

Stylistics of the Amateur String Instrumental Ensembles in Modern Ukraine

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Abstract

In the paper, the author examines the stylistic peculiarities of amateur string instrumental ensembles in Ukraine on the example of “Exprompt” string ensemble, “Crescendo” chamber orchestra (Kharkiv, Ukraine), and “Polyphonya” chamber orchestra (Lviv, Ukraine). Taking a point of departure in the previous definitions of the term “culture”, the author advances the definition of the “amateur string culture”. In the paper, the author uses personal extensive experience as the head of “Exprompt” string ensemble and “Crescendo” chamber orchestra, and interviews with colleagues to determine common trends in the repertoire of amateur string ensembles in chamber music, concert music, and plain-air music. The results show that the main genres used by the ensembles are popular classical music, including originals and arrangements, music pieces by the national composers, including both adaptations and original music pieces, as well as remakes and cover versions of the modern popular and rock music. Additionally, the author presents characteristics common to instrumental composition of amateur string ensembles and gives examples of music pieces commonly used by amateur ensembles. The results of the study show that artistic aims of amateur music-making reflect those of academic art but amateur music-making has its own distinct characteristics, which can be observed through stylistics.

Keywords: amateur string ensemble, culture, repertoire, stylistics

1. Theoretical background on amateur string culture

1.1. Definition of amateur string culture

The analysis of any music and artistic phenomenon is based on the following three pillars – style, genre, and stylistics. Amateur string music is not an exception. However, the main question in analyzing the amateur string music lies in identifying the distinct aspects of the genre, style, and stylistic factors of amateur music culture. The aspect of *culture* in particular makes it possible to link various components of amateur art and performance, reveal its common and unique features formed as a result of both international and national traditions of Ukraine. The cultural aspect vital for studying diverse expressions of the string amateur music can be defined as “amateur string culture”.

The term “culture” applied to the instrumental visual stylistics is not new for the Ukrainian music science. It appears in different specifications and with different predicates, for example, in the works of V. Siryatskiy (“piano culture”) (2003), I. Polskaya (“ensemble culture”) (2003), A. Zherzdiev (“guitar culture”) (2011). Methodologically, one of the distinct examples of the cultural approach to style-visual phenomena is the definition of the piano culture, advanced by V. Siryatskiy: “Piano culture is piano music put together with its closest social context, the set of common music making-standards, the specific development level of composing and performing art in piano music, as well as understanding and ethos of using the expressive opportunities that piano provides (e.g., real-pedalless piano, phantom-pedal piano, symphonic piano, coloristic piano, linear piano, etc.), requirements to its design (e.g., a piano for performances at home, for a lounge, for a concert platform, for jazz music), and piano education and training (Siryatskiy, 2003).

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Let us examine the components of this definition in more detail in order to transfer their meaning onto the suggested definition of the amateur music culture:

- the first part of the definition by V. Siryatskiy suits the amateur string music well – the amateur string culture, as well as the piano culture, is the respective “music with its social context” determined by “the set of common music-making standards”;
- the second point – the connection of a particular type of music culture with “the specific development level of the composing and performing art” – is also related to the amateur string music;
- the third point related to “understanding and ethos” of using the expressive opportunities that a music instrument provides (both piano and, e.g., violin) can indeed become a component of our amateur music culture definition. However, we should consider the specific character of “images” inherent to solo and chamber types of instruments, which are adapted for the amateur music;
- the fourth point taken from the definition by V. Siryatskiy – that the ability to master a music instrument (a piano in this case) depends on the corresponding level of “education and training” – relates to the amateur strings, too. Violin training takes on many different forms and takes place in a diverse system of institutions, including schools, studios, hobby groups, as well as through private classes or by a self-education.

The phenomenon of “instrumental culture” itself, whether it is the piano or the strings culture, exists in a society and takes on aspects from within both communication and aesthetics. Communicative aspect of instrumental culture refers to the relationship between composer, performer, and listeners, while aesthetic aspect relates to specific artistic styles that dominated during various historical periods, in national cultures or regions, and that were practiced by particular personalities. All these aspects eventually manifest themselves through the stylistics of a music piece and its performance. Studying stylistics and performance, as observable sound artifacts, can help examine deep processes that occur in the music mentality. In this article, we talk about the mentality of amateur string instrumental ensembles and violin ensembles, in particular.

