

V. Ia. Propp and Ethnomusicology: Memoirs and Approaches (1)

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Allow me to begin with some personal remarks. I was the only ethnomusicologist among the students of V. Ia. Propp. That being the case, I consider it my duty to discuss those features of Propp's scholarship and that part of his legacy which specifically concern music. I have already completed an article entitled "Propp the musician" that will appear in "Russian Studies." Here I turn to a part of Propp's work which has not yet been examined and focus on his contributions to ethnomusicology.

Propp wrote little about music, at least in his studies that have appeared in print. On occasion, he would mention musical motifs appearing in tales or epics. One striking example is a passage from "The Historical Roots of the Magic Tale" (2) that clearly reveals his love of music. Propp wrote: "It is impossible not to mention the beauty and the lively splendor of certain Greek concepts. The Greeks, it appears, were the first to introduce music, which was not the magical music of flutes and drums, but which was intended for everyone. Such music later permeated Europe, appearing in everything from the tale "The Little Red Flower" to the angels pictured playing violins and trumpets at the feet of Mary. After citing a series of supporting examples, Propp concludes with a discussion of the "singing tree" in Russian folk tales (3).

When Propp wrote about music, his style had a characteristic musicality and acquired a certain melodiousness. The following line from "The Secret Forest" (4) almost bursts with music: "The sound of the flute summons the spirits" (*Zvuki dudki vyzyvaiut dukha*). Music is capable of resurrecting the dead and turning them into wolves. Propp was intrigued by a legend on this topic which Boas had collected and published (5). "Then the wolves brought in a corpse. They wrapped it in a wolf pelt, laid it down near the fire, and began to dance around it, chanting to a specific beat. Then the dead man got up and began to stumble about. The longer they sang their chant, the more confidently the man moved. Finally, he actually began to run about like a wolf."

A few examples will suffice. We can see and hear how music sounds through the pages of Propp's books. This being the case, we might expect the author to begin contemplating music alone and to move toward ethnomusicology. This was indeed the case. Propp's most substantial contributions to the field appear in his book "The Russian Heroic Epic" (6) and in his articles on the classification of folklore genres. (7) In his book on epic poetry, Propp made two important musicological observations. First, he noted that in an epic singing coincides with the text, something that, as he observed, is not always the case. Furthermore, he pointed out that the musical style used in the performance of one narrative genre "is self-contained and cannot be used in the performance of other narrative types." Propp's second contribution involves his reaction to the notion of "epic calm," an idea that was wide spread in Soviet epic studies. He expressed his

position clearly in statements such as the following: “Epic calm exists only in some poorly formulated theories. As for the people themselves, they see an epic as something vibrant. This is apparent in the fact that epics are sung and in their type of musical performance, which borders on the ecstatic.” (8) We can only wonder how Propp, never having had the opportunity to hear a live performance of Balkan, Indonesian, or Central Asian epics, could make such a profound observation.

When discussing genres, Propp considered their relationship to music to be one of their central distinguishing features. He wrote that studying any aspect of poetic folklore without considering its relationship to music was the same as looking at only part of a picture. He repeatedly advocated cooperation between folklorists and musicologists. He was convinced that “text and musical performance form an organic whole and that the meter of poetry cannot be studied apart from musical rhythm and vocalization.” He maintained that the lines of a song cannot be delineated except by examining them in their sung form and that studying music along with the text plays a decisive role in determining the origin of a song. He believed that such considerations should apply not just to individual songs, but to entire genres.

Nonetheless, Propp himself never wrote specifically about these subjects; neither did he treat them in their own right, isolated from other topics. He nevertheless was a musician by nature. During childhood he learned how to play the piano, and he knew and valued music in general, in particular folk music. Even so, he considered himself to be a dilettante in musicology. He made a clear distinction between musician and musicologist; once correcting an unfortunate confusion of these two words in a paper I wrote as an undergraduate.

