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BALAKIREV'S "THE LARK": INTERPRETATION AND PERFORMANCE

Though less well known than his virtuoso showpiece *Islamey*, Mily Bala-kirev's skilful arrangement of Glinka's song "The Lark" appears periodically on piano recital programmes. With its cadenzas and roulades, it too can be treated as something of a showpiece, yet such treatment presents a rather one-sided view of this song-like piece, "song-like" being the operative epithet. The present essay thus takes this composition as a case-study to demonstrate how a multi-layered hermeneutic understanding of a work can beneficially impact on performance.

FROM SONG TO PIANO PIECE

Glinka's song "Жаворонок" ("The Lark", text by Nestor Vasil'yevich Kukol'nik) was composed in 1840, appearing as No. 10 in his song cycle *Прощание с Санкт-Петербургом* (*A Farewell to St Petersburg*) and was subsequently arranged for solo piano by Balakirev in 1864. Given this history, the first layer of signification to examine is the work's status as an arrangement: it stands in for something else and is thus a representation of it. Paul Thom (2007) regards this as involving a "three-term relation" (xxii) between the object (in this case the original song by Glinka), its representing vehicle (the song's arrangement) and the human agency (Balakirev). He also stresses that, where human agency is concerned, the object is not "just a thing" but "an intentional object" as "construed by the agent" (xxii), adding that, in the act

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of representation, there is likely to be a model which "the agent is emulating" (xxii). In the case of arrangements, Thom identifies these models as transcription (including paraphrase), variation and realisation.

So where might Balakirev's "The Lark" fit into these categorisations? Although variation techniques are used by the composer, the arrangement is not a set of variations, nor is it a realisation, which according to Thom is essentially performative and "involves a capacity to depart from a planned reading, adding decorations, flourishes, cadenzas, or other departures from the score" (xix). So that leaves either transcription or paraphrase. Although Thom discusses paraphrase under the heading of transcription, he differentiates between the two, stating that a transcription adapts a work "to a medium for which it was not originally devised" (xvi), tracking "the [original] material's content bar by bar" (xvii) whereas paraphrases "adopt a looser approach … taking bits from here and there … mixing them up, and linking them by novel transitions" (xvii).

In a letter to his publisher Jurgenson in 1900, Balakirev described his arrangement as a "plain and entirely uncomplicated arrangement of Glinka's beloved melody" (Bitzan 2021, iii). However, the arrangement does not track Glinka's song bar-by-bar, although it does follow its broad scheme of: introduction–verse 1–interlude–verse 2–conclusion. Where Glinka uses the same material for his introduction, interlude and conclusion, Balakirev never repeats anything note-for-note and the concluding section is in the nature of

Example 1. Glinka, "The Lark", bars 1–2, the lark-song motive

a rhapsodic fantasy on the song's themes. Glinka only uses a "lark-song" motive in the introduction, interlude and conclusion (example 1), whereas Balakirev, to an extent, integrates it into the musical discourse. Nevertheless, he follows Glinka's general scheme far more closely than does, say, Liszt in his paraphrases which really do take "bits from here and there"—admittedly

a far more likely procedure when the paraphrase relates to an entire opera (for example *Don Giovanni*). To describe the Glinka-Balakirev piece as a paraphrase does not seem quite right, so maybe the best term to use would be "reworking".[1]

Semiotically speaking, a reworking (likewise a paraphrase) is indexical because as semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce ([1911] 1988) has it: "*Indeces* … represent their objects independently of any resemblance to them, only by virtue of real connections to them" (461). On the other hand, according to Thom's definition, transcriptions are iconic in their relationship to their objects because "they resemble them in themselves" (461). Peirce's categories of icon, index and symbol were of course originally applied to the perception of phenomena in general, not specifically to music, but within music signification they have become common parlance, and, in the present case, their transfer seems particularly pertinent.