Therefore, before suggesting a definition of the amateur string culture, we first define its stylistic components. E. Nazaykinsiy identifies four stylistic components of culture: genre, national, historical, and personal components. The genre component implies genre interpretation or transformation of genres from primary to secondary, tertiary, etc. in the areas of creation and performance. The national component is a national element in music writing (including language) in the works of national composers and its combination with elements from other nations. The historical component includes styles and genres of different historical periods and how they are reflected in music pieces. The personal component implies the stylistics within the system of “a person” and “personage” (Nazaykinsiy, 2003). All these stylistic components have to be considered in the definition of the amateur string culture or when analyzing its proxies that stylistically still contain a set of the above-mentioned components – historical, national, genre, and personal components. It is also relevant to add a regional component to this list.

That said, *the amateur string culture is a music-stylistic phenomenon that includes various genres of string music, their social-communicative context, which is defined as a set of relevant norms of the common music-making, and determined by: 1) a particular development level of the composer and performance art in a particular area; 2) understanding of the “image” of violin in the system of instrumental intoning, 3) the level of music education and training in general; and 4) the level of music education and training in playing strings in particular.*

1.2. Stylistics of amateur string culture

The key word combination in this definition is the notion of the “music-stylistic phenomenon”. The choice of this notion corresponds to the very nature of the amateur string music-making itself. Being associated with both folk and academic strata of music, amateur music-making develops its own characteristics defined not only by the criteria of genre and style but also by the stylistics in particular. Judged by the genre and style criteria only, the amateur and academic string music-making would have very little difference. The stylistics represented through a specific music piece, style of its author and performer, appears as individual only at the first sight. Its connection to a particular style is revealed through the language and form of the music piece, a group of music pieces united by genre-related, national, historical, and individual attributes, including personal characteristics of the author, co-author, and performer. When clarifying the content of the stylistic aspect in analyzing music, E. Nazaykinsiy points out to the following: “The components that build up the stylistic structure of a music piece not only are quite dissimilar, but are also combined in the artistic unity in different ways” (Nazaykinsiy, 2003).

The author examines parameters of the stylistic structure of music pieces among others, those relevant to the repertoire of amateur string ensembles according to the 3-dimensional organization of the music texture. The components of this structure are not pitch formations, however, but the stylistic units organized into a complex structure of a music piece.

The understanding of this structure can be divided into the horizontal and vertical dimensions. Horizontally, it is “time deployment”, built up from a “smooth combination of different components”; vertically, it is a “peculiar stylistic polyphony” which completes the horizontal time-dependent stylistic expression. Lastly, the stylistic structure can also have a volume dimension just as the music texture, because an individual composer’s “handwriting” reflected in it can expand depth ward, so to speak. As a result, we can track the connection between this “handwriting” and the stylistic peculiarities of a particular school, historical period or national culture (Nazaykinsiy, 2003).

The stylistics that defines the character of the amateur music-making, which is built from the aggregation of diverse stylistic ingredients, has one more characteristic directly related to the repertoire of the amateur instrumental ensembles. This characteristic is that stylistics seem to be determined particularly by style, while genre, as the second category of the music mentality only exists on its background. In fact, according to E. Nazaykinsiy, “...we have the whole different picture: in the European professional music, the music stylistics more intensively assimilated the genre styles instead of the individual, historical or national ones (Nazaykinsiy, 2003).

I will use the term “genre-stylistic complex” to characterize the repertoire of the amateur string ensembles; its definition can be found in the dissertation by E. Chorna (2013). The author of the definition presumes that if the notion of “genre-style complex” was established in musicology since long ago, the term may be used solely in a figurative meaning. Meanwhile, a genre in *combination* with the stylistics appears as an “intermediary phenomenon between a genre and a style, which shows a particular interaction between these two fundamental principles of music applied to a specific music text. This interaction allows a genre to create stable and categorized functions of music images, while it allows a style to create mobile and individualized functions of music images. Altogether, through acoustic senses, these functions aggregate to higher levels of generalization – style of a particular genre, national school, and eventually to their “concentrate” – styles of an author and a performer” (Chorna, 2013).

