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## IDEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF EROTIC CAPITAL AND PATRIARCHAL POWER RELATIONS IN THE VISUAL INTERPRETATIONS OF LOLA ASTANOVA

**Abstract:** Lola Astanova is a professional Uzbek-American pianist who resorts to controversial performance practices in line with neo-globalist trends. Thus, her extravagant musico-visual “spectacles” are recognisable by an excessive emphasis on female sexuality and the absence of a highly aestheticised, contemplative piano sound. This paper aims to explore how the ideological and interpretive strategies of this unconventional artist are imbued with the erotic capital and patriarchal power relations of the modern consumer society. A selection of publicly available performances by Astanova has been made, most of which are presented to the audience in the form of video clips. The focus is understandably on Astanova’s interpretations of classical music, whose prosaic elements of eroticism and overdramatising musical narration are primarily, but not exclusively, intended for the ear of a patriarchally interpellated listener.

**Keywords:** Lola Astanova, erotic capital, patriarchy, visual musical interpretation, pianistic video clip.

Based on the artistic biography of Lola Astanova, we can assume that the Uzbek-American artist received a high-quality musical education. She received her first piano lessons at the age of six at the elite music school for talents “Uspensky” in Tashkent,<sup>1</sup> while she was able to perfect her piano technique through pedagogical cooperation with the esteemed Russian pianist

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<sup>1</sup> Astanova received her first piano lessons from her mother and later studied with Professor Tamara Popovich.

and pedagogue Lev Naumov. After 2003, when she settled permanently in the United States, her career as a pianist continued to soar. Notable awards include the Emmy Award for her interpretation of Gershwin's composition *Rhapsody in Blue*<sup>2</sup> and the *Premio Kinéo Award* at the *78th Venice International Film Festival*.<sup>3</sup>

Lola Astanova captured the attention of a large audience by performing prominent works by Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, and Scriabin, which were known not only in professional musical circles but also in a wider cultural environment. However, an analytical look at her music videos gives the impression that her interpretive poetics is not based on the Russian piano school. On the contrary, under the strong influence of contemporary socio-political and cultural trends, the pianist resorts to performance gestures that exude excessive visual aesthetics and theatrical body language, mostly imbued with a provocative erotic charge. In search of her own pianistic identity, the artist attempts to redefine the traditional norms of musical behaviour by breaking institutional, aesthetic, and artistic taboos. The expressive means of Astanova's pianism, which conceptually and characteristically lean more towards the model of musico-visual performance art rather than artistic interpretation,<sup>4</sup> condition the ideology of musical perception that differs drastically from conventional listening protocols.<sup>5</sup> The lack of interest in critical listening to the standard classical repertoire, which requires a refined musical perception and a holistic understanding of music, is confirmed by the provocative statement that serious music "has no future with its boring concerts where musicians only bang the keys".<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Astanova considers it

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<sup>2</sup> Astanova performed this composition by Gershwin in 2016 in collaboration with the All-Star Orchestra under the baton of conductor Gerard Schwarz.

See <https://youtu.be/Fpsku1TwQ7E>.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, "Venezia 2021, a Lola Astanova il Premio Kinéo Arte per la Musica", *Sky TG24*, September 1, 2021. <https://tg24.sky.it/spettacolo/musica/2021/09/01/venezia-2021-lola-astanova-premio-kineo>.

<sup>4</sup> Although performance art is usually referred to an art performed through action that emerged in the 1960s, Astanova's interpretations undoubtedly contain performative and processual elements that resemble a musico-visual performance.

<sup>5</sup> One of the many common, if outdated, ideologies of musical perception of art music is based on an objectivist model of listening and an aesthetic ideal that respects autonomous musical logic and the acousmatic approach to listening.

<sup>6</sup> "[L]a música clásica académica con sus 'conciertos aburridos de músicos que solo pulsan las teclas, no tiene futuro'". Anonymous, "Instintos, pulso, aliento... Apasionada pianista comparte su experiencia con Sputnik (fotos, vídeo)", *Sputnik Mundo*, 25. 12. 2017.

