

## DAVID SAMOILOV'S POEM "RICHTER" AND ITS TRANSLATION BY JAAN KROSS\*

LEA PILD

As noted by the commentators of the David Samoilov volume of the "Library of a Poet" collection, Samoilov's poem "Richter" was written in 1980 and originally published on January 9, 1981 in the newspaper "Literary Russia" («Литературная Россия») as "To Richter" [Примечания: 706]. It was also included in the poetry anthology "The Gulf" (1981).

Even in his youth, Svyatoslav Teofilovich Richter (1915–1997), the brilliant Russian pianist of German heritage, became a legendary, almost mythological personality in the minds of his contemporaries, thanks not only to the magnitude of his remarkable musical talent, but also to his extraordinary personal qualities. On the one hand, the text that is the focus of this article fits in with Samoilov's later works, in which he writes about artists (and not only about poets, but also painters, musicians, etc). Instead of this, in this case particular attention is drawn to Samoilov's verses that refer specifically to music and the lyrical hero's perception of music. It is worthwhile to consider not only the works of the 1970s and 1980s, but also earlier texts, since despite the importance of the "musical theme" to Samoilov (see, for example: [Стащенко]), he wrote many fewer poems about musicians and music than about poets and poetry. This article will take into account this wider context of Samoilov's work only when absolutely necessary; the main focus will be a close semantic analysis of the poem of interest. Here it is in full:

---

\* The article was written under the research theme TFLGR 0469 "Reception of Russian Literature in Estonia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: from the Interpretation to Translation".

**Рихтер<sup>1</sup>**

Крыло рояля. Руки Рихтера,  
 Изысканные, быстрые и сильные,  
 Как скаковые лошади. Точнее  
 Сравненья не умею подыскать.  
 Он заставляет музыку смотреть,  
 Угадывать ее предвестье  
 В лице, фигуре, мимике и жесте.  
 Не видя Рихтера теряешь что-то  
 От вдохновения и мастерства,  
 Как в письмах  
 Утрачиваешь что-то от общенья.  
 Транзисторщики и магнитофонцы,  
 Мы музыку с собой таскать привыкли  
 И приспособлявать ее к жилью.  
 А Рихтер музыку возводит в зал  
     И возвращает музыку в музыку.  
 Прислушаемся к Рихтерову лику,  
     К рукам задумчивого ездока,  
 Вожатому коней, изваянных из звука ...  
 Так, колесницы умедляя ход  
 На спуске с небосклона,  
 Сам Гелиос внимает, как поет,  
 Крыло откинув,  
 Черный лебедь Аполлона [Самойлов 2006: 287–288].

The first part of "Richter" accents *visual* images, related to the performing appearance of the protagonist. In this case, we can talk about one of the most common motifs found in critics' reviews of Richter's concerts and about their descriptions of the art of Richter's piano playing in the 1970s through the 1990s. So, for example, Samoilov may have had access to the brochure about Richter, first published in 1977 by Gennady Moiseevich Tsypin, renowned musicologist and researcher of the creative psychology of musical performers.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Richter" — The wing of the grand piano. Richter's hands, / Exquisite, quick and strong, / Like racehorses. Rather, / A comparison I cannot find. / He makes one look at music, / to guess at its portents / in face, figure, mimicry, and gesture. / Having not seen Richter you lose something / Of inspiration and mastery, / As in letters / You lose the sense of interaction. / Men of transistors and tape players, / We've grown accustomed to carry music with us / And adapt it to our dwelling. / But Richter builds music in the hall / And returns music to *music*. / Hark to the face of Richter, / to the hands of the contemplative horseman, / Guide to the horses carved from sound... / Thus, while the chariots slow their pace / on the descent from the horizon, / Helios himself harkens to the singing / of the black swan of Apollo / with the wing thrown back.

