto 1a | 182 (49%) | 138 (37%) | 55 (14%) | 375 |
| Alto 1b | 171 (45%) | 146 (39%) | 59 (16%) | 376 |
| Alto 2a | 100 (26%) | 210 (54%) | 82 (20%) | 392 |
| Alto 2b | 100 (26%) | 210 (54%) | 82 (20%) | 392 |
| Tenor 1 | 193 (44%) | 168 (38%) | 78 (18%) | 437 |
| Tenor 2 | 121 (28%) | 224 (51%) | 93 (21%) | 438 |
| Tenor 3 | 122 (28%) | 225 (51%) | 91 (21%) | 438 |
| Bass 1a | 149 (34%) | 200 (46%) | 84 (19%) | 433 |
| Bass 1b | 125 (29%) | 214 (49%) | 94 (22%) | 433 |
| Bass 2a | 130 (30%) | 195 (45%) | 106 (25%) | 431 |
| Bass 2b | 130 (30%) | 195 (45%) | 106 (25%) | 431 |
| Percentage of motion consisting of repeated notes or intervals of half or whole step (average across all voices, mm. 30-203): 80% | | | | |
| mm. 204-222 | | | | |
| Soprano 1a | 13 (29%) | 28 (62%) | 4 (9%) | 45 |
| Soprano 1b | 15 (33%) | 25 (56%) | 5 (11%) | 45 |
| Soprano 2a | 20 (44%) | 23 (51%) | 2 (5%) | 45 |
| Soprano 2b | 21 (47%) | 21 (47%) | 3 (6%) | 45 |
| Alto 1a | 17 (33%) | 29 (56%) | 6 (11%) | 52 |
| Alto 1b | 20 (39%) | 28 (55%) | 3 (6%) | 51 |
| Alto 2a | 20 (39%) | 25 (49%) | 6 (12%) | 51 |
| Alto 2b | 19 (37%) | 26 (51%) | 6 (12%) | 51 |
| Tenor 1a | 23 (49%) | 18 (38%) | 6 (13%) | 47 |
| Tenor 1b | 21 (44%) | 20 (42%) | 7 (14%) | 48 |
| Tenor 2a | 24 (53%) | 17 (38%) | 4 (9%) | 45 |
| Tenor 2b | 23 (50%) | 18 (39%) | 5 (11%) | 46 |
| Bass 1a | 16 (43%) | 17 (46%) | 4 (11%) | 37 |
| Bass 1b | 20 (54%) | 16 (43%) | 1 (3%) | 37 |
| Bass 2a | 9 (35%) | 12 (46%) | 5 (19%) | 26 |
| Bass 2b | 7 (27%) | 14 (54%) | 5 (19%) | 26 |
| Percentage of motion consisting of repeated notes or intervals of half or whole step (average across all voices, mm. 204-222): 89% | | | | |

Andante (rubato)

Soprano (S):
 О По - ве - ли - тель су - ще - го все - го, бес - цен - ны - ми да - ра - ми нас да - ря - ший, Гос -
 O Pa - v'e - li - t'el' su - shche - vo f'se - vo, b'es - tsen - ny - mi da - ra - mi nas da - r'a - shchij, Gas -

Alto (A):
 О По - ве - ли - тель су - ще - го, бес - цен - ны - ми да - ра - ми нас да - ря - ший, Гос -
 O Pa - v'e - li - t'el' su - sche - vo, b'es - tsen - ny - mi da - ra - mi nas da - r'a - shchij, Gas -

Tenor (T):
 О По - ве - ли - тель су - ще - го все - го, да - ра - ми нас да - ря - ший, Гос -
 O Pa - v'e - li - t'el' su - shche - vo f'se - vo, da - ra - mi nas da - r'a - shchij, Gas -

Bass (B):
 О По - ве - ли - тель су - ще - го, Гос - подь, Гос -
 O Pa - v'e - li - t'el' su - sche - vo, Gas - pod', Gas -

Measures 8-15:

Soprano (S):
 1. подь, тво - ря - ший все́ из ни - че - го, стра - ша - ший,
 pod', tva - r'a - shchij fs'o iz ni - che - vo, stra - sha - shchij,

Alto (A):
 подь, тво - ря - ший все́ из ни - че - го, все - зна - ю - ший, стра - ша - ший,
 pod', tva - r'a - shchij fs'o iz ni - che - vo, fs'e - zna - ju - shchij, stra - sha - shchij,

Tenor (T):
 подь, тво - ря - ший все́ из ни - че - го, не - ве - до - мый, Гос - подь, стра - ша - ший,
 pod', tva - r'a - shchij fs'o iz ni - che - vo, n'e - v'e - da - muj, Gas - pod', stra - sha - shchij,

Bass (B):
 подь, тво - ря - ший все́ из ни - че - го, не - ве - до - мый, Гос - подь, стра - ша - ший,
 pod', tva - r'a - shchij fs'o iz ni - che - vo, n'e - v'e - da - muj, Gas - pod', stra - sha - shchij,

Figure 1. Alfred Schnittke, *Concerto for Choir*, Movement 1, mm. 1–15.