STRUCTURAL SIGNIFIERS

So how does Balakirev's reworking differ from the song in terms of structure? The song's very simple layout, following a pattern found in Schubert's strophic songs such as *An Sylvia*, is indicated above. Balakirev, whilst broadly following a two-verse pattern, expands both the introductory and concluding material, bringing to mind Kofi Agawu's (1991, 2009) beginning-middle-end paradigm,[2] a paradigm that has almost universal application in that it applies to all time-framed human experiences and activities. This division also suggests the label "ternary", but, as the latter is usually associated with an A-B-A structure linked to themes and keys, a scheme which does not apply in the present case, the beginning-middle-end description seems more accurate. Using this, the most obvious way to sectionalise "The Lark" is to identify bars 1–12 (an introductory mixture of melodic fragments and lark-song motives) as the "beginning", bars 13–54 (the song's melody presented twice, with the second iteration decorated and elaborated) as the "middle",

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[1] Olga Askhatova (2019) describes Balakirev's arrangement both as a transcription and a rhapsody bespeaking a rather looser approach to terminology than Thom's (2007) or the one adopted here.

[2] A paradigm that can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics* (350 BCE) in which the author defines tragedy as something that is "complete and whole", and a whole as something "which has a beginning, a middle and an end" (sec. 7).

and bars 55–70 (decorated melodic fragments leading to a major key coda) as the "end" (table 1).

Table 1. Beginning-Middle-End in "The Lark" (version 1)

Beginning (bars 1–12)	Middle (bars 13–54)	End (bars 55–70)

However, this does not take into account Balakirev's strategically placed cadenzas. If one regards the two big ones as structural signposts, then the beginning section consists of two parts: the introduction, featuring fragments of the melody (A) separated by the lark-song motive (B), followed by the first full iteration of A, ending with the first cadenza. The middle section includes the elaborated presentation of A (with allusions to B) and ends with the second cadenza. The ending may also be divided into two parts, Part 1 consisting of melodic fragments and ending with a *fioriture* passage, Part 2 being the major-mode coda based on B. This division, which seems more connected to what is heard in performance, is shown below and includes more detail (table 2).

Table 2. Beginning-Middle-End in "The Lark" (version 2), plus details

Beginning	Middle	End
Part 1: Introduction based on melodic fragments of A + lark-song motive (B) (bars 1–12)	Variation-elaboration of A + B (bars 34–53)	Part 1: Fantasy on A (bars 55–63) Brief cadenza (*fioriture*) (bar 64 extended)
Part 2: Full melody (A) (bars 13–33) Cadenza (bar 33 extended)	Cadenza (bar 54 extended)	Part 2: Coda on B (bars 65–70)

The table could usefully be expanded a little to show the further subdivisions more clearly and also to indicate how the key scheme interacts with the sections (table 3).

Table 3. Beginning-Middle-End in "The Lark" with subdivisions and keys[3]

Beginning		Middle	End	
Part 1: Introduction based on song melody (A) + lark-song motif (B) (bars 1–12)	Part 2: Theme A (bars 13–33)	Variation-elaboration of A + B (bars 34–53)	Part 1: Fantasy on A (bars 55–63)	Part 2: Coda, on B (bars 65–70)
	Cadenza (bar 33, extended)	Cadenza (bar 54 extended)	Brief cadenza (*fioriture*), (bar 64, extended)	
Key: B-flat minor; passing chromatic inflections in bar 7	Key: B-flat minor; D-flat major and G-flat major in passing; E-flat minor inflection	Key: B-flat minor; D-flat major and G-flat major in passing; passing chromatic inflections in bars 50–51	Key: D-flat mixolydian; B-flat minor	Key: B-flat major

The original key for Glinka's song was E minor, providing a pitch range (E4 to F5) that is comfortable for most voice types. Balakirev significantly transposes the music to one of his favourite keys, B-flat minor[4]—also the home key of, for example, *Islamey* and the 1905 sonata. In this, he is considerate to the pianist: the music would lie less comfortably under the executant's fingers in E minor than it does in B-flat minor. However, having decided on this key, the music rarely leaves home (as in the original). There are chromatic inflections here and there and brief visits to D-flat major (bars 20–21, 40–41), G-flat major (bars 22–25 and 42–43) and D-flat mixolydian (bars 55–60), but the B-flat minor (major in the coda) rooting is apparent throughout, giving added markedness to the few departures.