“bizarre that classical music has come to mean something so restrictive, dark and sad that wearing a modern dress can be viewed by some as offensive”.<sup>7</sup> This partly explains her radical artistic move to significantly alter the primary ontological, phenomenological, and metaphysical values of the compositions that represent the crown of the piano repertoire, and to distance the mass audience from the experience of aesthetic listening.<sup>8</sup>

Considering that we live in an age of visual culture, mass media domination, hyperreality, and the recent wave of globalisation—where the laws of the market fluctuate according to private sector interests—one could argue that artistic individuals like Astanova are necessary to fashion companies, patrons, capitalist elites, and upper-middle-class art financiers who see in their interpretations the potential for capital gains. In this case, Lola Astanova captures the audience’s attention not through her highly average pianistic skills, so to speak, but through extra-musical performance attributes adapted to the patriarchal society of an imposed capitalist reality.<sup>9</sup> So it is the capitalist and patriarchal system of power administration that has enabled her to redistribute the sensual and aesthetic pleasure of recognised musical works to fit the demands of the consumer market, and to perform in some of the most prestigious concert halls, such as the Carnegie Hall, where only world-famous artists used to perform.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it was the lack of creative musical ability<sup>11</sup> that led the Uzbek-American artist to promote and shape her pianism with erotic capital—a specific kind of capital that draws its power from the physical attributes of a hedonistically oriented subject.

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<sup>7</sup> Hana Khemissi, “Lola Astanova: Classical Music Today”, *Dubai Fashion News* [Online Journal], <https://dubaifashionnews.com/lola-astanova-classical-music-today/>.

<sup>8</sup> The issue here is the redistribution of sensory and aesthetic auditory experience, noting the attempt to equate the values of elite and mass culture.

<sup>9</sup> As early as 1998, the British political theorist Carole Pateman considered it necessary to free the concept of patriarchy from patriarchal interpretations. Kerol Pejtmén, *Polni ugovor*, transl. by Ranko Mastilović, *Belgrade, Feminist* 94, 2001, 28.

This paper, then, does not refer to the old, outdated definition of patriarchy as the rule of fathers, but to the patriarchy of modern capitalist civil society, adapted to the age of new media and new male domination. It is precisely in such a socio-economic and political system that Astanova’s visual interpretations expose the layers of capitalist and patriarchal structures of social relations.

<sup>10</sup> We will discuss this concert in more detail later.

<sup>11</sup> Here, of course, it is not a prejudice that the eroticisation of performing-creative practice necessarily conditions the lack of creative musical ability. Nevertheless, Astanova’s visual interpretations have obviously neglected the philosophical depth and high artistic qualities of the contemplative piano sound.

Erotic capital is a special category of capital, whose concept was developed by the British sociologist Catherine Hakim. The author of the controversial book *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*<sup>12</sup> defined it as “a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness”<sup>13</sup> that includes various aspects such as “sex appeal, liveliness, a talent for dressing well, charm, social skills, and sexual competence”.<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological thought played an important role in elaborating this concept,<sup>15</sup> erotic capital, unlike other forms of capital, “can be completely independent of social origin”.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, this concept has provoked negative reactions from some theorists in the humanities, especially feminist-oriented thinkers.<sup>17</sup> Although the British sociologist sees the main enemies of erotic capital in patriarchal and feminist practices,<sup>18</sup> erotic

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine Hakim has published three successive monographs on erotic capital, although one might assume that these treatises are expanded or slightly altered versions of the same. Cf. Catherine Hakim, *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom*, New York, Basic Books, 2011; *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*, London, Allen Lane, 2011; and *Honey Money: Why Attractiveness is the Key to Success*, London, Penguin, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Hakim, “Erotic Capital”, *European Sociological Review*, 26(5), 2010, 501.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Hakim, *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom*, op. cit., 10.

<sup>15</sup> One of the most widely accepted classifications of capital comes from Pierre Bourdieu and includes cultural, social and economic capital. However, modern theorists from the social sciences and humanities have noted other types of capital, among which health, sexual, and spiritual capital stand out. See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, in: J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Westport, CT., Greenwood, 1986, 241–58; Peter L. Berger and Gordon Redding (Eds), *The Hidden Form of Capital: Spiritual Influences in Societal Progress*, London, Anthem Press, 2011; and Robert T. Michael, “Sexual Capital: An Extension of Grossman’s Concept of Health Capital”, *Journal of Health Economics*, 23(4), 2004, 643–52.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Hakim, *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom*, op. cit., 18.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Alicia Valdés Lucas, “Can Erotic Capital Subvert Masculine Economy? Aesthetic Work and the Post-feminist Approach to Economics”, *Recerca: Revista de Pensament i Anàlisi*, 24, 2019, 87–108; and Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful cultural practices in the West*, Second Edition, London and New York, Routledge, 2015, 12–3.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Hakim criticises feminists because, instead of acknowledging and valorising erotic capital, they supposedly reinforce the patriarchal order by rejecting it. Catherine Hakim, *Erotic Capital*, op. cit., 511.

