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PLAY OF SIGNS IN *ANTENNAE* BY ALEKSANDRA VREBALOV¹

Abstract: During a Creative Fusion residency at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2018, composer Aleksandra Vrebalov was inspired by the Byzantine icon the *Virgin Eleousa* and shortly after composed the piece *Antennae*. This paper presents the semantic relationship between the icon and various signs which are selected and combined to structure the musical piece. It is argued the composer uses signs based on their acoustic qualities and communicational potential, and embraces the postmodern technique of quotation to depict the religious doctrine of Love and Suffering, Life and Death, or more generally speaking, Connection and Disconnection as the title itself suggests.

Keywords: Byzantine chant, *Virgin Eleousa*, sign, ison, quotation, bells, organs, trumpets, Morse code.

“Of the world as it exists, it is not possible to be enough afraid”.² This thought of Adorno cannot more accurately describe the situation in which the world found itself from 2020 onwards, a world where artists in particular struggle to find ways to adapt their *modus vivendi* to the new conditions of creation and performance. In this “new normal”, the unusual premiere of the work

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² Cited in Jonathon Green, *International Dictionary of International Quotations*, New York, Morrow, 1982, 1.

Antennae by Serbian-American composer Aleksandra Vrebalov (Александра Вребалов) came to fruition.³ Originally conceived of as a site-specific sound experience featuring members of the Serbian Orthodox Kovilj Monastery choir, 60 local singers, four trumpets, two organs, and bells, according to the composer, *Antennae* was intended to be “a human tuning fork through which we align and for a moment sustain a common frequency.”⁴ The work was to have its world premiere on March 27, 2020, but the event had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a response, Vrebalov created an adaptation and arrangement of a short fragment of the piece for the Kronos Quartet and the Monk Hierotheos of the Kovilj Monastery that was realized on the Internet.⁵ A year after, on May 7, 2021 *Antennae* was performed in the integral version for the first time at the Catholic Church in Novi Sad. The concert was streamed on radio and the Internet, and the work had its world premiere in this way.⁶

The unusual premiere is coupled with an interesting and beautiful story about the origin of this work. Namely, the piece was commissioned during the Creative Fusion residency of Vrebalov at the Cleveland Museum of Art⁷ in 2018. Inspired by the Museum’s 15th century icon attributed to the Greek artist Angelos Akotantos, Vrebalov composed the piece *Antennae*. The multiple meanings of the icon are thus semantically interrelated with a brilliant play of signs which are displayed throughout the piece.

Painted on a wood panel, this highly important Byzantine icon represents the Mother of God with the Infant Christ. It belongs to an iconographic type known as the *Virgin Eleousa* (Virgin of Tenderness), characterized by the cheeks of the mother and child touching, capturing an emotional and lov-

³ <https://www.aleksandravrebalov.com/>

⁴ Aleksandra Vrebalov cited from an interview with Tom Welsh, Director of Performing Arts for the Cleveland Museum of Art. <https://www.clevelandart.org/magazine/cleveland-art-marchapril-2020/aleksandra-vrebalov-antennae>

⁵ The fragment of the work “Antennae” was premiered on YouTube on April, 14 2020. It is performed by the Kronos Quartet and Monk Hierotheos. The video is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8ubNmfAhc>

⁶ The concert was premiered on YouTube on May, 7 2021. It is performed by The Choir of the Academy of Arts, Novi Sad Chamber Choir, Choir of monks from the Kovilj Monastery, String Quartet TAJJ, soloists on trumpets, organs, and bells. The conductor was Božidar Crnjanski. The video is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Q4EAYb5M28>

⁷ In partnership with the Cleveland Foundation.

ing moment. The icon signifies the Christian doctrine of the incarnation—the Christ Child born of human flesh who is destined to suffer and die for the sake of humankind. Its large size communicates this core doctrine in a deeply spiritual and powerful way, provoking the question of what the term “Antennae” in this context might possibly mean.



Figure 1: Icon of the Mother of God and the Infant Christ (Virgin Eleousa) 1425–50.
Angelos Akotantos (Cretan, active 1425–50).