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[3] Olga Astakhova (2019) uses a "chronotopic" analysis to identify an alternative (though not dissimilar) formal dissection. Her method is derived from Mikhael Bakhtin, who developed the idea of a time–space interdependency in literature. He regarded the chronotope as "a formally constitutive category of literature" (84).

[4] According to Edward Garden (1967), B-flat minor and D major were keys that came to "almost haunt" (22) Balakirev.

DYNAMIC SIGNIFIERS

In a chapter on Brahms's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel* op. 24, John Rink abstracts the dynamic and expressive markings of the variations,[5] revealing an increasing "dynamic intensity" in the later variations "which sweep in an accelerando of momentum towards the climactic fugue" (1999, 87). By similarly extracting the dynamic markings from the score of "The Lark"—and Balakirev provides very few expressive indications other than dynamics—one can see a sonic shape to the music (table 4), signifying the underlying structure. It will be seen that the *forte* passages mostly occur in and between the first and second cadenzas making the music evenly spaced in terms of its sonic intensity. This is of primary concern to the performer (and listener) and is something I will be revisiting later when I consider the music in performance.

Table 4. Dynamic plan of "The Lark"[6]

Beginning		Middle	End	
Part 1: *pp* (*mf* in bars 5–6)	Part 2: *P* Cadenza: *f*, *p, pp, sf, f, pp*	*pp* (? = no specific indication, but previous *pp* not amended) *f, p, f* cadenza: (*f*), *pp*	Part 1: *pp* (? = no specific indication, but previous *pp* not amended) *f* (very briefly), *pp*	Part 2: *pp, ppp, pppp*

TOPICAL SIGNIFIERS

Márta Grabócz has constructed an insightful analysis of Liszt's Sonata in B minor, in which she links topical allusions to structural subdivisions, thereby adding a layer of narrativity to a formal and dynamic analysis. The terms Grábocz uses, "semantic isotopy", "semes" and "classemes", derive from the French school of semiotics the first of which implies something more

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[5] Julian Littlewood presents a similar dynamic abstraction in an analysis of the same work (2004, 93).

[6] Godowsky's edition (1923) shows some minor differences. See footnote 8 for editions consulted.

in the nature of a topical field but the latter two of which approximate to topics in their more standard usage. Her method is particularly suited to a long romantic work such as the Liszt sonata, but a similar strategy is also illuminating in the present case, despite its much more modest proportions. During its 5-to-6-minute span, the music references a number of topics and these are shown in table 5 as they relate to the beginning-middle-end model.

Table 5. Topics in "The Lark"

Beginning		Middle	End	
Part 1: Recitative Lark-song	Part 2: Singing style Cadenza: brilliant style	Elaborated singing style (Lark-song embedded) Bravura style Cadenza: brilliant style	Part 1: Recitative Brief cadenza: *fioriture*	Part 2: Lark-song

Most of the topics listed in table 5 are familiar from other contexts, but a few demand further explanation. "Lark-song" is not a recognised Romantic topic but its topical status falls under the more general label of birdsong (a style rather than a type), which is by no means new. There is a long tradition of birdsong in music (for example, Couperin's *Le Rossignol en amour* or Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony) so there is a clear historical referentiality present. "Lark-song" could therefore be understood as a token of the type "birdsong". Raymond Monelle suggests that "the musical imitation of a cuckoo is the most literal icon of all" (2000, 15) which, according to the author's own criteria, does not in itself permit topical status. However, he goes on to state that "if it is culturally prescribed that the imitation of a cuckoo by an orchestral instrument *inevitably signifies the heralding of spring*, then this icon has been transformed into a topic" (17). This is only Monelle's take on the matter, but the lark-song can be understood as more than just simple mimesis. Its ornithological function is to attract a mate (RSPB n.d.) and if one examines Kukol'nik's text, it is apparent that the lark's song is also symbolic of the poet's song to his beloved: "Лейся ж, песенка моя, Песнь надежды сладкой…. Кто-то вспомнит про меня И вздохнёт украдкой" (Pour, then, my little song, Song of sweet hope…. Someone will remember me And will

sigh in secret).[7] The lark-song motive can therefore also be interpreted as a symbol of hope and longing, enriching its status as a topical token. This two-layered interpretation is also supported by the motive's rising, then falling tail-piece (hope followed by doubt?) and, in Balakirev's reworking, its generally rising iterations (which also suggest a rising, sky-bound lark) (example 2).