Tsy-pin deftly summarized a whole list of the views of his peers regarding the *visuality* of Richter's playing. For instance, among many others, he cites the statements of Richter's teacher, Heinrich Neuhaus, and renowned pianist Vera Gornostaeva, Richter's younger peer and professor at the Moscow Conservatory. From the brochure we read: "Richter is an artist who creates exclusively alive, nuanced, and characteristically precise soundscapes. Emanating from the hands of the pianist, they strike listeners as something absolutely real, almost absolutely tangible, like something distinctly *visible in every edge and contour, almost "substantive", stereoscopically voluminous"* [Цыпин: 20].

The statements of Richter's peers are congruous with another important motif that dominates the second part of the poem: the freedom of the pianist's art from all that is "everyday", "utilitarian", or not of true value (compare, for example: "... he never knew, and as a matter of principle didn't want to know the everyday, "worldly", vanities surrounding music" [Ibid: 12]). This contrast of Richter, who frees music from "vanities", to other performers who don't understand music's fundamental principles, can be found in Neuhaus's 1957 essay about Richter: "In this regard I am compelled to recall the words of my student, Jakov Zak, after one of Svyatoslav Richter's concerts in the Grand Hall of the Conservatory. He said something like this: 'In the world there is music that is pristine, sublime, and clean, simple and clear, like nature; people came and started to decorate music, draw patterns on it, dress it up in masks and costumes, and distort its meaning in every way. Then Svyatoslav appeared, and with one movement of his hand wiped away all that excess, and music became clear again, simple and pure'" [Heйрайз: 189–190] (the first edition of Neuhaus's diaries, notes, and articles was published in 1975, and so also may have been accessible to Samoilov when he composed "Richter"). Compare also musicologist and critic Leonid Gakkel's characterization: "Many, I think, say to him the lines of Thomas Mann: 'the piano is a direct and sovereign agent of music as such, music as *pure spirituality*, that's why one must master it' ("Doctor Faust"). That is why Richter has mastered it, the only reason!" [Гаккель].

The next layer of meaning in "Richter" is connected to a reference to a poem of Boris Pasternak: "the second-to-last genius", as Samoilov puts it<sup>2</sup>. The image of the pianist carried aloft into the space above the earth can be found in Pasternak's well-known poem "Music" (1956). Specifically, this is a poetic reference to Alexander Nikolaevich Skryabin, whom Pasternak likened to God in "Safe Conduct" and in "People and Positions". As is well known, this comparison to Skryabin was already widespread at the beginning of the 1910s;

---

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the role of Pasternak's poetry in the creative work of Samoilov, see: [Немзеп: 33–35].

it is recorded, for example, in Balmont's sonnet "Elf" (1916), which was dedicated to the author of "The Poem of Ecstasy": «И шли толпы. И был певучим гром. / И человеку бог был двойником. / Так Скрябина я видел за рояль»<sup>3</sup> [Бальмонт: 422].

Analyzing the autobiographical layer of Pasternak's poem "Music", Boris Aronovich Katz writes, "... the piano is equated with God's covenant. But, by the way, if the poem's hero does not feel like God, then at the very least he is king of the world, humbly called a resident..." [Кац: 28]. Compare:

Они тащили вверх рояль  
Над ширью городского моря,  
Как с заповедями скрижалъ  
На каменное плоскогорье.  
Жилец шестого этажа  
На землю посмотрел с балкона,  
Как бы в руках ее держа  
И ею властвуя законно<sup>4</sup> [Пастернак: 112].

Samoilov's poem also speaks about the ascension of the pianist above those around him (the listeners), while he himself is clearly totally equated with divinity; however, in contrast to Pasternak, here the "heavenly" hue is fashioned entirely with ancient images (Helios, "Apollo's swan"). It is of note that Richter himself was associated with the ancient world in the consciousness of his contemporaries (see: [Цыпин: 27]).