In October, 1963 Vladimir Propp was in the audience at a meeting of the Union of Composers and listened to my lecture on the genesis of lyric folk songs. During the discussion that followed, he made no comments. The next day he called me and spoke the following words which I wrote down after he had finished speaking: “I did not speak because I was surrounded by eminent specialists in the field of song. As you know, I can be reticent. But here is what I have to say. First, you have a hypothesis. Second, this hypothesis is new, original, and convincing. Furthermore, philological studies support your theories. Ideally there should be a series of lectures on this topic, but I thank you for just this lecture. It was very interesting.” These words convey the essence of Propp: he was humble, he was kind and supportive, and he expressed himself clearly and succinctly.

Actually Propp violated his self-imposed ban on commenting about musicology when he agreed to serve as the opponent for two doctoral dissertations in ethnomusicology. One such occasion occurred on March 14, 1963, when Feodosii Antonovich Rubtsov defended his dissertation and the other was on October 20, 1964 when I defended mine. In passing, I should add that Propp's responses to the two dissertations were expressed in detailed papers some eighteen to nineteen pages in length. Someday I hope to publish them in a collection entitled “The Unpublished Works of Vladimir Propp.”

In spite of his ability to write cogently, Propp was again strikingly modest. When in 1959 he advised me to choose musicology as my profession, he pointed out that it was an exceptionally time-consuming and difficult discipline in which I should receive as much training as possible. He added: "You can always become a philologist on your own when you feel the need to do so." These words coming from my teacher – and philologist – decided my career.

In May, 1961 when he was responding to my letter about his collection of lyric folk songs, a collection appearing in the Library of a Poet Series and having a foreword on folk music for a general audience, (9) Propp wrote modestly but decisively: "The only purpose of my foreword is to introduce the folk song, a goal which many say has been adequately accomplished. At one time I abandoned any thought of writing something about songs because that would have required training in music. It is too late for me to receive such training. I hope that you will perform that task someday." Propp wrote these words to a twenty-five year old youth who had just decided to dedicate his life to folklore. Even though I have numerous publications about folk songs, I still consider my teacher's admonition to be unfulfilled.

Now I would like to present several of Propp's thoughts which I call "Propp's Lessons." They concern ethnomusicological issues and include parallel problems and supporting observations. The "lessons" represent ideas in Propp's thinking which were not realized in separate scholarly works.

One of Propp's most remarkable contributions and one which has still not received deserved attention, is his attitude that folklore genres are not abstract categories, but are specific units which should serve as the starting point for scholarly study. The boldness of this position was extraordinary. In my opinion, it was based on accepting several simple hypotheses and moving from them to a unifying concept. The five hypotheses are cited below:

1) "Membership in a genre category is not a formal feature of a folklore work." (10) "Making artificial (generic) distinctions is not productive"(op. cit. p. 60). "Establishing generic categories requires accurate terminology and correct techniques of systematization"(op. cit. p. 64).

2) The generic system of every culture is unique. "For every people one needs to identify a genre system that belong to this people and one needs to describe all genres that belong to that system"(op. cit. p. 39). "A system of folklore genres developed for one culture cannot be mechanically applied to the folklore of another culture. Only the principles used in the classification can be international, not the materials themselves"(op. cit. p 38).

3) "A genre is determined by poetics, usage, manner of performance, and relationship to music. As a rule, none of these traits in isolation can be used to characterize a genre; a genre is determined by the aggregate of these traits. Oral literature scholarship, ethnography, and ethnomusicology cannot alone solve these scholarly problems"(op. cit. p. 39).

4) "The study of one genre in isolation, apart from others, cannot yield sound conclusions because folklore works in various genres are often closely linked. (Examining single genres) fails to show us the

richness and the unique features of the poetic tradition in a particular culture; this also does not reveal features which distinguish one tradition from others.”(op. cit. p. 39)

5) “A classification system is useful only when it is as detailed as the material demands” (op. cit. p. 40). “Folklore scholarship is dominated by a fear of finely delineated categories” (op. cit. pp. 39-40).

Propp illustrated these hypotheses by his analysis of Russian folklore genres, a subject to which he devoted the cited articles. In February, 1965 Propp came to my home on the eve of my birthday and gave me as a memento an offprint of this article which he had just received. It comes as no surprise that he highly valued this article: in it he managed to chart the genre system of all Russian folklore.