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to be limited to intervals of a perfect fourth or smaller. In cases such as the *ostinato* figure beginning in the bass voices at the opening of the B section, m. 30, the skip upwards of a third at the end of each measure (bass 1b, 2a, and 2b) resets the pattern for another iteration (see Figure 2 on page 14). The repetition of the *ostinato* effectively trumps any disconnection in the individual lines created by the leaps themselves. This musical effect coincides with the text “И безначален Ты, и нескончаем,” referring to the “beginningless” and “endless” character of God. Within the opening and closing sections of the movement, larger leaps do occur, as in mm. 8–9 (soprano 1a and 2a) or m. 11 (bass 1 and 2). The interruptive impact of many of these wider intervals on the otherwise smooth note-to-note movement is mitigated, however, by their role in strengthening a more generalized effect of expansion and contraction of overall ambitus.

Throughout the movement, instances of contrary or oblique motion between voice parts allow the global range to widen and narrow progressively over time. Coupled with the tendency for these voices to move by step, the cumulative result is a gradual swelling and closing of vocal range that generates for the listener a feeling akin to inhalation and exhalation. In the opening phrases of the piece, for example, there is a two-stage expansion outward (see Figure 1). First, in mm. 5–7, the soprano and alto voices rise while the bass parts remain in a fixed position. A simultaneous *crescendo* amplifies the shift in the upper range.

The second stage of this widening process takes place in mm. 8–9, where downward motion in multiple alto, tenor, and bass parts counters the leap upward of a diminished octave in the top voices. The distance between the outermost voice parts reaches over three octaves at its widest point in m. 9, and then contracts over mm. 10–11. By the downbeat of m. 12, all voices have been condensed within the interval of a major sixth as the phrase ends. The *diminuendo* and *rallentando* in m. 11 reinforce an overall feeling of relaxation into this downbeat and create a sense of anticipation for the beginning of the next phrase, where the quasi-respiratory process can begin anew. This phrase powerfully illustrates the text as well, highlighting God's creation of “everything” (“всё,” aligned with the widest-spaced chords) out of “nothing” (“ничего,” corresponding to the narrowest).

Similar examples of expansion and contraction occur periodically across all three large-scale structural sections. In some cases, they echo the motion of the opening measures of the work. Instances of this effect in the B section of the movement, such as the gradual widening of the perfect fifth at the downbeat of m. 30 to a span of nearly three octaves in m. 42 (at which point the text emphatically praises God as the one “authentic” and “real” presence in the world; “Что в мире подлинно и достоверно”), are often enhanced by the addition and subtraction of voice parts over time. Elsewhere, as in mm. 99–112 (Figure 3 on page 15), a combination of the accumulation or dissolution of voice parts over subsequent measures and movement upward and downward within those voices achieves the same feeling of breathing.

Further supporting the undulating quality facilitated by the flowing contour of both individual lines and the overall ambitus of the piece is the flexible density of the texture. Across the span of the *Concerto*, Schnittke utilizes between one and twenty-six separate voice parts at a time. The densest textures appear at the end of the final movement (Figure 4 on page 16), a cascade of joyous cries of “АМИНЬ!” (“Amen!”) and the resolution of the gradual accretion of intensity over the duration of the work in which many independent lines contribute to a sweeping wash of sound. In the first movement, where the maximum number of distinct parts reaches sixteen, the number of voices heard at any given time often varies on a chord-by-chord basis, and there is frequently a steadiness to the increasing or decreasing of textural density, which coincides with the other facets of incrementalism described previously.

Across the three sections of the first movement, changes to the texture tend to occur in two somewhat different manners. The outer portions of the movement (mm. 1–29 and its varied reprise in mm. 204–222) feature several passages in which a general SATB orchestration becomes more or less dense by the addition or removal of *divisi* within the four primary voice parts. The first chord of the piece, for instance, is notated as SSAATTBB but comprises only four distinct pitches (B2, F#3, B3, and F#4) and just two pitch classes. The remainder of the phrase reveals an initial swelling of chord components beginning from the first chord (four

4 *a tempo (mosso)*

30 *pp*

B
He - про - ни - ца - ем Ты, не о - ся - за - ем
Ne - pra - ni - tsa - jem Ty, n'e - a - s'a - za - jem

pp

34 *p*

A
и без - на - ча - лен Ты, и не - скон - ча - ем
i b'ez - na - cha - l'en Ty, i n'e - skan - cha - jem

B
и без - на - ча - лен Ты, и не - скон - ча - ем
i b'ez - na - cha - l'en Ty, i n'e - skan - cha - jem

p

5

38 *mp*

A
Ты - то е - дин - ствен - но - е, что без - мер - но,
Ty - to je - din - stven - na - je, shto b'ez - m'er - no,

T
Ты - то е - дин - ствен - но - е, что без - мер - но,
Ty - to je - din - stven - na - je, shto b'ez - m'er - no,

B
Ты - то е - дин - ствен - но - е, что без - мер - но,
Ty - to je - din - stven - na - je, shto b'ez - m'er - no,