Example 2. Glinka-Balakirev, "The Lark", bars 1–8[8]

Another topic that needs some explanation is the elaborated singing style. The middle section (example 3) features complex scale passages played by the right hand, matching Leonard Ratner's definition of the brilliant style: "rapid passages for virtuoso display or intense feeling" (1980, 19).

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[7] Translation by kind permission of Simon Nicholls.

[8] Editions consulted: Bayley and Ferguson, ed. Archibald Martin Henderson (1920); Art Publication Society USA, ed. Leopold Godowsky (1923); Könemann Music Budapest, ed. Konstantin Titarenko (1997); G. Henle Verlag, ed. Wendelin Bitzan (2021). Small differences between these editions (for example, pedal markings in the Henderson edition) do not impact on the current discussion.
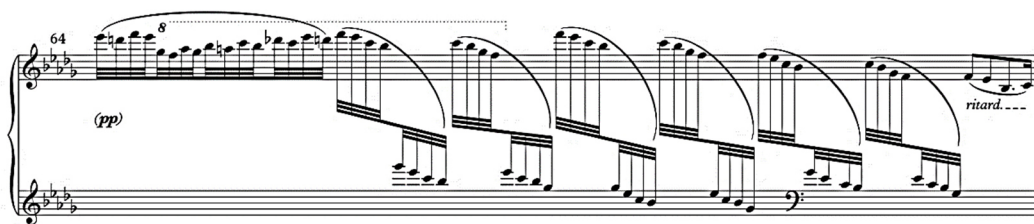
Example 3. Glinka-Balakirev, "The Lark", bars 34–37

The section, starting at bar 34, is also headed "*brillante*" by the composer. However, this is only half the story because the passagework surrounds the song's melody, thus also invoking the singing style, and Balakirev, in addition to "*brillante*", instructs "*la melodia ben marcato*". We thus have two topics at play simultaneously resulting in a hybrid which I am calling "elaborated singing style". Roman Ivanovich suggests that for the 18th-century the brilliant style and the singing style were "simply markers of a gross binary opposition" (2014, 331). It is true that in the music of Mozart and Haydn the two styles are probably never actually combined, but in the nineteenth century, with both singing and brilliant styles having broadened considerably in scope, the opposition tends to dissolve and the elaborated singing topic is not uncommon in Romantic piano literature. It can be

found in, for example, many of Liszt's vocal arrangements such as the *Rigoletto* paraphrase or his transcription of Schubert's *Ave Maria.* Michael Klein has written of "an economy of the musical sign" (2005, 56) citing the finale of Schubert's Sonata in C minor D958 as an instance of a musical sign (6/8 metre, fast tempo, iambic rhythms, constant triplets) which can yield two topical interpretations: horse and tarantella. Whilst the referentiality of the Balakirev passage is double-layered, it presents a reverse pattern in that it does not represent an economy of sign, more a duplicity which when taken together, meld into a single topic.