The British sociologist, however, studiously overlooks the fact that it is patriarchal power

capital is evidently an important resource of patriarchy—a resource that promotes the hegemony of masculinity and the objectification of the female body in modern hypersexualised society.<sup>19</sup> This is borne out to some extent by Will Atkinson’s consideration that women with an above-average amount of sexual capital pursue forms of recognition that are largely determined by the desires of men.<sup>20</sup> However, it seems that musicologists have not yet considered this cultural-aesthetic phenomenon in detail, as information about Astanova’s sensationalist performances tends to be found in journalistic articles. The apparent lack of musico-theoretical debates on the role and importance of erotic capital in the world of classical music would possibly explain the fact that erotic capital initially dominates the market of mass or popular culture. But even then, one must distinguish between singers with exceptional musical skills (such as Christina Aguilera or Amy Winehouse) and skilled “showmen” like Madonna, who overcome the shortcomings of their technical abilities thanks to erotic capital and fascinating stage effects. In addition to Lola Astanova, in professional pianist circles Khatia Buniatishvili, Yuja Wang, Anastasia Huppmann and, to a certain extent, Valentina Lisitsa also resort to similar strategies, although their visually coloured pianist discourse is more convincing than that of the Uzbek-American pianist.<sup>21</sup>

Even though Astanova has gained a large circle of fans on social networks such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and *Instagram*, which function at the be-

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relations that promote the hypersexualisation of women, and that feminists, unlike patriarchally interpellated subjects, do not (as a rule) evaluate women by their reputation for physical appearance and charisma. The passionate advocates of erotic capital, however, do just that, neglecting all other human qualities beyond the power of erotic capital. Not even erotic intelligence, as we know, manifests itself through an overemphasis on female sexuality and the components of femininity in general.

<sup>19</sup> In discussing the complex dynamics and various functions of erotic capital in the public music scene, Spanish anthropologist Josep Martí notes that modern society is “labelled as ‘sexually schizophrenic’”, emphasising that there is still a negative notion of overt sexuality. Therefore, Martí recognises in erotic capital the tool for sexual liberation and the struggle against the establishment. Josep Martí, “The Erotic Capital Onstage”, in: Ben Ambler, Ana Dosen & Kristina Kocan Salamon (Eds), *PanEroticism*, Oxford, Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2015, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Will Atkinson, *Beyond Bourdieu: From Genetic Structuralism to Relational Phenomenology*, Cambridge/Malden, Polity Press, 2016, 117.

<sup>21</sup> Compare here, for example, Astanova’s and Huppmann’s interpretation of Chopin’s *Minute Waltz*. Although the power mechanisms of erotic capital explicitly capture both interpretations, Anastasia Huppmann gives the contemplative tone and musical imagination an obvious advantage over the visual exposition of the erotic. Cf.

<https://youtu.be/XqkaLWg5D1g>; and <https://youtu.be/xKNCnn9ZP8c>.

hest of surveillance capitalism in modern post-industrial society,<sup>22</sup> her unconventional piano practices are still not accepted in professional music circles, especially by those who recognise the immanent value of art.<sup>23</sup> Since the visual eroticisation of pianistic sound has not yet fully taken hold of works in the classical repertoire, at least not to the extent that it can be considered a new institutional paradigm, most trained musicians do not advocate similar hybrid performance practices.<sup>24</sup> This is borne out to some extent by the results of numerous contemporary music competitions and festivals, where professional juries generally look favourably on those artistic and craft inventions<sup>25</sup> by performers that are stripped of sensationalist sonic and visual gestures. This is not, of course, an attempt to undermine the importance of erotic capital on the public music scene. On the contrary, when the bodily performing gestures do not endanger high artistic qualities, they can serve as a strategic means to attract a larger audience without compromising the artistic and aesthetic integrity of the compositions and the authority of their creators. But in this case, the corporeal form of capital ownership should not be emphasised as the most important constitutive element of interpretive poetics, especially if the erotic otherness does not emerge from the very piece itself that is being performed.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Surveillance capitalism is the term used by the American philosopher and social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff, who attempts to explain the logic of modern capitalist accumulation. Thus, the author warns of the formative instrumental power that threatens human subjects and market democracy. For further information see Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> The immanent value of art, for example, could be Kant's claim on the beautiful as disinterested interest.

<sup>24</sup> This refers primarily to professional performances of the standard classical repertoire that do not contain explicit erotic elements, although, of course, the aestheticisation of erotic elements in all canonised works of art music is not disputed. However, even in the case of an admixture of eroticism, these are usually highly aestheticised and clearly profiled erotic attributes that go beyond the trivial display of femininity.

<sup>25</sup> Although it is ineffective to separate the "artistic" from the "craftsmanlike" in traditional pianism, since the craftsmanlike component also belongs to the realm of the artistic, we would like to draw attention here primarily to two equally important aspects of musical interpretation: the poetic, aesthetic, and stylistic imagination on the one hand, and the craftsmanship of the performer on the other.