42 *p* **6**

S
что в ми - ре под - лин - но и ос - то - вер - но,
shto vmi - r'e pod - lin - na i das - ta - v'er - na,

A
что в ми - ре под - лин - но и ос - то - вер - но, Ты - то, что нам да
shto vmi - r'e pod - lin - na i das - ta - v'er - na, Ty - to, shto nam da -

T
что в ми - ре под - лин - но и ос - то - вер - но, Ты - то, что нам да
shto vmi - r'e pod - lin - na i das - ta - v'er - na, Ty - to, shto nam da -

B
что в ми - ре под - лин - но и ос - то - вер - но, Ты - то, что нам да
shto vmi - r'e pod - lin - na i das - ta - v'er - na, Ty - to, shto nam da -

Figure 2. Alfred Schittke, *Concerto for Choir*, Movement 1, mm. 30–47.

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99 **12**

A *mp*
наш пас - тырь не - ус -
nash pas - tyr' n'e - us -

T *p* *mp*
лич - ем о - си - ян - ный, всем у - год - ный, наш пас - тырь не - ус -
lich - jem a - si - jan - nuj, fs'em u - god - nuj, nash pas - tyr' n'e - us -

B *p* *mp*
лич - ем о - си - ян - ный, всем у - год - ный, наш пас - тырь не - ус -
lich - jem a - si - jan - nuj, fs'em u - god - nuj, nash pas - tyr' n'e - us -

104 **13**

S *f*
все - ви - дя - щий, и днём и ночь - ю
fs'e - vi - d'a - shchij, i dn'om i noch - ju

A *mf* *f*
тан - ный, царь без - злоб - ный, все - ви - дя - щий, и
tan - nuj, tsar' b'ez - zlob - nuj, fs'e - vi - d'a - shchij, i

T *mf* *f*
тан - ный, царь без - злоб - ный, все - ви - дя - щий, и ночь - ю
tan - nuj, tsar' b'ez - zlob - nuj, fs'e - vi - d'a - shchij, i noch - ju

B *mf* *f*
тан - ный, царь без - злоб - ный, все - ви - дя - щий, и
tan - nuj, tsar' b'ez - zlob - nuj, fs'e - vi - d'a - shchij, i

109 *ff* *mf* *mp* *rall.*

S *ff* *mf* *mp*
бдя - щий, _____ судь - я, по спра - вед - ли - вос - ти су - дя - щий,
bd'a - shchij, _____ sud' - ja, pa spa - ved - li - vas - ti su - d'a - shchij,

A *ff* *mf* *mp*
бдя - щий, _____ судь - я, по спра - вед - ли - вос - ти су - дя - щий,
bd'a - shchij, _____ sud' - ja, pa spa - ved - li - vas - ti su - d'a - shchij,

T *ff* *mf* *mp*
бдя - щий, _____ судь - я, по спра - вед - ли - вос - ти су - дя - щий,
bd'a - shchij, _____ sud' - ja, pa spa - ved - li - vas - ti su - d'a - shchij,

B *ff* *mf* *mp*
бдя - щий, _____ судь - я, по спра - вед - ли - вос - ти су - дя - щий,
bd'a - shchij, _____ sud' - ja, pa spa - ved - li - vas - ti su - d'a - shchij,

Figure 3. Alfred Schnittke, *Concerto for Choir*, Movement 1, mm. 99–112.

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distinct pitches), reaching a localized high point in the third chord (eight distinct pitches), and gradually relaxing to the thinnest texture of the phrase at the downbeat of m. 5 (three distinct pitches). Then, between the downbeats of m. 5 and m. 7, voice parts join in roughly one at a time to thicken the texture, as shown in Table 3 on page 17. By the downbeat of m. 7, midway through the expansion of ambitus that continues through m.

9, the *divisi* has grown to feature sixteen notated voice parts sounding fourteen distinct pitches. Through this passage and similar ones elsewhere, the work effectively constructs high points of orchestrational complexity via steady accumulation of musical lines. The result of this incremental process of variation is that the doubled octaves and open fifths of the first chord of the piece and the diatonic cluster of m. 7 seem as though they

39

7

S

го слу - жи - те - ля. А - минь! А - минь!
vo slu - zhi - t'e - l'a. A - min'! A - min'!

A

го слу - жи - те - ля. А - минь! А - минь!
vo slu - zhi - t'e - l'a. A - min'! A - min'!

T

го слу - жи - те - ля. А - минь! А - минь! А - минь!
vo slu - zhi - t'e - l'a. A - min'! A - min'! A - min'!

B

го слу - жи - те - ля. А - минь! А - минь!
vo slu - zhi - t'e - l'a. A - min'! A - min'!

Figure 4. Alfred Schnittke, *Concerto for Choir*, Movement 4, mm. 39–44.