The *fioriture* style, applied above to the third cadenza, is another topical reference that I have not found named elsewhere. Whereas the first two cadenzas (bars 43 and 54), with their predominantly forte dynamic, sweeping up (and down) the keyboard, clearly adopt a brilliant style, the third one in bar 64 (which separates the two parts of "The Lark" end section) is marked *pp* and is of a gossamer lightness for which *fioriture* seems a better description (example 4). The French word means 'flourish' and is defined as: "Note ou groupe de notes, improvisées ou écrites, insérées dans une mélodie vocale ou instrumentale pour l'embellir" (Note or group of notes, improvised or written, inserted into a vocal or instrumental melody to embellish it).[9] There is certainly an improvisatory character to the passage in question and, intertextually, similar passages of *fioriture* may be found in Chopin (e.g., Nocturne in D-flat Op. 27/2, bars 51–52, Piano Concerto in E minor Op. 11, 2nd movement, bars 98–100) and Liszt (e.g., "St. Francois d'Assise: 'La predication aux oiseaux'" (No. 2 of *Deux légendes*), bars 45–48 and Sonata in B minor, bars 200–204).

Example 4. Glinka-Balakirev, "The Lark", bar 64, *fioriture* style

[9] *Larousse* (online ed.), s.v. "fioriture". Accessed July 15, 2023.

SIGNIFICATION IN PERFORMANCE

So how far can the above considerations be signified by a performance? Would not the beginning-middle-end plan hold good however the music is played, given that it was composed this way and is therefore to a great extent given? This is undoubtedly true, but there are ways in which the design can be projected to greater effect if the performer does more than merely allow the music to speak for itself.

As suggested above, the musical scheme may be aided in performance by means of projecting the rises and falls (the "shape") of the music, which are clearly encoded in the dynamic markings. As noted, the loudest points occur between the beginning section (Part 2) and the middle section, and between the middle section and the end section (Part 1). Grafted onto the now familiar structural table, the dynamic table, very broadly speaking, shows this relationship (table 6):

Table 6. Graph showing the relationship of the scored dynamics in "The Lark"
to the beginning-middle-end design
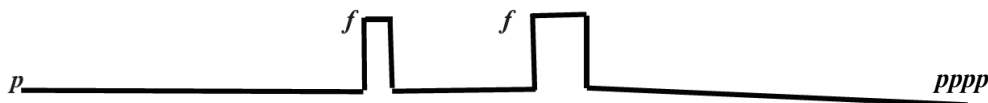
Beginning (Part 1)	Beginning (Part 2)	Middle	End (Part 1)	End (Part 2)

One occasionally hears performances in which the entire middle section is played more-or-less forte and brilliantly[10] which, whilst not actually obscuring the design, rebalances it quite radically, giving the overall shape a much more middle-weighted feel. The two dynamic peaks broadly coincide with the two big cadenzas and if this is represented in performance, the tripartite structure is subtly highlighted rather than hammered home as it would be if there were no dynamic trough between the two peaks.

Attention to topics can also interface with structural aspects. As noted above, the beginning and end sections feature recitative-like passages. At the opening Balakirev writes "quasi recitativo" so the topical referent is spelled out. He does not write this at bar 55 where Part 1 of the end section commences but the instructions "poco meno mosso" and "*espressivo*" along with the

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[10] For example, Mikhael Pletnev, live in Moscow 1983.

melodic fragmentation, arpeggiated harmonies and, later, trills, suggest a freer, quasi recitativo approach.

Given that recitative is primarily a vocal style, how might "quasi recitativo" be interpreted in the context of a solo piano piece? According to theoretician Heinrich Koch's definitions (1802), recitative had the following characteristics:

> 1. It has no fixed metre
> 2. It has no symmetrical melodic pattern
> 3. It is syllabic and has no melodic elaboration
> 4. It has no main key
>
> (Ratner 1980, 316)

Of course, Koch was writing about vocal recitative, not an instrumental counterpart, and he was also referencing pre-Romantic practice, thus none of the above applies directly in the case of the Glinka-Balakirev piece. So perhaps it is up to the performer to realise at least one of the recitative-like characteristics listed by Koch: no fixed metre. Some of the information the performer needs is scored (see example 2 above). For instance, the pause marks in bars 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12 can be substantial in length, especially the ones over the rests. By thus permitting silence to divide the phrases, Koch's second parameter of "no symmetrical melodic pattern" may additionally be evidenced. But it is also appropriate to inflect the melodic phrases themselves with rubato, so that they do not sound as if they are straight-jacketed by a 4/4 metre. Although there are no pauses indicated in Part 1 of the end section starting at bar 55, again freedom of timing can be applied and, if the trills in bars 61–63 are executed to a quickening pulse (as indicated in the score), then again, the metrical framework is loosened. If Part 2 of the end (the coda) and Part 2 of the beginning (A unadorned) are played, as the music seems to require, more-or-less "straight" then the design of the music, described earlier in terms of theoretical structure, may be audibly reified in performance.