<sup>26</sup> One should always keep in mind that the works of art music that Astanova brings to the audience were not originally based on deeply eroticised musical narratives, while her intriguing performances, on the other hand, are overloaded with explosive and prosaic erotic motifs.

Let us return to the aspect of eroticisation of the pianistic discourse, which operates in the form of the visual emphasis on one's "self". It is well known that Astanova's interpretations are striking for their visual performance gestures, provocative costumes, and expensive jewellery that reinforce the objectification of her biological body. The emancipatory female subject is thus only seemingly promoted, for although it may seem paradoxical, Astanova's deliberate emphasis on bodily-kinaesthetic and musical expression is consistent with the post-patriarchal attributes of femininity.<sup>27</sup> Even more intriguing is the fact that under the guise of engaging the audience in various aspects of interpretation,<sup>28</sup> the pianist actively promotes the hypersexualisation of women through her onstage behaviour, particularly in her music videos. One could even argue that her interpretations are politically and ideologically compromised by the culture industry<sup>29</sup> and a patriarchal consciousness that favours an attractive physical appearance over the pianistic qualities of all those female artists who cannot match Astanova's physique. Such a principle of the sensationalist de-aestheticisation of art music, which overemphasises female sexuality, finds its basis not in the emancipation of women but in the patriarchal order of power. At the same time, the subversive attitude towards the musical text understandably cannot be attributed simply to the preservation of the integrity of artistic freedoms, the rebellion against social, gender, and sexual taboos, or the popularisation of high art, which, for example, was promoted in salons during the Romantic period and

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<sup>27</sup> Here it refers to the conventions of modern patriarchy in a highly developed capitalist society whose hegemony of ideological and social totality is veiled by deceptive concessions to women. However, it is extremely problematic to speak of gender equality when the "space of women" is also administered by patriarchal subjects.

<sup>28</sup> This is also confirmed by the following thought of Astanova:

"La actuación de cualquier artista es una combinación de factores, y cada uno de los espectadores se concentra en lo que más le interesa. Alguien escucha más la música, alguien contempla más los vestidos, y para otros el concierto es solo salir y pasar el tiempo. Mi cuerpo es parte de mí, y si alguien está interesado solo en ello, no me molesta en absoluto." Anonymous, "Instintos, pulso, aliento..." op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Influenced by Adorno's aesthetic-musicological discourse, Robert Winston Witkin warns of how the cultural industries attempt to manage both high and low art, transforming the integrated consumer from a subject into a manipulated object. Robert Winston Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, London & New York, Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2003, 47; see also Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, transl. by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002.

now takes place (in addition to concert halls, museums, galleries, palaces, and theatres) in shopping malls, cinemas, restaurants, cafés, and other places suitable for mass gatherings. So what is the goal of Astanova's eroticised performances, in which the artist nonchalantly plays with the piano sound while taking full advantage of her formal musical training to impress listeners unfamiliar with the genre and style conventions of the classical repertoire?<sup>30</sup> One of the explanations lies in the propagation of capitalist values, which was particularly evident in her Carnegie Hall debut.

Lola Astanova made her Carnegie Hall debut in early 2012 in a glittering gown by Roberto Cavalli and Mark Bauer, high heels and gems by Tiffany & Co<sup>31</sup> worth 850 thousand dollars.<sup>32</sup> It was a charity concert for the American Cancer Society, which is a kind of tribute to Vladimir Horowitz. The concert was hosted by British actress Julie Andrews and Donald Trump,<sup>33</sup> an advocate of ultra-capitalist and patriarchal ethics. Based on the above information, one can see the pervasive neoliberal capitalist machinery behind the efforts of this unconventional artist, especially considering that the artistic photographs that capture Astanova's visual image sell for extremely high prices. The use of the copyright of one of many such photographs, for example, the commercial professional photographs of Matthew Peyton, can cost up to 475 euros,<sup>34</sup> which far exceeds the price of the original CD or a concert ticket for an outstanding contemporary pianist. On this occasion, Trump also took a photo with Astanova, which allowed Peyton to profit more easily through self-promotion and the sale of copyrights, and the Uzbek-American pianist to consolidate and accumulate the power of erotic capital.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In a short music video showing Astanova practising, for example, the pianist's provocative posture is particularly intriguing, as it makes the attitude towards the instrument and the artistic repertoire extremely trivial. See <https://youtu.be/NeM842RG08g>.

<sup>31</sup> The *Tiffany & Co* company also sponsored this concert.