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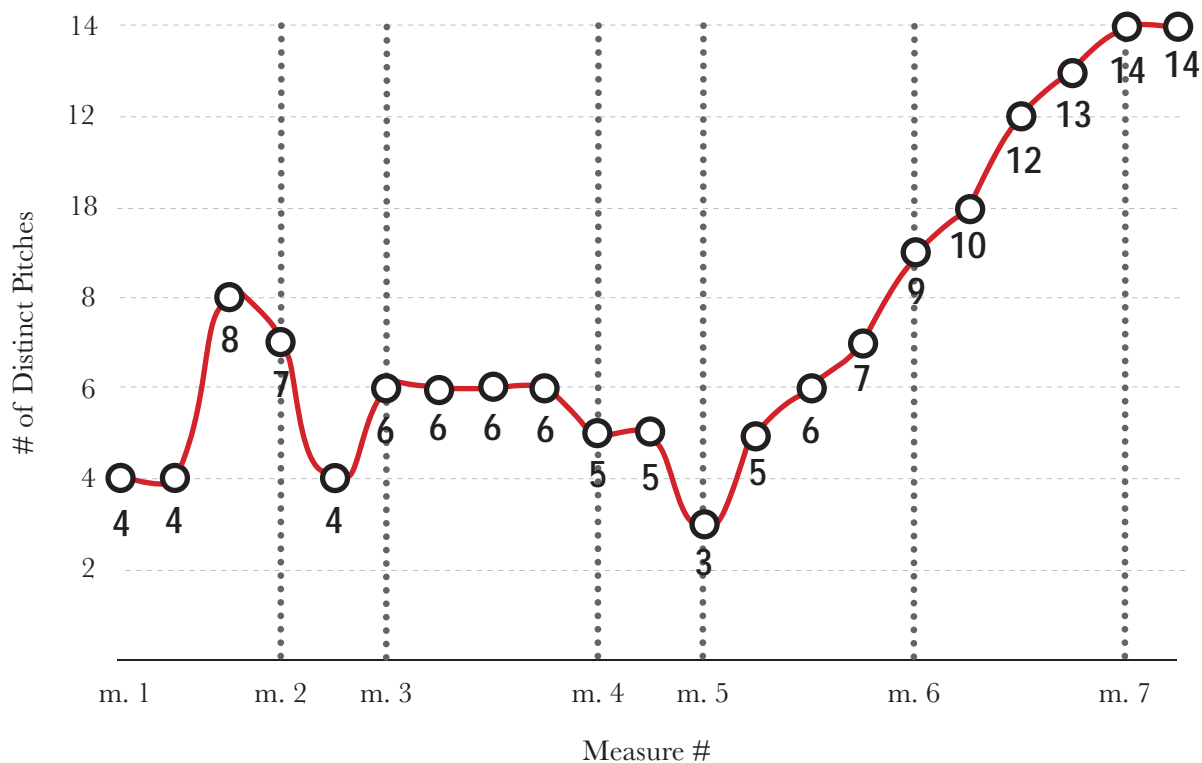
belong to the same sound world. Were these two chords positioned next to one another without the intermediary steps that connect them, as one could imagine being done in a polystylistic work, the contrast of tonal constructions might be jarring.

Textural growth in the middle section of the movement is also facilitated in a stepwise fashion, but often through the addition of entire choral sections one by one rather than individual pitches or voices. The passages from mm. 30–45 (Figure 2) and mm. 113–129 (Figure 5 on page 18) begin with four separate musical lines each, covered by divided bass voices in the first instance and tenor and alto voices in the second. In both cases, a block of additional voices joins every four measures, expanding the range and marked by a shift in dynamic to further emphasize the intensifying texture. Subsequent passages of similar *ostinato* material in mm. 82–89 and mm. 129–144 couple the addition of successive voice parts with a *sol*i descant figure that progressively rises in pitch over multiple iterations. The meditative repetition of the

ostinato figure throughout the main body of the movement also inflects the text, which lists a litany of short supplications to God (beginning with “непроницаем,” “unfathomable,” and “неосвязаем,” “intangible”). As the text slowly builds in fervor through the steadiness inherent in its cyclic structure, the musical setting supports by ramping up intensity via accumulation of texture, range, and dynamic.

The combination of the incremental progression of various facets of texture and range bolster the text in other portions of the movement as well. The contrast between mm. 12–15 in the introductory section of the piece and the corresponding phrase in mm. 214–222 (Figure 6 on page 19) is an apt example. In the first of these passages, what begins as a single tenor line emerging from the condensed range at the end of the previous phrase grows into a comparatively thickly-voiced set of chords by m. 15. The addition of the bass, alto, and soprano parts in succession adds to the total range covered by the intervening chords in mm. 13–14, and the

Table 3. Chord-by-chord Textural Density, mm. 1-7



14

113 *a tempo*

S Ты - весть, не - су - ща - я уе - по - ко -
 Ту - v'est, n'e - su - shcha - ja us - pa - ka -

A *p* взгляд не - гне - ту - ший, го - лос у - те - шень - я Ты - весть, не - су - ща - я уе - по - ко -
 vzgl'ad n'e - gn'e - tu - shchij, go - las u - t'e - shen' - ja, Tu - v'est, n'e - su - shcha - ja us - pa - ka -

T *p* взгляд не - гне - ту - ший, го - лос у - те - шень - я Ты - весть, не - су - ща - я уе - по - ко -
 vzgl'ad n'e - gn'e - tu - shchij, go - las u - t'e - shen' - ja, Tu - v'est, n'e - su - shcha - ja us - pa - ka -