The work features an unusual but carefully chosen instrumentation: 4 chanters (monks), mixed choir (with portable high pitched bells), 4 trumpets, 2 sets of tubular bells and 2 organs. It is divided into eight parts, according to the performing apparatus as follows: I (b. 1–96) 4 trumpets, choir, 2 organs; II (b. 97–153) monks, choir; III (b. 154–192) 4 trumpets, 2 organs; IV (b. 193–257) 4 trumpets, bells, choir, 2 organs; V (b. 258–323) monks, 4 trumpets, choir, bells, organs; VI (b. 324–385) 4 trumpet, bells, choir, 2 organs; VII (b. 386–464) monks, 4 trumpets, bells, choir, 2 organs; VIII (duration of a cou-

ple of minutes) choir, bells. The designation of “atrium score” in the subtitle refers to the specific architecture of the Museum where the piece should have primarily been performed. There, the sound would travel and mix, reflecting and resonating, and thus could be considered as a *Raumkunst*.⁸ In this respect, the beginning of the piece is imagined as a kind of procession where “very few bells and the ison on C are softly sounding while the audience/choir settle”⁹ as they move from the Galleries into the Atrium.¹⁰

The choir, performing the ison on tone C, is gradually joined by trumpets, followed by the organ, eventually achieving a common frequency in which the first part of the composition unfolds.¹¹ The procedure of layering is used, with the repetition of long pitches in the choir and melodic-rhythmic patterns in the organs and bells. Occasional pauses in the sections contribute to the vivid creation of the sound timbre network. Effective contrast is achieved by a combination of instruments, dynamic nuances, synchronization and imitation of layers, as well as by the minimalist procedures of permutation and repetition. If we take into consideration the reference of the signs displayed within the piece and the whole system of their relations, we discover a musical narrative with its deep semantic levels. Namely, the beginning of the work faithfully depicts the image of the Nativity of the Infant Jesus, then the “tuning” of the tone C¹² comes as no surprise for at least two reasons: the tone C can be understood as a “pure” (white tone) symbolizing the purity and innocence of the

⁸ German word for spatial art or spatial design. In this regard, the composer confirms her intention to “respond to the architecture” of the Museum: “The sound will be coming from all over the place, so as we move through the galleries there will always be something else to pay attention to.” <https://www.ideastream.org/news/composers-inspired-by-cleveland-museum-of-art>

⁹ Instructions on the first page of the score.

¹⁰ Before the audience is even aware of it, the work begins. In fact, the composer imagined the beginning of the piece as a common humming on the pitch C with an audience which joins in freely.

¹¹ The pitch changes for the first time after bar 66.

¹² Additionally, some technical aspects should be addressed. Specifically, trumpets are instruments in C and while the same tone in different octaves is entering the tessitura, or comfortable range of voices, it thus represents the most natural tone. The only exception might be the long and sustained pitch of C2 in the bass line at the very beginning of the piece (for 41 measure and throughout the entire second part) which is typically classified as extending the tessitura of the bass. The vocal range of the bass is normally defined as E2-E4, but categories of bass voices vary according to national style and classification system. Note: all pitches are marked in American standard pitch notation (ASPN).

new born soul, and acts as the “only” pitch, the only begotten Son of God.¹³ This interpretation is supported by the fact that the composer selects several elements characteristic of Christian Church musical practice. These include the *ison*, used throughout the piece, which originated from the tradition of Byzantine chanting, and is widespread within the Orthodox Church. Also, the use of *organs* references Western Christianity. These two signs, even from today’s perspective, have not experienced any diachronic change of meaning and are not, *ipso facto*, separated from their original meaning.

However, the treatment of the instruments is rather non-traditional. By putting the technical capacities of the instruments aside, the composer mainly focuses on their timbre and rhythmic characteristics as the central components of the sound construction. In this regard, when the organs introduce the familiar sound of Morse code (Example 1, b. 72), it is perceived as the transmission of a message about a great secret, i.e. “O Magnum Mysterium”.¹⁴ A few bars later, another sign appears in the form of the light pitch D5 in the soprano section (b. 84) after dwelling for some while in a rather low, alto register. This “light” is immediately accompanied by the captivating sound of bells (b. 87).¹⁵ This is yet another spiritual symbol, inseparable from the life

¹³ The phrase “only begotten Son” appears in John 3:16 and reads: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

¹⁴ The Latin text “O magnum mysterium” is a Gregorian chant from the fifth responsory for the Vigil on Christmas Day and is traditionally related to the Nativity of Jesus as a symbol of the mystery of the self-abasement of God in his Incarnation. Throughout history, many composers such as Tomas Luis da Victoria, Giovanni Gabrieli, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Morten Lauridsen and others have created choral pieces inspired by the Latin text.

Latin text

*O magnum mysterium,
et admirabile sacramentum,
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum,
iacentem in praesepio!
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera
meruerunt portare
Dominum Iesum Christum.
Alleluia!*

English translation

*O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the newborn Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear
the Lord, Jesus Christ.
Alleluia!*

¹⁵ It should be mentioned that another festive signifier is the sound of 4 trumpets. In Christian Eschatology, the first six trumpets are used to serve as a wake-up call to the sinners on Earth and as a call to repentance.