<sup>32</sup> Zachary Woolfe, "Air Kisses, Spike Heels and Ample Rubato," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2012; Berlin Iglesias Art, *Beauty and talent: American pianist Lola Astanova with concerts in Europe*, Official Communication, 2019, 2.

[https://berlin-iglesias.art/img/cms/pressrelease/pressrelease\\_LA\\_ENG.pdf](https://berlin-iglesias.art/img/cms/pressrelease/pressrelease_LA_ENG.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> It is worth mentioning that Donald Trump did not start his presidential term at that time.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew Peyton, "A Tribute to Horowitz' Hosted By Julie Andrews", *Getty Images North America*, January 19, 2012. <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/pianist-lola-astanova-performs-a-tribute-to-horowitz-news-photo/137416059?adppopup=true>.

<sup>35</sup> It should be remembered that Lola Astanova, apparently thanks to her political ac-



Therefore, one can get the impression that this jubilee event, instead of commemorating Vladimir Horowitz and people suffering from cancer, became political and sensational propaganda, promoting various fashion and art brands under the pretext of philanthropy.<sup>36</sup> Music critics were also less than enthusiastic about Astanova's performance, with Zachary Woolfe concluding that "Chopin[']s music] should gleam more brightly than Tiffany diamonds".<sup>37</sup> Again, this suggests that Astanova gained her place in this concert hall through political acquaintances rather than fascinating pianistic virtues, as she quite obviously favours the monetary values of music<sup>38</sup> over its artistic and aesthetic qualities. The most striking example of Astanova's performative interpretation, however, can be found in her promotional music recordings, i.e. video clips that should be considered from a musicological perspective.

### **Patriarchal and erotic models in the video clips of Lola Astanova**

Compared to piano recitals, piano videos allow for faster and more efficient marketing success. Thanks to social media, Lola Astanova has also attracted and fascinated audiences from different parts of the world by performing representative, though now largely commercialised, works such as Chopin's *Fantaisie-impromptu* in C-sharp minor and *Etude* Op. 25 No. 12 in C-minor, Debussy's *Clair de lune* from the *Suite Bergamasque*, Liszt's Paganini *Etude La campanella*, or Rachmaninoff's *Moment musical* in E-minor.<sup>39</sup> These are interpretations, however, that are not adorned with the kind of passionate, erotic, semiotic musical signifier that Roland Barthes called *le graine*, defining it as "the body in the singing voice, in the writing hand, in the performing

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quaintances, also performed at the White House. See, for example, Seth Hettena, "The President and the Soviet-Born Pianist", *Rolling Stone* [Online Journal], 15. 1. 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/lola-astanova-trump-779405/>.

<sup>36</sup> Astanova's affinity for fashion is quite obvious. See, for example, Kimberly Cunningham, "Whatever Lola Wants", *San Diego Magazine* [Online Journal], August 24, 2012. [https://www.sandiegomagazine.com/guides/whatever-lola-wants/article\\_3db83a47-5a50-5c32-b7d3-8e361017db22.html](https://www.sandiegomagazine.com/guides/whatever-lola-wants/article_3db83a47-5a50-5c32-b7d3-8e361017db22.html)

<sup>37</sup> Zachary Woolfe, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> On the official website of Lola Astanova, there is a note that the pianist offers a personal video message and a short video clip (usually between 15 and 45 seconds long) for \$375. See Lola Astanova, *Get a Special Video Just for You* [Official Website], <https://lolaastanova.com/personalized-video>.

<sup>39</sup> Astanova has also performed complex piano works such as Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2*, as well as sentimental and commercial pieces such as Chopin's posthumous "Waltz in A-minor" or Beethoven's Bagatelle *Für Elise*.

limb”<sup>40</sup> that are intuited in a “genosong”.<sup>41</sup> Despite the obvious artistic liberties Astanova takes, her videos exude pianistic bodily gestures that are too calculated to be considered spontaneous, highly individual, or sincere, passionate musical enthusiasm recognised, for example, in the vocal apparatus of Charles Panzéra.<sup>42</sup> And if the listener perceives the eroticism in the voice (or instrumental sound) rather than in the composition itself, Derek Scott concludes that „the signified is ignored in favo[u]r of the sensually produced meaning [that] Barthes calls *signifiance*”.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, the only erotic element in the pianist’s body that Barthes points to is to be found in the fingertips, “whose ‘grain[iness]’ is so rarely heard”,<sup>44</sup> while the manifestation of eroticism in Astanova’s pianism is achieved through entirely different feminine attributes.