15

120 *mf*

S ень - е. Твой стрст-гий перст, все - ви - дя - щ - е о - ко о - сте - ре - га - ют
 jen' - je. Tvoj stro - gij p'erst, fs'e - vi - d'a - shche - je o - ka a - st'e - re - ga - jut

A *mf* ень - е. Твой стрст-гий перст, все - ви - дя - щ - е о - ко о - сте - ре - га - ют
 jen' - je. Tvoj stro - gij p'erst, fs'e - vi - d'a - shche - je o - ka a - st'e - re - ga - jut

T *mf* ень - е. Твой стрст-гий перст, все - ви - дя - щ - е о - ко о - сте - ре - га - ют
 jen' - je. Tvoj stro - gij p'erst, fs'e - vi - d'a - shche - je o - ka a - st'e - re - ga - jut

B *mf* Твой стрст-гий перст, все - ви - дя - щ - е о - ко о - сте - ре - га - ют
 Tvoj stro - gij p'erst, fs'e - vi - d'a - shche - je o - ka a - st'e - re - ga - jut

16

127

S смерт-ных от по - ро - ка.
 sm'ert-nykh at pa - ri - ka.

A смерт-ных от по - ро - ка.
 sm'ert-nykh at pa - ri - ka.

T *p* смерт-ных от по - ро - ка. Судь - я то - го, что пра - во и не - пра - во,
 sm'ert-nykh at pa - ri - ka. Sud' - ja ta - vo, shto pra - va i n'e - pra - va,

B *p* смерт-ных от по - ро - ка. Судь - я то - го, что пра - во и не - пра - во,
 sm'ert-nykh at pa - ri - ka. Sud' - ja ta - vo, shto pra - va i n'e - pra - va,

Figure 5. Alfred Schnittke, *Concerto for Choir*, Movement 1, mm. 112–132.

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211

Soprano: и сло - ба нч - тож - ны - е - моль - ба, / i sla - va nich - tozh - ny - je - mal' - ba,

Alto: и сло - ба нч - тож - ны - е - моль - ба, / i sla - va nich - tozh - ny - je - mal' - ba, ко - ка -

Tenor: и сло - ба нч - тож - ны - е - моль - ба, / i sla - va nich - tozh - ny - je - mal' - ba, ко - то - рой жаж - ду / ka - to - raj zhazh - du

Bass: моль - ба, / mal' - ba, ко - то - рой / ka - to - raj

216

Soprano: ко - то - рой жаж - ду об - рес - ти спа - сень - е, / ka - to - raj zhazh - du ab - res - ti spa - sen' - je.

Alto: то - рой жаж - ду об - рес - ти, ко - то - рой жаж - ду об - рес - ти, спа - сень - е, / to - raj zhazh - du ab - res - ti, ka - to - raj zhazh - du ab - res - ti, spa - sen' - je.

Tenor: об - рес - ти спа - сень - е, об - рес - ти спа - сень - е, / ab - res - ti spa - sen' - je, ab - res - ti spa - sen' - je.

Bass: жаж - ду об - рес - ти спа - сень - е, об - рес - ти спа - сень - е, / zhazh - du ab - res - ti spa - sen' - je, ab - res - ti spa - sen' - je.

Figure 6. Alfred Schnittke, *Concerto for Choir*, Movement 1, mm. 211 – 222.

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shift from *tenuto* articulation to accents and the growth in dynamic from *piano* to *forte* over these measures both further drive momentum toward m. 15. Mark Jennings points out that the climactic arrival point at the end of this phrase corresponds with the word “страшаший,” describing the “frightening” power of God.

In mm. 214–222, the four separate entrances of voices in the earlier phrase expand to eight and the broadness of ambitus, dynamic level, and number of accented notes intensifies even further. Together, these changes yield a multifaceted *crescendo* that ends the movement at an impassioned climax. However, though the first phrase used a similar (though less forceful) progression to represent the awesome power of God, here the text is “которой жажлж обрестиб спасенье,” referring instead to the speaker’s fervent “yearn[ing] to obtain salvation.” The more comprehensive incremental gathering of musical intensity in this latter passage thus reflects the growth in textual intensity from the many supplications of earlier in the movement to the personal and desperate cry for mercy at the end.

Patterns of step-by-step development in the *Concerto for Choir* also carry over to the harmonic structure of the piece. Though the work is not strictly tonal and ventures into numerous highly dissonant passages and tone clusters, root-position triads act as pillar points throughout. In many cases, triads of this type occur at cadential moments in the piece or alongside particularly evocative text, although this is not exclusively the case. Regardless, as moments of simple diatonicism return repeatedly across all four movements, they begin to comprise a reassuring trope that seems to keep the *Concerto* anchored in tonality and to dissuade the musical language from venturing too far afield to stylistically disparate tonal worlds. Jennings suggests that the stability of diatonic passages in the work may be linked to the musical tradition of the liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church. Though the question of whether the inclusion of these moments is a deliberate reference to such music is beyond the scope of this article, listeners perceiving a connection of this type might find that a recurring reference to liturgical music further enhances the overall stylistic unity of the *Concerto*. This tendency to anchor the listener with moments of triadic harmony can also be found in Schnittke’s later *Psalms of Repentance* (1988), suggesting that the composer

found the technique worthy of continued exploration in subsequent works.