Working from the fifth of his hypotheses, Propp wrote about the genre of an early historical minstrel (skomorokh) song, one which was “to date represented by a single plot” (op. cit. p. 61). He founded a system of Russian historical song genres based on the historical epochs in which they originated, the social strata to which they belonged, and the features of their musical performance (p. 63).

I would like to focus attention on the fifth hypothesis because it has a special significance for the theory and practice of folklore genre studies. This hypothesis is also supported by folk music: I have written on this subject in my analysis of calendar songs, particularly the winter and spring songs (koliadka, vesnianka). From the musical point of view, the genre interrelationships among calendar songs become clear from analysis of their melodies. However, Propp was able to perceive genre relationships by using the text alone and he was able to delineate relationships that no one had recognized previously.

Propp's first hypothesis, developed within the framework of verbal folklore, has similar implications. In ethnomusicology, which at present may be losing sight of generic distinctions, Propp's work recalls the interaction among the productive genres of a tradition. A “productive” genre is one that can serve as a generative model. An accurate picture of genres cannot exist without including this “productive” group. Any genre exists only as long as it serves as a generative model.

Propp's second hypothesis touches the very heart of an oral and traditional art. It is fundamental because it deals with the folk way of thinking. It helps us see that the thinking process of the folk is a central question. In the first chapter of his “Historical Roots of the Magic Tale,” Propp devoted special attention to primitive thought. Manner of thought is, to Propp, “a category that can be historically determined” (11). All causes and explanations, no matter what they may be, “always function through the prism of a specific world view” (p. 20). Propp admitted that it was extremely difficult to recognize and explicate these different patterns of thought, but a folklorist cannot ignore them. He made similar observations in his analysis of calendar customs and rituals, showing how they were related to the concerns of the earliest peasants.(12) All folklore genres are products of their corresponding world view behind which lies a semantic system. It in turn is determined by its historical circumstances.

This second hypothesis is, in many respects, the foundation on which all of Propp's theories and those of his successors are based. Even discursive problems such as historicity and comparativism are

linked to this hypothesis. In ethnomusicology worldview and manner of thought are central, even though they do not always receive the attention that they deserve. In some musicological studies, for example, everything seems to fit and yet the author's conclusions appear to hang in mid-air, no matter how psychologically or semantically interesting they may be. Almost invariably the reason for this problem lies in the author's failure to understand the key role of musical thought as the generative and transforming engine behind all of these relationships.

Propp's first book, "The Morphology of the Folktale" (13), contains the germs of the second hypothesis. Strictly speaking, this inspired book represents a synthesis of a whole group of ideas and methods, many of which governed Propp's scholarly thinking his entire life and some of which were, for understandable reasons, not developed further. I do not have an opportunity here to examine Propp's "Morphology of the Folktale" in greater detail and to write about the significance that it and related books have for musicology and folk song analysis. I will merely point out that Propp offers us many observations and methodological suggestions that are useful for the study of traditional folk music. Such analysis might constitute yet another of "Propp's lessons"; it shows us that the artistry of folklore forms should be analyzed and it gives us an analytical tool.

NOTES

1. This paper was originally presented at a St. Petersburg conference held in 1995 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Propp's birth.
2. V. Ia. Propp, "Istoricheskie korni volshebnoi skazki," Leningrad, 1946.
3. "Istoricheskie korni," p. 275.
4. "Istoricheskie korni," p. 90.
5. "Istoricheskie korni," p. 64.
6. "Russkij geroicheskij epos," 2nd edition, Leningrad, 1958, pp. 55-56.
7. "Printsipy klassifikatsii folklornykh zhanrov" [Principles of the classification of folklore genres] and "Zhanrovyyi sostav russkogo folklora" [The genre system of Russian folklore], "Folklor i deistvitel'nost'" [Folklore and reality], Moscow, 1976, pp. 38-39, 53.
8. "Russkij geroicheskii epos," p. 537.
9. "Narodnye liricheskie pesni" [Folk lyric songs], Leningrad, 1961.
10. "Folklor i deistvitel'nost'," p. 37.
11. "Istoricheskie korni," p. 20.
12. "Russkie agrarnye prazdniki" [Russian agrarian festivals], Leningrad, 1963, p. 113 ff.
13. "Morfologija skazki," Leningrad, 1928.

(Translated by Natalie Kononenko)