2. The repertoire specifics and types of ensembles

2.1. Repertoire of amateur ensembles

One can analyze the repertoire of the amateur music ensembles through the genre stylistics, based on the text of a particular music piece. It relates to the three fundamental genre-stylistic principles of music represented as generic (“mentalistic”) categories of chamber music, concert music, and plain-air music (see more details in the cited work of E. Nazaykinsiy). The most distinctive genre-stylistic principle for an amateur string instrumental ensemble is chamber-performing style with respective attributes present in the music society, including expressive and constructive, artistic and communicative attributes.

The chamber repertoire qualities of the amateur instrumental ensembles are best revealed in adaptations of “popular classical” music, as well as in the original music pieces composed considering the capabilities of amateur musicians. Taking the examples of Ukrainian amateur string instrumental ensembles, in particular those organized by the author of this paper, we can name the following: “Little Symphony” by A. Vivaldi for chamber orchestra and clavier obligato (played with almost no adaptation), “Passacaglia” by G.F. Haendel with Suite g-moll (played in both original version and adaptation made by V. Skuratovskiy, L. Kholodenko; the variations made by Handel are changed to more catchy and coloristic, i.e. modernized ones).

Another type of widely used music pieces is the original versions and remakes of concert music. Genre-stylistic tendencies of a concerto style are an important part of the amateur instrumental ensembles repertoire. They can be represented in the two following ways:

- 1) Performance of the separate parts of popular concert music pieces for solo instruments with chamber orchestra. For example, 2nd part – “Largo” (“Winter”), and the 3rd part – “Vivo”, (“Summer”) from “The Four Seasons” by A. Vivaldi; the 1st part of Concerto for two violins and chamber orchestra by J.S. Bach. Adaptations: the 1st part of Concerto for mandolin and chamber orchestra by A. Vivaldi (C-dur) – the mandolin part was divided between two amateur violins). Also, concert versions of sonatas for bowed string instruments; for example, Sonata for cello and piano by G. Cassadói Moreu (the piano part is adapted for an amateur chamber orchestra).

- 2) Demonstration of the concert function that amateur string ensemble/orchestra performs when serving as an accompaniment to a soloist. In this position, chamber ensembles, particularly, “Expromt” string ensemble and “Crescendo” chamber orchestra (Kharkiv, Ukraine) can act as accompaniment for solo singers. The repertoire of these ensembles contain the fragments from operas (“Brindisi from “Traviata” by G. Verdi, “Aria of Lauretta” from “Gianni Schicchi” by G. Puccini), and also vocal miniatures of composers from different historical periods and national schools – from “Ave Maria” by G. Caccini, romance song “I still love him” by A. Dargomyzhskiy, to Ukrainian songs for solo voice (“Zhuravka” by A. Bilash, “Zhuravlyneslovo” by N. Stetsyun).
- 3) The strategy of repertoire selection for the amateur instrumental ensembles should take into account the present-day music tastes, as this would guarantee their livability and popularity among the mass audience, which they target. Therefore, these ensembles have a separate repertoire tendencies represented by the arrangements of popular jazz, rock, and pop music. Taking the examples of the above-mentioned ensembles from Kharkiv (Ukraine), the following music pieces are a part of the repertoire: “My Valentine” by Paul McCartney and similar (all arrangements for chamber orchestra are made by O. Neklyudov).

Alongside with the mentioned music pieces, the repertoire consists of the original works in a similar stylistics, composed by the members of the amateur ensembles - the composers-amateurs - who know the specifics of such ensembles well. This has become customary all over Ukraine. As an example, we can mention V. Skuratovskiy (Dnipro, Ukraine), M. Romanishyn, V. Mishyn (Lviv, Ukraine), and O. Neklyudov (Kharkiv, Ukraine). As for “plain-air” as a separate area of the stylistics in the amateur chamber instrumental ensembles, it is primarily connected to the adapted versions of the sound “landscape” taken from the “popular classical” music. Among those are already mentioned fragments from “The Found Seasons” by A. Vivaldi. Some original works can be associated with plain-air music pieces by their stylistics, particularly, the Elegie for piano and chamber orchestra “Das FerneLeuchtfeuer”, which was composed specifically for “Crescendo” chamber orchestra (piano solo part is played by the author).