Beyond providing an overarching stylistic backdrop to the work, however, root-position triads also reveal a pattern of incremental connection to one another via step-wise motion of constituent parts. These triads can often be linked via a procedure that the music theorist Richard Cohn describes in the music of Schubert as “maximally efficient voice-leading,” in which harmonic progressions are governed not by standard functionality but by proximity of some combination of the three component pitches from one chord to the next (an example of triads linked in this way might be A Major and F Major, which are functionally removed from one another but which have a common component—A—and two pairs of corresponding notes which are separated by a half step each—C# and C; and E and F).

In the case of the *Concerto for Choir*, these harmonies may be connected even across passages of music diverting toward clusters or other types of non-triadic chords. Here, then, it is the strength of the relationship of particular root-position triads to important textual or cadential moments that marks the chords as apt for linking to one another in this manner.

Within the first fifteen measures of the piece (Figure 1), root position triads occur in at least four significant places. The initial chord of the work and the downbeat of m. 4 are open fifth dyads that mark the beginning and ending of the first short phrase. Together, the roots of these sonorities provide two of the three component notes of the first consonant triad of the work, the G major chord on the downbeat of m. 5 that begins to describe the “priceless” (“бесценными”) gifts of God and initiates the process of intensification of texture over the subsequent measures. The downbeat of m. 8 marks the next unique and significant root position triad (A \flat minor, spelled with an enharmonic B in place of C \flat), this time on the word “Lord” (“господь”). “всё,” signifying “everything” that God creates out of nothing, sounds in m. 10 as a G minor triad.

At the end of this section, a G minor triad on the downbeat of m. 15 dissolves into an F# major triad at the aforementioned “frightening” force of God on beat 3. Table 4 on page 21 highlights how these landmark chords can be connected sequentially via effi-

Schnittke's Concerto for Choir as a Transformation of Compositional Method

cient voice-leading maneuvers in the manner of Cohn. Though the individual harmonies in question may be separated from one another by other materials, their status as significant musical moments and the gradual shift of components that leads a path between them creates an underlying harmonic unity across the opening of the work.

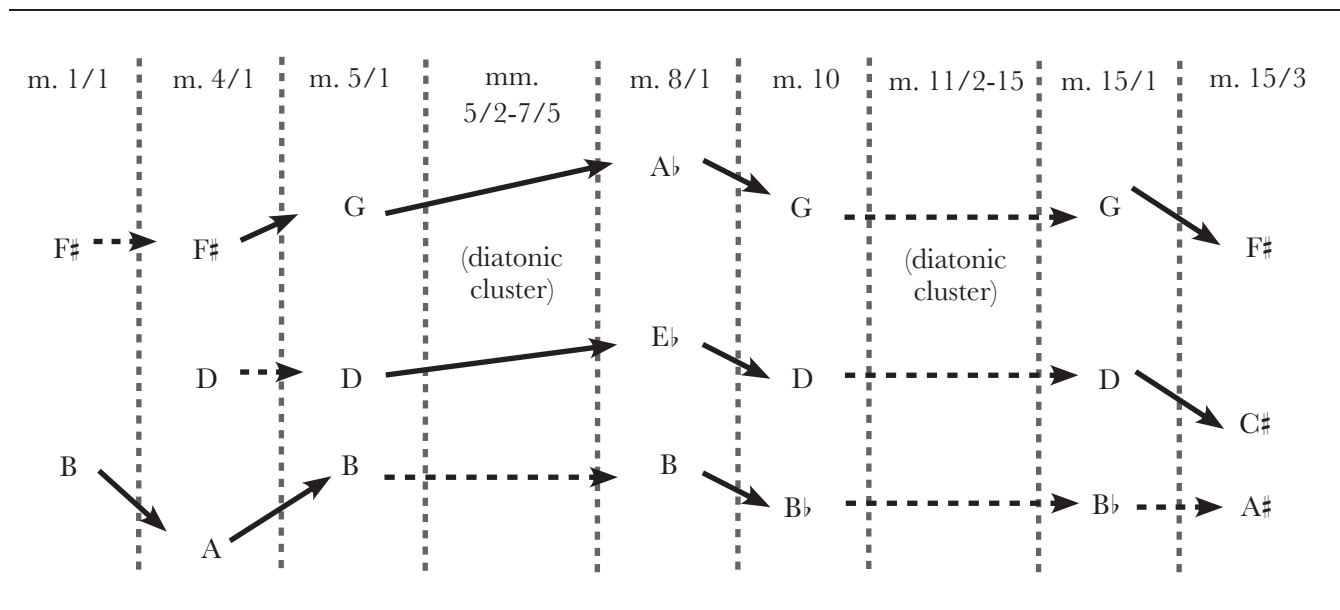
Table 5 on page 22 highlights how similar pathways between triads are found elsewhere in the movement. For instance, the *ostinato* passages in the middle section frequently shift between minor and major modes through stepwise transformation of individual chordal elements. Motion of the third of the chord yields the same modal shift in transitions from B minor to B major (mm. 33–34; mm. 49–50; mm. 136–137) and back (mm. 45–46) as those between E \flat minor and E \flat major (mm. 66–67) and from G minor to G major (mm. 124–125). These different passages are correlated to one another not only by their tendency to shift between modes, but also via a more direct harmonic link akin to the triads at the opening of the work. As at the beginning of the piece, interceding musical material separates these *ostinato* passages from one another. Nonetheless, the familiarity of the shared repetitive pattern draws these examples together and emphasizes the stepwise harmonic alterations that