The emotional expressiveness and formative musical structure of Astanova’s interpretations depend on the extra-musical impressions and sensual likeability of the listeners, most of whom are interpellated by the ideology of patriarchy. Thus, the visually peculiar feminine sound has become the dominant constitutive principle that permeates the glamorous stage appearance of the Uzbek-American pianist. The video clip of Chopin’s *Fantaisie-impromptu* in C-sharp minor,<sup>45</sup> her official music video, begins with the sound and image of Astanova’s glittering high heels, their colours harmonising with the design of her dress. Arm swings and movements of the upper body, as well as the pianist’s posture behind the instrument, stand out in particular. To emphasise the sensuality of the lower extremities, Astanova even

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<sup>40</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, (transl. by Richard Howard), Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1991, 276.

<sup>41</sup> The terms “phenosong” and “genosong” were conceived by Barthes based on the “phenotext” and “genotext” from the critical semiotics of Julia Kristeva. Phenosong is characterised by artistic and formal features of sound that lack the abstract and orgasmic pleasure of music. The pleasure is indeed in the genosong, which builds on the sensuality of the sounds and their signifiers that do not interfere with the signified. Roland Barthes, op. cit., 270–73.

Astanova’s visual interpretations, however, interfere with the signified (the voice of the author whose works she performs).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>43</sup> Derek B. Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, 19; Cf. Roland Barthes, op. cit., 270.

<sup>44</sup> Roland Barthes, op. cit., 276.

<sup>45</sup> This video currently has over 11 million views on *YouTube* alone.

sits quite far from the keyboard while playing. In this case, the cult of hyper-sexualised femininity is promoted as a constitutive resource of erotic capital, but to the detriment of a disciplined playing apparatus and a tonally profiled musical expression. Nevertheless, it is commendable that the dynamic and affective amplification of visual kinetics did not lead to the collapse of the most basic norms of pianistic craft, except in certain episodes where Astanova resorted to excessive rubato and multiple temporal prolongations of the last note of the phrase.

On the other hand, the visual-aesthetic background of the video clip *Clair de lune* is more reminiscent of a video for a fashion advertising campaign than of a presentation of a particular piano style. That the whole idea of performative musical expression is subjugated to the visual plan is also confirmed by Astanova's fetishistic attitude towards music,<sup>46</sup> when the pianist subordinates the displaced aesthetic qualities of art music to the taste of a larger audience. The modified lush and profiled Debussian tone in its applied form mimics Astanova's facial expressions, her body in a camera close-up, and a provocative angelic costume as a kind of counterpart to the deification of female sexuality.<sup>47</sup> However, considering that Astanova's performances are intended for (listening) spectators of different ages, genders, and sexual identities, one should keep in mind Josep Martí's assertion that erotic capital goes beyond the primitive function of sexual arousal. What is more, Martí notes that women on stage display a specific model of femininity that is also presented to women and not exclusively to male audiences.<sup>48</sup> One of Astanova's narrative strategies that potentially interpellates a gender-neutral audience is reflected in her portrayal of romance.

The eroticised arrangements of Handel's *Passacaglia*,<sup>49</sup> the first movement of Beethoven's *Piano Sonata* in C-sharp minor,<sup>50</sup> and the *Bagatelle Für Elise*,<sup>51</sup> Chopin's *Prélude* in E-minor,<sup>52</sup> and *Nocturne* in E-flat major<sup>53</sup> highly prosaically mimic the Romantic sensibility, with Astanova's (and Hauser's)

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<sup>46</sup> Adorno's or a more modern interpretation of the concept of fetish may be considered here.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. <https://youtu.be/bN2LPy2zWzs>.

<sup>48</sup> Martí, op. cit., 60.

<sup>49</sup> <https://youtu.be/xXKx8Kbzi9A>.

<sup>50</sup> <https://youtu.be/AzWDs26YL9Y>

<sup>51</sup> <https://youtu.be/Nb9YqX4iid0>.

<sup>52</sup> <https://youtu.be/2frUjZgsXFI>.

<sup>53</sup> <https://youtu.be/PPhTVt4ZpLU>.