2.1. Composition of amateur ensembles

The repertoire specifics of the amateur instrumental ensembles are closely connected with the instrumental composition of ensembles. Investigation of the amateur music in Ukraine shows that, on the one hand, amateur ensembles tend to form around a strong stable “core” of performers, which is generally a group of bowed string instruments. On the other hand, such ensembles strive for the timbre-functional enrichment. The latter quality defines the specifics of chamber string instrumental ensembles among other amateur ensembles and orchestras in Ukraine. The main types of ensembles can be also categorized depending on their participants from the most typical and “stable” to “mobile” and varying.

A bowed string ensemble or an orchestra with a piano can be considered as the basic standard form of an amateur instrumental ensemble. The representative nature of such ensemble composition can be confirmed by the typical repertoire: most music pieces, both adaptations and original works composed specifically for such ensembles are designed specifically for this group of instruments. The advantages of such ensembles are:

- 1) The mono-timbre sound of the bowed string group, similarity of the playing technique, which allows achieving both a complete unison and a timbre-dynamic balance in a general sound;
- 2) The presence of a tempered piano that ensures retaining of the pitch structure, and also gives harmony and texture support, and sometimes duplicates the melodic polyphony.

At the same time, mono-timbre sound always involves “monochromaticism” – limitation of colors in a timbre palette, which presence is always attractive for a mass audience. No wonder that A. Schoenberg called the audience of the 20th century “the timbre gourmet”, which relates not only to the academic music but to the mass music culture as well.

Therefore, the bowed string basis of the amateur instrumental ensembles together with the piano support is quite often enriched by adding other timbres, both instrumental and vocal. Vocal genres, such as solo, ensemble, and choir fragments from popular operas, as well as songs and romance songs of various genres, are also popular to use. These pieces include a range of arrangements from folk songs to popular songs of different stylistics, vocal jazz, pop romance songs, modernized classic music pieces, for example, different versions of “Ave Maria”, and other similar remakes of the popular music of the past. The tendencies to include vocal pieces are described in the dissertation of T. Ryabukha dedicated to the sources of into national elements in Ukrainian popular vocal music (Ryabukha, 2017).

Earlier in this paper, we mentioned similar examples from the repertoire of “Exprompt” string ensemble and “Crescendo” chamber orchestra from Kharkiv, Ukraine. Similarly, using the vocal component is a common feature for other ensembles. That said, the repertoire of “Polyphnia” chamber orchestra (Lviv, Ukraine) has vocal-instrumental music piece called “Hallelujah” by L. Cohen, arranged by V. Kotlyarov for a solo vocal and full chamber orchestra without a piano accompaniment. “Violino” string ensemble used even more large-scale music piece, composed not only for a solo vocal and an instrumental ensemble but for a full ensemble with a choir (“Dignare” – adapted version of Aria with the choir from Cantata Dettingen Te Deum by G.F. Haendel).

We can also observe a tendency towards expanding the instrumental-timbre palette of the amateur string ensembles and orchestras by means of including wind and percussion instruments, as well as bowed string plucked academic and folk instruments. If we take Kharkiv music ensembles as an example, their repertoire contains concert music pieces for harp (Concerto for harp and chamber orchestra G-dur by G.C. Wagenseil; soloist – prizewinner of International music competitions – Anna Vlasova), for marimba (Concerto for marimba and chamber orchestra, 1st part; soloist – Veronika Menzhynskaya), for oboe (J.S. Bach – A. Marcello, Concerto for oboe and chamber orchestra, 2nd part; soloist – Ulyana Makeeva and others), for flute (arrangement of song “Moon River” from OST “Breakfast at Tiffany's” by G. Mancini; soloist – Christina Andrukiv). The repertoire also contains the adaptations of popular modern music, particularly, “Oblivion” by A. Piazzolla (the author’s original version for violin, cello, and piano; adaptation for violin, bass-trombone, chamber orchestra and piano by N. Chistyakova and O. Neklyudov).