transform and link them over time.

Schnittke's Approach to the *Concerto*

Across the first movement of Schnittke's *Concerto for Choir*, incremental shifts in musical elements such as texture, melody, and harmony establish a consistent affect and sound while avoiding dramatic juxtapositions of highly distinct materials. Even the overarching structure of ABA¹ suggests progression of a subtle, smooth type between sections: the opening A passage gives way to new but stylistically similar B material before stepping back toward familiar (though varied and heightened) A¹ music at the end of the movement. In contrast with the tenets of polystylism, the *Concerto* relies on stability to achieve its expressive effects. Such foundational differences in compositional style support speculation by Ivashkin, Kremer, and Ross that Schnittke underwent a change in approach around the time he was writing this piece. Though the *Concerto* was completed in March of 1985 and the composer's stroke occurred in July, Ivashkin nevertheless observes that Schnittke experienced premonitions of something terrible to come for several months before the stroke. Schnittke thus may have had growing concerns about his health and the future as he

Table 4. Harmonic path between consonant triads via internal stepwise motion, mm. 1-15
(note: for emphasis, diagram organized via pitch classes, not actual pitch space of original material)



FROM POLYSTYLISM TO INCREMENTALISM

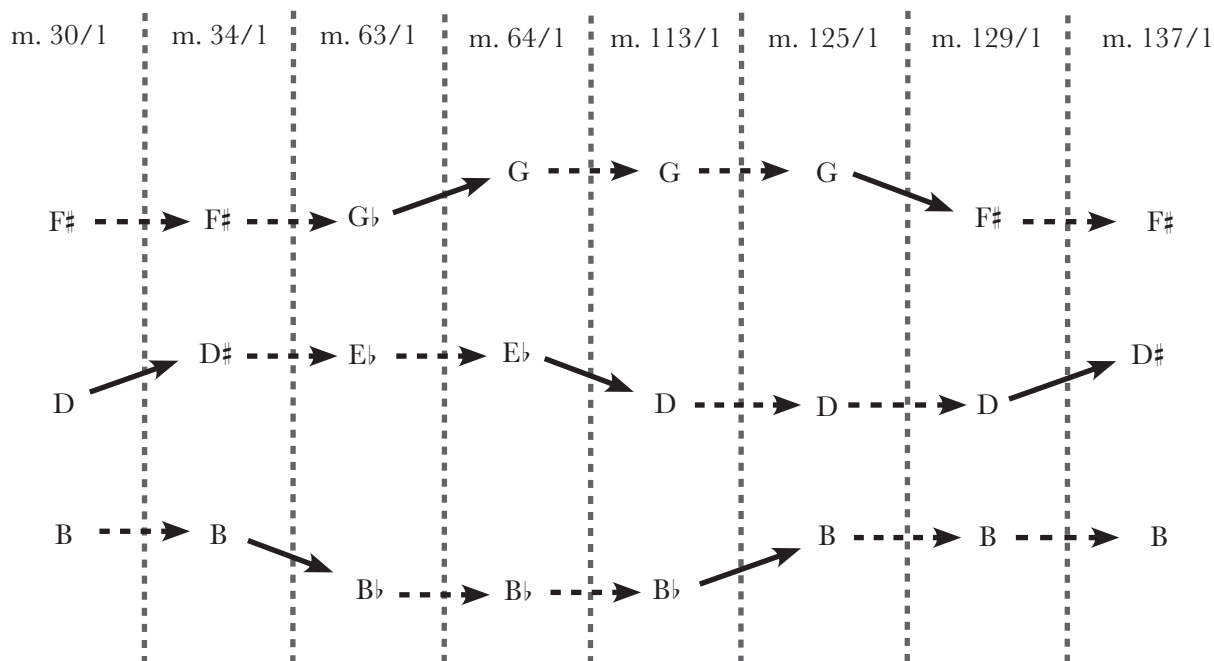
was composing the *Concerto*.

Could the *Concerto* represent a deliberate choice to move away from polystylism in search of another means of musical expression? Perhaps Schnittke wrote the piece in an attempt to grapple with the challenges of growing older or with concerns about his own mortality. Schnittke was fascinated by the progression of time, and the gradual unfolding of a piece of music such as the *Concerto* neatly analogizes the passing of time over the course of a human life. At the same time, Schnittke considered himself to be a deeply religious man, even in spite of the difficulty associated with observing religious practices in the Soviet era. The words of Gregor of Narek that Schnittke set in the *Concerto* are profoundly penitential and reflective, and have potential to intertwine gracefully with the sentiments of a faithful individual looking back upon his life and unsure of what the future holds.