Example 1: A. Vrebalov, *Antennae*, b. 71–77.

path of an initiate, from spiritual birth to death.¹⁶ Indeed bells have multiple meanings, yet the most common are “a call to prayer” and the announcement of special church feast days – precisely what we have here. A melodic lift in the organ sections with an acceleration in all parts leads to the very moment

¹⁶ There are differences in the structure and sonority of Catholic and Orthodox bells, but there are also similarities when it comes to symbolism and use. In both churches, the bells are inseparable from the church and retain an important status throughout history. Bells are predominantly used in both Christian traditions for the Holy Liturgy – on Sundays and feast days, for the evening and morning service, and when the Bishop comes. These are solemn bells, and during those holidays and events the bells ring solemnly, e.g. the bells ring even when someone dies and then the sound of the bell is somber and indicates the farewell to the deceased in the cemetery, i.e. where they are to be buried. In the Catholic tradition, among other things, the bells could indicate time, reminding us of Jesus’s suffering and death (when they ring at 3 p.m.). They recall the historical event of the defense of Belgrade from the Turks (an order issued by Pope Callixtus III in 1456, stating that bells should be rung in all churches at noon in order to encourage the faithful to pray for victory over the Ottomans). Bells also remind us of the event of the incarnation of Jesus Christ in the Virgin Mary – the Annunciation. In the piece *Antennae*, the use of bells at the very beginning, as well as at the moment of “birth” is reminiscent of the very practice of using bells before and during the liturgy (during “We sing to Thee” – “Tebe pojem”).

Example 2: A. Vrebalov, *Antennae*, b. 87–91.

87 **accel.**
 no need to count, follow the gesture - slow to fast
 Tub. B. 1 *mf*
 Tub. B. 2 *mf* gestural, free
 S.
 A.
 T.
 B.
 Org. 1
 Org. 2 **accel.**

of Birth (Example 2, b. 91), immediately succeeded by the “prayer” of the monks. This part plays a prominent role; the melody resurfaces from the ison, bringing forth the beautiful old Byzantine chant the *Akathistos hymn of praise of the Most Holy Mother of God*¹⁷ which celebrates the divine motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Example 3).

Example 3: A. Vrebalov, *Antennae*, b. 97–107.

**PART TWO
 MONKS**
 97
 Monks
 CHOR hold ison, breathe freely

¹⁷ The Akathistos is the most beautiful hymn by which the Byzantine Church celebrates the divine motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary, solemnly proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. (cf. Byzantine Leaflet Series 1983, No. 27). It celebrates the Virgin's role in the mystery of the Incarnation.

Example 4: A. Vrebalov, *Antennae*, b. 183–186.

The musical score for Example 4, measures 183–186, features four trumpet parts (C Tpt. 1–4), Organ 1, and Organ 2. The trumpets play a melodic line with dynamics like *f* and *meno f*, and some parts are marked *gliss.*. Organ 2 has an *irregular rhythm* section. A performance instruction "(if impossible on one breath, repeat the f)" is present above the trumpet parts.

At this point, it is obvious the composer uses the whole acoustic potential of the material and seeks to reanimate it in a different context. In continuation of the work, we listen to the rhythmic-timbre dialogue between the trumpets and organs, which are 'passing' the Morse code back and forth (Ex. 4). The composer then introduces a new melodic fragment in the trumpets (b. 182) which irresistibly resembles neumes of Gregorian plain chant tradition¹⁸ (Ex. 4, 5). The same fragment is used in the fourth section in a predominantly choral and harmonic texture, thus creating a tender atmosphere. A very strong effect is achieved at the beginning of the fifth section with freely established rhythmic patterns and repetition in the choir. At the same time, the *ison* in the organ section is layered with familiar materials: bells, Byzantine chant, and the "Gregorian" melodic fragment, now transformed, shortened and occasionally sustained. During the next section, the aforementioned materials are increasingly juxtaposed, growing in density and obtaining a brutal 'orchestral' sound. The familiar trumpet fragment is rhythmically transformed and harmonically inflected, the *ison* becomes movable, and the Morse codes, bells and choral patterns all gradually lead to improvised noise – a "loud, and chaotic, wild"¹⁹ beheaded world (Ex. 6). These gestural and visual characteristics of the segment, with empty 'necks' and 'fallen heads', support the doctrine

¹⁸ Written without indication of rhythm in a free execution.