performance urge more akin to a parodic Romantic consciousness than reflecting the spirit of Romanticism. The main reason for this could perhaps lie in the hyperbolisation of pianistic expression as Astanova's tautological performative self-evidence, with which the artist strategically interpellates mass listeners through sensory-psychological processes. In a sense, this is confirmed by the sensationalist name of the video clip *Lola – Passacaglia (Beautiful romantic piano)*, while what is sonically labelled "romantic" is actually the affective-metaphorical potential of the descending seconds sequence, visually and discursively underlined by a stereotypical vision of femininity. Canadian radical feminist Shulamith Firestone was one of the first theorists to identify the cause of women's positioning and self-identification as "love objects" in romantic love and eroticism.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Firestone concluded that women can only be sexually fulfilled "by vicarious identification with the man who enjoys them".<sup>55</sup> It is in this context that one should consider Astanova's video clip of the etude *La campanella*, in which, following the capitalist and patriarchal norms of elegant masculinity, a male subject unexpectedly appears. Through the use of melodramatic kinaesthetic gestures and overdramatising musical narration, the pianist introduces provocative scenes of male-female erotic charge into the performance. Interestingly, however, the erotic and economic capital of the male "actor" recedes into the background, although Astanova's performative domination of the male subject is manifested through the gendered inversion of patriarchal conventions. By strategically highlighting those models of femininity that ideologically presuppose the female subject as the main vehicle of eroticism, the Uzbek-American pianist simultaneously attempts to interpellate both male and female recipients. It is fairly certain that "non-expert" patriarchal listeners<sup>56</sup> are part of the target audience. Those female individuals, however, who do not reject the ideological power of hegemonic masculinity<sup>57</sup> but live under the

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<sup>54</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, New York, Bantam Books, 1970, 148.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Here Adorno's typology of the listener is placed in the context of the power mechanisms of modern patriarchy, that is, post-patriarchy. An Adornian expert listener may be a patriarchal listener, but not an "Astanoian" consumerist mass listener. For further information about Adorno's typology of listeners, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, (transl. by E. B. Ashton), New York, The Seabury Press, 1976, 1–20.

<sup>57</sup> Hegemonic masculinity here means the theoretical concept problematised by the Australian sociologist Robert Connell, by which he means the ideological legitimization of

patriarchal imperatives of femininity will respond to the interpellation first. With this visually striking pianistic behaviour, Lola Astanova reinforces the patriarchal form of exercising power, ideologically coloured by the strategies of exploitative capitalism. Moreover, playing blindfolded explicitly underscores the acrobatic virtuosity<sup>58</sup> once resorted to primarily by great male composer-virtuosos and now increasingly employed by women.<sup>59</sup> By combining elements of exhibitionistic and theatrical pianistic virtuosity with an affectively stimulating eroticisation of the pianistic body, Astanova's recording of Liszt's Paganini Etude fulfils the function of a romanticised signifier of femininity.<sup>60</sup>

From the limited selection of Astanova's video clips available to the public, the interpretation of Rachmaninoff's *Moment musical* in E-minor stands out qualitatively, in which the artist gives priority to the piano sound over the visual décor. Thus, the colours of her clothing are not too garish, yet striking enough to distract from the acousmatic form of listening. Despite a certain illogic in the phrasing, especially during the descending melodic movement,<sup>61</sup> the pianist somehow manages to reach the aesthetic core of the work and not just to mechanically sound the musical text. In this way, something more subtle, but still obvious, channels the erotic capital to interpellate the larger audience. In the more recent version of Astanova's interpretation of this piano piece, however, the musical content was sensually overshadowed by the over-emphasised emotions expressed through the pianist's facial expressions and the striking colour scheme of the building's interior.<sup>62</sup> Although this hierarchical twist between auditory and visual factors of interpretation is intriguing, it becomes a mannerist performative expression of Astanova's pianism

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the global subordination of women to men. This category of masculinity is fundamentally different from the masculinity displayed by socially marginalised male subjects. Robert W. Connell & James W. Messerschmidt, "Masculinidade hegemônica: repensando o conceito", *Estudos Feministas*, 21(1), 2013, 245.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. [https://youtu.be/wsl2YN7FN\\_4](https://youtu.be/wsl2YN7FN_4) and <https://youtu.be/TRZ5X5pPNis> [from 2:50].

<sup>59</sup> On this occasion, it should suffice to mention the contemporary piano discourse of Yuja Wang, in which the artist combines elements of visual eroticism, i.e. erotic capital, and exhibitionist virtuosity.

<sup>60</sup> The emancipation of the female subject cannot be complete, but only apparent, since it is based on patriarchal gender stereotypes of femininity.

<sup>61</sup> Lola Astanova, "Lola Astanova plays Rachmaninoff Moment Musicaux Op. 16, No. 4", LOLA ASTANOVA, October 30, 2011, YouTube video, 3:10. [0:55-1:02], <https://youtu.be/FhcidIUkCbk>.