The structural aspect can also be further clarified if the brilliant style topic is reserved for the two main cadenzas which, as has been noted, act as structural indicators. According to Ivanovitch, the brilliant style favours "high registers over low, execution over expression, the instrumental over the vocal … the theatrical over the intimate … the difficult over the easy" (333)—tendencies which are clearly apparent in the two cadenza passages but are rarely found elsewhere, although the related bravura topic prepares the way for the second cadenza. In these cases, the pianist, whilst adopting a legato

touch for the singing-style passages found especially in Part 2 of the beginning section, for the cadenzas, may wish to engage what Tobias Matthay called "Arm-vibration touch" in which the tone is "produced by individually-timed *exertions of the finger and hand …* and the arm itself [is] sympathetically driven *into vibration* by reaction from these individual and momentary impulses of the finger-and-hand against and with the keys" (27). In plainer language, the primary attention is on clear, precise, down-oriented finger articulation rather than on "singing" tone (or, as in the middle section, a hybrid of both).

As noted above, a passage of bravura style (example 5) leads into the second cadenza (forming part of the second dynamic peak) and here, the player needs to use more bodily motion than elsewhere, keeping the arms loose and engaging a "rounded, sonorous" tone with a "relaxed, confident travel from note to note" (McLachlan 2014, 99). Though powerful and climactic, the effect still needs to retain something of the melody's cantabile character, albeit with intensified emotion. Which brings us back to the music's first layer of signification: its status as a song transcription.

Example 5. Glinka-Balakirev, "The Lark", bars 50–53

Despite Stephen Davies's observation that when one performs a transcription (or, as here, a reworking), one is not simultaneously performing the parent work (179), it is nonetheless worth remembering that the singing style in the piano writing is indexical of the human voice in the original, and as such, cantabile tone is apposite. So when the song's vocal melody (A) is given in its first unadorned iteration, the pianist needs to be aware of the singing style as it has been applied to Romantic music. Gyorgy Sandor writes that "singing

tone is produced when the cushioning activities of the joints slow down the descending arm speed, thus making it possible for only a portion of the speed and weight to be transferred to the keys.… This partial weight of the arm produces an intense warm singing tone" (1980, 181). Whilst this physical action may produce an appropriate touch, in and of itself, it cannot produce the pianistic equivalent of singing. Thus, cantabile requires a careful combination of touch, balance, pedalling and phrasing. In bars 13–32 the right hand needs to be judiciously balanced with the left-hand chordal accompaniment, the pedalling must be harmonically alert, and the natural rise and fall of the phrases, as may be heard in an expert vocal performance such as Galina Vishnevskaya's (1976), can be mimicked in the pianist's dynamic minutiae.

A performer's ability to appreciate the various layers of signification discussed above—song transcription, beginning-middle-end, dynamic structure, topical structure and character—can lead to a well-informed, well balanced and expressive interpretation, all of which presuppose the necessary technique on the part of the performer. Without this, as with a wingless lark, no performance can take flight.

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Summary

Following on from work carried out by Márta Grabócz, John Irving, Julian Hellaby and others, this article examines ways in which a piece of music can signify in terms of its structure, its dynamic and expressive trajectory and its topical content, and shows how a grasp of these aspects can be a valuable tool for the performer. Focusing on Balakirev's arrangement of Glinka's song "The Lark", a particular beginning-middle-end design (Agawu 1991, 2009) is identified and shown to support and interact with dynamic, expressive and topical features. Recommendations for performance are drawn from these hermeneutic observations.

Keywords: interpretation; reworking; performance; topics; arrangements