Adding the styles of rock and jazz leads to the creation of symphonic show ensembles akin to classic sympho-jazz or symphonic bands. In this case, the string group is accompanied not only by wind instruments, such as saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and clarinet but a full rhythm section plus electric guitars. With these groups of instruments, “Polyphonia” (Lviv, Ukraine) and “Crescendo” (Kharkiv, Ukraine) chamber orchestras perform cover-version of music pieces composed by world-known rock-groups, such as The Beatles (“Golden Slumbers”, “Eleanor Rigby”), Pink Floyd (“Wish You Were Here”), Led Zeppelin (“Kashmir”), Queen (“Who Wants To Live Forever”), as well as other leading composers in rock and pop-music, such as David Gilmour (“Out Of The Blue”), Karl Jenkins (“Palladio”, arranged by Escala), and others.

3. Conclusions

The amateur string culture is a unique phenomenon in the system of public music-making and is characterized by distinct characteristics in repertoire and instrumental composition. In most cases, the instrumental composition of such ensembles is not mono-timbre, i.e. not only limited to the bowed string group. In the definition of the “the amateur string culture”, presented in this paper, the main focus falls on the genre-stylistic complex, which defines the context and forms of music composing and performance in the area of the amateur music-making.

As for the repertoire, the genre-stylistic complex of Ukrainian amateur string ensembles is represented by the three main functional categories – chamber music, concert music, and plain-air music, according to the classification made by E. Nazaykinsiy. The chamber performing style with all its properties and attributes appears to be the leading stylistic type, manifesting itself through ensemble’s stylistics and the preferential usage of the ensemble genres. In general, these are various adaptations of “popular classical music”, as well as the original ensemble music pieces composed for amateur ensembles. The stylistic tendency to play concert music in the amateur instrumental ensembles relies on the diverse concert programs that include both vocal and instrumental solo parts and ensemble and orchestra concerto playing. The performers of the solo parts are usually solo singers, solo instrumentalists, and small ensembles, such as duets and trios. Their repertoire usually consists of adaptations, including remakes and cover-versions of classic, popular folk and “3rd-layer” genres, altogether building the repertoire palette of such ensembles.

As for the concert performances, the amateur ensembles and orchestras of Ukraine have both polystylistic and also thematic programs, dedicated to a particular historical period, genre, or specific composers and performers of the past and present. The diversity of the repertoire requires the diversity of instruments used in the ensembles. Alongside with the “core” of the bowed string group, other instruments are widely represented, including piano, wind instruments, string plucked instruments, percussion instruments, academic and even folk instruments. Piano especially stands out as an indispensable participant of bowed string ensembles and orchestras, ensuring retention of the pitch structure and the variety of the music harmonic texture. The rising popularity of jazz and rock music in the repertoire points out to a new tendency in the timbre stylistics of amateur ensembles and orchestras in Ukraine. This new tendency is connected with the appearance of mixed-timbre and mixed-style ensembles that include, for example, jazz rhythm-section, synthesizers, and electric guitars. Music arrangements and adaptations also play a special role.

They influence the repertoire and the instrumental composition of the amateur ensembles. The arrangements and people composing them influence the genre stylistics of music pieces, as these music pieces are included in the ensemble repertoires according to the capabilities of ensemble participants and the public demand.

Publications in Kharkiv (Dolgareva, 2017), (Gayevoi, 2016), (Pelyukhnya, 2015), (Smirnov, 2011) and Lviv (Gerić, 2012), (Yatsenko, 2012) printed media indicate extensive creative activity of “Crescendo” and “Polyphonia” chamber orchestras, both independent and in cooperation. This includes various concert programs, participation in festivals and competitions, and also a collaborative organization of projects, which allows these amateur ensembles extend the “stylistic limits” through communication.

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