<sup>62</sup> <https://youtu.be/urbyn0vaxJ0>.

when the pianist plays with the visual interior by choosing pianos in white,<sup>63</sup> blue,<sup>64</sup> or purple.<sup>65</sup>

Interestingly, Lola Astanova also resorts to those performative strategies that involve a simulation of performance in nature. In this context, it is worth mentioning the video clip in which she simulates the performance of Chopin's *Etude* Op. 25 No. 12 by the ocean. This kind of choice of a natural setting underlines the mimetic function of music, especially as far as the choice of the composition is concerned, whose misnomer—*Ocean Etude*—has become accepted even in pianist circles.<sup>66</sup> The repetitive body movements and the deliberate swaying of dishevelled hair are accompanied by a massive, somewhat more discrete tabooed piano sound that complements the onomatopoeic, musicalised sound effects of the rushing waves. Such artistic practice could possibly be attributed to the applied sonic-visual description of the musical flow when the musical meaning of the etude is represented by visual and other non-musical artistic components. Even the dynamic and dramatic climax of the etude is in harmony with the affectively stimulating naturalistic sounds of the ocean. Moreover, in this promotional music video, Astanova advocates for the protection of natural resources by expressing the ideological thought: "Our oceans need our care... It's the one thing WE ALL can agree on..."<sup>67</sup> Notwithstanding the marketing ploy to impress the audience with environmental activism, the inclusion of a clear moral message raises awareness of the problem of water pollution, which mitigates the effects of the clichéd underlining of sexuality and other socially imposed patriarchal patterns.

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The pianistic video clips of Lola Astanova are the product of a new era: the age of visual culture, the dominance of social networks and virtual reality, consumerist attitude towards art, and the neoliberal capitalist model of production operating within patriarchal power structures. Completely overshadow-

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<sup>63</sup> <https://youtu.be/6f4BUnt3i1I>.

<sup>64</sup> <https://youtu.be/lnkKPqGXmR0>; <https://youtu.be/urbyn0vaxJ0>.

<sup>65</sup> <https://youtu.be/XqkaLWg5D1g>.

<sup>66</sup> As is generally known, Chopin did not name his piano studies.

<sup>67</sup> Lola Astanova, "Lola Astanova – Ocean Etude". LOLA ASTANOVA, October 4, 2020, YouTube video, 3:12. [2:58-3:12], <https://youtu.be/iYlyqvmzv30>.

owed by the visual elements of a performance, Astanova's unconventional piano sound takes on a decorative and mimetic function, without any hint of an autonomous musical logic. Her musical interpretations, viewed from the neo-globalist standpoint of new media, are in fact the contemporary form of musico-visual performance art. The erotic capital and the patriarchal power order enabled the pianist to prosaically display the female sexuality in her performances and to significantly alter the poetic, stylistic and expressive features of the pianistic sound. Then the holistic approach to musical understanding gives way to new(er) fetishistic practices of visual listening. Although the physical form of capital ownership cannot in itself be the cause of the rejection of the aesthetic experience of listening, the trivial eroticisation of pianistic discourse necessarily conditions the ideology of musical perception to which patriarchal listeners, indoctrinated by the new consumer-capitalist system, are the first to respond. Given Astanova's popularity on social media, and probably the generous capital gains she makes thanks to the visual peculiarity of pianistic sound, it is safe to assume that she will continue to endow her pianistic identity with erotic capital as long as her physical attributes allow. But when a new generation of female performers emerges whose attractive combination of erotic intelligence and contemplative artistic imagination far exceeds the resources of Lola Astanova's physical and cultural capital, the capitalist order will force her to adapt to the new laws of the music market or retire permanently from the concert stage.

Translated by the author

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## Summary

Controversial Uzbek-American pianist Lola Astanova has built her career performing the revered works of various musical ensembles and genres. She has collaborated with many renowned artists such as Lev Naumov, Valery Abisalovich Gergiev, Jahja Ling, Eduardo Marturet, Gerard Schwarz and Andrea Bocelli, which has allowed her to promote her extravagant piano skills on the international concert stage. Her interpretations are thus in line with contemporary neo-globalist trends, which to some extent neglect the intellectual, functional and stylistico-aesthetic qualities of musical works of high artistic value. The main hypothesis of this paper is that erotic capital is a constitutive factor of Astanova’s artistic imprint, the commercial potential of which has been recognised by certain capitalist elites and dominant institutions of power. The musico-rhetorical, poetic, and aesthetic interpretive strategies on which Astanova’s piano sound is based are thus derived from the normative practices and achievements of patriarchy. However, it is the modern patriarchy of a highly developed capitalist society that promotes consumer individualism and the skillfully managed emancipation of women within the neoliberal market economy. A selection of Astanova’s pub-

licly available performances was made, mostly presented to the audience in the form of video clips, characterised by unconventional visual aesthetics and prosaic performative sound. Piano performances conceived in this way often exclude the possibility of acousmatic listening—the so-called non-representational form of listening that may prevent the effective cashing of erotic capital.