Finally, the third layer of meaning in the poem is connected to Samoilov's other works. In 1979, Samoilov finished an article dedicated to Pasternak and entitled "The Second-to-last Genius", in which the description of the older poet's reading of verses not only corresponds with visual imagery, but builds itself on an entire series of images that coincide with the description of Richter's playing in the poem of 1980:

"It seems that only in Russia do poets know how to read verses from the stage. Pasternak in black, looking like a musician, sang out verses through his nose. His reading was amazing. His jutting *lips fully and sculpturally outlined the sound*. And that rare *visibility of sound* of Pasternak's verses happened. Probably this is how those exquisite horses, the houyhnhnms of Jonathan Swift's 'Gulliver's Travels', would read poetry" <italics here and hereafter mine. — L. P.> [Ca-

<sup>3</sup> "And the multitudes went. And there was melodious thunder. / And god was the man's twin. / Thus Skryabin I saw at the piano" [Бальмонт: 422].

<sup>4</sup> They lugged the piano up / above the expanse of the sea of the city, / Like a tablet with commandments / on a stone plateau. / The resident of the sixth floor / Looked at the earth from the balcony, / As if he held it in his hands / and ruled it by law.

мойлов 2000: 318]. Compare to “Richter”: “The hands of Richter / Exquisite, quick and strong, / Like galloping horses”; “He makes one look at music, / To guess at its portents / In face, figure, mimicry, and gesture”; “Hark to the face of Richter, / to the hands of the contemplative horseman, / Guide to the horses carved from sound” [Самойлов 2006: 287].

In this case one can speak of the direct subcontext of “Richter” in Samoilo-  
lov’s article about Pasternak. Clearly, in this poem, in addition to a portrait of  
a great musician that by all appearances can be traced back mainly to Neuhaus’  
and other contemporary musicians’ descriptions of Richter, there are grounds  
for seeing a portrait also of Pasternak. Samoilov had a complicated relationship  
with the poet, which gradually changed after the death of the author of “Doctor  
Zhivago” in the direction of unequivocal acceptance and admiration. So, for  
example, in Samoilov’s work of the 1970s and 1980s Pasternak became a sym-  
bol of “the exalted”, freed from the worldliness of art. In “The Second-to-last  
Genius”, in explaining to the reader why “Doctor Zhivago” did not make the  
right impression on Pasternak’s contemporaries when it came out, Samoilov  
writes: “At that time ‘Doctor Zhivago’ was incomprehensible to both readers  
and authorities. It’s possible that the Nobel Prize and all that past hullabaloo  
surrounding it, having hastened Pasternak’s death, knocked down and ob-  
scured the true meaning of the novel. The book attracted attention to all the  
hype raised around it. And at that time, I recall, few people liked it... At that  
time we thought about morality on a political level. That’s why Solzhenytsyn’s  
novels were closer and crowded out Pasternak’s wonderful novel” [Самой-  
лов 2000: 318].

In his later poetry also Samoilov mused upon possible perceptions of his  
poetry and the creative works of today’s generation of poets “without hulla-  
baloo” (that is, outside political, ideological, and literary arguments): «Пусть  
нас увидят без возни, / Без козней, розни и насады, / Тогда и скажется:  
“Они — Из поздней пушкинской плеяды”. / Я нас возвысить не хочу. /  
Мы — послушники ясновидца... / Пока в России Пушкин длится, / Мете-  
лям не задуть свечу»<sup>5</sup>, (1978) [Самойлов 2006]. In the 1970s and subse-  
quently, in the eyes of Samoilov, Pasternak became that “high” artist that man-  
aged to free himself, while still alive, from the political pressure of the times,  
accepting all that happens as historical fact: “It <“Doctor Zhivago”. — L. P.>  
discusses not that which would have been, if nothing had been, but the neces-

<sup>5</sup> “Let them see us without hullabaloo, / without intrigue, hostility and strife, / Then it will be said,  
‘They are of the latter pleiad of Pushkin’. / I don’t want to elevate us. / We are novices of that  
seer... / While Pushkin prevails in Russia, / The blizzard can’t extinguish the candle”.

sity of understanding one's time. And without judging that time (who has the right to do so!) to live fully and with dignity, that is, to be 'the music in the ice'" [Самойлов 2000: 319].