¹⁹ Indications in the score.

Example 5: A. Vrebalov, *Antennae*, b. 208–209.

of suffering.²⁰ Topically speaking, this *Sturm und Drang* could represent not only Jesus who suffers, but the suffering of all mankind as announced by the first tragic chord of c-minor (b. 43). The “prayer” provides final consolation and the piece ends in a state of hypnotic trance.²¹

The *Akathistos* chanted by the monks from the Kovilj Monastery in Serbia is the only quotation used in the piece, transposed from one context to become part of a new context. It almost goes without saying that based on the associative mechanism, this material as a signifier will always re-activate the idea of divinity. This means the “material becomes a crucial site of signification,”²² and directly signifies by evoking “prayer”. Clearly, the signification itself also depends on the ways in which the quotation is treated in those new contexts, i.e. new compositions. Interestingly enough, Vrebalov does not work *with* the material, but *around* it. In other words, the quotation is not treated

²⁰ It could be argued that the score surpasses the media of sound, but cannot be seen by the audience. The same situation can be observed in other works of Vrebalov. Cf. Ira Prodanov Krajišnik, Nataša Crnjanski “Beyond Zero: 1914–1918 – A Century after”, *New Sound*, 44, II/2014, 69–78; Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, “Musical Notation: The More or Less than Sound”, *New Sound*, 35, I/2010, 49.

²¹ The choir is repeating names accompanied by the deafening sound of bells.

²² Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, “The Nature of Post-Modern Classicality in European Music”, *New Sound*, 39, I/2012, 54.

Example 6: A. Vrebalov, *Antennae*, b. 379–385.

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 379 to 385. It features four Trumpets (C Tpt. 1-4), two Tubas (Tub. B. 1-2), a Choir, and two Organs (Org. 1-2). The score includes dynamic markings such as *ff* and *sub p*, and performance instructions like "AD LIB. loud and chaotic, wild, breathe when necessary" and "break into chaotic, disorganized noise, increase intensity for 4 measures". A section of the choir is labeled "name patterns" with the instruction "NAME PATTERNS END HERE".

AD LIB. loud and chaotic, wild, breathe when necessary

AD LIB. loud and chaotic, wild, breathe when necessary

AD LIB. loud and chaotic, wild, breathe when necessary

AD LIB. loud and chaotic, wild, breathe when necessary

name patterns

NAME PATTERNS END HERE

break into chaotic, disorganized noise, increase intensity for 4 measures

379

C Tpt. 1

C Tpt. 2

C Tpt. 3

C Tpt. 4

Tub. B. 1

Tub. B. 2

CHOIR

Org. 1

Org. 2

381

C Tpt. 1

C Tpt. 2

C Tpt. 3

C Tpt. 4

Tub. B. 1

Tub. B. 2

CHOIR

Org. 1

Org. 2

as a sample subjected to various processes of development or transformation, but is always used in original form and recognized as such, without losing its original identity. As previously mentioned, the *Akathistos* appears three times. At the first presentation, it sounds just as we would hear it in a church, in primary form consisting of a melody and *ison* (Example 3). We might observe this musical unfolding as objective, or in Tarasti's words, as "music of being". In the next two appearances, the sound environment changes. In the fifth section, the chant is juxtaposed to seemingly unrelated ideas displayed in the trumpets, bells and choir, while the organs coexist with the *ison*. The juxtaposition or "music of becoming" thus serves as anticipation and a step towards the upcoming chaos of the sixth section. Subsequently, in the seventh section, the chant is given harmonic accompaniment in the choir, bringing back the primary character of the musical unfolding. This postmodern poetic and compositional technique is characteristic of previous works by Vrebalov, creating an intertextual network in which the quotation not only refers to its primary (con)text, but to all other texts of the same composer where similar intonation is used.²³ Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman points out the importance of the quoted material in two senses, as an acoustic means in itself and also as a means of communication: "This is clearly also a form of intertextuality, in which quoted material [...] acts in a dual way. First, as an acoustic means in itself, selected for those sound qualities that the composer finds appropriate to use as integral components of the work. Secondly, it acts as a means of communication, a symbol of the whole spectrum of possible musical and extra-musical meanings to which the musical source of the quotation might refer. In this second role, a quotation functions as a representative of its primary context."²⁴

But we should also consider a further interpretation. Firstly, Byzantine chant is not merely a "prayer", or a quote. It is used here as "the aural counterpart of an icon"²⁵ with a strong correlation to its image of emotional touch and the purest love between mother and child. Secondly, the term "Antennae" should be understood dialectically – it indicates lost communication or disconnection on one side and, on the other side, offers the possibility of establishing a true frequency of loving connection. This brings us to a pure

²³ The Byzantine chants of the Kovilj Monastery monks appear in the work *Byzantine* (2013), *Prayers for Isa* for clarinet and prepared piano (2013) and *Beyond Zero 1914–1918* for string quartet which accompanied a film by Bill Morrison (2014).