Other, less personal factors may have also been involved. Though Schnittke's music tended increasingly toward sacred themes and texts as his life progressed, and though he described his choice to include religious

material in his compositions as "quite serious," the *Concerto for Choir* seems to fulfill a function beyond that of a pure, personal expression of faith and fear or of an introspective examination of one's life. By 1985, Schnittke had achieved immense popularity in Russia. He enjoyed widespread acclaim as an "underground" musician for works such as the *Symphony no. 2*, the premiere of which the Soviet government forbade him from attending but which nevertheless drew the attention of progressive audiences across Russia. Schnittke had managed to achieve this level of acclaim thanks in some part to his savviness in navigating the Soviet censors. Schmelz acknowledges that performers at the upper echelons of fame enjoyed a unique "leverage in programming," allowing them to perform controversial works which would have otherwise been blocked. Earlier in his career, Schnittke's affiliation with Kremer, the cellist and conductor Msislav Rostropovich, and others in this class, as well as the number of pieces he composed featuring soloists and his tendency to engage those leading performers to play those solos, indicates his awareness of what

Table 5. Harmonic path between consonant triads via internal stepwise motion, mm. 30-137
(note: for emphasis, diagram organized via pitch classes, not actual pitch space of original material)



was necessary in order to make forward-thinking music available to a wider audience. Eventually, the *Concerto for Choir* would also be associated with a famous performer: the star conductor Valeri Polyansky commissioned the work for the officially recognized USSR State Chamber Choir, perhaps granting the piece greater credibility and Communist Party clout by association.

Schnittke seems to have realized the potential power of challenging an audience's ingrained expectations of what his music would be by making a sudden shift in style. In observing the practices of polystylism in many compositions after 1971, Schnittke created what Hans Robert Jauss refers to as a "horizon of expectations" for his listeners, with each successive polystylistic work strengthening the association of Schnittke's music with that approach. Defying this tendency with a piece like the *Concerto*, which not only fails to progress in the expected polystylistic manner but which seems to be constructed through a wholly opposite approach, would doubtless surprise and engage listeners in a new way. Indeed, this would not be the first time that Schnittke had undercut his audience's expectations by abruptly changing his musical style. Schmelz points out that the composer's works from the 1960s tended toward serialism. In 1974, Schnittke premiered the *Symphony no. 1*. Written alongside his lecture and paper espousing polystylism, the piece turns from serialism to the rapid stylistic juxtapositions typical of later works. The audience response to the piece was immediate and enthusiastic, and the composer's career flourished.

It is possible that Schnittke hoped for an analogous outcome for the *Concerto for Choir*. Though his writings and official biography do not mention this wish explicitly (Schnittke would likely have been savvy enough to recognize the detrimental effect such an overt admission might have on his reputation, and in interviews he publicly maintained his disinterest in success), hints at the new style of a "Series B" or something similar could have piqued the interest of his followers. And sure enough, Schnittke does seem to have enjoyed even greater recognition both outside and inside of Russia in the years following the *Concerto*. In the West, David Wright noted that "Schnittke currently enjoys enormous popularity" in 1991, Alex Ross described the composer's "indisputable international stature" in 1992, and Peter

G. Davis remarked that "everyone seems to be playing the music of Alfred Schnittke" in 1994. Even the Soviet government recognized the composer, nominating him for the prestigious Lenin Prize in 1990 for his work on the *Concerto for Choir* and the *Cello Concerto no. 1*. The fact that an overtly sacred piece by a composer with a history of pushing the boundaries of regime-approved music would receive recognition of this level points to Schnittke's titanic status at this time, or perhaps to the Soviet regime's appreciation for monostylism.

Though further research is necessary to determine exactly how the *Concerto for Choir* fits into the puzzle of the reception of Alfred Schnittke's music, the piece is nonetheless a landmark among the composer's works for reasons of compositional style. Schnittke previously viewed the amalgamation of widely varied types of music within a single piece as a means of maximizing expressive potential and reaching a universal audience. In the *Concerto*, he abruptly turned away from polystylism. The result is a work with powerfully focused unity of construction, and one that may have unlocked the capacity to touch a widespread audience via an entirely different set of means.

NOTES

- ¹ Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1994), 410.
- ² Peter J. Schmelz, *Such Freedom, if only Musical: Unofficial Soviet Music during the Thaw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 326.
- ³ Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 99.
- ⁴ Alfred Schnittke, *A Schnittke Reader*, ed. Alexander Ivashkin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 90.
- ⁵ Alexander Ivashkin, *Alfred Schnittke* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 190-191.
- ⁶ Schnittke, *A Schnittke Reader*, 234.
- ⁷ Alex Ross, "Connoisseur of Chaos: Schnittke," *The New Republic*, September 28, 1992, accessed May 13, 2016, http://www.thereistisnoise.com/2004/05/schnittke_1992.html.