It is obvious that Svyatoslav Richter (the student of Boris Pasternak's close friend, Heinrich Neuhaus) in Samoilov's mind became a sort of alter ego to Pasternak, not only because in his art he achieved that hypostasis of the poet, which Pasternak had consciously rejected in his early youth (as we know, Pasternak consequentially rejected pianism and composition), but also because Richter's performing, artistic character was close to Pasternak's character as Samoilov understood it. As Richter's many colleagues and contemporaries bore witness, he successfully didn't notice or ignored the political regime: "With his back completely turned to politics, being always outside the regime, outside authority, he ingeniously shielded himself from it;" "When he decided something needed to be done, Slava did it. He had no fear before the regime. He simply stood with his back to it" [Горностяева]. In this way Richter's attitude toward the regime became, from his contemporaries' point of view, one of the manifestations of his freedom from "worldliness". It is just such a position that Samoilov later dreams for Pasternak, that spokesman for "high art", free of worldliness, although Samoilov understands that, at least for him, this was unattainable during his lifetime. For just this reason Samoilov partially identifies himself with the collective "we" that profanes and trivializes music.

Now let's turn to the poem's translation by the esteemed Estonian novelist Jaan Kross, who was bound by friendship to Samoilov for many years. In the bilingual collection "Bottomless Moments", published in Tallinn in 1990<sup>6</sup>, the poem "Richter", from the point of view of the original author and the translator, is representative of the extremely important theme of (artistic) culture that, first and foremost, unites two poets of different nationalities. The poem is written in blanc iambs (rhymes are found only in two places); this peculiarity of the metric structure allows Jaan Kross to translate most of the verses very close to the original, frequently not even changing the order of the words in a line ("Käed on Richterial / nii kaunid, väledad ja tugevad"; "Sa teda nägemata kaotad palju / nii meisterlikkuses kui vaimuhoos" [Самойлов, Кросс: 39]). Compositionally, the poem may be divided into two unequal parts. In the first part, Samoilov's lyrical hero shares with the reader his impressions of the visual appearance of the great pianist, his relationship to music, and contrasts Richter with modern audiophiles (14 lines). The conversational tone of this part ap-

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the collection's structure and other translations of Samoilov by Jaan Kross see: [Степанищева: 2010; Степанищева: 2011].

pears also in the fragmentary syntax (14 lines arranged within seven complete sentences) and enjambment (the poem's rhythmic divisions often do not correspond to the syntactic divisions). In the second part (10 lines) there are only three sentences, and the poetic tone shifts from fragmentary to more fluid and melodic. Here the visual impressions of Richter's playing become concrete; in the eyes of the author, the performer is associated with the mythological figure of Helios the sun god. The piano also undergoes metamorphosis and becomes the black, singing swan of Apollo. In this way the performer (Helios, seated on the chariot and driving the horses that are Richter's hands) is distanced from his own performance and becomes a listener. In this case the poem, it seems, reflects the opinion, widespread among Richter's contemporaries and undoubtedly known to Samoilov, about the "artistic objectivity" or "photographic reliability" of Richter's performance art. The pianist himself believed that the performer must fully submit himself to the composer being performed and maximally reduce his own individuality.