²⁴ Veselinović-Hofman, op. cit, 54.

²⁵ Aleksandra Vrebalov cited from an interview with Tom Welsh, see footnote 4.

antagonism of Life and Death, Silence and Noise, or – Connection and Disconnection. While the Disconnection is presented in the piece by bruitism²⁶: “[the] *noise is violence*: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder”;²⁷ the Connection is shown by Byzantine chant, the sound of peace, of silence, of pure love – the sound of Birth and of Life. To receive this universal message – that every end brings a new beginning – a message which transcends cultures and religion, we are exposed to a cohabitation of various signs, selected and combined to structure a musical piece. As Veselinović-Hofman noticed: “One of the essential features of both poetics and technology stems from the specific focus of the postmodern method on the phenomenon of the musical fact as such and on its communication potential. Put in other words, it stems from an interest in musical materials from the entire world heritage, regardless of stylistic, historical, geographical, ethnic or any other origin”.²⁸ Relying on the competence of her listeners, Vrebalov ‘plays’ in ingenious ways with those signs.

At the end, we can conclude the work *Antennae* is also a story about established and lost connections with the past, culture, and identity which “oscillates between similarities and differences”²⁹ between the individual and the collective, and yet is something which constantly builds and changes.³⁰ Pro-

²⁶ Bruitist aesthetics became an important feature of Futurism and a “sonic representation of modernity” (Berghaus, 31) at the beginning of the 20th century. See: Günter Berghaus, “Noise: A Category in Futurist Theatre and Music”, in Nataša Crnjanski (ed.) *Zbornik radova Akademije umetnosti* 6, Novi Sad, Akademija umetnosti, 2018, 15–35.

²⁷ Jacques Attali, *Noise, The Political Economy*, Minneapolis – London, University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 26. Emphasis by Attali.

²⁸ Veselinović-Hofman, op. cit., 54.

²⁹ Edmond Mark explains the complexity and paradoxicality of identity as a phenomenon: “As a complex phenomenon, identity is also paradoxical. In fact, in its very meaning, it signifies what is unique, the fact that we stand out and differ from others. But it also determines what is identical, that is, what is perfectly similar, while still remaining different. This semantic ambiguity has a deep meaning: it suggests that identity oscillates between similarity and difference, between what makes us an individual and what makes us similar to others at the same time. Psychology shows well that identity is built through the twofold movement of equalization and differentiation, identification with others and differentiation in relation to them.” Edmond Mark, “Identitetska izgradnja pojedinca”, in Katrin Halpern, Žan-Klod Ruano-Borbalan (prir.), *IDENTITET(I) – pojedinac, grupa, društvo*, Beograd, Clio, 2009, 41–50, (42)

³⁰ “People have as many social, collective and personal identities as there are groups to which they belong and the personal relationships in which they are involved.” Marko

found connections, being a rarity as they are now, have recently become what is the most valuable – Life itself.

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Summary

During a Creative Fusion residency at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2018, composer Aleksandra Vrebalov was inspired by the Byzantine icon the *Virgin Eleousa* and shortly after composed the piece *Antennae*. This paper presents the semantic relationship between the icon and various signs which are selected and combined to structure the musical piece. The composer selects several elements characteristic of Christian Church musical practice. These include the *ison*, used throughout the piece, which originated from the tradition of Byzantine chanting, and is widespread within the Orthodox Church. Also, the use of *organs* references the Western Christianity. Besides that, Morse code, bells, a "Gregorian" melodic fragment, as well as gestural and visual characteristics of scores are encountered.

It is argued the composer uses those signs based on their acoustic qualities and communicational potential, and embraces the postmodern technique of quotation to depict Love and Suffering, Life and Death, or more generally speaking, Connection and Disconnection as the title itself suggests. The term "Antennae" thus should be understood dialectically – it indicates lost communication or disconnection on one side and, on the other side, offers the possibility of establishing a true frequency of loving connection. While the Disconnection is presented in the piece by bruitism, the Connection is shown by Byzantine chant, the sound of peace, of silence, of pure love – the sound of Birth and of Life.