This second part underwent substantial changes in translation to Estonian. Kross strove to preserve Samoilov's contrast of the two parts of the poem at the level of rhythm and syntax (the second part of the poem as described above also consists of three sentences in translation). Nonetheless, the enjambment here is nearly as frequent as in the first part of the poem (compare, for example: «Сам Гелиос внимает, как поет, / Крыло откинув, / черный лебедь Аполлона» and "jäab Helioski kuulama, / kui laulab / Apollo / mustatiivuline luik" [Самойлов, Кросс: 43]). However, the most serious change occurs on the lexical-semantic level of the translation. First, from the translator's point of view, the performer bends the music being performed to his own will, literally, "makes it docile in nature and responsive to the hands of a quiet rider": "ja teeb ta ülevaks ja luulekaks/ ja enda loomusele kuulekaks/ ning altiks vaikse sõitja kätele, / ja sõitjale, kes rihmab hobuseid, / mis helist voolitud..." [Ibid: 39–43], at the moment when for Samoilov music becomes an objective fact, and the hands of the pianist are simply a tool, an instrument for the objectification of music, for returning it to *music*. Given this condition, the Helios in translation is not a personification of the pianist listening to his own playing, but becomes an additional character listening to the playing of "the rider".

The changes in the translation noted above can likely be explained by the fact that Jaan Kross did not reconstruct the intertextual space within which Samoilov composed his poem. Nonetheless, a range of important ideas in this poem were successfully transferred. Above all, the translation depicts an artist to whom is opened the freedom of handling materials. In contrast to an artist of the word, such freedom is always (independent of time) open to a great musi-

cian. This idea is emphasized by Jaan Kross in his translation, which, while changing the main idea of the original author, nevertheless closely preserves the aesthetic characteristics of late Samoilov.

## Works Cited

Бальмонт: *Бальмонт К.* Стихотворения. Л., 1969.

Гаккель: *Гаккель Л.* Пианистический Ленинград // URL: <http://www.sviatoslavrichter.ru/articles.php?show=51>.

Горностаева: *Горностаева В.* Само имя его символично // URL: <http://www.sviatoslavrichter.ru/articles.php?show=72>.

Кац: *Кац Б. А.* Пробужденный музыкой // «Раскат импровизаций...». Музыка в творчестве, судьбе и в доме Бориса Пастернака / Сост., вступит. ст. и коммент. Б. А. Каца. Л., 1991.

Нейгауз: *Нейгауз Г. Г.* Святослав Рихтер // Размышления, воспоминания, дневники. Избранные статьи. Письма к родителям. М., 1983. Изд. 2-е.

Немзер: *Немзер А.* Лирика Давида Самойлова // Самойлов Давид. Стихотворения. СПб., 2006.

Примечания: *Немзер А. С., Тумаркин В. И.* Примечания // Самойлов Давид. Стихотворения. СПб., 2006.

Пастернак: *Пастернак Б.* Стихотворения и поэмы. Л., 1990.

Самойлов 2000: *Самойлов Д.* Перебирая наши даты. Мой 20 век. СПб., 2000.

Самойлов 2006: *Самойлов Д.* Стихотворения. СПб., 2006.

Самойлов, Кросс: *Самойлов Д., Кросс Я.* Põhjatud silmapilgud / Бездонные мгновенья. Таллинн, 1990.

Сташенко: *Сташенко Т.* Полисемантизм образов в книге стихов Д. Самойлова «Улица Тооминга» // Лотмановский сборник 4. Материалы Лотмановского конгресса в Тарту. Москва (в печати).

Степанищева 2010: *Степанищева Т.* Стихотворение Давида Самойлова «Дом-музей» в переводе Яана Кросса (Из сборника «Бездонные мгновения») // Блоковский сборник XVIII. Россия и Эстония в XX веке: диалог культур. Тарту, 2010.

Степанищева 2011: *Степанищева Т.* «И ему показалась Россия...». Баллада Д. Самойлова и ее перевод Я. Кросса // Humaniora: Litterae Russicae. Studia Russica Helsingiensia et Tartuensia. Мифология культурного пространства. Сб. к 80-летию Сергея Геннадиевича Исакова. Тарту, 2011.

Цыпин: *Цыпин Г. М.* Святослав Рихтер. Творческий портрет. М., 1987.